

A man with a full beard and a leather jacket stands behind a woman with long dark hair and heavy eye makeup. She is sitting on an ornate,雕花 chair, wearing a black dress and high heels. The background is a textured, greyish wall with stars scattered around. The overall aesthetic is gritty and romantic.

THESE ARE
THE TYPE OF
MEN YOUR
MOTHER
WARNED YOU
ABOUT

Corrupt Intentions

A LIMITED EDITION
COLLECTION OF BAD BOY ROMANCE

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A SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

To our brave readers...

Prepare to enter worlds where the only thing black and white is the ink on these pages. In this epic anthology, we're bending laws like a yogi at a flexibility workshop—because who needs rules when you've got dangerously sexy anti-heroes?

Gird your loins as we take you on a rollercoaster of emotions. Brace for anti-heroes who don't wear capes but might steal your heart (and your moral compass). These stories are the love child of twisted minds and warped senses of humor.

WARNING: Contents may offend the faint of heart, shock the prudes, and make grandma gasp. We apologize in advance for any emotional whiplash. Buckle up, buttercup, because the heroes here wear shades of gray, and the romance isn't your grandma's cup of tea—it's spiked.

If you're still reading, congratulations! You've got the guts to dive into a world where love is a bit wicked and redemption dances on the edge of darkness. Grab a snack (and maybe a stiff drink), and remember, it's just fiction... or is it?

Welcome to the dark side of romance—where anti-heroes reign, boundaries shatter, and laughter is the best defense against emotional chaos. Enjoy the ride!

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Whether you prefer reading about virgins, captives, or heroines who fight back, each story will take you on a wild ride of passion, danger, and heart-stopping romance. So get ready to indulge your wildest fantasies and fall in love with the bad boys who will steal your heart and leave you breathless.

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Ashley Kay

Cori Zahara

Tara Lee

END GAME
CASSIE VERANO

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END GAME

It's time to bring this game to an end.

Meeting Nova was the best thing that ever happened to me.

The only thing she ever asked of me was to protect her when she was most vulnerable.

And I did until I failed to show up one day.

Losing Nova was the worst thing that ever happened to me.

But it was no surprise when I lost her because I always screwed up everything that I touched.

Two decades have passed, and she's found her way back into my world.

But with her has come a host of problems, including a secret admirer who is out to claim her in more ways than one.

Her secret admirer is someone who's close to her and knows her intimately.

It's just when Nova pushes me out of her life again that trouble rears its ugly head, and her admirer becomes a stalker.

Now that she's called on me for help again, it's pulling everyone into the sights of a psychopath, including the MC.

I can't be what Nova needs me to be.

I'm incapable of showing mercy.

I just may be her last chance for survival.

And it's time to bring this game to an end.

-End Game

CHAPTER 1

Nova

Lovely classical columns give the store an ancient but romantic appearance. Bright lights, three-level balconies, and a gorgeous spiral staircase lend an open and airy feel. Upon entering the store, the cash register is to the right, and the book café and champagne bar are through an entrance to the left. Straight ahead is the spiral staircase and three balconies of books, a reader's paradise.

This Georgia Peach has come a long way.

Today was the grand opening of my bookstore, *Another Chapter*. I can't help but be grateful for the success of the day, though I'm tired as hell. My feet are sore, and my back hurts. I can't wait to get home and soak in the tub, take a relaxing bath, grab a sandwich and head to bed. I'll do it all over again tomorrow.

The work is just as hard as my prior job as an accountant but a lot more rewarding. I head to my office to shut my computer down for the day. Just as I sit behind my desk, I hear the tinkling of the bell over the doors, and I call out, "I'll be there in just a moment."

I frown, realizing that Martin, my assistant manager, must have forgotten to lock up behind himself. A glance at the clock on my computer shows that it's five minutes till seven. We closed early when there was a lull in business. We only had another half an hour, and I was certain that I could handle it if anyone else came in.

I can't imagine who might be in here to purchase a book at the last minute. The coffee shop closed just before Briana and Cody, my clerks, and Lalah and Natalie, my two baristas, left for the day. Even Clark Stewart, my champagne bar operator, has left.

After I shut my computer down, I look around my office. It's relatively clean. Once I finish the sale that is waiting for me, I can return and grab my keys, purse, and phone and head out. I'd made the bank deposit earlier, and we've done more credit and debit sales than cash in the end. I don't have much cash remaining, so I feel comfortable enough leaving it here. It's less than a hundred dollars.

I click the lights off and head out into the store. Inhaling the scent of books and vanilla beans, I'm on a high that I hope doesn't erode with time.

This afternoon, a lady with a toddler came in and asked if she could volunteer to do a story time once a week for children in her daughter's age group and other under-school-aged children. She even suggested that when school is out, it would be the perfect time to include older children, as well.

I loved the idea, and since it does not cost my store a dime, I agreed to let her come in each Wednesday, starting next month and have story time from one to two. Briana created flyers, and Cody and Martin agreed to pass them out around town. The staff slipped one in each customer's bag before they left.

Mayra, my other clerk, suggested a sign-up sheet, and so far, I can tell that we'll have plenty of little readers in here to

listen to storytime.

I scan the store and see a man in the Do-It-Yourself section flipping through a book. He's tall, and he's wearing black jeans, black boots, and a leather vest with patches all over it. His head is covered with a black beanie. Other than that, I have no idea what he looks like except that his arms and hands are covered with tattoos.

“Hello, may I help you with a purchase or help you find a specific book, sir?” I ask.

He grunts something under his breath and never turns to acknowledge me.

“Okay, I'll be upfront waiting for you when you're ready to check out.”

For the most part, my customers have been nice, although there have been a few that were less than friendly. They weren't rude, but they seemed to want to not be bothered. I respect that, but it is close to closing time, and I'm not okay with him just scanning my books for information and no plans to purchase them.

Sighing, I head to the front of the store and behind the counter. I busy myself with straightening the displays on the counter before I wipe them down. When I'm finished with that, I straighten a couple of displays in the middle of the store, returning to the front when I hear movement coming in my direction.

I hold my breath, wondering if he's purchasing something or if he's just going to walk out of the store. To my surprise, he

is still holding the same book that he was looking through when I first noticed him, and he seems to be still reading it. He places the book on the counter and reaches into his back pocket.

“Is there anything else that I can...Kai?” I say breathlessly when the man looks up at me.

It feels as if I’ve been thrown back through space to a very uncertain and scary time in my life.

The scowl on his face deepens until he really looks at me.

“Nova,” he says softly.

I watch as his face transforms, and the scowl is no longer there. His smile grips my heart and chases away the darkness that always surrounded me at that time.

I don’t know how my feet manage to move, but somehow, I’m no longer behind the counter, and I find myself in his arms. Arms that tighten around me, stronger and more comforting than they ever were. And much like he used to do, he rests his chin on the top of my head. Only I no longer have to duck mine for him to do it. I fit perfectly in the groove between his chin and neck.

I inhale the unfamiliar scents of leather, musk, and marijuana that cling to him.

Pulling back, I stare at him through blurry eyes. He wipes the tears away with his thumbpads and smiles, saying, “Aye, don’t go getting all emotional and teary-eyed on me, girl.”

Laughing, I say, “I’m sorry. I can’t help it. I never expected to see you again.”

“I’d always hoped that I would find you again somehow. Never expected it to be on the West Coast, though.”

Shaking my head, I say, “Yeah, things change...just like dreams.”

“I’m sure you’re doing great things. So, you’re the owner of the new bookstore everyone’s raving about.”

“Yeah. I am,” I say, looking around proudly.

“I heard today was the grand opening. Sorry, I couldn’t make it earlier. I was busy. How are things going?”

“Busy. I’m so excited, though I didn’t get a break today. But the beauty of that is that I will fall asleep tonight, thankful that I’m finally living my dream,” I share. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

Kai steps back and assesses me, shaking his head. “Little Nova, all grown up. You look amazing.”

“And you...you look...”

I take in the shorn sides of his head, the beard and mustache that he so desperately wanted years ago, and the wary look in those pale blue eyes. My eyes drop to the tattoos on his knuckles, hands, and wrists.

“Different,” he says, shoving his hands into the front pocket of his washed-out jeans.

“Yeah, you do. Are you busy, or were you just passing through?”

“Not busy anymore. Just dropping in to see what you had going on over here. Like I said, everyone’s been talking about

your store, and I've been meaning to get by here and check it out. Sorry to drop in just before closing time."

"It's okay. I'm glad that you did. It's been the best part of my day so far," I share.

We're quiet for several seconds as we stare at each other.

"You still read sci-fi?" I ask, trying to break the silence.

"Ahhh," he scratches the back of his head and looks around as if he's worried someone might overhear our conversation. Unless the walls have ears, his secret is safe.

"Okay, okay. Well, do you have a few minutes to grab some coffee with me and play catch up?"

"Uh, yeah. I do," he says, scratching the back of his head and looking around.

"Let me lock up, and I'll get us a fresh cup of coffee, and then we can sit down and chat for a minute," I say.

"Or how about you get the coffee, and I'll lock up," he says.

Nodding, I say, "Okay, that'll work too."

As I prepare the coffee, I try to ignore the tightening in my chest, the warmth taking over my body, and the beautiful memories assailing my mind. It's been exactly twenty years since I last saw Kai McGinnis, but there hasn't been almost a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about him and wondered what he was doing.

He returns and takes a seat in one of the chairs on the coffee shop side of my bookstore and watches me.

“Do you like—”

“Just black. No sugar. Real coffee,” he says, winking at me.

I laugh. “Just like Mary taught you, huh?”

He scoffs. “That wasn’t the only thing that she taught, but hey...”

I finish adding sugar and cream to my coffee before I grab his and head to the table. “I always wondered about that,” I say of the first foster mother that we were with together.

“Nothing to wonder about. With a husband on the road all the time selling insurance and no one to watch over her, she manipulated most of us young boys coming through her house. Made us think it was all our ideas when it was really hers.”

“That was sick. You were only fifteen, Kai.”

“Well, she didn’t have any limits, and honestly, I was a horny teenager like the rest of ‘em, and she was...available.”

“I always wondered if that was why she was so hard on me,” I say softly, blowing my coffee.

I notice Kai sips his without blowing, and it doesn’t seem to bother him. I know it’s hot as hell.

“Yeah. When you came into the house, she recognized the moment that I turned my interest to you. She tried everything that she could to discourage my attraction to you.”

“Including being mean to me and giving me all the chores no one else would do,” I say.

“That’s why I had to become your protector. I knew it was because of me that you were enduring all the bullshit she was dishing out...and Art too when he came off the road.”

Smiling, I say, “You made those days easy for me. I appreciated you for it.”

He looks down at the table and smiles that shy smile that I remember from all those years ago. The same smile that endeared me to him.

“I got through mine because of you, too, Nova. Looked forward to seeing you at the table every morning and getting to walk home from school with you.”

Laughing, I say, “Remember how you’d always scoop up all those pecans from the Wheelers’ yard and then sneak into Old Man Baxter’s yard and pluck a couple of peaches for us.”

He laughs and says, “Almost gave that bastard a heart attack every time. He’d be sitting on the porch every afternoon, waiting for us to walk by when school let out. I guess he was coming out too early because he’d always fall asleep in his rocker, waiting for us to get out. I’d sneak into his yard all quiet like.”

“Yeah, and then as soon as you’d finish, you’d grab one of those pecans and throw it at the window behind him, waking him from his nap!” I giggle.

Kai laughs, too, and it warms my soul.

I reach for his hand over the table, and his smile drops, and his eyes darken. I wonder what he’s thinking and what’s been going on in his life since I’ve been away. He must be thinking

the same thing because he asks the same question I'd been thinking about.

“So, how has life treated you since we last saw each other?”

“It's been fair. Better than before.”

“Are you married?” he asks.

I swallow, pushing the dark thoughts aside and reply, “Not anymore. Married twice and divorced twice.”

“They were a fool. If we hadn't been underage, I'd have never let you go. Never let you walk out of my life, Nova,” Kai says.

My eyes tear up, and I look away until I feel his rough, callused hand wrapping around mine.

“Hey,” he says, forcing me to jerk my gaze back to him.

“I'm sorry. I'm fine. I am,” I assure him. “That was a long time ago. What about you?”

“Never. It's not in my molecular structure to get married.”

I laugh.

“Still love your laughter. It's beautiful and infectious.”

“Thanks, Mac.”

His eyes darken, and he smiles. Laughing, he says, “I haven't heard that name in forever.”

“So, people just call you Kai?”

“No.”

“Okay...Mr. McGinnis?” I ask, chuckling.

“No.”

“Please, tell me. What name do you go by now?”

“End Game.”

“Okay, well, how—”

“Nova, I’m not the same kid you once knew.”

CHAPTER 2

End Game

NOVA: *Hey, are you busy this evening?*

ME: *Got some things to take care of. What's up?*

NOVA: *Nothing. Thought maybe you might want to swing by for dinner.*

ME: *Sorry, I can't make it.*

NOVA: *No problem. Maybe some other time?*

I feel like such an asshole. I can hear all the hope in her questions and wish that I hadn't been so dismissive. I mull it over for a minute, thinking about the run tonight before I reply again.

ME: *Doubt if I can get away early, but maybe late-night coffee?*

NOVA: *Sounds great!*

ME: *I mean, it might be around midnight.*

NOVA: *Um, okay. That's fine.*

ME: *Send me your address, and I'll swing by as soon as I get free.*

"You find out anything on that new bookstore?"

"I ain't been by there yet," I lie.

I'm not sure why I do, but I'm not ready to disclose the fact that someone that I once cared very much for owns that bookstore. I know what Anarchy wants, and the last thing that

I want or plan to do is get the MC involved in Nova's business in any way. There's no way in hell I'll allow her to be impacted by club business or have her business tainted.

She's been through enough shit in life as it is. She deserves something to go right in her life for once, and no matter what I have to do to ensure it, I'm doing it. I've left her once before and failed to protect her. I'm never making the same mistake twice.

"I need facts, End Game. Need to know if it's gonna bring trouble our way, what traffic the store's generating, if we need to get involved and how we can get involved if we need to," Anarchy sniffs, kicking his boots up on his desk and leaning back in his chair.

I stare at the metal balls in his fingers that he's juggling and switch the toothpick in my mouth to the other side. The phone buzzes in my hand again.

NOVA: *7369 Oceanfront Cove Rd.*

ME: *See ya later.*

"End Game? You paying attention?" Anarchy snipes.

"Yeah, Prez," I say, tucking my phone away.

"How are sales at the dispensary?" he asks.

I glance at Phantom, who's sitting to my right, and he rattles off a report on numbers for last month versus numbers for this month so far, and then he compares them to the numbers for last year this time. Anarchy moves on from the dispensary and does the same thing for the remainder of the businesses in the MC.

I'm not usually in council meetings, but every now and then, when Anarchy wants to discuss business, he'll pull me in along with Tantrum, Rage, Falcon, Snake, Chainz, and now Mayhem. None of us are council members, but we all co-own businesses with the MC.

"What's on your mind, End Game?" Anarchy asks when we finish with the financials.

Shaking my head, I reply, "Just wondering if tonight's meeting at the club is a good idea."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Shrugging, I reply, "Cappellacci's been moving strangely lately. Not trusting shit from him."

"In what way?" Anarchy asks.

"Just the usual order has changed. It started off with small changes, but lately, his orders have doubled, and he's not even haggling over price the way he normally does. He ain't even picky about the product selection. Shit don't make sense to me."

"Could be he knows he's about to get business from us with these girls," Cannon, our enforcer, says.

We've been trying to infiltrate a sex trafficking ring that Cappellacci is rumored to be tied to. Cannon's Ol' Lady, Roxie, was once married to an asshole politician who was a part of that ring. He cheated with Roxie's cousin, Courtney. Not long after Roxie confronted them, Courtney came up missing, and everyone suspects it has something to do with the human trafficking ring.

Our MC has taken on the challenge of finding out more information so that we can save her, if possible. Hence, our infiltration efforts and tonight's meeting at Cappellacci's club.

"You suspecting a setup?" Raider, our VP, asks.

"Yeah."

"Cops or robbery?" Rage asks.

Shrugging, I say, "Don't really know. All I know is something feels off."

"Aight, keep an eye on that. Whiz, switch up tonight's route a little bit," Anarchy orders.

Whiz bobs his thick, white hair, which looks as if it belongs on a man in his seventies, but he's half that.

"Got it, Prez," Whiz says.

"His last order, he sent some dude in to pick it up. Not even sure who the fucker was, and when I refused, Cappellacci was pissed. Told him to never send someone to me blind again."

Anarchy shakes his head. "I don't like this shit. Why the fuck is he changing his normal guy?"

Shrugging, I reply, "That's what I'm saying. None of this shit's making sense."

"You think Cappellacci's trying to weaken us?" Rage asks.

Anarchy shakes his head. "Not thinking that, but I don't know what the fuck he's thinking. Just be ready to roll tonight, boys."

They give him updates on that while my mind turns back to Nova. I try to stay away so that I don't draw attention to myself or to her. If anyone sees me hanging around too much, they might draw a parallel between her and the MC.

It's only been a week since we reconnected, but I'm careful to only go to the store right at closing time or after. I circle around back to make sure that her car is out there and no one else's before I go to the front door and tap on it with my keys.

She lets me in, and we share coffee and conversation. It's a side of me that my brothers will never see. She and I have a past. She's the only one who knows the depth of my pain, the confused, hurt, and angry soul that I used to be. The one who simply wanted someone to love me, the boy who wanted and missed his mother and didn't understand why she didn't love him enough to keep him around.

I can't help but marvel at how Nova and I came to be in the same space and time again. So, all I want is to be around her. I mean, come on. What are the odds that two foster kids from Atlanta, GA, could both end up in Northern California in the seaside town of Smokey Ridge? Whereas I landed straight here, she's come by way of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"Alright, fellas. We'll be ready to roll out in a couple of hours. Everyone knows what to do?" Anarchy asks, glancing around and checking each of us.

We all nod or mutter our agreement.

I'm just ready for the night to end so I can see Nova again.

* * *

Shit is tenser than a muh'fucka. Although Raider got us an invite to Cappellacci's party, the security team is acting shady as hell.

We've all been patted down, but these dumb fucks are asking us to get rid of our guns.

"Not doing that. Cappellacci didn't say we had to come unarmed," Anarchy says.

"No one's allowed in the club with guns. That's just it," says one of the guards.

"Maybe you might wanna bring him out," Cannon says, stepping beside Anarchy with an intimidating demeanor.

I mean, these are some big guys, and I'm not so small myself, but I don't think any of them want to take on Cannon.

He looks like the incredible fucking Hulk minus the green and bad haircut.

"We're not disturbing Mr. Aiello," the other security guy grunts.

"Hey, I received a personal invitation from him. I don't think he'll take too kindly to you turning guests away," Raider says.

"What he won't take kindly is me not enforcing his rules," the blonde says.

There's a little more arguing before Phantom steps up. While I don't quite see what happens, I see Phantom make a

quick move that stuns the first guard. As soon as the other guard pulls his gun, my brothers and I are ready with ours.

I aim my gun at his head, Raider aims his gun at the other side, and Anarchy has his gun aimed under the man's chin.

“Enjoy yourself, gentlemen,” he grinds out.

Phantom releases the other guard and steps inside, and we all follow him. The club is crowded, the music is loud, and sexy bodies are everywhere. Most of the women are scantily clad, and if they're not grinding on the dance floor, they're grinding on someone's lap in a corner.

They're not much different than the Roses, who are currently on the road with the Ol' Ladies and most of the other brothers. As we walk by, a table of six women eyes us closely, licking their lips, smiling, twirling their hair, and everything else they can do to get our attention.

If the banner one woman is wearing around her body is to be believed, they're having a bachelorette party. But all of them, including the potential bride, look like they're ready to ride us as soon as we sit down.

“Gotta think that shit was too fucking easy,” Cannon mumbles just ahead of me.

“Yeah, it was,” Raider agrees.

“Think you might be needing this, bro,” Cannon says, reaching back to hand Phantom's gun to him.

“You think?” Phantom sneers.

He's pissed, and I can't say I blame him. He wants to be anywhere but here tonight, and we all know how he feels about human trafficking. Attending this party and pretending to be a part of it goes against everything we believe.

"Phantom, keep a grip no matter what the fuck you see. Got me?" Anarchy is tense and shooting daggers at Phantom, but it doesn't seem to faze him.

"I said I was cool," Phantom gripes.

A mid-sixties Italian guy with salt and pepper hair, Martin Cappellacci considers himself a ladies' man. It's not because of his looks but more related to his connections.

"Gentlemen, glad you could make it," he says.

I find myself wanting to wipe that smug grin from his face. I'm sure I'm not the only one.

"Had a bit of trouble at the door," Anarchy says. "Our guys took care of it."

Those words cause that smile to slip for a moment. "Yes, saw that on the camera," he says, glaring at Phantom.

"Would you gentlemen like drinks?" one of two brunettes asks.

They're wearing nothing at all but holding a tray of drinks in front of them. Before any of us can answer, Martin Cappellacci is quick to answer.

"No, these men will be joining me in the VIP room. They'll get drinks there. Gentlemen," Martin says.

We look out of place among the men in dress suits or business casual attire with our jeans, hoodies, Henleys, lumberjack shirts, or tees and our cuts and biker boots.

Martin unlocks a frosted glass door. The atmosphere is a lot more relaxed and chill on the other side of the door, with softer music.

Small groups of people congregate on black and blue leather couches, armchairs, and chaise lounges.

“What would you gentlemen like to drink?” Martin asks after we’re seated.

“Whatcha got?” Mayhem asks.

“Whatever your pleasure is. Pills. Powder. Leaves.”

“Alcohol,” Cannon sneers.

“Whatever pleases you,” Martin answers.

“We’ll defer to your selection,” Anarchy says.

I can’t help but snicker at Anarchy’s word choice, and he glares at me.

“Bring a couple of bottles of Paradis Imperial,” Martin says to a woman who appeared seemingly from nowhere. “I didn’t think the Disciples were into anything more than arms and pharmaceuticals.”

“We’ve got a few side hustles. Those are just our primary sources,” Anarchy answers. “Besides, Phantom, our treasurer, is always looking for opportunities to expand our business. Says this is the hottest market going now.”

Martin seems fixated on Phantom when he responds, and though he's seen Phantom at the dispensary on a few occasions, they've never interacted. It's me he trusts, not Phantom, because he doesn't know him. And like most people, he assumes Phantom's out of place in our MC because he's of mixed Asian and Caucasian descent.

Business talks commence while drinks are poured, and I do my best to look relaxed, taking in the scenery. My mind briefly turns to Nova, and I can't help but think the women who will be sold here tonight are much like her. Someone's sister, daughter, friend, girlfriend and so on. It sickens me to know that these men and women, too, can so callously participate in the skin trade.

It's not long before the show starts, and we see the first in a string of drugged girls stepping out to parade in nothing more than thongs and high heels.

None of them are able to focus on what's happening around them from the dazed, distant look in their eyes. The men treat them as nothing more than cattle, if even that decent, as they smack their asses. The degradation cranks up a few notches, and Anarchy has to warn Phantom to calm down.

He's gonna blow it if he's not careful.

I make my way around the room as more girls are brought out and begin to converse with them to see just how high they are.

“End Game.”

I turn away, assessing Martin Cappellacci as he assesses Phantom. Although he's called my name, it's not me that he's watching.

“What's with your friend?”

“Which one?” I ask nonchalantly.

“The one that you do business with. I don't trust him. Why does he seem so on edge?” Martin asks, stroking his beard.

“Maybe because he is.”

“Why?”

Shrugging, I say, “Look, Martin. If this thing goes smoothly, the MC stands to become very profitable from this business.”

“As will my organization.”

“Correct. On the other hand, if shit doesn't turn out the way that it should, then it's gonna come back and bite him in the ass. After all, he's our Treasurer and the one responsible for overseeing the management of our businesses and funds. He suggested we take on this new venture. So, if shit goes down, if the MC gets into trouble, loses money behind this, or fuck up our connections with you guys, it's his ass that's on the line. He treads carefully whenever it comes to doing business.”

“As he should.”

“Right. So, that's why he's moving carefully and analyzing everything because it's his ass that Anarchy and Raider will hold over the fire.”

“Why my organization, though? If he doesn’t know or trust me, why would he lead them in this direction?”

I can hear the suspicion in his voice.

“He didn’t. He only suggested that we get into the skin trade.”

“Who suggested me?”

“I did.”

Turning his gaze in my direction, he asks, “And how did you come to know about it?”

“Come on, let’s be honest, Martin. I’m no fool. We’ve been doing business for a long time. I know what you’re into. Andres Garcia, your old friend, had loose lips. He quite often talked about it. So, when I heard Phantom suggest us going this route, I figured there was no better person to get in bed with on this than you. We work with the Aiello family already, and you and I do business on a smaller scale. Why not keep it in-house?”

Slowly, Martin nods and says, “Makes sense.”

When he walks away and heads back to Anarchy, I blow out a sigh of relief. Perhaps he bought my story after all.

Time ticks by slowly as Anarchy and Raider make negotiations to purchase one of the girls from Martin. I don’t know how long they plan to play this game because there’s no way that the MC can save all these girls by buying them from Martin. Surely, they’ve got something else planned.

And though the night is long, when we finally get away, I don't want to head back to the bunkhouse with my brothers. I need time and space to clear my mind of the bullshit I saw tonight.

Yet, as we come up on the cut to the compound, I glance at the time on my cockpit and make the turn with my brothers.

It's just after two in the morning. At some point, I'd completely lost track of time and never bothered to text, letting her know that I couldn't make it.

CHAPTER 3

End Game

I watch as she drags her bag further up her arm and then holds her head down while she chuckles. Nova was always a beautiful girl. Now she's an amazing woman. The thin girl with the long legs that went on forever and barely budding breasts has developed curves that are as sinful as the crimes my MC commits.

Her auburn hair still has those same thick ringlets that frame her oval-shaped face. Where it once used to hang to her waist, she's cut it to just at her breasts. Those light-green eyes still sparkle with delight and intellect when something pleases or intrigues her, but they hold a pearl of deeper, profound wisdom than they once held when she was just an innocent and precocious but depressed girl.

Nova's smile can brighten the darkest day, turning a monsoon into a brilliantly sunny day with rainbows in the sky. Her long limbs no longer give her a lanky look, but her body has filled out nicely from her high, pert, and full breasts to her curvy hips and round, tight ass.

"Thought you were caught up again," she says as I take a step up to her.

"That was a one-off. It couldn't be helped. Do I look like a man who would regularly miss our nightly coffee dates?" I ask as I spread my arms out wide.

She folds her arms over her chest and eyes me up and down. "Dates? Is that what we're doing?"

“Not sure what you want to call it. All I know is that I look forward to them.”

“So do I. Funny...”

“What’s that?”

“Wouldn’t expect to hear a man that wears these things speaking the way that you do,” she says, touching one of the patches on my cut.

For the first time, I feel unclean and uncomfortable about what I do in the MC. I’ve always been proud of my role in the MC and my brotherhood, but Nova makes me rethink some things.

I stayed in trouble as a teen, and she was accustomed to it, but she always wanted better for me. In some respects, I feel as if I’ve failed her in that too.

“This has nothing to do with whether I show up for you or not.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, instantly feeling guilty as I think about missing last night because of the club run or the annual Dallas trip that’s coming up in a few days. “You still want to go inside and get that coffee?”

“No.”

Disappointment fills my insides, but I put on a smile anyway as I try to hide my feelings. “You’ve got another date so soon?”

She laughs.

“No. I don’t have another date. However, I am tired, and I do want to get home.”

I nod. “Okay...so see you tomorrow at the same time?”

“I was kind of hoping that I’d see you in a little while.”

Nova laughs at the confusion on my face and says, “Follow me home. I can whip up something to eat for us really quick, and we can have coffee out on my front porch and listen to the ocean. Wasn’t that always something we dreamt of?”

“Yeah. It was,” I say, thinking back to simpler times.

She looks sad, so I change the subject.

“Ahh, you’ve got a cottage on the ocean. Bookstore’s doing better than I thought,” I say, glancing at the building behind her.

“Not quite. Well, I hope to say that one day, but no. That’s all thanks to my divorce settlement.”

“Well, if he had to be a fool, he might as well pay for his foolishness, huh?”

“My thoughts exactly,” she says, winking and moving around me to her car.

Following her, I hop on my bike once again with a curious beating in my chest that doesn’t feel like my normal heartbeat.

* * *

She truly meant it when she said coffee and dinner. In no time at all, she’d made roast beef sandwiches, a Caesar salad, and coffee. We’re sitting on the back porch overlooking the beach on our second cup of coffee.

It was a simple meal, but with the right company, it was perfect.

“Smokey Ridge is a long way from Santa Fe, and Santa Fe’s a long way from Georgia. How’d you get to Santa Fe?” I ask her.

“Nothing as exciting as marriage number one. But several dinner dates, romantic evenings, and a marriage proposal led me there. Will proposed to me, and then six months later, he mentioned that he’d been offered a position as chair of cardiology at a hospital in Santa Fe. We hadn’t married yet, so I could have said yes or no. I thought it was an exciting opportunity, and since I had nothing holding me back, I accepted and agreed to the move.”

“You get married there?”

“No. We married seven months after his proposal and held our wedding in Atlanta because he still had friends and family there. We moved to Santa Fe two weeks after our wedding.”

“No children?”

“Honestly, that’s the one thing we both agreed on throughout the marriage. Neither of us wanted children for various reasons. I learned that he was a selfish bastard who didn’t want kids because his ego was so big. Will wanted me to himself, my attention, and everything else. He didn’t want to share his money, his woman, or the attention from the world with anyone but himself. Eventually, I realized that was why he ‘handpicked’ me. He loved the idea that I didn’t have a family or many friends. Being solely dependent on him was exactly what he wanted.”

“Something’s wrong with that picture.”

“Damn right, it was. Moving to Sante Fe only underscored that fact. It allowed him to do all the dirt he wanted without any witnesses, his family’s judgment, or me being able to run home to family and friends. Or so he thought. For the first few years of our marriage, I didn’t work. I spent time focusing on my art, always trying to improve it. Will would encourage me to keep working at it until I got better, and I would listen but always discouraged that I was never getting better. Until a friend of his visited us, and his wife said that I should consider an art showing.”

“You always did have an eye for art. I remember how you could sit on that porch for hours drawing everything you saw...the neighbor’s dog chasing the kids, the mailman talking too long with Mrs. Spencer, Mr. Calhoun coming home drunk and falling up the stairs.”

She laughs, and I swear it sounds like the most beautiful thing my ears have heard in a long damn time.

“You remembered that?”

“I remembered most things about those years.”

Her gaze turns down, and her smile slips. “Even...”

“Yeah. But we’re not there anymore, Nova, so don’t let those dark times infringe on the good ones. So, why’d you divorce the asshole other than him being just that?” I ask, lifting my ass from the chair a little to pull a cigarette pack from my back pocket.

I open the box and shake one out, lighting it up as she stares at me.

“Sorry. You mind if I smoke?”

“No, Kai. Not at all. I was just thinking, I remember the first time you learned to smoke. Almost killed yourself.”

“Yeah, still killing my damn self with these things,” I say, pulling it away from my lips and looking at the lit end before sticking it back in my mouth again.

“Will and I divorced because I realized that I deserved better. I didn’t have to keep putting up with his cheating and his gaslighting me. It didn’t matter if I lost everything, freedom and peace of mind was better than putting up with his shit.”

“How long was he cheating before you gave up?”

“We were married for nine years, and I swear, Kai, he had to have cheated for at least five of those years. I only found out about it in the last two years. By that time, I was fed up with his disparaging comments about my art, my hair, and anything else he could think of. He doted on me the first few and then grew tired of me like an old toy. The emotional abuse was more than I could take, and one day, I woke up and remembered that I have to love myself.”

“Did the bastard ever put his hands on you?”

“Hell no! I would’ve been out the door a lot quicker if he had.”

I narrow my eyes through the smoke.

“No, Kai. He never did,” she emphasizes.

I nod.

“What happened with marriage number one? You mentioned that getting to Santa Fe wasn’t as exciting as marriage number one.”

She laughs. “We were drinking with friends one night on an overnight camping trip. Someone dared us to do it, and the next morning, we all climbed in the friend’s truck and headed for the local city hall and made it happen. You should’ve seen the ragtag bunch of us in the truck with shorts, t-shirts, tanks and muddy boots. We were a motley crew, but we were so excited. After we left city hall, somebody went into the back of a store across the street and found a box, while someone else went inside and bought a marker, some string, and some cans of fruit. We tore the box and wrote “Just Married” on one of the pieces.

She starts laughing again, and though I’m jealous as hell of her marrying someone else, especially in the years I was still missing her, I’m glad this memory brings joy to her heart.

“We sat in the back of that damn truck under the hot sun eating that canned fruit until we had five empty cans and then strung them to the back of the truck.”

She starts giggling again, and this time, tears spring to her eyes. When she stops, she looks at me as her smile slowly dies from her lips but not her eyes. I almost don’t want to ask the next question.

“What happened?”

“We divorced over irreconcilable differences after three years. We had no business getting married so young and straight out of foster care. He needed someone to care for and protect to make him feel like a man, and I needed someone to love me and take care of me. It wasn’t enough,” she says simply with a shrug.

“Did you end on amicable terms?”

Laughing, she asks, “You always did pull a word out of your ass that no one expected you to use. To answer your question, yes, we did. It was best for both of us. He moved to Wyoming with his grandfather, and I stayed where I was until Will came along several years later.”

“Why hadn’t he lived with his grandfather instead of foster care?”

“Dylan said that his grandfather wasn’t well enough to care for him. So, when he was old enough, he went out and took care of his grandfather.”

“You stay in touch?”

“At first, for a few years. His grandfather eventually passed, but he stayed out there working on a ranch and eventually married again. I lost contact after that. What about you?”

“Told ya.”

“No. Kids?”

Laughing, I say, “You can pretty much guess my reason.”

“For the same reason, Dylan didn’t want any, I’m guessing. His parents were on drugs really bad, too, although he wasn’t in the system as long as you were.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you didn’t have any with Will.”

“Scared. Never wanted to love anyone as much as I loved my parents and then lose them. Scared that if anything ever happened to me, my kids might have to go through the same thing that I did.”

“Can’t live your life based on fear, Nova.”

“You did.”

“No. I lived it based on logic. I knew my mom was fucked up, never knew what fuckoff might be my dad, and with my twisted mind didn’t want to pass any of those genes off to anyone. It’s safer that way. ‘Sides, I’m a selfish bastard.”

“No, you’re not. You never were. You always put my needs before yours.”

“You were a puny kid that was scared and lost and easy prey. You needed someone to look out for you.”

Shrugging, she says, “Whatever the logic, you’d apply it to your kids, too.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” I say, getting up and jogging down the porch steps to crush my cigarette under my foot.

I walk out to the water’s edge and toss the cigarette out into the ocean.

I hear her footsteps behind me.

“Thank you,” she says softly, stepping up beside me.

“For?”

“Back then. I never told you how much it meant to me.”

I crook my arm over her shoulders and press a kiss to the top of her head. She was my saving grace, too. She taught me how to give a damn again.

CHAPTER 4

Nova

I'm reviewing a list of applicants for independent authors who want to sell their books in my bookstore. I've always been an avid reader, and there are so many talented authors who people haven't taken a chance on because they're unaware of them.

I want to do my small part in changing that and making sure a variety of authors have the opportunity to showcase their works before new audiences.

Some of the applications are from well-known authors. While I don't want to ignore those, I am trying to find some who are lesser known. Those will be the ones that I display at the front of the store and around the checkout center.

The others will be further back in the store because I know that people will automatically look for them. If they don't see them, they'll ask for them, and we can point them in the right direction. Hopefully, placing the lesser-known authors in the front will generate interest, and people will read the blurbs and maybe take that leap of faith.

A knock sounds at my door, but I'm deep in concentration, and while I know I should answer, I'm having trouble pulling away from reading the blurb of one of the newer authors.

"Delivery for you," Briana calls out through my partially opened door with another knock.

Looking up from my computer, I struggle to maintain my composure at the bouquet of orange buttercups in her hand.

“For me?”

“Yeah, that’s what the card says. Not that I opened it to read it, but your name is typed on the outside,” she says, tapping the card attached to the bouquet.

I stand and force a smile as she brings them to me.

I hope these brighten your day the way you always brighten mine.

XOXO

“Who are they from?” she asks when I finish reading the card.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t say.” It would be easy to assume they’re from Kai, but today isn’t the first time that I’ve received flowers from an anonymous sender. This has been happening for the last three weeks as I’ve been working to get the store together for our grand opening. They’re always different flowers, but always orange, my favorite color. Also, the flowers are usually sent through different courier services and different floral boutiques. Although I’ve called them all, none of them seems to know who my sender is. The person orders online and then pays with a prepaid Visa card.

I seriously doubt it’s Kai because I’ve never known him to be the sweet and romantic type. Besides, he only recently found me.

“Ohhh, boss lady has a secret admirer. How cool is that?” she coos, making me blush.

Shaking my head, I reply, “Don’t you have inventory to log.”

She laughs and says, “Mm-hmm. I may as well get back to it because one of us needs to be getting some work done today.”

“Just because I received flowers doesn’t mean that I can’t get any work done.”

“Mm-hmm. Good luck with that,” she says, waving and walking out of my office.

I shake my head and smile, still holding the flowers that came with a beautiful vase. Walking to the window on the right side of my office, I place the vase there and admire the flowers for a moment.

I want to call Kai, but I saw him and an Asian man hop on their motorcycles about an hour ago. I haven’t heard them return, and the way that they peeled out of the parking lot, I’m sure there was something important happening. I know that he’s in a motorcycle club and that he owns and runs the dispensary a few doors down, but other than that, I’m not sure what kind of stuff he gets into.

As much as I don’t want to think about it, my guess is that it probably has something to do with drugs. I bite my lip thinking about that, hoping and praying that he doesn’t get into trouble. Chuckling under my breath, I think about the irony of my life.

The daughter of a teacher and Marine, I went from being a foster child in my late teens struggling with depression to a surgeon’s wife, and now falling for a biker dude. Like, what the entire hell? I’ve made some type of interesting journey on the road of life.

My heart ramps up when I think about seeing Kai tonight. He usually drops by when the store closes for coffee and conversation.

I don't want my staff to know that I've been hanging with Kai, so I'm glad he comes after the store closes. It's not because I'm ashamed of him because I'm not, but it's as though he and I both have this unspoken promise to keep it a secret that we've been spending so much time together lately.

I don't know why he's keeping it a secret from his "brothers," as he calls them. I just know that he is. As for me, I keep it a secret because it isn't a secret what my staff thinks of his MC. I don't know my neighbors well enough to talk about him with them, so I keep it to myself. Besides, if anyone had anything negative to say about Kai, I would take it personally.

I owe that man my life. He literally saved me from death. Tears fill my eyes when I think of the past.

"Nova? Nova?"

I heard the voice coming at me, fighting its way through a deep, thick fog that cocooned me. The fear and the concern didn't rattle my nerves or even penetrate the thick cloud around me. I was determined to go through with it because it was the only hope that I had.

My fingers shook, and my hand trembled as I held the rope. Stepping onto the chair, I looped the thick cord around my neck and jumped off the chair.

"Nooooovvva!"

Arms wrapped tightly around me, shoving me up. I fought against them, trying to surge forward, but my strength was no match for his. I clawed at his hand as he worked to tug the noose over my head.

When he finally pulled it free, our bodies slammed onto the dirty garage floor with a loud thug and lots of pain.

“Let me go!” I cried between choking coughs.

“No!” he grunted in my ear.

His grip on me tightened, and I collapsed into a bucket of tears.

“Why, Nova? Doncha know that you’re all I got in this world?”

Those words only made me cry harder. Ripped something inside of me to shreds while healing something deeper that I didn’t know was broken.

“It hurts, Kai. It hurts so badly.”

“I know,” he muttered in my hair, and for the first time, I could tell that he was crying too. “I know.”

We laid on that floor for what felt like hours that afternoon. I cried, ranted, pleaded, slept, and cried some more. We talked and cried together. Everyone was at work and school, and by the time we got up, the others were home. Still, I didn’t feel like going into the house with anyone else.

I just knew they would be able to see the shame of what I’d done...or tried to do written on the lines of my face or the possible line around my neck where I’d tried to hang myself.

Kai said there was no line, but I still wondered if the others might be able to tell.

So, we stayed in the garage all that evening, too, until the sun went down.

“You scared me,” he grunted gruffly.

“Nothing scares you, Kai.”

“Everything scares me, Nova. Sometimes I get tired of being scared.”

“Is that why you act the way that you do? Always getting into trouble.”

Shrugging, he replied, “Partly. Part of it is I’m tired of adults’ shit. Seems all the adults around us always telling us what we need to do, and ain’t none of ‘em got their shit together either.”

I nodded.

“You gonna tell Mary and Art?”

He cleared his throat as he traced a line in the dirt with the toe of his shoe. We’d moved from the garage to the swings in the backyard under the large oak tree.

“No. I’m not telling ‘em shit.”

“They might...they might try to put me in the hospital.”

“Said I’m not telling ‘em shit.”

“The others might.”

He turned to look at me, staring at me the way no one ever had. I often felt that people didn’t see me anymore, that I’d

become invisible after my parents' passing. It seemed as if I didn't matter to anyone anymore, so it was easier to just fade into the background.

"What happened this afternoon...we're never talking about that again. You understand? That was a bad mistake on your part. You were just feeling low and...lonely, but I promise you I ain't never gonna leave you lonely again, Nova. You understand that?"

I nodded.

"You're my girl. Mines to protect. Mines to look after. Mines to love. Kay?" Kai asked, brushing his knuckles against mine as I gripped the rope on the swing tighter.

"Yours?"

A smile crossed his lips and then slipped away. Frowning, he asked, "You do wanna be my girl, doncha?"

"Like...Adrian and Matt at school?" I asked shyly about a popular senior couple at school.

I'd first met Kai in a foster home at thirteen. I was the new kid, and he was always in trouble. One day, we became friends when we both got into trouble for getting home from school late. He'd had detention, and I'd been bullied by some kids all day at school. One of the girls and her friends threatened to jump me after school. I'd snuck out of our last period early and hidden in the woods by the playground until pretty much everyone had left, even the teachers.

I'd walked home alone that afternoon and came in just as Kai was getting lectured by Mark, our foster dad at the time.

He'd turned that fury my way, and I'd been placed on punishment too, not allowed to leave the room except to go to school and to use the bathroom. I even had to take my meals in my room. Kai's room was next to mine, and we started talking through the vent system when he realized he could hear me crying. We'd become good friends but lost touch when he was sent away to another foster home.

Meeting up two years later was a godsend. I'd nurtured a crush on him since our first time together in a foster home, so hearing him say what he'd said just now made me wonder if it was just my imagination or if he liked me too.

"Yeah, like Adrian and Matt at school," he said, smiling at me and brushing his knuckles over my face.

Leaning forward on his swing, he bumped mine shyly a couple of times before he ducked his head around the rope and pressed a kiss to my forehead. I closed my eyes, basking in the feel of his soft lips on my skin. When I finally opened my eyes, he was staring at me, and then he smiled and chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"You."

"Why?"

"You just are. But you're my girl, so I'm okay with that."

I smiled, loving the way that it sounded being called his girl. He leaned in again, and this time, he brushed his lips softly against mine. My eyes closed, loving the way that it felt and not wanting the moment to stop. But it did all too quickly.

“Kai? Nova?” Tara, one of the other kids at our foster home, called from the back door.

We jumped apart so quickly, but she’d seen us. She came flying across the yard and stopped a couple of feet in front of us with her hands planted firmly on her hips. Tara was a junior at our high school, where Kai and I were sophomores.

“Not sure what y’all doing out here, but Mary just called everybody to dinner. She’s been looking for you two all afternoon. Here,” Tara said, handing me a worn copy of To Kill A Mockingbird.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“You’d better act like you were out in the garage studying for an English test tomorrow. She’ll believe it,” Tara said.

“Thanks,” I muttered, smiling at her.

“Thanks, Tara,” Nova said. “I’ll come through the front door and tell her I just came from a game of basketball at the court. I’ll be in there in about five or ten minutes. You two go in,” Kai said.

“You sure?” I asked, getting off the swing.

Winking, he said, “Go in. I’ll be fine.”

Tara and I walked to the back porch as Kai walked to the side of the house, but not before I saw the tip of his cigarette lighting up. He stole cigarettes from Art, our stepfather, all the time. He only smoked when he was stressed, though.

I felt bad that I’d scared him earlier, but I was thankful to still be here. Thankful that I had Kai watching over me and

*amazed at how different I felt than I'd felt earlier in the day:
hopeless.*

With a glance up at the sky, I blew a kiss to my parents, believing once again, for the first time in a long time, that they were watching over me again. They'd sent Kai to protect me.

CHAPTER 5

Nova

“Hey, you,” I greet when Kai walks through the door.

“Hey yourself, gorgeous,” he says.

“What you got there?” I ask, pointing at the bags in his hand.

“Country fried steaks and gravy, green beans, mashed potatoes, pork chops, and tomato green pepper omelets.”

“Who’s eating all of that?” I ask, laughing.

“I remember somebody used to have a big appetite, especially when they were stressed out. Used to pack it away and didn’t keep a single pound,” Kai says.

“Dude! This ain’t that same body,” I laugh, walking from behind the register to lock the door.

“Looks just as good...actually better,” he says, eyeing me up and down and sending a warm, fiery glow through me.

“Thank you, but that’s thanks to watching what I eat and working my ass out every morning.”

He whistles. “It’s a great-looking ass, if I do say so myself.”

I blush and shake my head. “Just take that meal to my office so we can pig out. It’s my secret, so don’t tell anyone,” I say, laughing as I turn the final lock in place.

When I meet him in my office, he’s already spread the food out on the table by the couch.

“I was always good at keeping secrets. Not sure if you remember that or not.”

“You were good at many things, Kai,” I say, cutting into the country-fried steak.

He nods. “Tried to be. So, what happened after I left?” he asks, changing the subject.

I groan at how delicious the food is and say, “I’m sorry.”

He smirks and keeps chewing his food. He then says, “Always did change the subject too.”

“Yeah, I guess I was pretty good at that,” I admit.

“Never said ‘good.’ Just that you always did it.”

I laugh. “Whatever.”

“So, what happened?” he repeats.

I sigh, set my fork down, and stare at him.

“Um...about three months after you left, a new kid came. Dylan. Kinda like you, he was always getting in trouble, but he kept running away, too and being brought back. The other kids were mean and told him he was making the house miserable.”

I watch as Kai chews his food slowly. He was a bad boy, too, but the other kids adored him.

“I started taking up for him the way you’d done for me.”

He nods and keeps staring.

“We developed a bond, Kai. He became my only friend and my confidant, and I was the same for him.”

“My replacement.”

I reach out and touch the back of his hand, drawing my fingers over his knuckles. “Never. No one could ever replace you, Kai. You were my first love. I just...I was alone and against Mary. Although she did eventually chill out on me once you were gone. I don’t think she ever set her sights on him, though.”

“Dylan.”

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head.

I close the lid on my box of food because I’ve lost my appetite.

“Um...he got a job at a local warehouse and an apartment a couple of months before my eighteenth birthday. He’d turned eighteen four months before me and left the McLeods, but we still saw each other. He’d meet me at school, and I’d sneak out or skip school to be with him until I got caught. After that, I was homeschooled until I turned eighteen. I hadn’t graduated yet, but I moved in with him and finished school. Then you know the rest. We married.”

He nods. “S’okay, Nova. You needed to do what you had to do for you.”

“I didn’t have any way to take care of myself, and he was all that I had in this world. Didn’t know where you were.”

“In county serving a year for receiving stolen property.”

“I didn’t know. She never told us that.”

“What were you told?” he asks before eating more of his food.

I pull my feet up on the couch and turn sideways, facing him.

“That you’d gotten a job and got on your feet and that you were no longer in town. She said that you were doing good for yourself and wanted to pave a new road, cut your losses, and leave your past behind.”

“Hmm...” he hums.

“Maybe she was trying to paint you in a positive light and give the rest of us hope. You were her golden boy for a while. She probably didn’t want the rest of us to look at you in a bad light,” I suggest, though deep inside, I don’t believe it.

“Yeah. Right. She didn’t give a damn about nobody but herself. Not even her husband. She could’ve cared less about what the fuck y’all thought about me. Mary McLeod said what she said for one reason only. She wanted you to give up hope on me ever returning for you. Wanted you to forget about me.”

“I couldn’t do that, Kai.”

“No, but you did do at least part of what she wanted.”

I look up at him, and he stares at me, chewing slowly. When he finishes, he says, “You went on with your life.”

“I had no choice.”

“You owe me no explanation, darlin’. I was the one that went out there and got my ass in trouble, knowing that I was already on probation. I was the one that ended up in County

and refused to write letters because I was ashamed of the stupid shit I'd gotten myself into."

"What happened?"

I hate that all these years went by, and I had no clue what went on with him.

He heaves a sigh before he starts explaining. "I was hanging out with Tommy Barrow and Ricky Haughton one night, shooting the shit, getting high...same ole stuff we always did. Garrett Eaves came through and asked if any of us wanted to make some quick money. I jumped at the idea first. He asked me to pick up a package for him at one location and drop it off at the next. Figured that was easy as shit, nothing could go wrong."

He sniffs and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I want to pull him back and force him to look at me because it seems that he's still ashamed of it after all this time. Yet, if those patches all over his cut are to be believed and if what my staff and neighbors say is true, then he's done a whole lot worse than what he went to the county for back in Atlanta, Georgia, a couple of decades ago.

"I picked up the package from the address he'd given me over on the southside. Hopped on the highway and dropped it off on the west side. When I finished, I was returning the car back to Garrett. He said it was a friend of his. About a couple of streets away from my destination, cops pulled up behind me and flashed their lights."

He shakes his head as though reliving the memory and glances over his shoulder at me.

“My dumb ass felt relieved because I knew I’d just gotten rid of the package, and I didn’t have shit on me ‘cept some cigarettes.”

“What was in the package?” I foolishly ask.

He slants a gaze my way and says, “You know what we were into back then.”

“Crack?”

He nods.

“Anyway, I thought I was good, so I wasn’t worried about it. Punk ass cop asked for my license and registration. I gave him what I had and thought I was home free. Next thing I know, I’m being pulled from the car and slammed against it. Hands pulled behind my back and read my Miranda rights.”

“Why?”

“The car was stolen. Garrett lied about it, belonging to a friend. It belonged to some crackhead he’d been selling to. Guy said he could use it for a day, but at that point, Garrett had the car for three days. I was the idiot driving it at the time, though I didn’t steal it, so that’s what I went down for.”

“Couldn’t you just explain that you didn’t know?”

“Doesn’t work like that, darlin’.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, but I’m glad that you didn’t get busted with drugs on you. You’d have been gone for a lot longer than what you were.”

“Yeah. I know. I’ve thought about that a lot over the years, too.”

“So, California. How’d you end up here?”

Turning his lips down, he leans back against the couch again. I get a whiff of his cologne, and I want to snuggle up to him, but I don’t.

“Got out of county and had nothing and no one to turn to. A friend of mine let me crash on his couch for a couple of weeks, and another guy gave me a little product to sell on the streets. Made just enough to get a bus ticket from Atlanta to LA.”

“What was waiting for you here?”

“A job at a local mechanic’s shop. The guy whose couch I was crashing on at the time, Steve, had an uncle, Dice, who was looking for someone he could train and wouldn’t complain. Steve told him about me, and he said if I could get a bus ticket out there, I’d have a job and a place to stay. I sold some weed for a while to get me a bus ticket and a few dollars. Took the risk of traveling out there and found that what he said was true. He gave me a room over the shop to stay in for about a year. It worked out for him because he wanted someone on the grounds, and I needed a place to sleep and a job.”

“That was decent, but how did that lead to the motorcycle club?”

“Dice was a member. I first started hanging around to get a feel for things, and so they could get a feel for me. Eventually, I became a prospect and then a fully patched member,” he says, shrugging. “Only family I’ve ever known.”

Kai's mother was a drug addict, and he'd spent most of his life in and out of foster homes. She'd get her act together for a while and bring him back home, only to spazz out on him again. Whenever that would happen, he'd be back in foster care or group homes.

It all changed when she finally OD'd on meth. He was in the system for good at that point. His mother's family didn't want to be bothered with him because they didn't really know him. They lived in a small Georgia town, and everyone worried that he would bring the same problems to their homes that she'd bought.

I met him not long after she died, and he had a lot of anger and aggression at that point, but not towards me.

"Seems like you couldn't ever catch a break," I say softly.

I get up, walk to my desk, and grab some hand-sanitizing wipes to clean my hands with.

"Neither could you."

I walk back around and prop my hip on the edge of my desk.

"Life was tough for a while there. When you left...I didn't know what to think or feel. I thought you'd come back for me, and when you didn't, I wondered if your feelings changed. Maybe you didn't love me the way that you thought you did, or maybe you'd met someone you cared for more than me."

"Never."

"All I know, Kai, is that something changed. I thought it was your feelings for me."

“Make no mistake about it, Nova. That never changed. I swear to God it didn’t,” he grunts.

My breath hitches in my throat as he stalks nearer to me. I don’t run because I can’t. I’m already pressed against my desk with nowhere to run.

Long tapered fingers stroke the column of my throat, and my eyes close. His touch is the same as it always was, burning a trail of fire along my column. It lights inside of my breasts and fans the embers throughout the nearby brushes of my heart, my belly, and between my thighs.

Kai’s head dips, and he sucks at the side of my neck, and the moan that slips from my throat doesn’t sound like me, but some horny, bold bitch that I don’t even know. My back arches, pressing against him as I grip the raw leather of his cut in my fingers, pulling him closer.

I turn my head as he sucks at my neck and find myself licking along the side of his neck, as well. The saltiness of his sweat mingles with the delicious coffee bean taste, creating a weird but welcome taste on my tongue.

My hands press under his cut to tug at his t-shirt until I pull it up, and my fingers rub across his nipples until they’re pebbled and hard like mine.

His fingers wrap in my hair, jerking my head back, and I stare into those beautiful pale blue eyes. Eyes that always assured me that everything would be okay.

Our mouths clamp together, and he crushes me, wounds me, leaving me breathless and hungry for more. While my

fingers remain on his nipples, his fingers move to my jeans, unbuttoning and unzipping them. I push forward to help him pull them over my hips and ass. And when his fingers find their way into my snatch and stroke me, I damn near lose my mind.

“Kai!” I hiss.

His strokes are gentle but quickly turn urgent as though his need to give me what I want can't be gratified quickly enough. I arch my hips forward as he fingers me, and my hips gyrate to meet his appeals for my release.

With a powerful grip, he grabs my jaw, turning me back to him and kissing me again. Hungrily and desperately. He doesn't let up as if he were giving me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and my life depended on it.

His other hand pumps me furiously and intentionally until I'm on the brink of an orgasm. Our open-mouthed kiss allows my moans and whimpers to escape.

“I need you, Kai! Right now!” I moan.

He lifts me and sits me on my desk, knocking several things over, and I don't give a damn. He can't get inside of me fast enough.

Kai's fingers continue working me over as he tries unsuccessfully with one hand to unbutton his jeans. I reach forward, disconnecting his hand from my pussy, and help him unbuckle his belt and then get his jeans open.

Reaching into his back pocket, he removes his wallet and looks for a condom.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in this game, but you’re prepared, aren’t you?” I ask lightly.

“Always. Sweetheart, I won’t lie to ya. I’m not the same guy you once knew. I fuck often, and it ain’t always the same broad. But I always use protection.”

As much as that should disgust me, it doesn’t. Not at the moment when he’s securing himself with protection. Once he’s finished, Kai grabs my ankles and pulls me toward the edge of the desk, snatching my jeans the rest of the way down my legs and off my body. When he shoves himself inside of me, it’s like a sweet release. A hiccup catches in my throat as I lose my breath.

He uses my thighs as leverage to shift me back and forth in powerful, fast slides as he thrusts hard and deeply inside of me every time I come to the edge. It feels good, raw, and fulfilling. This connection is just what I need and everything I need to run away from.

When he pulls me to the edge again this time, he holds me there, and I balance myself on my desk with the palms of my hands. For the first time, I’m grateful for the daily workout routine that I maintain, especially the chair squats, because although this is pleasurable, my abs and triceps are getting a powerful workout.

When the distance between us becomes too much for him to bear, he wraps his arms around me, cradling my ass and lifts me. The breath is knocked out of me as he bounces me on his dick, and all I can do is hold onto him with my fingers interlocked behind his neck.

My head drops back as my curls brush my back, tickling it and heightening the sensation of what he's giving me. Kai leans forward, nipping my chin with his teeth. I gasp in ecstasy and moan with delight when he drags those teeth to my covered breasts and tugs at my nipples through my tee shirt.

My fingers run across the sides of his shaved head, reaching up to tug at the longer, silken, dark brown strands on the top of his head. I won't let him move his mouth from my breast, enjoying the flood of heat that runs through my core with each nip of his teeth and every thrust of his cock.

I'm not a small girl, but I'm not a big girl either. The fact that he can hold me up, bouncing me with one hand while his other hand finds its way back inside of me alongside his dick, is a testament that he's in great shape.

He spins us around until he finds a free wall in my office, pressing my back against it. He stops writhing inside of me, and I'm still with my fingers still twisted in his soft hair.

"Never thought I could have this again," he says, staring at me before he kisses me with soft pecks.

His words, while welcome to any other woman, scare the hell out of me. They speak of things that cannot be, promises that cannot be fulfilled.

"You feel so good, Kai."

"You do, too."

"You're different, though."

"Everyone grows up at some point, Nova. No one remains the same."

“Thank heavens for that, huh?”

He starts plunging inside of me again, communicating his need and pleasure in a series of grunts. My legs tighten around him because although our connection is reminiscent of the past, I know that it cannot be our future.

He always felt good buried inside of me like this. He always made me feel that nothing could stop us, and this reminds me that I never wanted us to be disconnected. Only with Kai could I feel whole. Only with him could I feel complete. Until I wasn't.

He never knew, but I fell back into a dark place again after he left.

My salvation during that stint? Were all the wrong things that led me down the path of destruction. One that I'm just now emerging from.

I cannot afford to go down that dark path again if I were to lose him. And knowing everything that I know about him now, it would surely happen.

CHAPTER 6

End Game

She's so damn soft and wet, fitting perfectly around me. Being with Nova like this is like going home again. All I want is to be with her because she's the only one who completes me. She's the only one that knows Kai Donovan McGinnis in all his finery and still accepts me for who I am; the only one whose eyes I don't see judgment in after one of my famous fuck-ups.

Before the brotherhood of my MC, there was Nova. There was always Nova. No matter how many times I got in trouble, suspended for fighting, kicked out of group therapy, or spent the weekend in juvie until our foster parents could pick me up, she was there waiting.

We're still entwined in each other as I carry her back to the couch where our meal begins. I sit on the couch, and she's still straddling my dick, her legs on either side of me. As she tosses her head backward, I take one of her breasts in my mouth and feed on it. She has yet to pull her shirt off, but that doesn't stop me from enjoying her. I've pretty much soaked her shirt by sucking on her breasts.

Golden skin is so light, rich, and complex, like a rare bottle of Duncan Taylor Macallan single malt Scotch tastes smooth and soft, like vanilla and honey combined. Long, dark curls, the color of the finest bourbon that showcases blonde highlights in the sun, tumble over her shoulders and caress my knees.

Those glittering eyes that sparkle green and amber like a fire set in the forest pin me into place, telling me she wants, no needs more. The sunburst of her hazel eyes sparkles, drawing me deeper into their depths and manipulating me into giving her just what she wants.

My thrusts grow harder and deeper as she grinds down on me, lifting her tee-shirt up and offering me her uncovered breasts. Her arms tighten around my neck, pulling me back to feed on those purplish pink-hued nipples the color of Lilly Pilly berries but much sweeter. The more that I suck on them, the more she moans and the harder I grow.

Nova slides up and down my pole, dragging out my pleasure and making me want to beg her to give me what I need. She's like a fucking drug shot up in my veins that I can't come down from, and her body dances a sweet tango while her pitchy cadences convey the passion she's feeling.

My fingers find their way between us, and I pinch her clit, making her hiss as she jerks her head forward, pressing her forehead against mine.

“Damn it, Kai!”

“Does it feel good, Nova?”

“You know it does! Give me more. Now damn it!” she begs, jerking wildly all around me, her former choreography long forgotten.

One hand grabs her ass, kneading it like dough while I slide the fingers of my other hand inside of her, gliding along

my dick and coaxing her pussy to free what she's holding back.

"I'm not ready," she cries in a higher pitch.

My hand frees her ass, grabs the back of her head and pushes her forward and closer to me. Our kiss is a heated clash, a passionate argument full of affirmatives and negatives of the same debate. Her tongue avoids mine, then dashes back out to duel with mine. I suck at her tongue, her lips, and glide across her teeth.

Nova's moans are breathy and deep, and she bobs her head back once again when I release her from the kiss. She pushes me back against the couch and keeps her hand in the middle of my chest, forcing me to break the connection with her.

Slowly, she begins to rise and lower, biting her bottom lip and staring at me as if she dares me to look away. When did she become this beautiful, confident vixen?

The girl I remember was shy and unsure, constantly second-guessing herself and looking for approval even in sex. The one that's riding my dick hard and ready to put him away for the night is confident, persuasive, and eager to please herself...fuck me.

"Okay," she hisses, making me realize that I spoke those words aloud.

Nova rises high and slams back down on me, her ass smacking against my thighs. She grips the hem of her tee shirt in her teeth, and as she watches me watch her, a fire lights in her eyes.

There's something sexy as hell about her, with the tip of her tee-shirt clenched between her teeth while she rides my dick and gyrates her hips. I look down at her again and take note of the sparkling diamond piercing in her belly button.

I press my thumb there, and she slows her moves, her eyes growing darker, her mouth gaping open as she drops the hem of her shirt from her mouth. Slowly my finger trails from the piercing to her mound and then drops lower to finger her clit before slipping inside her pussy.

“Come on, Kai!” she screams.

“Just cream for me, baby,” I grunt as she loses breath now that I'm taking over once again.

She's powerless to ride me the way that I'm pumping inside of her.

“Come here,” I say, lifting her off me.

“Huh?”

“This is your loveseat,” I say before opening my mouth and wiggling my tongue.

She smiles bashfully at me, and I get a glimpse of the girl she used to be, but she takes my hand. I help her climb onto the couch, and then she straddles my face. I waste no time with small play but set about eating my meal, her ass spread wide and her pussy covering my nose and lips.

With one finger, I trail the line down her ass cheeks until it reaches her ass. She wiggles slightly, but I don't penetrate. Instead, I just massage her there until she relaxes.

Nova leans forward, pressing her hands against the wall behind me, and I brace her with my hands gripping her thighs. My head works tight, controlled circles while I suck up all the juices she emits—and clean my plate.

I don't let go until she's shaking and banging her fists against the wall. Only then do I allow her to get up, and when she climbs off, I stand up and turn her to face the back of the couch.

Grabbing one of her legs in the air and out to the side, I guide my dick inside of her folds and pump furiously, coaxing screams from her throat and cream from her pussy. She continues to give me more until my body tenses into one tight muscle.

My vision and hearing slowly dissipate. Bit by bit, the energy drains from me until I'm resting against her back.

Nova lowers her leg from my hold, and I wrap an arm around her midsection to keep us both from falling. Heaving breaths punctuate the silence as we both work to regain our composure, our bodies slick with sweat.

I pull Nova upright with me when I finally stand.

She heads to a little door to the right of the couch. I hear the water turn on as I grab tissues from the little plastic box on her desk to remove the condom.

When she steps back out, she says, "You can clean up in there."

I head to the door she just exited and take note of a toilet and sink. There's a glass cabinet across from the sink filled

with towels and washcloths.

I grab a washcloth and pump some soap from a dispenser onto it to wash myself up. When I glance into the mirror, I look at my face, the stubble on my jaws, and the beard and mustache that have grown since I last saw Nova years ago.

I look at the tattoos covering my neck, arms, and hands, and I wonder what she thinks of me now. My face is hardened compared to what it used to be. Gone are the soft, boyish looks of a kid who's had a rough life and is trying to look intimidating. In its place is a man who truly doesn't give a shit about what others think. A man who isn't constantly looking over his shoulders because he's confident in his powers and abilities as well as the protection of his brotherhood.

"You okay in there?" Nova calls.

I turn off the water and head back out of the restroom to where she's in her office. She's still sitting on the couch with her legs turned sideways and her feet pulled underneath her.

I take a seat on the couch beside her, and she glances up at me shyly.

"That was a workout for the week," she says, laughing nervously, and her hair falls forward into her face.

I push it back over her shoulders, tracing the line of her lips.

"We were always amazing together, Nova."

"Yeah...we were," she says in a breathless whisper.

“You don’t know how often I’ve thought about you over the years, thinking of all the things we could have accomplished if I hadn’t fucked up so badly.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Kai. Whatever is meant to be will be. I think it had to happen for you to grow up...me too. I’d always been so scared and immature that all I knew how to do was look for someone to depend on. You became that person for me.”

“Still that man. You should have been able to always rely on me, and I’m sorry you couldn’t when it mattered most.”

She reaches out and brushes her knuckles over the hair on my face before taking my hand in hers.

“No. I needed that more than you know. If you hadn’t gone away, Kai, not that I wanted trouble to come to you, but I would have never learned to stand on my own two feet. I wouldn’t have learned that deep inside, I was strong and I could overcome trials. I wouldn’t own this bookstore,” she says, looking around and smiling.

“That’s not true. Wasn’t it you that just said, ‘Whatever is meant to be will be?’ Then, discovering your strength, overcoming trials, and owning this bookstore would have all come in time. It may have come sooner. All I know is that the things you consider painful, your divorces, your moves, it all led you back to me. If those things hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be here now.”

I run my fingers over hers and then intertwine our hands again.

“Remember when I said earlier that I wouldn’t miss our coffee dates?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there’s this annual thing we do. It’s a trip that I take with my brothers every year for about a week. This year, we’re heading down to Dallas.”

“Sounds nice. When?”

I clear my throat. “In a few days.”

“Oh. Oh, okay,” she says, nodding.

“I mean, I know we just reconnected and all, but um...I would get out of it if I could.”

“Why’re you telling me this?”

“So, you’ll know where I am when you don’t see me for the next week. Don’t want you to think that I ghosted you after sex, not after this. I don’t plan on losing you again because of miscommunication,” I say, lifting our hands and brushing my lips over her knuckles.

She smiles sweetly and says, “My father used to have this saying. ‘Yǒu yuán qiān lǐ lái xiàng huì, wú yuán duì miàn bù xiàng féng.’”

“What does that mean?”

Nova’s father was Chinese, and her mother is black and white.

“It literally translates to ‘You will meet people who are thousands of miles away if it’s meant to be. Otherwise, you will never meet each other, although you live just next door.’ It

basically means that fate brings people together no matter how far apart they may be.”

“So, you’re saying you think that we were meant to be.”

“No,” she says, laughing. “I’m just saying that for whatever reason, we’re here in this space today, in the same town at the same time it was meant to be.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said that it means we were meant to be together, and I didn’t say that. Two totally different things. We could have been meant to be in the same space and time to save someone, save each other, or go to war together. Hell, I don’t know...it just doesn’t have to mean that we’re meant to be together.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, Nova.”

She pushes off the couch and walks toward her desk, hiding behind it. I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and watching her.

“No, that’s not it either.”

“You wanna tell me what it is instead of keep telling me what it ain’t?”

She breathes out a deep breath, looks at me with a compassionate smile, and purses her lips together as she walks from behind her desk. I stand and smooth a finger over her eyebrows.

“Spit it out.”

“I’m not looking for anything serious, Kai. I just got out of a horrible marriage. My trek record isn’t so great, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I’m not pressuring you one way or another, Nova. I know shit’s changed in all these years, and we’re not the same as we once were. But...

“I think you’re looking to recapture our youth.”

Scratching the back of my neck, I scoff and shake my head. “That’s the last fucked up place I’m trying to be.”

“You know what I mean,” she says, touching my shirt gently and then pulling her fingers back as though singed. “Maybe you’re remembering us the way we were back then. Only I’m not that same foolish, naïve girl anymore. I’ve hurt people, and I gave scars, and now it’s time for me to live my life for me. Selfish as it may sound, it’s what I need, Kai.”

“Doesn’t sound selfish at all. I may not like what it sounds like, but I respect it, Nova.”

“Your lifestyle and mine...they just don’t fit, Kai.”

“How so?”

“The things you once did when we were younger, it seems as if...they’ve gotten ten times worse. And while that was okay when we were kids, that’s not the road I’m trying to go down anymore. We’re almost forty, Kai. At some point, it’s time to grow up. I don’t want to be sent to jail for conspiracy or an accessory to a crime. I want to live the rest of my life in peace.”

“You have no idea what I do, Nova. Just assuming that my life will only end one way is pretty presumptuous and judgmental of you.”

“No, Kai. It isn’t. I’m being realistic. Your life, your choices, and the people that you hang around scare me. I’m not saying that you can’t be a part of that life. I’m just saying that I’m not interested in having that as a part of my life anymore.”

“How can you say that when you haven’t even seen my life, Nova?”

“There’s one thing that I know to be true because I’ve experienced it. One thing I know to be true is that I don’t want to fall in love with you again and then lose you. Losing my parents devastated me. Losing you...crushed me. It took two men to try to get me back right...and even now, I’m still not completely whole. So, no, I can’t do it again. So, um...these nightly...things we’ve been doing...”

“Coffee dates?”

“Yeah.”

“You need to cut back?”

“I do. I need to um...meet other people in town, and it’s hard because I’ve been spending every evening with you. I need to live my life, Kai, and you need to live yours.”

I nod and back away from her. “Message received.”

“Kai, please don’t—”

I turn at the door and eye her up and down. “I get it. I don’t know you anymore, and it wasn’t cool for me to pretend I do.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, Kai!”

Her words are lost on me as I make my way out the back door and across the parking lot to where my bike’s parked.

Why the fuck I ever thought a dude like me could have a normal life is beyond me.

CHAPTER 7

Nova

Sitting up in bed, my heart races. I look around the darkened room and try to calm my nerves. Surely it was just a bad dream, wasn't it? A sliver of moonlight cuts through the gap in my dove grey curtains. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, I see that it's a quarter 'til five, and I still have two more hours left to sleep before my day begins.

Stretching, I climb out of bed and head to my bathroom to use the toilet. My mind pores over the remaining items that I need to do today to get ready for the book signing later. Maybe that's why I'm restless because I'm nervous. It's the first book signing that I'll be hosting, and I'm extremely proud that my newbie bookstore was chosen.

After washing my hands, I head back to the bed and climb under the covers. Restlessness teases me as I toss and turn in the bed, praying for sleep to come once again.

Cameron Marino is a USA Today and New York Times Best Selling Author of romantic suspense. I love his work and can't wait to see him at the signing today. He's a handsome but shy and mysterious man. There isn't much known about him other than that he lives in Virginia Beach, and he's an only child whose parents died when he was much younger, much like me.

I wonder if Cameron is his real name or a pen name that he crafts his mind-blowing but deliciously steamy books under. I'm anticipating a nice crowd, even though Smokey Ridge

isn't a big city. It's not really a small town either, but it falls somewhere between the two and has several large cities close by.

It could do wonders for my sales and draw interest to my store. His agent reached out to me before my grand opening upon hearing news that the store would be coming and inquired if I'd be interested in hosting a book signing for the author.

Although I was overwhelmed at the thought of doing that upon just opening, I also knew that it was an opportunity that I could not pass up either. So, with a little bit of apprehension and a good dose of excitement, I agreed to host Cameron.

No more than a couple minutes pass before I hear another noise, and this time, I know that it's not a bad dream. I sit up in bed and remain extremely quiet before I hear something clattering to the floor at the front of the house. It sounds as if it's coming from the kitchen.

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I quickly open my nightstand and grab my Canik. My heart thunders in my chest as I whisper a little prayer and stealthily make my way to the bedroom door. Plastering my body against the hallway wall, I take furtive steps as I listen and hear a rustling sound.

I thought moving to Smoky Ridge would be a peaceful transition from the hectic life that I'd lived in Santa Fe. Never in a million years had I thought that I'd be potentially robbed, assaulted or murdered in this serene beachside community.

My mind rakes over all the cold case and homicide shows I've watched over the years, and fear creeps up my spine. I

can't help but wonder if I'll be just another victim as I slowly approach what awaits me on the other side of the hallway.

Quickly peering into the kitchen, I don't see anything, but I duck out of sight again just as I see the police do on cop shows. Sweat forms under my breasts and in the armpits of my nightgown, and pinpricks of fear creep upon my scalp and down my neck.

My heart and breathing sound loud to my ears, and I glance around the living room again and see nothing. Finally, I boldly step into the kitchen, flipping the light switch on as I go. I notice two things at once.

My back door is partially open, and a kitten is eating from the torn box of cereal on the floor. The box that I just purchased on the way home yesterday evening and had for dinner. I never put the cereal away but placed it on the counter, planning to put it up later.

A spatula lies on the floor. I guess that was where the clatter came from.

"Where did you come from?" I ask the little white, black, and orange calico.

The little baby lets go of a soft purr as I walk to the back door and peer out into the night. There's nothing amiss that I can see. All the neighbors' lights are out, and everyone seems to still be sleeping.

I kick the door closed and lock it with my free hand, my other hand still holding my gun. Leaving the cat where it

remains, I walk through my little two-bedroom house once more just to ensure that I'm all alone other than the cat.

When I've checked the guest room that I use as a library and my guest bathroom, I return to the living room and finally the kitchen. All the doors and windows are locked, and I'm confident that it's just me and my little late-night marauder.

I kneel in front of the kitten who's eating the Special K cereal that I've designated as my morning breakfast and apparently late-night meals, too. I lift the kitten's tail and peer underneath and find that it's a boy. He meows as though offended, but I smile and stroke his soft coat.

The precious baby closes his eyes under my touch. When he opens them again, I stare into the most magnificent mint-green eyes. They're so clear that they almost appear white.

"Where did you come from, little one?" I ask, heading to the refrigerator to grab a carton of milk, which I proceed to pour into a bowl and set on the floor.

Shyly, the kitten glances at me before looking at the bowl but then turning back to the cereal. I sit on the floor next to him as I try to figure out the conundrum of how the kitten got into my house when I know that I didn't leave that door unlocked, let alone open.

Still holding the gun, I lift the kitten into my free arm, and he curls up there comfortably. I check the cabinets and drawers in the kitchen before returning to the living room and then my office and searching the entire place as thoroughly as possible through yawns and bleary eyes.

I find nothing missing, and I'm baffled. If someone did break into my house, I can't find a single thing that they took, and nothing is out of order.

Yet, if no one broke in, why do I feel so violated? I struggle with whether I should call the police or not. What would I report? Something woke me in the middle of the night, and all I found was this cute calico marauder eating my cereal. They'd probably laugh at me, and I'd quickly become the butt of every joke in Smokey Ridge. Not to mention, I don't want to share this with Kai. He'd really think that I was delusional and probably be afraid that I was sinking back into depression again. No, that's the last thing that I need.

Sighing, I sit back on the kitchen floor, sitting my little visitor down beside the food bowl. This time, he nudges it with his nose but then turns to the bowl of milk and laps viciously at it before looking up at me quizzically.

I smile, rub his head, and rest my elbows on my knees. He returns to his milk, and my eyes drift closed again until he's finished, and I feel him nuzzling my leg. When I glance up at my refrigerator, I notice a piece of paper sticking from underneath a magnet on the side of the refrigerator. I'd missed that before.

I stand and pull the slip of notebook paper from underneath the magnet and read it.

You're the cat's meow!

XOXOXO

Your secret admirer

A chill runs down my spine, and I spin around the kitchen, looking and searching as if someone can see me. I rush to the kitchen window and look out again into nothing but darkness.

Now I know someone's been here. Whoever has been sending gifts to my job they've now found me at home.

I lift the furry baby in my arms, and with my gun in tow, I head to the living room and lie down.

* * *

"Are you okay?" Myrah asks, eyeing me up and down.

"My back hurts, and I'm sleepy," I mumble through a yawn.

"Boss lady, there's a kitten in your office," Briana says, rushing to where Myrah and I are standing in the breakroom.

Myrah finishes punching in her code to clock in and then eyes me over her shoulder. "A kitten? Are we running a pet shop or a vet now?"

"See, that's how I know you all have gotten comfortable with me," I say, pointing a finger at her and tossing the remnants of my sandwich in the trash.

"No...I'm just asking a question."

"The fact that you sit in here and eat lunch like one of us says that you're comfortable with us," Briana interjects.

"For your information, I found the kitten this morning."

"What kitten?" Clark asks, popping up in the breakroom with Cody right on his heels.

They both clock back in from break as Briana says, “Boss lady has a kitten in her office.”

“I want to see,” Cody says.

“Not me. I’m allergic to them,” Clark says.

“Where’d you find him? Outside of the store?” Myrah asks, scowling at the same time Briana wrinkles her nose.

“No, not outside.”

“Oh, I was about to say that I hope you weren’t picking up strays. They’re always climbing over that nasty dumpster out back and eating everything they can find,” Myrah complains.

“Where did you find him, Boss Lady?” Briana asks.

“In my kitchen eating my Special K in the wee hours of the morning.”

“In your kitchen?” Briana and Myrah shriek simultaneously.

“You’ve got a cat burglar,” Cody jokes.

Clark shakes his head. “That was lame,” he says. “I’m about to relieve Natalie from the champagne bar. Cody, stick to your day job because moonlighting as a comic won’t pay your bills.”

Cody follows behind him and nudges him with an elbow. “Shut up.”

“They’re like little kids,” Briana says as we watch them leave.

“So, in your kitchen, huh?” Myrah asks, returning to the original conversation.

“Yep.”

“How do you just find a kitten in your kitchen?” Myrah asks.

“You left your door open?” Briana asks.

“Apparently so. Guess I’d better do a good job of making sure I’m locked up at night,” I say, thinking about the break-in and my so-called admirer. It scares the hell out of me, but until I know more, I’m not saying a word. I almost feel as if I don’t know who to trust.

“Smokey Ridge is safe, but please be careful,” Myrah chides, leaving the break room and heading for my office.

I follow behind her to prepare her register for the day.

“Is that your little guest?” she gestures toward the small basket that I purchased at Walmart to keep the kitten in for the day.

“Yes,” I say, smiling at the little angel.

“He’s sleeping so peacefully.”

We make small talk while she counts her register down, and I have her sign her cash-in sheet. A knock at my door breaks our small talk when Martin sticks his head into the door.

“Nova, you’ve got a delivery.”

Frowning, I say, “We already received our shipment yesterday. No deliveries were expected.”

“Well, these came,” he says, stepping into my office with a bouquet of orange buttercups and a small, wrapped package.

“Oh, those are beautiful. Have you met a man already?” Myrah asks, wiggling her eyebrows as Martin hands them over to me.

“Apparently,” he says, smiling and winking at me as he disappears from my office.

I pull the card from the bouquet of flowers after setting them on my desk.

Keep casting those beautiful smiles, and you'll continue to receive things that make you smile.

XOXO

That chill returns, and I wonder who in the hell this person is.

“What’s in the packet?” Myrah asks, propping her register on her hip.

I tear into the brown paper wrapping, and my mouth drops open at the hardcover copy of Nora Roberts’ *Stars of Fortune*.

I remove the sleeve and look at the binding, flip open the pages and inhale the scent of the book. I trail my fingers over the embossed letters of her name and the title on the cover before putting the sleeve back on. As it slips open, I spot Nora’s autograph, and I inhale sharply.

“What’s wrong?” Myrah asks.

Shaking my head, I look up at her with tears pricking my eyelids.

“Nova?” she prompts as I fail to find the words.

“Honey, talk to me,” she says, placing her register on my desk and grabbing tissues to stuff into my hands.

I feel so foolish, and maybe it’s from the lack of rest and finding “Raider,” the kitten’s name, in my kitchen this morning. Maybe that’s why I’m acting so teary-eyed. Or maybe it’s from the fear that plagues me, knowing that someone out there is watching me and has been in my house.

“This,” I say, holding the book up and shaking it for her to see. “This book was released January twenty-fifteen, and I stood in line for more than two hours at a bookstore in Maryland to get an autographed copy.”

I turn the book over in my hands. “It was her husband’s bookstore. Nora’s, I mean. I’d gone to Maryland with my best friend, Sandra, for a conference she was attending, and it coincided with Nora’s signing. Anyway, I spent a small fortune on a few of her books that day that I wanted autographed. I returned to Santa Fe so happy with my purchase. We had a house fire just over a year later, and the book burned in the fire. Having this...I can’t describe what it means to me, Myrah.”

“Honey, I’m sorry that happened to you. But what a beautiful gift that someone was thoughtful enough that they wanted to return this to you. Who sent it?”

I look up at her with bleary eyes. Smiling, I say, “That’s just it. I have no idea who sent it.”

“What does the card say?”

I read the card to her. She has a half-amused and half-concerned look.

“What?”

“It’s just that...who would know you well enough to send you that book? It can’t possibly be anyone here, can it?”

“No. The only person I’ve told about this is Briana when we were talking about our shared love for Nora Roberts.”

“Well, yeah, Briana doesn’t swing that way,” Myrah jokes.

“Yeah. I know.”

I think about Kai once more, and I know in my heart that it can’t be him, but he’s the only plausible explanation. He knows that I’m an avid reader and a fan of Nora Roberts. What he doesn’t know is about what I went through to get that autographed book or how I lost it. It can’t be a coincidence, can it? Besides, he wouldn’t do something as creepy as sneaking a kitten into my home and leaving a cryptic message.

“It can’t be anyone here.”

“So, who knows that you moved to Smokey Ridge?”

Rolling my eyes dramatically, I groan, “My ex-husband.”

“You’ve got your answer. Maybe he’s trying to get back in your good favor.”

I doubt that, but I don’t say it. Instead, I smile and say, “You’re right.”

She shrugs and grabs the register. “Glad I could help, Sherlock.”

Laughing, I say, “I need to get out here and check on Cameron to see if he needs anything else.”

“That line is bananas. So glad that I came in two hours before my shift to get my books signed,” Myrah tosses over her shoulder as I follow her out front.

My heart is thrilled when I see all the people who are in the store. My staff has been able to come in for their regularly scheduled shifts as some of the local business owners volunteered to help in the store today. They were willing to do so in exchange for meeting and taking pictures with Cameron Marino, and several of them have purchased his books.

I make my way through the crowd to the table where he and his PA sit. An exasperated young woman with a toddler on her hip scowls at her baby before turning a beaming smile on Cameron Marino. She swipes a swath of hair away from her face and leans in to spell her name for him.

“Darla, do you all need anything else?” I ask Cameron’s PA.

She smiles up at me and says, “No. We’re good. Thanks for asking. We should be wrapping up in half an hour.”

I nod and walk away to the register, where I help for the next half an hour with book sales. I’m excited about how successful this day has been. When I see Cameron and Darla heading towards the back of the store, I meet them at my office door.

Unlocking it, I lead them into my office, where my little guest has decided to rip to shreds a stack of papers that were in

my trash can, which is now resting on its side on the floor.

“Ohhh, Raider,” I moan.

Laughing, Darla steps closer and leans down to pick the kitten up while I clean up the mess.

“Sorry about this, guys. He’s new.”

“It’s easy to be lured into how cute they are when you first get them until you get them home,” Cameron says, scowling.

I don’t dare tell them the story of how Raider came to be in my life. When I finish cleaning the mess, I discuss the business of the day’s sales with them and wrap up.

“Thanks so much for hosting us, Nova. As I said earlier, you have a beautiful place here, and your town made me feel welcome,” Cameron says.

“It’s been a pleasure having you, and I’m honored that your agent chose my store to host your signing. Though I’m new to this town, I’m finding that people are genuinely good-hearted here.”

We exchange more pleasantries before he leaves me with two signed copies of his most recent works, *Into the Fray* and *The Lure of Her Heart*.

“Thanks again, Nova. It’s been a real pleasure,” Cameron says.

“Just make sure that you return here on your next tour,” I say, smiling at him.

He hugs me and bussess my cheeks before releasing me and stepping out the door with Darla.

Just as I'm closing the door, preparing to lock it for the evening, I notice Kai standing several feet away at the front of his store. The scowl on his face is completely opposite the warm welcoming I told Cameron the people here are known for.

Before I can say anything, he steps inside his door, closing it behind him.

"I'm tired, but it's been a great day," I hear Briana say behind me.

Closing our door and locking it, I turn to smile at my staff, thanking each of them for the hard work and dedication they poured into making this day a success. Yet, the thought of Kai's scowl is not too far from my thoughts.

Even as I get Raider ready to return home for the evening after the day's business is done, I know that somewhere, Kai is not happy with me.

CHAPTER 8

End Game

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“No,” Phantom grunts.

He’s scheduled to meet with Cappellacci again, and this time one on one.

“Look, I know that you’re worried about taking Hadiyah with you to the club tonight. Don’t worry. Cappellacci has no idea we’ll be so close. If anything goes down, we’ve got your back, bro.”

He shakes his head. “I just can’t afford to lose another soul. Hadiyah looks to me for protection.”

Hadiyah’s one of the women that we saved from a sex trafficking ring over a year ago. She now works for me at Cloud 9, my dispensary. I’ve been watching Phantom whenever she’s around. He’s not an easy man to read, and he keeps his feelings close to his chest, almost never displaying any facial expressions other than a scowl.

Yet, when she comes around, he watches her closely, and I’ve noticed he’s somewhat protective of her. When he first learned she worked for me, he didn’t like it. Now, he’s always asking questions about her well-being and finding reasons to go to the breakroom whenever she’s back there. Probably the most telling indicator is that he spends more time at the dispensary than he ever did. He comes in three to four times a week now, different than his once-a-week visit.

“You won’t lose her. We’ll be there tonight to have your back if shit jumps off.”

“You shouldn’t have told Anarchy that she volunteered to go,” he grumbles.

“Look, dude. I did what I felt needed to happen. If she’s there, I’m sure your ass will tread lightly. Having her there means you’ll return to us in one piece.”

“Didn’t know you cared, honey,” Phantom says sarcastically, shaking his head.

“I don’t.”

“One day, there’s going to be someone you give a shit about other than yourself, End Game. When that person comes along, you’ll get it.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I grumble, grabbing my bag and helmet as my thoughts veer towards Nova.

He grabs his things and follows me to the back door as we climb on our bikes.

“Not stopping for coffee and sugar tonight?” Phantom says with a smirk as he pulls his visor down.

Damn, I didn’t know that he knew about her. I guess he’s been watching me as closely as I’ve been watching him.

“Fuck you,” I reply, pulling my visor in place too.

Sneering, he asks, “She broke your heart or something?”

I don’t bother to respond but start my engine and take off. The sound of my straight pipes fills the air, and he falls right into line with mine only seconds later.

I've given her the space that she's asked for, but it hasn't been easy. I think about the woman when I can't think of anything else. She's got me drinking this damn chai latte coffee rather than my usual black, no sugar. Now I wonder how in the hell I ever drank that stuff in the first place.

I keep thinking of reasons to go into the store to buy a book or two, only she's never around when I go. Maybe it's for the best. Sometimes, I wonder if maybe she's right.

Maybe I have been trying to recapture the past. Our past. She meant a lot to me back then, and she was the only thing that made sense for a long time. The only thing that felt right was home and family. She was my safety net even while she was claiming that I was hers.

Where she felt that I saved her life, she balanced me and made me whole. Gave me a reason to stay out of the streets and out of trouble. She was my future and my hope, whereas I'd never hoped for anything before. I knew life was a crap game, and it was full of shit. More often than not, I rolled snake eyes.

Should have known it was too good to be true even back then. We were so close to being out of that house, and I had planned on having a future with her, getting a good job and getting a place we could live together. The problem with that was nothing was happening fast enough, so I figured I'd up the ante and make sure it happened sooner rather than later.

Taking our future into my own hands did nothing but screw shit up for both of us. Now we're in this same space

again, but we can't even have the opportunity we once dreamt of.

Phantom and I roar through the streets, leaving smoke and a trail of noise behind us. It's not long before we pull up the long road that leads to the clubhouse. This is exactly where I need to be, getting lost in booze and pussy before our run later tonight.

The music is loud enough to wake the dead, as always. It's certainly loud enough to wake the dead brothers in the graveyard at the rear of our land.

I nod at the Prospects manning the wrought iron gate as we pass through. A sneer crawls onto my lips as the **skull with two fire-blazing guns crossing under the skull** welcomes us home.

Lights beam from the five-story castle-like stone structure, which is the clubhouse, and there's a Prospect at each of the turrets. Phantom blasts past me as I slow to a crawl at the clubhouse. He roars towards the rear of the property where the bunkhouses are housed.

Typical Phantom. He's not a people person, and more often than not, Phantom can be found walking the grounds or meditating somewhere on the property if he isn't in the bunkhouse or clubhouse. Cannon says that Phantom's communing with the spirits when we find him near the woods staring off into silence.

I wasn't around back then, but I know that he lost his sister when they were still teens, and she's buried at the cemetery not far from those woods. I also know that Phantom and his sister were victims of sex trafficking, and they escaped their captors. It was the former VP, Rogue's daughter, Duchess, who found them. She ran back and got her daddy and Anarchy's dad, Tank, who was the Prez at that time.

Tank took Phantom under his wings and pretty much treated him as his own. From the stories I've heard, Phantom caught hell back then. Many of the brothers wanted nothing to do with him because he was a mixed kid, Asian and white, instead of one-hundred-percent white like themselves. Some of the brothers back then had fucked up views about how things should be and definitely didn't approve of the mixing of races.

Thankfully, Tank was nothing like that, and he kicked ass when it came to Phantom. Unfortunately, their attention towards his sister veered in the opposite direction. Several of the brothers felt she should be treated like the Roses, free ass and property for all. Of course, Tank didn't allow that to happen either, but still, he couldn't save her life.

I climb off my bike and head inside, and I'm instantly hit by the Foo Fighters song *Under You*. It instantly triggers thoughts of Nova, and I'm reminded of how hard it was to get over her in our youth. At thirty-six, I'm not the same punk kid who made stupid choices and was a general asshole to all he encountered.

I may not be Prince Charming, but I'm damn sure not making the same stupid choices I once did. Whether they'll send me to heaven or hell about my choices is not up for question, but I won't be making the same fuck ups when it comes to women.

Someone presses a beer into my hand as I enter the clubhouse while someone else passes me a joint. I turn the beer up after I take a toke on the joint. My eyes narrow through the haze as I try to figure out what the hell I want to do.

I don't wanna really be at the clubhouse, but I damn sure ain't ready to return to the bunkhouse either. Going there will be filled with silence and my own shitty thoughts about how I screwed up when it came to Nova.

Just like I've changed, so has she. She says she's not interested in a relationship or going down the path we once did. I get that. No sweat off my back. So, it's a no-brainer when Tennessee saunters up to me what I should be doing.

"Hey, End Game," she purrs, draping her arms around my neck.

I can tell she's been drinking a little more than she should, but who am I to judge? She stays mostly sober the days that she works in Cannon's bar, Jaded Lizard, but on her off days, she sometimes slinks to the bottom of the barrel.

Tennessee used to be a good girl, well, as good as a club whore can be. She was crazy about Cannon but damn near in love with Warrior. So much so that she risked almost getting killed by his Ol' Lady, Hornet.

“What’re you doing here tonight?” I ask, wrapping my free arm around her waist before taking the beer to my lips.

“Trying to have fun, just like you.”

“Mm...surprised that you’d risk coming up here.”

“I’m not scared of Hornet, you know.”

Lifting an eyebrow, I reply, “Somebody busts me in the back of the head with a bottle and cuts me close to the carotid artery. I might not be scared, but I’d damn sure be watching my back. Woman left you in the hospital for over a week.”

“They should’ve charged her ass with attempted murder,” she sneers. “Anarchy covered that shit up.”

“Yeah, well, good, bad, right or wrong, she told you to quit fucking with her, Ol’ Man, or there might be consequences.”

She turns her lips down and then smiles up at me again. The dark eyeliner on her eyes is slightly smeared, and the mascara is clumping together on her upper left lash. At some point, I’m sure that Tennessee was a pretty girl, maybe close to beautiful, but the MC life can be a hard one. Without anyone to protect her and not being really close to the Roses either, Tennessee’s had her share of hard times. I often feel sorry for the woman.

“Are there any consequences for fucking with you?” she asks, licking her lips.

“None that I can think of lil’ darlin.”

She winks, tugs me by the hand and leads me to the rear of the pool hall to a booth. Our road captain, Whiz, Cyclone and

Decker are sitting at a table not far away playing a game of cards. Women are draped all over them, and I know there's gonna be trouble as soon as I see Decker's Ol' Lady Siren step inside the pool hall and look around.

"Sugar, you might wanna follow me upstairs," I say, nodding my head to the upper loft area where there are a couple of guys up there with Roses.

"Why?"

"Storm's brewing," I say, jerking my head at Siren.

Tennessee glances at Siren and then at Stiletto, who's sitting in Decker's lap.

"Shit," Tennessee mumbles as I tug her towards the steps, and we head upstairs.

I've just plopped my ass in a comfy leather chair with Tennessee at my feet when I hear the commotion down below. Closing my eyes, I take comfort in the feel of Tennessee's cool hands pulling my dick from my boxer briefs. And when her hot lips close around the head and work their way down my shaft, I forget all about the fight that's jumping off.

I push Nova and my confusing feelings about her out of my mind for the night.

"Tennessee," I moan, grabbing a handful of her dark brown hair and wrapping it around my hand. I continue pushing her further and further down my shaft until she chokes on it.

Apologetic, watery eyes look up at me, seeking forgiveness, but my black soul doesn't give a shit about

anything or anyone at this moment.

Tennessee's head bobs up and down, and her hands reach inside my briefs, juggling my nuts. I hear shouts down below that rival Slash's guitar, Brain's drums, and Axl's vocals and piano on Guns N' Roses *Perhaps*. Yet, none of that penetrates the fog of my brain as I grab more of Tennessee's hair with my other hand and begin pumping my dick hard and furiously down her throat.

She gags again, but I don't care as I slide to the edge of my seat. I pummel her throat, knowing that I'm fucking it raw, and she probably won't be able to talk come tomorrow.

Standing up from the edge of my seat, I continue to shove myself deeper and harder and faster into her mouth until her mascara and eyeliner are completely ruined. Until tears flow freely and fast down her face like a stream.

Her fingers desperately reach out to massage my balls while I continue abusing her throat. When I calm down just a bit and pull back, she smacks her lips around my dick, sliding back and forth and up and down, coating it with saliva. Her smacks turn into a gentle hum which turns into a primal, guttural sucking until I can't hold back anymore.

My movements shift to a slow and gentle rocking as I allow her to coax it out of me. When I cum, it rips right through me. I close my eyes, tilt my head back and let sheets of cum milk down her throat, basking in the gulping noises that she's making until she's relieved me of all the nut, all the tension, and all the sorrow that's been hounding my heels since Nova sent me away.

When she finishes, I help her to her feet and zip my pants.

“You were rough tonight,” she says.

Shrugging, I reply, “Had a lot on my mind.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”

“A girl?”

Smirking, I shake my head and reply, “No. A woman.”

I head back down the stairs with the warm remnants of beer left in the bottle. I slug it back before tossing it into a nearby metal trash can and grabbing another cold one on my way out the door.

We don't have that long before it's time to escort Phantom and Hadiyah on their run to meet Martin Cappellacci at the club.

* * *

We never entered the club the way we expected to, kicking ass. Phantom and Hadiyah weren't in the club for more than half an hour before they ran from the club and hopped on his bike. We all rolled out behind him, expecting a hail of gunfire, but nothing had happened.

We were summoned to Anarchy's office as soon as we hit the clubhouse gates, and we're gathered here now.

“He fucking disrespected her, Anarchy. Pointed a gun in her face,” Phantom says, a little too cool for my liking. “That's when shit went down.”

“What the fuck happened?” Anarchy repeats.

As Phantom tells his story, my thoughts wonder to Nova. I’d lose my mind if someone did some shit like that to her. I can’t blame Phantom for what he did, but I know the shit will fall back on the MC.

“She killed him.”

I tune back into the conversation.

“She killed who?” Anarchy asks.

“While I was fighting off the other men, Cappellacci took advantage of my distraction and grabbed Hadiyah. I don’t know what he’d planned to do with her or to her, but I took the others down while she fought him off. As soon as I was free, I snuck up behind him, but it was too late. She shot Cappellacci.”

“Didn’t know she could shoot,” Raider mutters.

Phantom glances at Cannon and says, “She used the gun that Cannon and Roxie had bought her and taught her to use.”

I’m dumbfounded. “Damn, sweet little Hadiyah killed someone?”

Phantom glares at me.

Hadiyah’s only twenty-two, and she’s been through a lot in her short life. After watching her parents tragically killed in front of her and her sister, she was kidnapped and forced into a sex trafficking ring. She spent almost two years with her older sister in the ring before our MC saved her.

After that, she finally got a place of her own and started working at a diner before being assaulted two more times. I guess when a person is fed up, they get to a point where they'll do anything to survive, including murdering a fucking mafia associate.

The ringing phone ends our conversation as Anarchy punches a button, still glaring at Phantom.

“What the hell just happened?”

I frown, wondering who the hell is calling Prez talking to him like that. Cannon catches my eye and mouths, “Aiello.”

Shit! The shit just got real. He's a fucking consigliere in the mob, and he's calling the Prez. Nothing good can come of this.

“It seems your man had some issues with Phantom. He personally requested him. Would you like to explain that shit to me?” Anarchy growls.

“Yes. He said that your man Phantom couldn't be trusted.”

Aiello's voice is too fucking cool for my liking.

“He's a brother. He's part of the Fiery Disciples. If you're saying that you can't trust him, then you can't trust us. What information do you have personally that makes you say that?”

“I have six dead men because of him, so I don't trust him either.”

“So, what are you saying, Aiello?”

The entire time, Anarchy's gaze doesn't break from Phantom's, and I swear that I see a challenge in Phantom's

eyes. He's not backing down on this one.

"I have some questions of my own. I'll call you back and tell you where we meet. The time and the place."

Aiello hangs up, and a thick, uncomfortable silence descends on the room.

"Are you gonna claim her now?" Anarchy asks Phantom.

Phantom gets off the couch and storms out of the office.

Raider and Cannon both stare at Anarchy as he shakes his head.

"What're you gonna do?"

Shrugging, he replies, "Ain't nothing I can do, cept wait to hear from Aiello."

"Don't sound like the best thing."

"Yeah, Raider? You got a better plan?"

Our VP shrugs and shakes his head. "This is some shit."

"Yeah, should've listened to Phantom in the first place. Shouldn't have pushed him into this situation. Know he doesn't do well when backed into a corner."

Anarchy doesn't respond to Cannon's comment unless a snarl can be considered a response. And in our Prez's case, I guess it can.

"Guess it doesn't help that he's got feelings for her," I say.

"Who?"

That's Cannon, Anarchy, and Raider.

“Hadiyah.”

Raider snickers. “Yeah, right. I don’t think he knows how to feel.”

“Well, I’d agree with ya if I hadn’t seen it for myself. He’s...got a thing for her,” I share.

“Why didn’t y’all go in when shit went down? That was the plan.”

“Never got a signal,” Tantrum says.

“Yeah, we only received a message from Phantom that said ‘let’s roll,’ and then the next thing you know, he and Hadiyah are hauling ass up out the club,” I say.

“Figured someone was on their asses from that,” Tantrum inputs.

“Were y’all followed back here?” Anarchy asks.

“Not from what I could tell,” I say.

“Fuck!” Raider growls.

“Well, all we can do for now is sit and wait for Aiello to contact us,” Anarchy says tiredly, pulling a hand down his face. “I’ve been thinking...we need to figure out what to do about that empty grocery store on Fifth and Grand,” Anarchy says. “It’s been sitting too damn long, and it’s not bringing in any income.”

“Not costing us a damn thing either,” Terminator says, switching the lollipop he’s smacking from one side of his mouth to another.

“That’s because we’ve got Sheriff Roche and Chief Bianchi in our pockets, and they sway the city council,” Raider replies.

“Won’t mean shit if we can’t get the new mayor on our side,” Anarchy points out. “We know every member of the city council is trying to kiss her ass. If they sway her way, we’ll be paying taxes out the ass on that property. As it stands now, we don’t have to worry about that, but I’m told that she’s doing an audit, and as soon as that building comes under her radar, we’re ass out.”

“New mayor, the first time a woman’s elected, everyone’s on guard,” Cannon, our enforcer, points out.

“The fuck’s wrong with these dick wads putting a woman in power? Everyone knows a woman shouldn’t be in charge of running jack shit. Too many damn emotions all over the place. She gets her monthly, and next thing you know, the country’s at war,” Dime, our secretary, interjects.

“Shows you don’t know jack shit, dick wad,” Cannon retorts. “A mayor wouldn’t be sending the country to war. Only the president would. Sides’ most the women in this country got more smarts in their pinky finger than you got in that entire brain of yours.”

“That’s my point. She starts off as mayor, and next thing you know, she’s running the whole damn country.”

Cannon shakes his head at Dime’s ignorance.

“Don’t let Roxie hear you saying that shit,” Whiz, our road captain, points out as he bites his thumbnail.

“Yeah, she’s liable to kick your ass,” Cannon sniffs. The look he gives Dime lets him know that he’s daring him to say something about his wife.

“You dumb fucks need to refocus. This ain’t about who’s running the council or not right now. We can always come back to that. I need some fresh ideas about what we’re gonna do with that old store,” Anarchy says, refocusing our meeting.

“Blow it up and collect the insurance on it,” Dime suggests.

Anarchy glances at Dime and snarls, “You say shit else the rest of this meeting, and I’m kicking your dumb ass off the council.”

Dime has the nerve to look offended, but he smartly doesn’t say anything.

“We could convert it to a warehouse for End Game’s shipments and stock,” Cannon suggests.

Everyone looks at me, and I shrug. “Still wasted space. I mean, yeah, we could use it, but I’m not stocking that much inventory at any given time.”

“Yeah, there’s no way that he needs that much shipment around. Legal or illegal. We’d be asking for trouble,” Raider says.

“Ask my wife, and she’d tell you to turn it into a clothing store, boutique or some shit,” Cannon mumbles, shaking his head.

Raider shakes his head and says, “Nah, something a little more lucrative than that.”

“Casino,” I suggest.

“Damn. I like that,” Anarchy says, tossing a rare smile. “All right. We’ll all mull over ideas for what we’d like that to look like, what it’s gonna take to pull it off and be prepared to discuss it at the next meeting,” Anarchy says.

Everyone mutters their agreement and heads off in different directions.

CHAPTER 9

Nova

“So, how are you settling in?” Jordan asks, holding her stick to the fire.

I watch as the marshmallow catches fire and slowly burns to a toasty golden brown as she turns it like a rotisserie in the fire.

I’ve been invited to a bonfire at my neighbor Jordan’s stretch of the beach. She’s trying to help me get to know more of the other neighbors, so she and her husband, Rick, are hosting a get-together tonight with a few other neighbors.

“Nova?” she says, calling my name again.

“Oh, um...I’m sorry. I was just basking in the ambiance of the night,” I apologize. “Everything’s pretty good. I like this town and the people. Everyone’s loving the bookstore, and I have to say it’s been easier than I thought it would...opening one, I mean.”

“Well, we haven’t had one here in years. After Ms. Evangeline passed on about six years ago with no one to inherit it, the old store closed. It became overgrown with weeds, and the city eventually tore the building down because it was attracting vagrants and dope fiends,” Sterling, another neighbor, says.

“I wouldn’t expect there are many of them around. This just doesn’t seem like that type of town,” I say.

Rick laughs, tilting a beer to his lips.

“That’s because you haven’t run into the riffraff yet,” Ethan, a brown-haired surfer type, says.

“And that would be?”

My stomach knots before I can get the question out. I have a feeling I know what his answer will be, and when he gives it, it doesn’t lessen the impact in my gut.

“The Fiery Disciples. Smokey Ridge’s very own one-percenter motorcycle club,” Ethan explains. “Surprised that they haven’t run into you. They’ve taken over almost every goddamn business around.”

“According to hearsay, they’d bought out Ms. Evangeline’s bookstore long before she passed. Apparently, they were letting her keep it open...for a percentage,” Sterling says.

“Yeah, I don’t know how true that was, though. Ms. Evangeline was scared of no one, but everyone feared her. I doubt the Fiery Disciples would cross that old, mean-ass woman. She’d have had them shivering on their bikes. Probably spank their asses if they got too out of line,” Rick says before tilting his beer again.

“I wouldn’t mind being spanked by one of them,” his sister, Claire, who lives at the opposite end of the beach, says as she scratches the scruff at my newfound pet, Raider’s neck.

“You would,” he sneers, turning his lip up.

Jordan presses a hand to her lips, trying to hold her laughter in.

“What sorts of things do they do? The motorcycle club, I mean,” I say, curious as to what others have to say about Kai

and his friends.

“They’re a bunch of thugs,” Ethan says. “They steal, kill, rape, and sell drugs and weapons.”

“Ethan!” Jordan admonishes. “That’s not true. Selling drugs and weapons, yes, and possibly murder. But rape? That’s a bit far, don’t you think? We’ve never heard of one person being raped by them. Not even any thefts have been reported.”

“Angel was,” Ethan retorts.

“Angel wasn’t raped,” Jordan hisses.

“Nope. She ran away from her family because her father couldn’t keep his filthy paws off her silky draws,” Claire says, imitating the character Betty Rizzo from the movie Grease.

Sterling sniffs. “That’s not a nice accusation to make against an upstanding citizen like Phillip Houston.”

“Neither is accusing someone of rape just because they’re considered subpar citizens in Smokey Ridge,” Claire says. She tucks Raider onto her lap, and I notice that he’s fallen asleep, quite comfortable with Claire.

“Right. Just because Phillip Houston is on the city council does not make him an upstanding pillar of the community. Hell, I remember when we were in high school, and he got caught screwing Debbie McAllister in his garage,” Jordan says.

Ethan frowns and asks, “His daughter’s best friend?”

“You remember that, don’t you, Rick?” Jordan asks, turning to her husband.

“Like it was yesterday. She was a junior in high school. Tore their friendship apart, made her a pariah of the high school, and kicked off the church choir,” Rick answers.

Jordan uses air quotes and says, “No self-respecting female would be caught dead within ten feet of her. Her boyfriend broke up with her.”

“Yep, and Phillip’s marriage remained intact,” Rick adds.

Jordan bobs her blonde head and says, “Poor Angel was devastated, and while everyone was offering her sympathy looks and asking if she was okay while trying to get the gossip, she was still scared everyone might find out the worst secret. If you’d ever been to their house, you could tell that something was off with their relationship. Every time he spoke with her, he had to touch her, rubbing her arms, hair, legs, whatever. I’d caught him kissing her on the lips once when I stayed overnight at one of the many slumber parties.”

“So, that gives them the right to rape her?” Ethan asks.

“She wasn’t raped,” Claire says drily. “She left her father’s house to become a whore for the MC. Guess she figured if she had to put it out, she may as well do it on her own terms.”

Sterling shakes his head. “That’s...crazy.”

“So is becoming a club whore for the worst motorcycle gang around,” Ethan adds.

“It could be argued they’re not the worst. They don’t rape, and they don’t participate in the outrageous acts of human trafficking,” Jordan says.

“They’re no worse than Phillip Houston,” Rick says.

“Still can’t believe he did that to his own daughter,” Sterling says.

“Yeah, but that’s your upstanding citizen. Mr. Houston,” Rick says.

For the most part, I can’t tell if they’re for or against the MC. They seem to be divided in half, with Ethan and Sterling against them, Jordan and Claire for them, and Rick somewhere in the middle. Selling drugs and weapons doesn’t surprise me as it relates to Kai, but the rest of it I can’t align with the man that I know.

Knew.

I have to remember it’s been two decades since we saw each other before this time. People change a lot over time. Though there was a time when he was the stable force in my life, the only person I trusted, believed, and loved, the fact remains that he may not be the same person. I’m not.

Club whores. Was he screwing them? I think about how careless I was when it came to having sex with him after not seeing him for so long. Just because he was my first love and I was horny as hell didn’t mean I had to jump him so soon.

I hadn’t had sex with my ex-husband, Will, for at least a year before we filed for separation and then divorce.

“How long have you had him?” Claire asks.

I look up to see who she’s talking to.

“Raider, your kitten,” she says at the look of confusion on my face.

“Oh.” I’d somehow missed the change in subject. “Oh, just a week.”

“Where’d you get him? He’s so cute,” Jordan says, leaning over and rubbing Raider.

“Actually, I found him. A surprise,” I say.

“Found him? Where?” Jordan asks.

“My kitchen.”

At the look of confusion and the startled look on Claire’s face, I proceed to explain the events of the early morning last Saturday as I leave out details about the note.

“Did you call the cops?” Claire asks.

“No. I mean, what would I report? That my back door was left open in my absentmindedness, and a random kitty cat comes pouncing in?”

“Awww, look at him. He’s so cute and harmless. Who couldn’t take in a cootsy-wootsy like this,” Jordan says in a baby voice as she continues petting Raider.

“Yeah, but you said yourself that you were sure you locked your door. To wake up and find it not only unlocked but also opened is scary,” Claire points out.

I nod. “I was scared, but in all honesty, there were no signs of forced entry.”

“You should have reported it just to be on the safe side, if nothing else,” Rick says.

“You’re right. But it’s been a week now, and nothing’s happened.”

“Just be careful. I know that Smokey Ridge isn’t a big city, but things can happen anywhere,” Sterling cautions.

“He’s right. Be careful. Make sure that you double-check your locks and install a security system if you haven’t already. We may be a close-knit community, but don’t forget lots of these homes are rented out to vacationers who we don’t know,” Ethan advises.

Everyone else nods and murmurs their agreement.

“You’re right. I’ll get on it first thing in the morning,” I say.

We continue roasting marshmallows, making s’mores, and drinking beer late into the night. I expect by the time I return home, I should be able to sleep peacefully without thoughts of Kai plaguing me and the devastated look on his face when I said that I wasn’t looking for anything serious. Nor the look of hurt when he saw me hugging Cameron Marino.

* * *

I’m cold and shaking. Darkness clouds everything as if I have a blanket over my face. I hear laughing and the muffled sounds of feet shuffling. My arms and legs flail, but I can’t seem to escape. It’s as if I’m being held down against my will.

I hate losing control and not feeling as if I have the final say over things in my life. I fight and struggle once more, but I still can’t break free.

Why the hell am I so cold? It’s the end of September, but it’s not often cold here in Santa Fe. Damn, Will! I bet he left the air on again and turned it down to a frigid temp. He

doesn't sleep well at night unless it's cold in our bedroom. If he doesn't turn on the air in the fall, then he'll have the windows open and the ceiling fan blowing in the winter.

I struggle again, and I still can't seem to break free. Nor does the darkness recede. Panic fills me, robbing me of the oxygen in my lungs. I want to scream, to cry out to Will to help me, but when I open my mouth, nothing breaks forth.

I scream and cry his name, but still nothing. Tears fall from my eyes, and each drop becomes bigger than the first. The teardrops become so big that they're growing larger than me until they consume me. I'm caught in one giant teardrop like I'm trapped in a bubble. Before long, I'm drowning in a sea of tears.

Then, a sound breaks through. Is that a baby crying?

The panic starts to ebb, and I'm no longer trying to scream. Neither am I flailing my arms and legs. The tears dry up, and I'm left alone in the darkness. It's just me and the darkness and that sound.

What is it? Whose baby is crying?

I look around, but I see nothing but darkness. The crying gets closer and closer until I realize that it's not a crying baby.

It's a kitten.

A little calico. Black, orange, and white. He's the cutest little kitten ever, but he seems to be in distress. He needs my help. It's now that I realize that I'm trapped in a nightmare. Nothing is real except for the crying kitten.

My eyes fly open, and there's still darkness all around me. Moving my head, I realize that somehow, I've become tangled in my covers again.

I shove them back and stare into the moonlit room. Turning my head sideways, I notice that it's a few minutes before six in the morning. Still too early to be up. The store doesn't open until nine, and I'm not expected to be in until noon.

I yawn and stretch, and then I hear Raider's little purr again. This time, I hop out of bed at the speed of lightning and head for the bedroom door. I've set up his little bed and toys in my office, but I keep my bedroom and office doors closed so that he can remain in there for the night. I'm trying to train him to remain there, and that's the only way he'll stay inside.

Yet, I shouldn't be hearing his cry from behind two closed doors. He's just a kitten and shouldn't be that loud. No sooner than I open my bedroom door, I almost trip over Raider. He's at my feet, looking up at me with those opaque eyes that seem to see everything.

Leaning down, I pick him up.

"Hey, little guy...hey, why are you wet?" I ask, stroking his fur as my heartbeat ramps up. "How did you get out of your room?"

I walk into the office, and I don't see anything amiss other than the open door, which should have been shut. I know for certain that I closed the door firmly before going to bed. After the conversation I had with my neighbors, I double-checked to

make sure the door was closed and my house doors were locked, along with the windows.

Raider and I head back to the front of the house, and I see that all is well in the living room. When I head into the kitchen, I see that the back door is closed and still locked this time, but the kitchen window is wide open.

I run back to my bedroom and grab my gun. There's no way that the window should be open. Someone has broken into my house, and while they're no longer here, I know that they were at some point. Raider didn't do this. He couldn't possibly open the window.

Not only did he not do that, he also didn't fill the kitchen sink with water. I walk back to the wall, flip the light switch on, and notice for the first time that there are tiny, wet paw prints all over the floor. Yet, I don't see another set of prints.

In the middle of the table is a plate of sugar cookies. There's a note beside them that says:

Girls are made of sugar & spice & everything nice.

XOXOXO

Your Secret Admirer

I think back to Rick warning me to call the cops if for no other reason than to report what happened. How can I tell them that I don't trust cops? How can I tell them that every time I was supposed to depend on them, they hurt someone that I love or brought bad news? Even more ludicrous is that I have a secret admirer who breaks into my home, leaving me

gifts and cryptic notes. They'd probably laugh me out of the station.

Nothing good ever came from contacting them, at least, not in my experience.

I return to my room and grab my phone, putting an alert in there to call a security company at the start of business hours. Looking through Google, I find Elite Security, Services, Systems and Solutions, and I make a note to dial them when they open at eight.

I'll also call Kai because he'll know what to do. As much as I hate to run to him now, this isn't a battle that I want to fight on my own.

I know that I won't get any sleep since this happened. So, I grab a blanket and pillow, return to the living room and get comfortable on the couch after I've secured the doors and windows.

Every light in the house is on, as well as my porch lights. I doubt anyone will want to walk up here with it lit up like the daytime.

"I wish you could talk, little one," I say, scratching behind Raider's ears.

He looks up at me, flattens his ears, and meows.

"Oh, sweet baby. Did they harm you?"

After calling the security company, I'll see if I can't get him into the vet as soon as possible. Hopefully, they can squeeze me in before it's time for me to be at the store. I'd already taken him to get shots and checked out for any

diseases or problems a couple of days after I found him roaming in my kitchen.

It briefly occurs to me that I should get a guard dog, as well. Maybe one that's an attack dog, only I don't know how well this little guy would do with him.

Either way. Something has to change.

CHAPTER 10

End Game

Everyone's been on pins and needles, wondering when we'll hear from Aiello and what his demands will be. It's been almost three months, and still no word. Anarchy suspects that he's waiting for us to let our guard down before he makes a move.

As a result, the women are on lockdown at the compound, Ol' Ladies and Roses included. They're getting antsy, as you might expect, but Anarchy's not budging on this shit.

We've got brothers manning the gates with the Prospects, and we've got eight instead of the usual four. Everyone's hunkering down, waiting for some unexpected attack.

I'm in my office at the dispensary going over ideas about the casino with Phantom when John, one of my employees, pokes his head inside.

"Someone's here to see you," he says.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you," he says before closing the door behind him.

When I step from my office and into the store, I stop dead in my tracks.

What the fuck is she doing here, and what does she want?

Glossy, dark curls that used to hang loosely to her waist have now been chopped to the middle of her back. It's been three and a half months since I last saw her.

Golden skin holds that sun-kissed look from the summer months, so rich and luxurious you can't help but touch her whenever she's in the vicinity.

Ample hips swell down into curvy thighs, and a curvaceous ass fills out her jeans nicely. My dick swells in jealousy, wishing I was the one holding that ass, but I quickly push those feelings aside.

In their place rise confusion and hope. Her back is to me as she looks in one of the glass display cases that hold different vape pens.

I walk up behind her and say, "Meet me outside."

Turning, I quickly make my way to the door and push it open, stepping out into the evening. I look up and see the clouds that are starting to form overhead.

She's told me that I'm not good enough. She's proved to me that we're not the same kids we once were. So, why do I keep hoping that something will change?

"What's up?" I say coolly when she stops before me.

"I need your help, Kai."

"Need someone to commit a crime for you? Steal? Beat? Murder, maybe?"

Her face scrunches up, and she shakes her head. Nova looks as if she's on the verge of tears.

"That's unfair."

"No, what's unfair is that you were clear about not needing me in your life. I backed away and gave you the space you

need, so I don't get why you're here now."

"Okay, maybe I was wrong to come off so strong. Maybe I could have chosen a different way to say what needed to be said, but I wasn't ready for you, Kai. Running into you again was one thing, but becoming involved again was something totally different."

"So, you just what? Run away?"

"I'm not running, Kai."

"Aren't you? Because from where I'm sitting, you seem to be running away."

Tears stream down her beautiful face just as the skies open and the rain starts to pour. I should have known the clouds' appearance was an omen of things to come.

"I don't have anyone else to turn to, Kai, and I need your help."

"You know...I think I'm all out of favors, Nova."

"Why're you being mean?"

"I'm not being mean. I just don't want to play these games with you. I may not be a doctor, lawyer, or some other fancy high society professional, but what I am is a man with feelings. I still have strong feelings for you after all these years, Nova. I thought maybe we were on the same page, but you quickly let me know we weren't. I'm not into playing games. I'm either in your life or out. You don't get to pick me up like a forgotten book when you grow bored again."

"I'm not. I really need you, Kai. I'm scared."

“Scared of what?” I huff.

“Someone’s playing tricks on me.”

“You tried calling the cops?”

Scoffing, she asks, “You’re really asking me that? Come on, you, of all people, don’t trust them.”

“Not for me,” I say, jerking my thumb at my chest. “But you’re different. We don’t walk in the same paths of life anymore. They’d come calling for you. Take care of any of your requests in a jiffy.”

“I don’t trust them any more than you do,” she says softly, shaking her head.

Turning away from me, she says, “I knew this was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come here.”

I watch as she climbs into her car and speeds out of the parking lot.

Yet, as I go on with my day, I can’t help but think I hope that I don’t regret the decision to let her get away.

* * *

It’s a quarter til ten, and I’m walking up the cobblestone path to her front door when the lights go on all over the yard. A high-pitched alarm goes off, one that has dogs throughout the neighborhood barking.

What the fuck?

Instantly, I see lights flicker on at the front of the house, and I can see Nova moving quickly to the door. I reach into my pocket and grab my phone to call her so that she can know

that I'm here. By the time I've grabbed my phone, the front door is open, and she stands aiming a gun at me, looking wild-eyed with her curls tousled around her head.

“What the fuck?”

“Kai?”

“Yes, would you please lower that thing?” I say with my hands raised, still clutching my phone.

“It's just you?”

“Nova, no one is out here but me. I swear. I was getting my phone to call you and let you know it was me. There's my bike right there,” I say, pointing at the middle of the driveway where my bike is parked behind her car.

She peers behind me and finally, begrudgingly lowers the gun. I walk the rest of the way up the sidewalk, and as soon as I step into the doorway, I grab the muzzle of the gun and snatch it from her.

“Don't you ever point a gun at me in your fucking life!” I growl.

“I didn't...Kai, I didn't know it was you.”

“You told me to come by.”

“I thought you were someone else.”

“Who? One of the guys you wanted to make room for in your life?”

“No!”

“Then who? Who has you so scared that you’re pointing a gun at me?”

“Someone’s trying to make me think that I’m crazy, Kai.”

“Who would have a reason to do that and why?” I ask, looking down at a little Calico that’s nudging against her leg.

“I don’t know. That’s why I need your help.”

“Then maybe you should’ve gone to the cops. I’m no detective, Nova.”

“You’re the only one I trust. I don’t know anyone in this town, Kai. It could be someone who works for me or someone who lives beside me. Anyone from A to Z.”

Her kitchen is open to the living room, and I watch her through the opening as she grabs a canister marked “Tea” on the outside. “Would you like some?”

“Don’t drink tea.”

“I’m all out of coffee,” she says by way of apology.

“I’m fine.”

When she finishes with her tea, she returns to the living room and sits beside me.

“Thought you didn’t like animals,” I say when I see her lift the kitten onto her lap and start stroking its fur.

“I didn’t ever dislike them.”

“When we were kids, you hated animals.”

“That’s going a bit far,” she says, sipping her tea.

“No. You hated them.”

“Okay, I didn’t care for animals when we were younger. I got over it, though. I’m still not a fan, but...”

“But?”

“Raider is one of—”

“Raider?” I chuckle.

My VP would love that.

“What’s so funny?” she asks, looking offended. “I think it’s a cool name.”

“Yeah? So does my VP. Anyway, how did you end up with this little guy?” I press on, overlooking the confusion on her face.

“I caught him raiding my kitchen in the wee hours of the morning.”

“How’d he get in?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. So many things have happened since I arrived in Smokey Ridge, Kai. It started with the secret admirer gifts.”

Jealousy streaks through me, but I tamp it down.

“Secret admirer? What gifts?”

“Just before we reconnected, I was getting these little gifts with a note attached with little sweet messages. Things that seemed innocent enough at first. There was never a name signed. It started off as bouquets of flowers, always in my favorite color, orange. They started a couple of weeks before I opened the bookstore. Then there were other little things like a

journal, a keychain with my zodiac sign, and other little random gifts.

“They transitioned to things like an autographed book that I’d lost in a house fire years ago that meant so much to me and escalated to panties and lingerie. These things coincided with other strange events like Raider’s appearance. I thought I heard a noise one night, so I got up, grabbed my gun much like I did tonight, and went into the kitchen. This little guy was there,” she says, lifting him and nuzzling her face against his body.

“How’d he get in?”

“The back door. It was open, and I’m certain that not only did I close it before bed, but I locked it too.”

“You call the cops?”

“No. I did a search of my house and found no one. I couldn’t see anyone out in the yard, although I didn’t go out because it was too dark. The next major incident didn’t happen until last Friday. Before that, I would come home and see little things like maybe a rock sitting on my porch swing when I knew a rock hadn’t been there before or my flower pot moved several inches from its original space. It was never anything serious, but things that I was aware of.”

“What was the major thing that happened Friday?”

“I’d spent the evening with some neighbors at a bonfire. When I returned home, all was well, but when I woke up in the middle of the night because of a noise, I found Raider at my

bedroom door. I knew that I'd shut him in my office, but somehow, he made his way out. He was wet."

"Think he'd gotten outside? It has rained the last few nights."

"That wasn't it. My kitchen window was wide open, and I always locked everything up before going to bed. Not to mention, my kitchen sink was full of water. Someone placed Raider in there and took him out."

Anger fills me that someone would dare fuck with her this way. Despite the fact that I have personal issues with her, she still matters to me. I'm still as protective of her as I always was.

"Who knows you're here aside from the people in this community?"

"You mean like friends and family?"

I nod.

"My best friend, Sandra."

"What about your ex-husband?"

"Will? He knows I'm in California, but he could care less."

"We have to rule out everyone, Nova. It's easy to say that he could care less, but if you didn't end on amicable terms—"

"Trust me, this isn't his way. He's a cheating bastard, not a romantic, deranged stalker. Besides, he doesn't know where in California I am."

I sigh, running my hands across my head. "This has been going on since you first arrived, and you never had any

problems before?”

“No.”

“Who all do you know in this community?”

We spend the next ten minutes discussing those possibilities, and then I ask her, “If you got the security in place, why’d you call me? You told me that you’ve hired Elite. It’s owned by one of my brothers, Falcon. You couldn’t get better security than his men on you. So, why am I here?”

“With the security in place, someone was able to bypass the system.”

“That’s impossible. Not Falcon’s security.”

“Yes. Falcon’s security.”

Alarm bells go off in my head, and as soon as I gather all the facts, I’ll contact Falcon to see what the hell is going on.

“Did he leave something else?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know someone bypassed the system?”

CHAPTER 11

Nova

I flush warm with the memory of what happened this morning. I think about how sick I felt last night, which prompted me to go to bed earlier than normal. I had taken a much-needed day off work after running the store for the last two months daily, seven days a week.

I'd spent the day picking through an antiques shop a town over and then going to another town to do some clothes shopping.

"I um...I was sick last night, so I'd gone to bed early. Felt a bit woozy for some reason, but I made sure that everything was locked up and the alarm was on. Tucked Raider into his room and locked him in this time. I woke up this morning when the alarm went off. Nothing out of the normal, like noises or open windows and doors. But when I got up to go to the bathroom, my..."

How the hell do I say this to this man? Hell, it was embarrassing enough discovering it, and I haven't told anyone about this morning's snafu, not even my best friend, Sandra.

"And what happened in the bathroom?" Kai prompts.

Uncontrollable tears of anger and fear flood my face. I can't hold it in any longer, and I'm pissed, a wreck, and walking in fear.

"What happened in the bathroom?" Kai repeats this time through clenched teeth.

Swiping at my tears, I say, “I had to use the bathroom before showering, and I didn’t have any panties on.”

His face scrunches in a confused scowl, and I know that he’s not interpreting what I’m saying correctly.

“Kai, someone removed my panties while I slept last night. Like right off my body.”

Understanding dawns in his pale blue eyes, and a finger of fear dances along my spine as I witness them turning glacial.

“Somebody broke into your house and removed your panties, Nova?”

I nod.

“Did they rape you?”

Shaking my head, I say, “I don’t think so.”

“The fuck you mean?”

“I feel violated knowing that someone would do something like this, but other than that, my *body* doesn’t feel as if...as if I’ve been sexually assaulted or molested. I don’t believe anyone penetrated me, but—”

“But knowing what happened is fucking enough.”

He bursts up off the couch and paces my floor so hard that the porcelain figurines in my etagere shake. Then he stops as suddenly as he starts. Turning to face me, he asks, “You been to the doctor?”

“No.”

“We need to see if you were drugged, Nova. That’s the only way to explain how you slept through something like that. It only makes sense when you consider that you didn’t feel well last night, and you said you were woozy.”

I nod.

“What did you do when you found out?”

“I um...well, that was a little after ten this morning. I showered, dressed, grabbed Raider and left the house as quickly as possible. I wasn’t planning to be at the store until after one, but I went straight to the store and locked myself in my office. Told my staff that I had a lot of calls to make and contracts to review. So, no one disturbed me.”

“The rest of the day?”

I get up and walk to the window, staring outside into the darkness.

“Remained in that office until I could figure out something. I couldn’t...couldn’t figure it out. I’m so fucking pissed, Kai! Like if I knew who it was, then I could press charges, get the bastard back, kick their ass or something. But as it stands, I have no idea who my enemy is. Do you know how frustrating it is to fight a faceless enemy? How helpless I fucking feel?” I shout with tears streaming down my face as I spin around to face Kai.

I hadn’t realized how close to me he’d moved. He folds me into his arms, rests his chin on my head and rocks me slowly side to side. I feel safe in his arms, as though no amount of

evil in this world can penetrate the protective shield that he's placed around me.

He lets me cry in his embrace, and he doesn't make me feel bad about it. His arms strengthen me to experience the breakdown that I need. For the last few months since I've pushed him away, I've buried myself in the store only to return home to lonely nights.

"I wish you would've called me."

"I told myself that I would. But then I got the security system and had a sense of false security."

"I'm here now."

Those words are more reassuring than any security system.

I spend so much time at my bookstore that I'm exhausted at the end of the night. I come home, fall into bed around eleven, and wake up early in the morning to do it all over again.

It's the only way that I can escape the memories and longing that I have for Kai. It's the only way that I can convince myself that pushing him out of my life is the right thing to do. If I'd allowed him back in, I would only be hurt in the end, and without him anyway. With his lifestyle, it's inevitable.

"He left a note."

"What note?"

I hold up a finger and head to my bedroom. Grabbing the note from my nightstand, I return and hand it to him.

“This was lying on my nightstand when I woke up this morning.”

“‘Real elegance is everywhere – especially in the things that don’t show. Christian Dior.’ XOXOXO, Your Secret Admirer’,” he reads.

Exhaling loudly, Kai asks, “Have you been receiving these?”

Nodding, I reply, “With every package that he leaves.”

“You still got ‘em?”

I shake my head. “I threw most of them away, not thinking anything about them.

“I want you to get all the ones you still have for me. Oh, yeah, I’m staying here with you tonight.”

I nod.

“I want you to get some sleep. You can bet your ass that nothing will happen as long as I’m here. When we get up in the morning, you’re going to the clubhouse with me.”

“I have to open the store in the morning, Kai.”

“Fuck that store!” he thunders, pulling back and staring into my eyes. “I care more about your safety and wellbeing than I do that store.”

“It’s my business, Kai!”

“And you’re my business, Nova!”

When I look as if I might argue that point, he growls, “You became my business when you came back begging me back

into your life.”

My shoulders slump. He has a point.

“Why do I need to go to the clubhouse?”

“If you don’t want to go to the doctor’s office, then you’ll go see Doc. He’s the doctor at the MC, and he can tell if you’ve been drugged or not and anything else that we need to find out, including the contents of the drug.”

“I can’t have some biker guy—”

“He’s not just some biker guy. He was a smart-ass kid whose parents were a waste of space. His dad was in the MC screwing around on his mom every chance he got, and she covered those woes by staying doped up. Doc he was smart enough to know that his way out was using his brain. He got a full ride to college at sixteen. Graduated at twenty and went on to medical school, and the MC paid all those expenses. He did his three-year residency, got his license, and returned to us so that he could use his skills in-house.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know.”

He looks away from me, releasing me and says, “Yeah. There’s a lot you don’t know. Gotta stop making snap judgments, Nova. You, of all people, should know that.”

People often judged me when they learned that I spent my teen years in foster care.

“You’re right,” I say.

“Go get some rest,” Kai orders. He plops down on my couch and says, “I’ll be right here in the morning.”

“What if someone tries to come through the bedroom?”

His eyes flash again. “They won’t.”

I nod, knowing that I want to say more. A part of me wants to tell him that I’d only feel safe wrapped in his arms, him laying behind me in bed, but I don’t. I turn and head down the hallway to my bedroom.

* * *

Somehow, after tossing and turning and mulling over what happened to me earlier in the day and knowing that Kai was in my house, I finally fell asleep. I’d even turned my alarm off before going to bed so that I could get some real rest.

I glance at the clock, and I see that it’s a little after ten-thirty. I never sleep this long. I can hear pots and pans banging in the kitchen, and I’m a little startled because I didn’t think that Kai could cook. He wasn’t very good at it when we were kids, but he also wasn’t interested in trying to be good at it.

I slip my feet into my house shoes to make sure that I’m not in danger of having my house burnt down.

Walking into my kitchen, I’m taken aback by a couple of things. First, Kai has no shirt on, but he’s wearing an apron. The way those jeans hang on his hips makes me want to devour him for breakfast. Second, Raider is right at his heels with every move he makes.

“You’re gonna keep standing back there watching my ass, or are you gonna come help cook.”

Blushing, I reply, “I didn’t realize you could cook.”

“Can do a lot of things that I couldn’t when I was a kid. At some point, we all gotta grow up and mature, right?” he asks, throwing my words back at me as he steps away from the stove.

“Kai, I never meant that the way—”

He ends my words abruptly with a searing kiss. His hands lift me from the floor and set me on top of the counter as he uses his body to part my legs.

I make way for Kai between my legs, and my arms lift, looping around his neck and pulling him closer. Fire burns in my belly as the flames of desire ignite between my legs. His hand slips underneath my nightshirt, and he groans when he finds that I’m wearing no panties.

“How often do you sleep this way?” he asks, breathing heavily as he presses his forehead against mine.

“Since last night. Hoping you’d come back there,” I share.

“Fuck!” he grunts, reaching down to lift my nightshirt up and over my head.

I’m sitting on my counter with my legs wide open, breasts bared to him, and nothing between my ass and the counter. Kai leans in to kiss me again as he struggles to unbutton his jeans.

The time between him making that happen and him pressing against me with an intense, searing pressure is probably just seconds but feels like a lifetime. When he’s inside of me, he releases a deep-throated sigh of contentment, and my thighs tighten around his back.

“Kai,” I moan.

“Shut up,” he grumbles, pounding inside me.

His hands tighten on my thighs as he pulls me closer to the edge and rocks deeper inside of me. When he’s fully seated, I wonder why I’m so scared to take a risk on this man. I know that he’ll hurt me, and I know that I’ll lose my way, but isn’t that what love is all about?

Shouldn’t we be willing to take the risk no matter the consequences if it means these moments of happiness are experienced, memories are created, and we get to explore something beautiful, even if only for a while?

“Kai, I need more,” I beg as he rocks into me again.

He pulls back, and his lips greedily and hungrily devour my breasts, alternating between nipping and sucking at them. My hands tug at his hair, urging him on while my hips scoot forward, hoping that he’ll slip inside of me again because my walls already miss him.

When I’m finally at the edge, he lifts me from the counter and settles me on him.

“Kai!” I scream when he presses hard and deep into me with no warning or barrier.

He takes me hard and fast, and I hold nothing back, basking in the pain of his furious thrusts. A part of me wonders if he’s punishing me for pushing him away.

Kai’s teeth sink into my shoulder as he bounces me up and down on his dick. My head rocks back as I bite my bottom lip, enjoying the pain and the thrill of this unexpected union.

His hands are hot on my body as they roam up and down my back, cupping and caressing my ass, only to lift again and jerk my hair. When my head rocks back, his teeth sink into the flesh at the base of my throat, and I cry out.

“So, fucking wet and hot! So deep,” he grumbles.

“Oh, God, Kai! Damn,” I cry.

I can't believe that I'm literally crying. Tears fall from my eyes, and I shake and whimper at his touch and the feeling of him inside of me.

“Can't hold it, Nova. Your pussy's so sweet.”

“Please! Kai, don't stop. Don't ever stop,” I beg, even as I cum all down his dick.

“That's it, baby. Drench this dick with your juices.”

I continue to cum to his labored grunts of, “Yeah. That's it. Gush! Gush! Gush! That pussy's gushing!”

When he cums it feels like a volcano erupting inside of me. The shaking, earthshattering feeling of his hot semen spurting inside of me doesn't scare me as it should. It's a welcome feeling, one that makes me feel the strong bond between us that never really left.

When he's finished, he slowly lets me down, and when I reach out to touch him, he grabs my hand and stares into my eyes. We stare at one another for a while before he drops my hand and walks to the guest bathroom.

“Go get dressed. We need to leave. Breakfast will be ready when you're done,” he says, tossing a casual glance at me over

his shoulder.

“Thanks,” I say in reference to him cooking for me.

He grumbles something and then says, “Pack a couple of bags.”

“For what?”

“You’re not coming back here, Nova. Not until we figure out what the hell is going on and deal with it.”

“I don’t have any other place to go, Kai. Besides, going to a hotel would be more dangerous than here.”

“You’re staying with me.”

A chill runs down my spine, and I ignore all the warning bells and do what he says instead.

An hour and a half later, I’m showered, dressed, packed and fed, and the kitchen is clean.

“Where’s that thing going?” Kai asks, nodding his head at Raider, who’s wrapped in a blanket in my arms.

“With us.”

“There’s no animals where we’re going, Nova.”

“Well, I’m sure Raider will feel like the prince of the castle, knowing he has the place all to himself.”

“Not sure about that,” he grumbles, heading out the front door as I alarm the security system. I’m not even sure that I should bother knowing that someone can still infiltrate the system.

I slow my car to a crawl as Kai stops in front of a guarded entrance. In the distance, I see a tall building that looks like a castle, complete with turrets and guards. Is this where Kai lives?

The men at the gates wave Kai through and me after he says something to them and jerks his thumb back at me.

I follow him up a long, winding drive, and we don't stop at the castle but keep moving toward some low-lying, two-story brick buildings. There are five in all. Just when I expect we'll stop there, we don't but continue further down the road to a group of cottages.

They don't look like anything that I would expect to be on property owned by an MC. They're cute, little gingerbread-looking cottages with tiny gardens and hanging flowers. They're coral, camel, grey, mint, and terracotta in color.

Kai rolls to a stop in front of a coral-colored cottage that has several rose bushes.

"Who lives here?" I ask after I get out of the car.

"No one. These cottages are for visitors and other MCs when they come into town. They used to look shitty, but Roxie, that's one of my brother's Ol' Lady, she took on a project with a few of the other Ol' Ladies and decided to renovate the cottages inside and out and the grounds."

"I don't know what they looked like before, but they're nice now," I say just as a beautiful, cinnamon-colored woman exits the door. She's gorgeous enough to be a model, but the look on her face is intimidating. Not that I can't hold my own,

but I'm not trying to come on these people's property and deal with bullshit from no one.

Just as soon as the thought enters my mind, it disappears as a smile blossoms on her face, and the scowl she'd worn before is abandoned. She sticks out her hand and says, "I'm Roxie. You must be Nova."

"I am," I say, accepting her hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I hear that you're a friend of End Game's, and I'm so excited that you'll be here with us for a while."

"End Game?"

Roxie looks between Kai and me with confusion, and I shake my head laughing. "Sorry. I'm not used to that name. I only know him by—"

"You said the cottage is ready, Roxie?" Kai asks.

Roxie winks at me and smiles, handing Kai the key. "It is. I'll let you get settled in, Nova. The welcoming committee will be back around for some tea."

The way that she says it with the twist of her lips and a lift of an eyebrow, I know she's not referencing drinking tea, but she wants me to spill the goods on Kai. I smile and say, "That'll be nice," if for no other reason than to not raise his suspicions.

It would be nice to have someone else to talk to around here for however long I'll be here. She waves goodbye, and I follow Kai up the two short stairs to the porch. There's a cute little porch swing and potted plants along the short porch.

When he pushes the door open, the scent of apples and cinnamon greets me, and I look around and see several lit candles. The vibe is cozy and welcoming while still coastal with its soft blue, tan, and green color palate.

We're standing in the living room, which opens to the kitchen. There's no dining room, but there is a breakfast nook. I can tell the place isn't very big, but neither is mine. It's clean, cute, cozy, and free. I can't complain.

"Take a look around, get acquainted. You'll be staying here for the foreseeable future," Kai says, extending a hand towards two closed doors.

The first door opens to a bathroom with a toilet and sink. I step out of that one, hoping the bedroom has a full bath. The bedroom isn't much smaller than mine and has a queen-sized bed, a dresser, a nightstand, and a desk. There are three doors; one I can tell belongs to a closet, and the next is the full-sized bathroom I'd been hoping to find.

It has a soaker tub, a separate shower, a pedestal sink, and a cabinet with fresh linens and towels. The bathroom is almost the same size as the bedroom. The third door leads to a private patio off the backyard, which is fenced-in and quaint. A tree at the back of the yard has a tire swing, and there's a tiny flower garden and not much more.

When I walk back to the living room, Kai is standing there, and I can see the anxiety in his eyes. The bags that I'd left in the car are now at his feet.

"Thanks."

“Yeah...um, will this work for you?”

“Yes, of course, it’s perfect, Kai. Thank you,” I say softly.

“Good. Well, I already checked. The refrigerator is full of food. Everything you need is here. Doc’s waiting on us, so if you’re ready, we need to roll to the clubhouse and meet up with him.”

I flinch inwardly, wondering what he’ll ask of me. I hope he doesn’t plan to do any examination because I’ll cooperate with pretty much everything, except for removing my clothes. I stop there. I don’t care how many credentials and licenses the man has; I’m not getting naked for a tattooed, leather vest-wearing stranger.

CHAPTER 12

End Game

“What d’ya got?” I ask, perching on the edge of my chair.

It’s been two days since we first came to the clubhouse, and Nova was subjected to a physical examination by Doc and since Falcon began investigating what happened at her house. We haven’t heard from either since.

I’m anxious since this is the first time that I’m getting any news. Anarchy called this meeting, and we’re waiting for Doc to arrive, but he’s running late.

Falcon looks from me to Cannon to Anarchy to Raider and back to me.

“It’s not looking good, dude.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I know the shit that we install is on point. There’s no way around that security system without disarming it. The system was bypassed internally by someone who knew how it worked or had the code and had access to the system.”

“So, you’re saying that she disarmed it?” I ask in disbelief.

I may be angry at how she pushed me away, but I doubt she’s capable of anything of that magnitude.

Manipulation.

Falcon runs a hand over his bald head and lifts thick eyebrows. “End Game, it’s an inside job. I’m on it in terms of finding out who the fuck it is. Because as soon as I uncover

what employee of mine dares to fuck with my company, my reputation, and a client like that...his ass is dead.”

“Get in line,” I snarl, recalling how terrified Nova was to go to sleep last night.

Even with me there, I could see that she was still nervous and had reservations about letting her guard down. I’d gone into her room several times to check on her, and thankfully, she slept like a baby. I, on the other hand, got not a wink of sleep.

“You need to let us handle this, End Game,” Raider says.

Shaking my head, I reply, “Nah, can’t let this shit get past without her knowing that she never has to worry about shit as long as I’m around.”

“This ain’t your battle to fight,” Anarchy snips.

“The moment this fucker touched her...” I shake my head, unable to repeat to them what he’d done to her.

When I called Anarchy, I’d only told him a portion of what was going on. Anarchy and Cannon agreed that she needed to be brought into our protection instantly, and Falcon was called in to discuss what was going on.

“What about it?” Anarchy challenges.

“He crossed an invisible line that he shouldn’t have fucking toed!” I seethe.

“She’s the same as the rest of these citizens around here, End Game. We’d protect them, too, as a club, if it came to it. This ain’t got shit to do with you,” Cannon says.

“Unless it does,” Anarchy says, glaring at me. “Care to tell me who she really is?”

“The new owner of the bookstore,” I mutter.

“Don’t fucking shit me!” Anarchy growls, slamming his palms on his desk as he stands. “Who is she, End Game? I need to know who the fuck we’ve brought onto our property and if she’s a liability to the club. Is this another case of Cannon and Roxie...you screwed her, and now you’ve got the feels for her?”

“No.”

“Trying to get with her?” Falcon suggests.

“No,” I growl, flaring my nostrils.

“Then who. The fuck. Is she?” Anarchy grinds out.

“A friend. Someone I’ve known for a long time.”

“How long?” Raider asks.

“Gotta be a long ass time for you to defy your Prez’s orders,” Falcon states.

“Since foster care.”

“Fuck,” Cannon groans, pulling a hand down his face.

Anarchy continues eyeing me and slowly nods his head. I can see his temper rising and feel his anger radiating off him.

“When were you gonna tell us?” Raider asks.

“Wasn’t.”

“That’s what I thought. So, when I fucking asked you to get details on the store owner, and it started taking you forever,

you were lying to me,” Anarchy says.

I nod, clenching my jaws tightly.

“Why?”

That one word bitten out by Anarchy leaves no room for discussion. He wants an answer, and he wants one now. I know that I’ve crossed the line on this one and that I’ll be held accountable for my actions, but I don’t care. I’d do the same thing a thousand times over if it meant protecting Nova.

“Nova’s not some random chick I’ve met. Like I said, I’ve known her since foster care...about fifteen. She lost her parents in a car accident, and no one claimed her. She caught hell in the system because she didn’t have the street smarts and the hard shell the rest of us did. She always wore her heart on her sleeve and was taken advantage of because all she wanted was to please people.”

“That was back in Georgia, though, wasn’t it?” Cannon asks.

I nod.

“You’ve been in touch with her all along?” Raider asks.

“No. We lost touch for several years and just met again when I went into her bookstore to do exactly as you asked,” I say, leveraging a look at Anarchy.

“People change. How much do you really know about this girl?” he asks.

“She’s been through a ton of shit.”

“Ain’t we all,” Raider sneers.

“Even back then. She was depressed, struggling with the reality of her situation, and she had no hope. I was all she had. The only person who had her back and saw her for who she was. The only person who saw her when she was at the end of her rope and gave her a reason to fight on.”

I see the change in Anarchy’s face, and though I won’t place the details out there, he’s already figured it out.

“She was suicidal.” It’s a statement; there’s no question in there, but I nod anyway.

“And you were there with her?”

“Stopped her.”

He nods and pulls his hand down his face.

“How do we know this isn’t some desperate attempt to get your attention?” Anarchy asks.

“She’s not the one that did this. Someone has been disarming her system of that much, I’m sure, and I also can prove it’s from my side. It wasn’t her. They’ve been hacking into the central system with a master code that I’m certain hasn’t been stolen or leaked. The master code changes daily, so it has to be someone with access to our systems,” Raider says.

“Have they stolen anything?” Cannon asks.

“No. Just doing random shit like I told you. Leaving windows and doors open, placing a kitten in her kitchen and then placing it in the sink, leaving potted plants and typed secret admirer cards and notes on her kitchen table. Never taking anything but leaving everything. Simple shit like

leaving the refrigerator door open. Things that may drive a sane person insane.”

“Why would someone be after her like that? Who do you employ who knows her personally? Maybe someone from her past has moved into town lately. You got any new hires?” Anarchy asks, looking at Falcon.

“No. Everyone who works for me has been with me for at least a year. Background check thorough and complete. You know my guys have to go through a background check annually.”

“But you said that you think it’s one of them,” Raider points out. “Could there be any other possibility?”

“None that makes sense. Man, this shit is baffling me, but I swear I’ll get to the bottom of it,” Falcon says, peering at me.

“I know you will. The fuckers just better hope that you find them before I do,” I grunt.

“She knows to stay on the property?” Anarchy asks.

“Can’t make her stay. She’s got a business to run. There’s no way that I can keep her from that store.”

“Any employees that can run it in her absence?” Cannon asks.

“She’s got quite a few employees and an assistant manager, but this store is her baby. It’s a dream come true for her.”

“If she doesn’t stay safe, she won’t be around much longer to dream,” Raider says, earning a wicked glare from me.

“The only way we’re going to be able to capture this fucker is if we use her as bait,” Falcon suggests.

I shoot up out of my seat like I’d been hit by lightning.

“The fuck, we will use her as bait!”

“How else are we gonna catch him, End Game? You gotta understand that there’s no way he’ll come after her if he knows she’s not there. Whomever this is, he’s watching the place. He knows when she comes and when she goes,” Falcon explains.

“He could just as easily come to her job,” I argue.

“Not likely. You said yourself the most that he’s done is send flowers and sweet gifts to her job. Anything that would woo any woman. The crazy shit he’s doing, he’s only doing it at her house where he doesn’t have witnesses,” Falcon points out.

“He’s got a point there, End Game,” Cannon says.

Shaking my head, I reply, “Not feeling the shit.”

“What about Roses? Could we use one of them to pose as her?” Raider suggests.

Shaking my head, I say, “No. You haven’t met her, but she doesn’t look like them. They’re all white women, and she’s clearly biracial. Chinese and black.”

“The only way something like that would be possible is to find a woman who looks exactly like her, and that probability is highly unlikely,” Anarchy says. “We can use her as bait or not. If we don’t, he’ll probably go back into hiding. As soon as

we let our guard down, that's when he'll strike again, and we might not be prepared, End Game.”

I know what they're saying makes sense, but how can I put her back in the line of fire after I promised to protect her?

“Can't do that to her. She trusts me to keep her safe. Throwing her right back there would be like throwing her to the sharks and lying to her. Can't do that...” I leave off the word “again” because they don't need to know how I've failed her in the past.

“What about if he stays at the house with her?” Cannon suggests.

“That's not gonna work. In the same way that the person sees her coming and going, he'll see End Game enter the house, and he'll see his bike there. He's not going to make a move unless she's there alone.”

“So, we do what, Falcon? Hand her to him on a silver platter and hope that he doesn't kill her?” I sneer.

“No. We let her return and have her house monitored inside and out. Everything except for her bathroom. That's where she'll handle all private business, like showering, using the crapper, and dressing. Nothing personal in her bedroom.”

“Yeah, and then what? Call the cops to get there when we see the fucker going inside?” I snap.

“Fuck no! We're going inside! We'll be not too far away, ready to go in as soon as this bastard crosses the line,” Cannon argues.

“End Game, this is an emotional situation for you, so you’re not seeing it clearly. I get that, but here’s what has to happen. Nova needs to go home after Falcon installs whatever equipment he needs to install. We need to find out where we can set up surveillance not too far from her house without being seen and be ready to go in at the drop of a dime. We’ll have men on her house day and night watching everything, and Falcon will monitor her house internally,” Anarchy says.

“This isn’t sitting right with me,” I say.

“Bro, I feel you. When I had to protect Roxie from her asshole ex-husband, nothing was good enough. No matter what suggestions were made or what plans we put in place, none of it felt good enough until that bastard stopped breathing. But we gotta start somewhere,” Cannon says.

Pulling my hand down my face, I say, “I’m scared to lose her.”

“Thought you two just hooked up again,” Raider says.

“Not that way. Scared, she’ll go back to that mental place she was in a long time ago and just give up. I can’t let that happen. Not on my watch.”

Anarchy stands and walks to me. Gripping my shoulder in his palm, he says, “We’re not gonna let that happen, brother. We’ll take care of her, but my job is bigger than that. I got a few hundred men that I need to protect, too, and make sure this shit doesn’t blow back on them. Already got my hands full with this bullshit from Aiello. Trust me.”

Though I do, there’s a part of me that still worries.

“How long do you need to set things in place before she can return home, Falcon?” Raider asks.

“One day. Keep her here today and let her go back tomorrow evening after work as if everything were normal,” he answers.

Anarchy stares at me, and I give a single nod just as someone knocks at the door.

“Come in,” Anarchy calls.

The door opens, and Doc and Whiz step inside. Nova has been sitting on pins and needles waiting for the results of her bloodwork since her examination two days ago. I’d turned the notes that Nova received over to Whiz for examination.

“What’d you find, Doc?” I immediately ask.

“Someone slipped her Doxepin. It’s a tricyclic antidepressant used to treat insomnia. Nothing that will poison her, and the dose wasn’t heavy enough to take her out, but it seems that it has been happening over a short period.”

“Elaborate,” Anarchy says.

“She’s given this med to make sure that she sleeps at least eight hours without waking up. This is how the person can easily slip in and out of her house undetected by her. If she’s given this medication nightly, she’s adjusting to it.”

“How have they been slipping it to her?” I ask.

“Easily. Whoever has been slipping into her house they’re probably doing it when she’s not there, too. I asked her if anyone had access to her food at work, and she said no. If she

doesn't eat at the Dark Horse Diner, then she packs her lunch. We know that Terminator does all the cooking at his diner, and no one's slipping shit in anything. She says that when she packs her lunch, she keeps it in her personal refrigerator in her office, and her office is locked whenever she's not in it."

"So, what is this person slipping it into?" Raider asks.

"Her water. She drinks a water bottle every night half an hour before she goes to bed. She has a shelf beside her refrigerator full of water bottles that she takes room temp. I'm willing to bet every one of those bottles has been tampered with."

"Can we find out?" Anarchy asks.

"Yeah. I can test them."

"Problem is getting them out of the house without this fucker seeing them removed. He doesn't need to know that anything is up. Maybe have her pack them in her lunch bag or a bag that she carries to work...as many as she can and bring them back here so that we can test them," Falcon suggests.

"Nah, she doesn't need to bring them back here. He's probably following her. May even know that she's here now," Anarchy says. "Have her take them to the store with her as if all is well. You can pick them up, or better yet, we can have a couple of the Roses go there as if they were on a book-buying mission and leave out with them in bags."

Everyone except for Anarchy and me snickers at the thought of the Roses in a bookstore.

"Either them or a couple of the Ol' Ladies," I suggest.

“Yeah, I’m sure Rox would be down for that. Her, Marlo, Lizzy,” Cannon suggests.

Everyone bobs their head.

“Whiz, what you got?” Anarchy asks.

“It doesn’t match the handwriting of any of Falcon’s employees,” Whiz reveals.

Shrugging, Cannon suggests, “Could’ve gotten a family member or friend to do it for him.”

Shaking his head, Whiz says, “Nah, this ain’t his handwriting or anyone else’s. He used the font from a computer program to create the scrawl that looked like his handwriting. It’s a dead end, but the fucker will slip up, and I’ll catch him as soon as he does. Has she had any communication to her email or phone from him?”

“Not to my knowledge,” I say.

“It’ll happen,” Whiz says confidently.

“In the meantime, we need to figure out how the fuck we put surveillance on her house without being detected,” Cannon says.

“I’ll call the entire Council together for that and include you, End Game,” Anarchy says.

“On that other matter, there were no signs of assault,” Doc says.

I tense up as all eyes turn my way.

“What other matter?” Cannon asks.

Doc looks between them and me, and I shake my head. “Isn’t something she wanted anyone to know about. We handled it. Besides, I had to pressure her to open up to Doc about it.”

“What was it, End Game? We gotta know who the fuck we’re dealing with here,” Anarchy pushes.

“Not this one, man.”

“Doc,” Anarchy says. “Patient-doctor privilege just went out the door.”

“Damn it, Anarchy!”

“Look! You bought this chick onto our property after asking us to help you protect her. You have all of us involved with this shit, and expect us to have your back. I don’t have a fucking problem with that, brother, but I can’t do my job without all the facts! I need to know every. Fucking. Thing! It’s the only way that I can protect my men, this family, and her! And you don’t get to tell me how to do that job. Capisce?”

“Yeah,” I grumble.

His attention swings back to Doc.

“It appears that our intruder was not only into giving gifts to Nova but taking things for himself, too,” Doc says.

“Things like what?” Falcon asks.

“Her underwear.”

“This guy’s got a panty fetish?” Cannon asks with incredulity.

“Panties off her body while sleeping,” Doc says, leaving everyone speechless.

“Can I go check on her now?” I ask, feeling violation and outrage on her behalf.

Anarchy nods, and I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

CHAPTER 13

Nova

“I don’t understand. What do you mean I have to return home?” I ask as I nervously pace the cottage.

“It’s the only way we’re going to figure out who’s behind these attacks. Falcon and everyone else on the council is sure that he won’t strike without you there.”

“Will you be there with me, Kai?”

His face scrunches up, and my belly turns to Jell-O.

“I will be, but not inside of the house with you.”

“Why not?”

“They think he’s watching your comings and goings, and he won’t move with me there. It’ll be pointless, but I promise that I’ll be close by.”

Shaking my head, I stop pacing and wrap my arms around myself. “I don’t like this, Kai. We’re dealing with a psychopath here. I mean, the guy removed my panties from my body while I was sleeping, and he’s been poisoning my water. All I want to do is go in there and throw all that shit out.”

“And you will. We’ll get fresh things in there for you to eat. In the meantime, you’ll inform your staff that you’re taking a three-day mini vacation. They don’t need to know whether you’re still in town or away on vacation. You will stay at home and not leave for anything.”

“I can’t go down to the beach? That’s what I loved about the cottage because it’s right on the beach.”

“Yeah, you can do that, but other than that, stick close to home.”

“So, I’m supposed to do what? Stay at home for three days with no visitors and go nowhere?”

He nods, and I don’t like this one bit.

“How do we know it won’t take longer, Kai? I can’t stay pent up there forever.”

“I get it, babe.” He looks sheepish at the term of endearment and then mutters, “Sorry.”

Waving a hand, I say, “No. It’s okay. How close will you be? How long will it take for you to get to me if anything happens?”

“They’re still working out the logistics of that. I don’t know, but what I need to know is, do you know how to shoot?”

“Yes. I carry a Canik Elite.”

“Nice. How long have you known how to shoot?”

“Just over eight years. Will used to take me to a firing range in Santa Fe. He thought that everyone should know how to protect themselves, and sometimes, he would go away for lengthy periods to medical seminars. He wanted to know that I was safe while he was away,” I explain, thinking about the last time that I’d handled a gun was the day I walked in on him cheating on me.

“You ever use it?”

“Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

“I had intentions to use it when I found Will cheating on me. It was the final time that I’d put up with it. All the times before, I’d only found evidence or had suspicions. That time I had indisputable proof in front of my eyes with Will humping one of the nurses he worked with from behind in our bed.”

Tears prick my eyes as I recall that afternoon.

“He was supposed to be at work, and I was supposed to be in LA with my best friend, Sandra, at a gallery opening. After two days, I was ready to come home, and I wasn’t sure why. I just had this gut feeling in my belly, you know. It was pressuring me to return home early from what was supposed to be a four-day trip. Sandra encouraged me to go with my gut, and I did.”

Confusion fills me as I grab my bags from the Uber driver and walk up the sidewalk to my front door. There’s no way that Will’s cars should all be there. He has a Range Rover, a Dodge Ram 2500, and a BMW. All three of them are parked in the detached garage. I’d just spoken with him this morning, and he hadn’t mentioned that he was taking the day off.

Neither had I mentioned that I was coming home from my trip early. Maybe it was that gut instinct that pressured me to keep silent on that.

That same gut instinct is what’s pressuring me to take my shoes off inside the door after I enter. Leaving my luggage at

the front door, I head into my study, unlock the drawer, and remove the package.

I close my eyes, whispering a prayer of forgiveness as I make my way up the stairs to the third floor of our home. The French bedroom doors are thrown wide open, and clothes are carelessly discarded on the cherry floors of the hallway leading into our bedroom.

I step over the dress pants, jacket, and skirt. I kick aside a pair of panties and a bra and glance around the meticulously cleaned bedroom. It looks nothing like I left it. Smells nothing like it either.

I take a seat in my favorite teal armchair by the window and place my hands in my lap. Disgusted at the disarray in my bedroom and the pungent, distinctly fishy odor, I turn my attention to the scene playing out before me.

The tufted headboard of my French bed bangs crudely against the dove grey walls that just had a fresh coat not even two months ago. The chorus of sighs and moans turns into hiccupping pleas and coarse barks of pleasure as they intermittently become shrill and deafening.

He spreads her legs wider and holds them in the air, gripping her ankles until they turn red. The forceful, brutish way that he's thumping inside of her is sure to leave her sore and bruised for days. Surely, they know that, considering they're both medical professionals, but I guess that's not important now.

“Oh! Will! Just like that...mph, mph, yeahhh!”

“Who’s your man? Huh? Who’s your man?”

I roll my eyes as she screams, “You, Will!”

If it wasn’t so pathetic and dismal, it might be comical. I glance at my watch and wonder how long this has been going on. I’ve been sitting here for at least five minutes now.

“You love me?” he grunts out as he continues to jackhammer her insides.

“Yes! Yes! Yes, I love you, Will!” she shrieks.

They kiss as the urgency of his pumps slows, but they don’t disconnect. He moves up and down, and she rocks with him, welcoming him over and over and stirring up the amazing funk that’s coming from her pussy. Oddly, he doesn’t seem to notice or allow it to deter him.

Filthy bastard.

“You said you’d leave her. Are you leaving?”

“Yeah, baby,” he groans, thrusting in her hard again.

“Said that...ohhh, Will! You said that for the last year.”

“I...will,” he says between grunts.

“Are you coming, baby?”

“Yeah...Big Willy’s coming!” he cries out.

She pumps up harder and faster and cries, too, as they both orgasm. Bored with the theatrics, I start applauding their performance.

Will jumps off her, and they both clutch the covers to their chests.

“I think it’s a bit late for that, seeing as how I’ve viewed both of your anatomy from every possible angle. Oh, Marie, you might want to get that smell checked out. There’s nothing healthy about that,” I say.

“Nova, baby, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh, it’s not my husband of nine years fucking his scrub nurse in our home, in our bedroom, in our bed. That’s not what I just saw and watched for...” I check my watch again. “At least the last nine minutes?”

“Baby, I thought—”

“You thought that I was still out of town, and you could openly have fun and screw everything in sight the way you typically do behind closed doors.”

“She doesn’t mean anything to me!” he declares.

“Will!” she cries.

“You know, I had planned on coming up here putting a cap in both of your asses,” I say, lifting my gun and watching in fascination as their eyes grow wide.

I stroke the butt of the gun and turn it over in my hands.

“Nova, please put that thing away!” Will grunts.

“You said that I need to know how to use it to protect myself. Well, the way that my heart has just shattered on the floor for the last time, I think that I need protection against that,” I say calmly.

“Nova, come on, baby. Let’s talk about this and get some healing. We can seek therapy.”

In a bored and detached tone, I stand and wave the gun at them. “No, I don’t think I’ll be doing that. In fact, I don’t think I’ll be doing anything with you anymore except for determining how we’ll split this house and everything we’ve acquired together.”

Will jumps from the bed, dick sagging sadly, without even a condom to cover it. Just a sticky mess. I shake my head at him and say, “Will, don’t bother. No matter what you say or do, I will never forgive you. Our marriage is over. Has been for a while.”

Tiredly, I walk down the stairs, ignoring his pleas. I can hear Marie fumbling around upstairs, getting her clothes together.

“Baby, just stay so we can talk it over.”

I grab my car keys off the hook by the door, pick up my luggage and start walking outside.

Will stops at the door and cries out, “Baby! I can’t live without you.”

Even then, I keep moving until I’m in my car, pulling down the driveway. I drive five miles away before I pull over at a park and let the tears fly. I promise that will be the last time that I shed a tear over my no-good, cheating husband.

“Damn, I’m sorry.”

Waving off his compassion, I say, “It’s in the past.”

“I know this isn’t easy for you, Nova, but—”

“You promised me that you’d keep me safe, Kai. I expect you to uphold that promise. I don’t expect that you’ll let me down. Just keep your word this time, okay?” I state.

His face turns red. He shoves his hands into the front pocket of his jeans and nods.

He steps toward me and cups my chin. “You think this could be one of the guys you’ve been seeing?”

I bite my lip to keep from telling him the truth, but it’s no use.

“I never dated anyone else, Kai. Never wanted to.”

“I don’t get it. That’s why you pushed me out of your life.”

“I didn’t push you out. At least not that way. I only wanted space where you were concerned because things were moving too fast. I trusted you once before, Kai, and you disappointed me. My heart can’t take that anymore,” I confide my half-truth.

“So, all this time, you haven’t been dating? Haven’t been seeing anyone else?”

Shaking my head, I say, “No, Kai. But I’m weak where you’re concerned.”

“I don’t get it.”

“When I saw you again, all my old feelings came rushing back. I wanted you in the worst way. Felt like I could be whole again. After you left...I tried...I tried—” a sob chokes my words.

“Nova,” he whispers, pulling me to him. He lifts my head. “Please say you didn’t.”

I nod. “Pills. Dylan was the one that found me this time. It hadn’t been long after I’d taken them, but he found me in the room passed out. Called nine-one-one. No one else was home, and he was supposed to be at school. I’d skipped, but he did, too. Came by the house before going to a skip party and found me. I spent six weeks in the psych ward after that.”

“Fuck!” Kai grumbles, crushing me against his body.

My face buries in his leather cut, and I summon the strength I know that I have.

“It’s the reason that my marriage to Dylan didn’t work. He one day told me that I needed to face the fact that I wasn’t over you. Before I met Will, I finally went to counseling. Probably a year after Dylan’s and my divorce. It was the loss that I couldn’t deal with. Almost like being rejected.”

“I’m so sorry that I put you through that shit,” he grumbles.

“No, Kai. I stopped blaming you a long time ago. I needed to deal with my grief over my parents and losing you. I did that. So, when you came back into my life, I was scared of losing myself to you. I felt that it was happening, and I knew that I could never go back to that dark place in my life. I knew that I could never lose you and lose myself again. You never intentionally hurt me, Kai, but your choices did. I just don’t want that to happen again.”

He presses his forehead against mine and brushes the tip of my nose with his lips.

“Promise that I won’t. Just give me a chance to make shit right, and I’ll show you.”

I close my eyes and nod, savoring the sweet brush of his lips against mine before he pulls away and heads out of the cottage. I don’t bother to open my eyes until I hear the door close behind him.

When I open my eyes, a single tear drop falls.

I can no more stay away from that man than I can deny that the sky is blue.

* * *

“This is why you need to know how to protect yourself, ladies,” Marlo says.

“I’m not shooting a gun. Sorry, if I tried that, I might end up putting a damn bullet in my own foot,” Siren says, filing one of her nails down.

I’ve come to learn that although she’s in the MC, she’s a very prissy thing. Yet, I like her well enough. She’s funny, and it seems as if she and Roxie are close, and I really like Roxie.

“It’s better than getting one put in your head by someone intent on taking your life,” Mama Bear grouses.

She’s one of the surliest women that I’ve seen in quite some time.

“Ladies, I think that’s enough of that talk,” Roxie says, frowning.

They've all crowded into my little cottage for the last hour. Roxie showed up to have "tea" and brought a load of other women with her. They're all curious about my circumstances, and rightly so. Each of them came bearing some dessert, or in the case of Bonnie, she brought margaritas and daiquiris.

"So, how do you know End Game again?"

Shrugging, I say, "We met as kids."

"In foster care?" Marlo asks when I'm reluctant to do so.

Not because of worrying about sharing my business, but I don't know how much he's shared with them. I nod.

"You've kept in touch with him all these years?"

"No. We lost touch right before my eighteenth birthday. It's a small world, though. After I left Georgia, I'd given up hope on ever seeing him again."

"Heard you were married to a doctor in Santa Fe," Lizzy says.

"You will soon learn that men gossip as much as women. Most of the information these ladies have come from their Ol' Men," Roxie says fondly.

"Yeah, Bullet can't keep shit a secret. The only damn thing he ever kept a secret was when he was screwing around with that whore Tennessee," Lizzy hisses sourly, pulling her long dark curls up into a high ponytail and securing it with a rubber band.

"Calm your ass down. That happened eons ago," Marlo says, shaking her head as she looks up from filing her nails.

“May as well have been yesterday,” Lizzy says.

“Do you know Stiletto’s been slinking up under Decker? Caught him a few months back with that slut on his lap,” Siren says.

“Yeah, heard you damn near sliced her,” Mama Bear says, snickering.

“Damn right, I did,” she declares proudly. “Raider jumped between us, and that tramp hightailed it out of there so damn fast. Ain’t seen her since.”

“Well, she’s still hanging around,” Marlo pronounces.

“What about you? Are you and End Game in a relationship? Is he planning on claiming you?” Siren asks.

“No and no.”

“The fact that he brought you here to this compound says something different,” Marlo says.

“I don’t know what it does or doesn’t say, but we’re not involved. He’s just looking out for me for old times’ sake.”

“Mm,” Mama Bear grunts and all eyes turn her way. “These men are protective as hell, and the one thing they don’t play is about someone screwing with their women. But they also don’t just bring any old body onto the compound for protection without reason. Every time it’s happened, I’ve seen the woman get claimed.”

“That’s only happened twice, Mama Bear,” Siren says. “Roxie and...Hadiyah.”

“Well, he hasn’t claimed her,” Roxie counters.

“Yeah, he may as well have. We all see how Phantom is about Hadiyah,” Siren says.

“Has been since they rescued her,” Roxie points out.

“Well, it’s just a matter of time before you are,” Siren says.

Marlo and Lizzy mutter their agreement.

“So, what is it that these guys do anyway?” I ask, changing the subject from myself.

“They run businesses like anyone else. The bar, gun range, securities firm, locksmith, leather shop, bike repair, dispensary, restaurant, computer shop. I mean, you name it, they do it.”

“Aside from that,” I say, hoping Roxie will be honest with me. “It’s no secret they live on the opposite side of the law. I guess I’d just like to know what Kai is up to when he isn’t at the dispensary.”

“Honey, why don’t you ask him?” Roxie says.

“I don’t believe he’d be honest with me.”

“Why’s that?” she asks.

“I think he’s worried that I can’t handle it and that I might judge him.”

“Can you? Will you?” she asks, giving me something to think about.

“I have never judged Kai, and I’m not about to start now. The only thing that I’m afraid of is losing him again. That...I can’t handle.”

“Sounds like you’re in love,” Roxie says smoothly.

“Maybe I am,” I whisper. “Maybe I am.”

* * *

“Hey, I haven’t seen you in a few days.”

I look up from the book I’ve been reading and scrunch my face against the sun that blinds me.

“Clark? What’re you doing here?”

“Hanging out on the beach today with some friends of mine,” he says, pointing down the shore to a group of people playing volleyball.

“Oh.”

“Thought you were on vacation out of town.”

Shrugging, I say, “I returned earlier. I was bored.”

“Never heard anyone being bored on vacation,” he laughs.

“Yeah, well...”

He sits down on the sand beside me. I scoot over, making just enough room for him.

“You don’t have to sit in the sand.”

Shrugging, he smiles at me and says, “I’m a beach bum, Nova. A little sand never hurt me. I grew up on a beach like this one. I’ve had sand in places that you couldn’t even imagine.”

“Do I want to?” I ask, chuckling.

He winks at me and says, “Probably not.”

“How’s everyone?” I ask.

“Briana and Lalah are acquiring a fan club of their own at the bookstore. Myrah worked the first shift. She headed home early to catch up on sleep. Natalie went to visit her grandmother in Alabama, and Cody and Martin’s at work, I guess, and me? Well, it’s Saturday, and it’s my first one off this month.”

“Nice.”

“Well, I know you don’t want to be talking about work while you’re off. You got anything special planned for your time off?”

“No, just relaxing. I’ll be back soon, though.”

“You need a weekend off. Just relax and don’t think about that place.”

“I know, but I had the previous weekend off. You know that I don’t take off every weekend. I don’t like to leave my staff to work those hours. I split it up fairly amongst us all. After all, it’s my dream. Besides, I love being there.”

“More so than home?”

“Sometimes,” I say, thinking of all the crazy things that’s been happening.

“That’s probably because you have nothing to do.”

“Like?”

“I don’t know. Do you date? Got friends? Cook? Maybe if you had a roommate or hell, I don’t know another pet.”

Laughing, I say, “I hardly think any of those things would be enough to keep me away from the store.”

He grows serious and says, “What about the right man? Think he might keep you at home long enough to keep your attention?”

His piercing gaze on me makes me just a bit uncomfortable. I lay back on my towel, pulling my sunglasses down over my eyes blocking out his penetrative stare. Instead, I bask in the laughter of the children playing in the water and those building castles and other ideas from their imaginations just feet away.

I listen to the parents chiding their children, adult conversation and all the other sounds that make this beach the perfect place to be. The cry of the seagulls and the rushing waters slapping the shore.

“What’s wrong? Not into men?” he asks.

Peering over my sunglasses, I reply, “Clark, I’m very much into men. To suggest anything otherwise would be ludicrous in my mind. But no...I’ve had my share of men and relationships. There’s not a man that’s engaging enough to keep me at home. My books are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Name one thing that a book can give you that a man can’t.”

I sit up on my elbows and reply, “Several things.”

“Okay. Name them,” he says, smirking.

“Escape, peace, laughter, and titillating my imagination.”

“Men can give you all that,” he says in a lower tone.

“Trust me...I’ve been married twice and have had at least one other serious relationship. I’m good on my own.”

“Books can’t offer you protection.”

“I can get a security service for that.”

“Even the best of them fail.”

“I hardly think this conversation is appropriate for me to be having with a staff member.”

“We’re friends. You hang out at the champagne bar with me and talk about lots of stuff.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that we’re not.

“I need to continue pretending that I’m on vacation, Clark. And you? Well, people are waiting for you,” I say, laughing as I point down the beach to where his friends are waving him back.

I grab my belongings.

“Where’re you going?”

“I’ve been sitting out in the sun too much. I’m ready to go inside and shower. Get some rest. Besides, your friends are waiting for you.”

“They’re just...”

“Just what?”

“Nothing,” he says, shaking his head and glancing back down the beach.

“I’ll see you later,” I say, hopping up.

That conversation was bordering on disturbing. Clark was becoming a little too personal for my liking. Or maybe I’m just suspicious of everything and everyone these days.

No sooner than I’m in the house, I head back outside to check my mailbox. I know there must be a stack waiting for me since I’ve been gone for a few days. Heading back to the mailbox, I pull out several envelopes along with a small box.

I wait until I’m inside to open the unmarked box with nothing except for my name and address.

I open the box and find a gold chain inside with a heart broken in two. Nothing is engraved on the heart, but there is a slip of paper nestled underneath.

You’ve been a naughty girl.

They can’t protect you.

XOXOXO,

Your Secret Admirer

CHAPTER 14

End Game

There's something that she's not telling me. Something that means the difference between her being with me and her not. If I can just get her to trust me enough to tell the truth.

My phone buzzes at my hip, and I glance down to check it.

"Alicia, can you come and finish this sale?" I call out to one of my employees.

"Sure," she says, locking the cabinet that she'd been working inside of.

I step away and punch in Nova's number.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I think I know who it is," she says breathlessly. "I just got a note in the mail along with a piece of jewelry."

"I'm on the way," I say, walking back to the front.

"Alicia, you guys hold down the fort. I gotta run to make."

She nods, and I head to my office, locking up before I head outside to my bike.

"Where are you?" Nova asks.

"My shop heading your way."

"Didn't they say you needed to stay as far away from me as possible? I only called to let you know what was going on so you could let the guys know."

“Was there a note?” I ask, ignoring her comment and hopping on my bike.

“Yeah.”

When she reads it back to me, anger grows in my belly. I’m about to prove this fucker wrong. I end the call and start my bike up. I don’t bother to call anyone because if they didn’t notice something was fucking wrong already, I don’t trust them enough to protect her.

When I pull up to her place, it’s quiet, and nothing looks out of sync. My phone starts ringing no sooner than I climb off my bike.

“Yeah?” I answer when I see my Prez’s name flashing across my screen.

“The fuck are you doing here, End Game?”

“She received a packet and a note, and no one ever saw it.”

“We saw it, End Game, but it was dropped off by her regular mail person, not by this dude.”

“She’s scared, Anarchy.”

“We know this, but she’s being watched. Falcon has eyes inside the house just as he promised you he would. Get the fuck out of there.”

“Can’t. I just need to let her know that we’ve got it under control. She needs to see my face, Prez. Can’t let her down again.”

He sighs, and I end the call, walking up the sidewalk to the porch. I rap on the door with my knuckles and wait until Nova

answers the door. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and she's hugging herself.

We don't bother to exchange words. I just crush her body against mine, holding her close.

We stand that way in the doorway for a long time until my phone starts ringing again. I don't reach for my phone this time, but I'll wish that I had. Gunfire rings out around us, and I fall to the floor, still holding Nova in my arms.

She cries out as her body hits the floor hard, but I continue covering her as the shots ring out all around.

"Stay low and move to the back!" I holler as I kick the door closed with my foot.

Pulling myself with my arms and elbows, I Army crawl to the middle of the living room as I holler out, "Stay low!"

Just as I remove my gun to start shooting, shots ring out over my head. There's no time to be appalled at the revelation that Nova is kneeling somewhere behind me but slightly higher, firing off rounds of her own.

When the return fire ceases, I turn around and glare at her.

"Get your ass back to the room!" I hiss.

"Can't! It's on fire!" she calls out.

Peering around the corner, I see smoke and a flickering light.

"Let's go!" I call out to her as she whisks the kitten into her arms.

I grab her hand and pull her from the cottage onto the lawn. There's no way that the authorities won't be alerted if they haven't been already.

“End Game! We gotta go!” Bullet calls out from his bike at the curb as Cannon and Mayhem pull up behind him,

“Get to the clubhouse! Now!” Cannon orders from the street.

Nova heads to her car as I run to my bike. My brothers pull off right behind me, and I follow her as we all head to the clubhouse. Sirens sound behind us no sooner than we exit onto the main street.

The ride back to the clubhouse is fraught with tension. I can tell by the way my brothers ride. After we pull through the gates, I pull up beside Nova's car, and she lets her window down.

“Head to the cottage. I'll meet you there shortly.”

I can tell she's terrified by her wide-eyed gaze and her trembling lower lip.

I head into the clubhouse and straight to Anarchy's office.

“The fuck was that?” Cannon yells when I enter Anarchy's office. “We told you not to come to the house!” Cannon shouts at me.

“If I hadn't, she'd be dead right now!” I yell back. “Y'all did nothing, absolutely nothing to protect her!”

“She wouldn't be dead! Your ass standing there hugging her in the doorway is what brought him out of hiding! If you'd

stayed away, she would've been safe like we told you!" Cannon shouts.

"The fact that my presence brought him out is a good thing. That's what we wanted? Where is he?"

"Falcon and Terminator took off after his car," Mayhem says.

"Did anyone get a good description? Did I hit his car?"

"His car was shot up but not bad enough to stop it," Bullet says.

"Where were you guys?"

"One street over, watching the place from an empty house," Mayhem says.

"Took you long enough to get there," I grumble.

"Dude! We did everything we could! You were given direct fucking orders, and you didn't listen, Bro!" Bullet says.

I push through the crowd and shove him in the chest. He shoves me back as Cannon grabs him, and Mayhem grabs me.

Anarchy takes his time walking between us.

"The next time I give you an order, you'd better fucking listen. You'd better do exactly as I say, or you're out on your ass! I can't protect you, her, or the men if you're running around like Doc Holliday in *Tombstone*! This ain't Hollywood, and you ain't him. I don't give a rat's ass if she's your girl. This is my show, End Game! You got that?"

Breathing hard and flaring my nostrils as I ball my fists by my side, I say, "Yeah. Loud and clear."

He turns and looks at Cannon. “See if you can reach Falcon.”

Cannon spares me a glance and then pulls out his phone to make the call. We sit in tense silence as we wait for the call to end.

“They’re on their way back here. Should be here in twenty minutes,” Cannon informs us.

“You. Go check on Nova to make sure she’s okay,” Anarchy orders.

I nod, walking out of the office and riding over to her cottage.

“Hey,” she greets softly when I knock at the door.

Resting my arm on the door frame, I lean sideways and close my eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asks, reaching up to touch my face.

Smirking, I reply, “Funny. I’m supposed to be here asking you the same thing.”

Her hand drops, and she says, “A bit shaken up, but I’m good. I don’t think I want to go back there, though.”

“You’ll call the insurance company after you make a report —”

“I have no idea what I should say to them,” she sighs loudly, stepping back from the doorway. “Come on in.”

Stepping in, I close the door behind me. “You don’t say shit to them. Anarchy will handle the police report, and once

he releases you to do so, you'll call the insurance company, get your money, and..."

"And?"

"I would say rebuild, but I'm sure that place holds too many horrible memories now."

"Yeah. I could never feel safe there again. Do they know who it was yet?"

"The guys are on their way back. I should know something soon."

"Why are you looking so upset, Kai? You got me out of there on time."

"Yeah? Well, everyone's looking at me right now like I'm a fucking screwup. Saying I shouldn't have come to the house."

"Is that what you were instructed to do? Stay away?"

"Yeah. What? I guess you're gonna tell me I screwed up too?"

"No. I wasn't."

"Damn it!" I shout, punching the air.

I breathe in angrily and exhale loudly, and before I know it, my breathing is wild and erratic, and I don't know why. I need something to pummel. Something to torture.

"It wasn't supposed to go down like this! If I hadn't been there, Nova, you could've been dead!" I snarl.

She walks up to me, grabbing my hands, but the rage running through me doesn't want to be contained or tamed. It needs to lash out at something, express itself and leave its mark on something.

“Kai, you did everything you knew to do. Your instincts saved me.”

“My fucking instincts could've gotten you killed!” I growl, acknowledging everything that my brothers said was true.

“No,” she says, shaking her head and grabbing the sides of my face.

“Let me go, Nova. I need to get away for a minute.”

“No, Kai. Where are you going?”

“Riding!”

“Angry like this? I don't think so. The last thing you should be doing is riding that bike upset the way you are. What if something happens, Kai? I don't want or need that on my conscious. That something happened to you because of me,” she pleads.

“I can't fucking do this right now, Nova! I need an outlet.”

Her hands tighten on my face, and she presses her lips against mine. I pull back, but she grips tighter and says, “Let me be your outlet.”

She kisses me hard again. It ignites something more dangerous within me, and when I open my mouth, and she slides her tongue inside, the rage morphs into need.

Nova reaches down and cups my dick in her hands while sucking my tongue. The passion she exudes incinerates my anger. Yet, the high emotion blasting through me is no less as potent as the rage was.

Reaching between us, I tug at the button on her pants until the button falls to the floor, making a plinking sound. Before she can respond, I've dragged her pants down around her ankles. I smack her thigh to encourage her to step out of them.

Reaching for the hem of her thong, I rip it straight off her ass. Turning her around, I push her against the front door, splaying her legs wide.

Satisfied that she's already unbuttoned my jeans, I simply unzip them and pull my cock free of my boxer briefs. Sinking into her warmth has the desired effect of tempering my anger that she was seeking. Yet, it's not completely extinguished, and for that, I take it out on her body.

Placing my hand on the small of her back, I push her forward as she plasters her hands against the door. When her ass juts out just the way that I want it to, I grip her hips tightly,

My thrusts are hard and furious, as evidenced by the sharp, startled cries that she releases. Memories of possibly losing her flood my mind. First to her suicide attempt, then when I got out of jail, and she'd left, and finally today to her would-be attacker.

The anger and rage build up within me again and swirl with the lust and hunger of my need, crafting a tornado of horrific proportions. The way that I pound into her pussy has to be devastating everything in its wake. I'm sure every organ

in her body feels the torrential thunder and winds I release on her.

Nova's cries are nothing short of hiccupping and pleading, but she gives back as good as she takes. Her pussy is wet and warm, drenching and drowning my dick with her juices. The harder I bang into her, the more she produces.

She's soft and silken like a cocoon, and I can't think of any place I'd rather be buried than within her confines right now. Leaning forward, I sink my teeth into her shoulder as I reach in front of her and grab a nipple, twisting and turning until she screams out.

My other hand finds its way to the front of her delving deep into her pussy and filling her up alongside my dick. Alternating between rubbing and tugging on her clitoris and fingering her with my dick, I'm driving her insane.

Her breaths are fast pants, deep sighs, and pleading moans. My head begins to pound. So deep and mind-boggling is our connection.

Nova angles her right leg up, giving me more access as she drops just a bit to allow me to go deeper.

"This pussy is so fucking good!" I grunt. "Fucking die inside you!"

Her fists began to beat on the door, but that didn't stop me. The possibility of a neighbor hearing her pounding on the door the way I'm pounding in her ass or her shrill cries doesn't stop me.

I tried to leave. I tried to hop on the road to release the rage that I was feeling inside, but she wouldn't let me. With the state of mind that I'm in now, knowing that I want to kill someone, I shouldn't be in her like this.

I'm worried that I just might hurt her, but at the same time, I can't bring myself to stop. She's all that I want and all that I need. Hell, Nova's the only one that can get me worked up the way that she does.

Always has and always will.

My need for her is so great that it's blinding and overwhelming at once, so much so that I don't even realize that I'm about to cum. Until it's over. Until she's resting against the door. Until I'm on my knees with my head resting on her ass.

When I regain my breath, I realize the air is vibrant with the scent of sex, making me heady and hungry again. In the state that I'm in, it seems as if nothing is ever enough.

I slip a finger in her ass, and she moans out as she spreads her legs wider. Dipping my head between her thighs, I lick her pussy lips, sucking at one and then another as she mewls her contentment.

I add a second and then a third finger into her ass and realize that she likes ass play a lot. It makes me wonder what more she would be open to, but that's something I'll find out later.

I suck and suck at her, sliding my tongue deeper and deeper into her pussy as the arch in her back deepens. The

sound of my fingers plunging in and out of her ass and the sopping sounds my tongue makes as I lap at her juices are music to my ears.

I feel my cock hardening once again, and I wonder at the arousal awakening inside me. Pulling my fingers free from her ass, I spread it wide and press my tongue there.

“Kai! Ohhhh shit,” she moans as her legs shake.

With my clean hand, I slip two fingers inside her pussy and fuck her hard and fast as I eat her ass. She clenches, and I formulate a fist with my hand, forcing her to open her legs again. My fingers scissor inside of her, intensifying the pain and pleasure that I offer.

With my face buried deep in her ass and my hand damn near fisting her, she finally cums, crying out, “Kai! I love you! Damnit, I still love you!”

It’s only then that I rock back on my knees and hop up. She’s still resting against the door, crying and softly banging the door as I make my way to her bathroom.

After cleaning myself, I turn to find her watching me in the mirror.

“C’mere,” I gesture to her, soaping up another washcloth.

She stands in front of me, splaying her legs wide as I clean her. With every pass of the washcloth, my eyes remain on her. Finally, I ask the question that’s been plaguing me.

“You meant what you said? Out there when...” I jut my chin to the door behind her.

“Yes. I do. I never stopped, Kai. It was a big point of contention between both my husband and me. It’s why Dylan left me and the excuse Will gave for cheating. They had my body, but neither man ever had my heart. It wasn’t fair to them.”

My phone buzzes, and I pull it free from my back pocket.

ANARCHY: *Get your ass here now!*

I realize that I’ve missed several phone calls from both him and Cannon.

“Gotta go,” I say, pushing around her and heading for the door.

“Kai!”

“I’ll talk to you later!”

CHAPTER 15

Nova

“You what?” Sandra screams on the other end.

“I met up with Kai again here, and we’ve had sex,” I repeat shyly.

“Wait a minute. Did your hot ass know that he was there when you decided to move to California?”

“No.”

“No way! There’s no way that it was just a coincidence that you moved to that town, and he just happened to be there after all these years. You’re shitting me! What did you hook up again on Facebook? IG?”

“Girl, no! I doubt if Kai even has social media. He’s never been the type, you know.”

“So you’ve said. What type he is, you haven’t told me.”

“I have. He’s a...quiet, loner type, but he has his inner circle. For those who know him, he lets his guard down, but he’s quiet, a little bit of a sulker.”

“Wait...could he be the one that’s been leaving you those gifts?”

I have told her about the gifts but not about the bad things like breaking into my house. She only knows that I have a secret admirer who leaves me gifts and notes and not much more. Not wanting to share the danger that I’ve been in because I won’t hear the end of that from her, I definitely don’t

want to share with her that he's in the MC. She wouldn't approve.

Everything that Kai represents now is so far from the lifestyle that I led back in Santa Fe. Yet, I feel more at home here, more like myself around Kai and my employees.

Why? Because in Santa Fe, I always felt as if I were faking. Surrounded by doctors' wives and hosting dinner parties for board members, CEOs, and other people that my husband wanted to impress, I always had to put on air.

The Nova Lynn Hamilton from my teens and twenties would not have had a tennis club membership or a golf club membership. That Nova wouldn't have been on the board of directors for art galleries and museums. She wouldn't have been having tea with the mayor's wife or the governor's wife.

While all of that is just fine for some people, it was never who I was. It was an expectation that Will placed on me when he said that we had to become the people that we wanted to be. When I told him that's who he wanted to be and not me, he reminded me that I said, 'I do.'

It was a lifestyle that my husband aspired to that was beyond my own aspirations. Wanting to make him happy and be the dutiful wife, I went along with it, bored every time.

"Nova? Is he?"

"Uh...no!" I say, returning to the conversation that left me daydreaming. "He's not the person that's been leaving the gifts."

"How do you know?"

“Because I know Kai. He’s the most straightforward person that I know, and he would never sneak around and leave things without being upfront about it.”

“I don’t know, it could be that—”

“No! He wouldn’t break into my house!” I screech.

It is the comparison of Kai to this monster that has me breaking my vow of silence. I don’t mean to do it, but before I know it, everything comes spilling out.

“Wait, what?”

I sigh.

“Nova, what’s going on?”

I find myself spilling the details about the break-in and how I’ve been living in a cottage for the last three weeks, but I don’t tell her it’s owned by the MC.

“Nova, why didn’t you tell me this? I would have come up there right away.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you, Sandra. I didn’t want you interrupting your life to take care of me. You did that long enough when I was going through the shit with Will. You stood by my side and came to my house every time I broke down in tears over his cheating and encouraged me to stay strong. You came to my condo the day that I received the divorce papers.

“You even held my hand while I signed them two weeks later when I finally got up the courage to go through with it. And it was you who sat outside waiting while the divorce

proceedings commenced. So, no. I don't want you uprooting yourself again to run to my rescue. You've been a great friend, Sandy. Thanks for that, but I can handle this."

"Well, have you at least called the police?"

"Absolutely not."

"You have a stalker on your hands, Nova. It could be some deranged crazy person, but you can't handle this alone."

"And I'm not."

"Oh. Let me guess, Kai to the rescue?" she says.

Sighing, I push my curls back from my forehead. "Actually, yes. He has been a great support system throughout this ordeal."

"What the hell can he do that the police won't?"

"He's...well, he's a part of this group. They handle things in their own way."

"What group?"

Shit! I've said too much again.

"A motorcycle club."

"You mean like the one that Andrea's husband belonged to?"

"No. Not a community service type group of men that get together and have fun drinking beers, shooting the shit, and doing community service here and there. This is a legitimate biker group. Like the ones that your mother tells you to watch out for...or she would if she were here," I say softly.

“Oh, honey. I’m sorry, but this Kai guy doesn’t seem like a good idea. He’s not the type that you want in your life. Sure, he can come over and break a few bedsprings, but long-term? You’re asking for heartache. Besides, at our ages, he’s too old for that type of stuff, Nova.”

“He’s the same person that he’s always been, Sandy. The same guy that I met as a lost kid who had my back.”

“Maybe that’s it. Maybe you’re holding onto memories of yesterday, and it’s time to let go. I know that Will did you bad, but a rebound relationship isn’t what you need. Just a maintenance man every now and then to keep you running smooth like clockwork.”

“Sandy, we’re not talking about my car maintenance here or my bowels, okay? He’s a great guy. I’m not holding onto the past. He’s someone that I know and care for deeply. I love him. I told him that today.”

The silence on the other end is so long and so deafening I grow uncomfortable in the wake of it.

“Sandy? You still there?”

“Um, yeah. Mom’s calling on the other end. Let me get back to you, okay? But in the meantime, keep your hot tail safe!”

“Okay.”

“Seriously. Please be careful, honey.”

“I will.”

“Love you and miss you much, Nova.”

“Love you more,” I say softly.

I lay back and pull my knees up. Resting my phone against my chest, I close my eyes and think back to the last time that I spoke with Will.

He’d apologized for all the shit that he put me through and told me that I was genuinely a good girl. He said that I’d never find happiness and love unless it was with Kai if I didn’t put him out of my heart and mind for good. He’d also said that it wasn’t an excuse for him to cheat, though.

In fact, Will told me to always trust my judgment because my instincts had always been on point. He’d said that each time that I thought he was cheating, even the times that I couldn’t prove it, that I’d been right.

When I asked him why he’d done it, he simply said because he could. He told me that I would never leave and that I was comfortable in the relationship with him.

I dial a number that I know by heart.

“Hello?”

“Will?”

“Nova?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

He sighs loudly. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am.”

“I always told you to call me if you ever needed anything. You said that hell would freeze over before you did that.”

Laughing, I reply, “I was speaking from a place of hurt, Will.”

“You had every right to say those things. What’s up?”

“Just wondering. You know how you always told me to trust my instincts?”

“Uh...yeah? Someone’s cheating on you?”

Laughing, I reply, “Every guy’s not you, Will.”

“Good. Glad to know that. I work hard to keep up this reputation,” he teases.

“Yeah, well, you could stand a sabbatical from it, you know.”

“Touché.”

“There have been some strange things happening lately. I just want to know, have you been sending me any mail?”

“Nooo,” he drags out.

“Have you given anyone my address or mentioned to anyone where I’d relocated to?”

“Other than my parents? No.”

“Okay. One more thing.”

“What’s going on, Nova? You’re starting to worry me. Are you safe?”

“Yes. I am. Just had a secret admirer and trying to figure out who it might be.”

“Couldn’t it be someone from your town?”

“Yes, but...someone sent me a signed copy of Nora Roberts’ *Stars of Fortune*.”

“The one that you lost in the fire?”

“Mm-hmm,” I mumble, unable to form words as tears choke my throat.

“No, darling. I would say that it’s a coincidence, but you know that I don’t believe in those.”

“That’s all it probably is.”

“Well, either way, you still got your gun?”

“I do.”

“Be careful. Make a report to the police, you hear?”

“Will, what will I say? Someone sent me a copy of a book that I lost in the fire, and it made me sentimental, and now I believe I may have a stalker on my hands?”

“Yeah. That might be a bit much, but be careful. Sure you don’t want to return to Santa Fe for a while?”

Laughing, I reply, “Sure of that.”

“Okay. Well, just let me know. I’m living in a bachelor pad with plenty of space.”

“No thanks, Will. Thanks anyway. You take care, okay?”

“You too. And darlin’?”

“Yeah?”

“When you figure out your mystery, give me a call, okay?”

“Sure. Will do, Will.”

I end the call and close my eyes again. The only person that comes to mind is Briana Ferrell, one of my bookstore clerks. She's the only person I shared information about the book with when we stocked the store with our first shipment before the grand opening.

No way that she's behind this!

CHAPTER 16

End Game

I head into the clubhouse and down to the Dungeon. The Dungeon is at the bottom of the castle, which is our clubhouse. It's soundproofed and damp and ranks with the musty odor of hundreds of killings.

I lied and told Nova that Anarchy called an emergency church meeting. I don't want her worrying about what I'm up to, but I also don't want her leaving her store by herself. She needs to wait until I arrive to escort her back to the compound like I've been doing. At least until we catch her stalker.

I know that we're close, but I won't be satisfied until I put a bullet in the guy's head. I received a text just as I was heading to her from Anarchy telling me to come to the Dungeon. He said they had information about her stalker but not that they'd caught him.

The Dungeon is nothing more than a torture chamber where we retrieve information from our enemies. Our nemesis' may enter many ways, walking, pushed, shoved, carried, or thrown into the Dungeon, but they never leave.

I pull the large, heavy metal door open and step inside. Most of the council is here: Anarchy, Phantom, Cannon, Raider, Terminator, and Dime. Aside from them, there's Doc, Decker, Falcon, Mayhem, and Bullet.

A man is tied to a chair. His face is bruised, and his blonde hair is tousled. Blue eyes shoot lasers my way as I walk inside.

"Is this him?" I ask.

“No, but he’s involved,” Falcon says.

“He’s yours to do with as you please,” Anarchy says.

“What the fuck do you know about any of this?” I ask the man.

He doesn’t say a word.

“He’s not talking,” Mayhem says, stating the obvious.

“He’ll talk,” I grunt, grabbing a chair and spinning it around to sit on it backward.

Disgust rolls through me as he spits on the floor beside my feet. The loud thud of my chair hitting the floor rings out in the Dungeon as I jump up and smack the sneer from his face.

He laughs and shakes his head.

“He works for you, Falcon?”

“Yeah. This piece of shit is Anthony Carter,” Falcon grunts.

From the bruises on his face, the swelling of his right eye and the busted lip, I can tell Falcon already has done a number on him.

His chair tilts sideways as Falcon punches him in the side of the head, but I put my foot out to right it once again.

He turns his gaze to Falcon and says, “Fuck you!”

Clapping, Phantom says, “So, he does speak. I was just beginning to think he was deaf and dumb.”

“Dumb maybe, damn sure not deaf,” Anarchy says.

“You threw a Molotov cocktail through my friend’s window while she was still inside, you grimy bastard! The fact that you’re not already pushing up daisies is a miracle.”

He glares at me again and returns to the silent treatment.

“Waterboard?” Cannon suggests.

“Not yet,” I say. “Bench him.”

Mayhem, Dime, Cannon, and Bullet grab the man while I untie his restraints. They carry him to a bench with a board against his back and neck. He flails as he’s strapped into place with several leather straps.

“Move again muthafucka, and I’ll put a bullet through your eye,” I threaten, pulling my gun out.

His nostrils flare and he shouts, “Fuck you!”

“Too bad for you, I don’t swing that way.”

Cannon and Phantom light cigarettes while Terminator says, “I think you should burn him. That’s one way to get rid of him quickly.”

“What’s with you and burning people?” Anarchy asks.

Inhaling deeply, he says, “Ah, nothing like the smell of burning flesh.”

“Sick puppy,” Dime says, shaking his head.

Placing a board just above Anthony’s knees, I slowly lift his ankles. He’s sneering at me as I continue raising the board, lifting his ankles higher and higher.

Sweat pops out around his temples, and his eyes bulge with the strain of trying to push against the boards.

“Who did you do it for?”

He grits his teeth and closes his eyes, refusing to answer me.

I continue applying pressure until I hear the satisfactory snap of his knees cracking. He shrieks in pain, baring his teeth as tears pour down his face.

“Poor bastard,” I hear Raider say behind me.

“Who is stalking her?” I repeat. “And why the fuck were you helping him to stalk my friend?”

“Don’t know your friend.”

“Oh, I’m sure you know her. Between the two of you, you’ve been breaking into her house, leaving stupid gifts, harassing her, you sick bastard! We know you weren’t the one doing it alone because you were out of town with Falcon for a seminar when one of the incidents happened. So, who the fuck is doing this to her?”

He snickers. “Oh, Nova. Yeah, he loved her.”

“Who?” I growl, hitting him on the knee.

A satisfying thrill course through me as I watch his mouth jerk open in pain, but no sound comes out.

“Just kill him already,” Terminator says boredly.

“From the places that she loves the best. A place where their hearts became one,” Anthony says.

“Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, or William Blake, you’re not. Cut out the drama and answer his questions,” Phantom says, standing close to the man.

“Go back to your country,” Anthony spits.

Phantom looks at me, and I nod.

As he walks to a freezer in a corner and removes a large bucket of ice, I turn back to Anthony.

“One way or another, we’re going to find out who it is. Don’t know why the fuck you’re protecting him when you’re gonna die anyway.”

“You said it yourself,” he snivels as Phantom returns with a metal lock box full of ice. “You’re gonna kill me anyway.”

“We’re just gonna have fun until we do,” Mayhem says as Phantom sets the lock box on the board in front of Anthony.

“Hold the board,” he instructs me and Mayhem, who stand on opposite sides. We do as he instructs.

“What were you? Affirmative action for the MC?” Anthony sneers.

Phantom hits Anthony’s jaw with the back of his hand, rendering him unconscious. I watch as he places the man’s hands in the ice-filled metal box and locks them in place.

Impatience to find the answers grows within me as Phantom walks to the refrigerator and removes a pitcher of water. Pouring some into a large plastic bowl, he places the bowl in the microwave and heats it to boiling. All the while,

he and Anarchy converse about Carmine Aiello and the sex trafficking ring he operates as if this were any normal day.

When the microwave beeps, Phantom removes the water and walks back to where we stand. Unlocking the box, he removes Anthony's hands from the box just as the man comes to again. We watch in fascination as he pours the hot water over Anthony's hands.

The man screams an eerie cry, snot drips from his nose, and tears pour from his eyes.

"Fuck you!" he screams.

"No, dude. You're the one that's fucked. I'm going to leave you lying here until you die. No one will come to check on you or feed you. You'll lie here in your piss and shit until you cease to exist, you sorry piece of shit. You were a waste of semen. Your daddy should've shot your sorry ass into the toilet instead of your mother's stinking cunt!" I shout.

"Now tell me who it is," I grunt.

"No!" he screams as Phantom dips his hands back into the ice box.

I grab a tire iron off the wall and take it to his knees, causing him to howl long and loud as I ask, "Who. Was. It?"

Tears stream down his face, and sweat drips from his hair. Through his labored breathing, he manages to grunt, "Clark."

"Did he just say he was Superman?" Mayhem snickers.

I glare at Mayhem over my shoulder and turn back to Anthony. "Clark, who?"

“Flying high!” he chirps, laughing.

“Who is he?” I growl.

“My cousin. Said she enjoyed their long talks,” he pants between words.

I think back to the days when I used to hang out with her after hours and our long talks. Had she been entertaining this Clark dude when I was no longer around?

Unstrapping the leather restraints from his body, I snatch him up by the collar and slam him against the wall. His breath leaves his body as he makes a loud thud against the concrete wall.

“Please...kill me!”

“We have no intentions of killing you,” Phantom says, smirking. Leaning closer, Phantom turns Anthony’s face toward him and says, “When we finish torturing you, we’re going to just bury you alive.”

My nostrils flare, and spit flies from my mouth as I grit out, “Who the fuck is Clark?”

Laughing, blood spills from his mouth. “She pushed you away because she wanted him. Wanted my cousin because you weren’t man enough to—”

I punch him in his filthy mouth repeatedly until teeth and blood fly from the dark, foul cavern. When I release him, he crumples to the floor, unable to stand because of his shattered knees.

Kicking him in his knee, I growl, “Get the fuck up! Stand up like a man!”

“Clark Stewart. Her champagne bar attendant,” he chokes out.

Kicking him in the mouth until he’s choking on his blood doesn’t bring me any satisfaction. Kneeling beside him, I say, “I should put a bullet in your head, ending your misery. But why waste a bullet on a sorry sack of shit like you.”

I spit on him.

“His grave is dug. Go get your woman. We’ll get more answers before we bury him,” Phantom says.

I race to the exit, knowing I’ve only got minutes to get to Nova on the other side of town.

“I’m following you!” Raider says as we take the stairs three at a time.

CHAPTER 17

Nova

It took a week and a half to convince Kai that I needed to return to my bookstore and carry on as though all was well. It's been almost three weeks since I returned, and I've finally found my peace. As much peace as a person can enjoy, considering there's an unidentified stalker on the loose.

In some ways, I'm relieved because I haven't had any incidents since my house burned down. The only challenge I've faced is the red tape that I've been going through with the insurance company to get my claim processed.

While I miss my neighbors, I'm glad to at least be back at work with my staff. I haven't shared anything with them except that I took an extended vacation to take care of my family back home in New Mexico. No one questioned me about that. They simply expressed their happiness that I'd returned because they missed me greatly.

"Nova, I'm getting ready to head out of here for the night. Be safe," Martin, my assistant manager, says.

"I will. I'm right behind you as soon as I finish these reports," I say, waving a hand at the computer.

"Malik and Clark are both still here."

"Okay, maybe I'll walk out with them if they're still here when I leave."

He smiles, winks, and closes my office door behind him.

My phone buzzes, and I answer it.

“Almost done?” Kai asks by way of greeting.

“Um...probably another half an hour, and I’ll be ready.”

He’s been escorting me back to the compound every night since I returned.

“All right. Church was called at the last minute this evening. Don’t think it’ll last long, but I just wanted to call to tell you to sit tight until I get there.”

“I’ll be fine driving by myself, Kai. Nothing’s going to happen between here and there.”

“I’m not taking that chance. Especially with this bastard still on the loose,” he says.

“Fine. I’ll wait for you.”

“Good girl,” he says, clicking off the phone.

I giggle and shake my head, returning my attention to the report on the screen. My numbers are not aligning with where they should be. Something’s out of balance, but I can’t figure out where it’s coming from.

Opening the report from the coffee shop, I do a V-lookup with the sales compared to the inventory. Everything balances there. I then do the same with the books and gifts, and I’m still balancing. It’s not until I get to the champagne bar and compare its inventory with the sales that I find that I’m out of balance.

Today is the first day that I started doing the reports again since I returned. During my absence and on my return, I had Clark, my champagne bar attendant, taking care of these. He’s

an accounting major in college, and I thought it might give him excellent experience.

I should have gone with my first instinct and had Martin do the reports since he's the assistant manager. He normally does them anyway on my days off, but I thought it might be great to give Clark the experience that he needs, and Martin agreed.

I continue to filter through the reports and notice that I've been out of balance since he took over. That's my fault because I should have checked behind him. Annoyance fills me as I think about how he hasn't reported it once.

Sliding my feet into my shoes, I push back from my chair and head into the main store. As I make my way to the opposite side of the store, I notice the coffee shop is dark. Malik has already left for the night.

The champagne bar is also dark, so I know that Clark must have already left, as well. I'll confront him tomorrow evening when he reports in after class. Frustration fills me, but at least I know that I'll have a night to mull over how I want to handle this.

I'd like to believe that it's an honest mistake, not that the kid is stealing from me. Yet, the numbers don't lie, and the more I look over the reports, the more it's not looking good for him. When I approach him tomorrow, I'll make sure that Martin is in the office with me when we have this conversation.

I review the reports one final time for accuracy, print them off, and sign them before locking them away in my drawer.

Shutting my computer down, I check the time and see that forty minutes have passed. Pulling my phone out to make the call, I hope Kai is on the way.

“Hey,” I greet.

I can hear the wind blowing, so I know that he must be on the way.

“Hey, just left the clubhouse about five minutes ago. I should be there in another ten, babe.”

“That’s fine. Take your time and be safe. See ya soon.”

“A’ight.”

I end the call because I don’t want him talking while riding his bike. I’d much rather he be safe, and we can talk later.

I bite my bottom lip when I think about the sort of talking we’ll do. Since I’ve moved back into the cottage, Kai and I spend every night together, and most of them are having sex. We haven’t approached any topic about a relationship or anything of that nature.

I think both of us are afraid to broach it, knowing that it’s created tension in the past. Yet, we’re both more than happy to oblige each other sexually to satisfy our cravings for one another.

I lock my office just as I hear a noise at the back of the store. Frowning, I pull my purse straps up my shoulder and stay still for just a moment until I hear it again.

Heading in that direction, my heart pounds mercilessly in my chest. I think about the gun that’s in my car and wonder if I

should grab it first and then return. Yet, I doubt there's a reason to have my gun other than my anxieties are on ten after the year I've had.

I creep past the Sci-Fi section, and just as I make my way through the mystery section, I think that I see something move.

"Hello?" I finally gather the courage to call out.

A shelf falls over, startling me, and I begin to back up towards the front of the store. Maybe I'm not so goddamned brave after all. Maybe I do need to go to my car to get the gun.

Clark's coming toward me, running his fingers through his long blonde hair. His eyes look wild and a bit red as he stalks in my direction.

"Nova, were you looking for me?"

"Yes, but I thought you'd left for the day. The champagne bar was closed."

He jerks his head towards the rear. "Had to use the restroom before I left."

"Oh, okay. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he snuffles, wiping his eyes. "You need me?"

"I, um, had a question about the reconciliation reports. They're out of balance."

"Oh?"

"Yes, but not all of them. Just the champagne bar."

Shrugging, he steps closer again and says, “I don’t know what I could’ve done wrong. I can take a second look.”

“Yeah, we do need to discuss it, but I was thinking tomorrow. I’ve closed it out and signed off for the evening.”

“Well, I can’t think of a better time than now,” he says.

“I’m running late, Clark,” I say, taking in his slightly disheveled appearance and the wild look in his eyes.

Something’s off, and I don’t feel safe or comfortable around him. As though he reads my mind, he reaches out and grabs my wrist.

I jerk back, but his grip tightens.

“Come on. We’ve got nothing but time.”

“No. I really have to go, Clark. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Can’t think of a better time than now. Come on, it’ll be like old times. You and me...chatting, a cup of coffee, or... maybe some champagne. Celebrate the turn of things,” he rambles on.

“Clark, please let my wrist go.”

Smiling, he says, “Why would I do that? Not when I finally have you alone. I’ve been patient, waiting for us to get some much-needed alone time, Nova.”

“What are you talking about, Clark?”

“Talking about how we never have time to sit and chat anymore.”

“We chat.”

“No...not since you came back. You never come to the champagne bar anymore like you used to.”

“Clark, I rotate around the store with everyone during closing procedures or lunchtime. You know this.”

“No, the only thing that I know is that I’m part of your game, Nova.”

“What game, Clark?”

“The one you play between me and the biker dude. The one that runs that weed shop. Oh, you didn’t think I knew, huh, Nova,” he growls, jerking me against his body.

I try to wrestle away, but he pulls a knife out and waves it in my face. My stomach lurches, and my heart pounds so loudly that I can’t hear anything else.

His breath reeks of alcohol and not just the champagne that he serves.

“Clark, I have never played with your emotions. You’re my staff, just like everyone else.”

“No, I see the way that you look at me and the way you smile at me. I saw how your eyes lit up when you saw me at the beach that day,” he slurs.

He pulls the knife up to my neck and nuzzles the side of my ear. I close my eyes, willing the vomit to go away that’s rising within.

“Clark, I care about you a lot. I want what’s best for you the way that I want what’s best for all the staff.”

“Mm, I don’t think so. I think you wanted me as much as I wanted you. But that asshole came back.”

“Clark, have you been drinking?”

He laughs. “No more than the usual amount,” he slurs. “I want to know why you haven’t been spending time with me lately. Is he keeping you busy at night? Huh? Is he doing the things to you that I can only dream of?”

His voice has taken on a desperate pitch, and I’m worried that he might hurt me before Kai arrives.

“Is he the reason that you couldn’t stay with me on the beach that day?”

“Your friends were waiting for you, Clark.”

“No. I lied,” he says, sniffing and laughing. “I’d just met them that day.”

“Why were you there?”

“Wasn’t it obvious? To see you. To check on you and see if you were out of town or not. But you know what, Nova? You lied!”

My hope is that when Kai gets here, he hears what’s happening first before he comes in. I know that it won’t be much longer before he arrives. I want to keep Clark talking long enough to catch him off guard.

“There’s been a lot going on, Clark, and I—”

“Lies!” he says, pressing the knife’s blade against my throat.

Tears prick my eyes, and I swear if I manage to get free, I'm kicking his ass.

"I'm not lying about anything now, Clark," I say, trying to keep my voice calm and neutral, but damn it's a struggle.

"Why do you keep saying my name?" he grunts.

"We're friends, Clark, and I enjoy your friendship. I enjoyed the talks we had during the lunch hour and right at closing. We've talked about everything and...and...and I miss that too. Unfortunately, things have been so crazy lately, but I was hoping we could get back to that."

"No, you never hoped that. You're lying to me just like all the others. You will pay for your mistakes, just as they did."

"Who, Clark? Who lied to you, honey?" I ask in a soothing tone.

"Don't you fucking patronize me!" he sneers, dragging the knife down to my collarbone and just a little beyond before he presses it into me.

I feel a warm sensation right above my breast. When I glimpse down, I see my yellow blouse ripped and a trickle of blood staining the material. Closing my eyes, I whisper a silent prayer and strengthen my resolve to keep the tears at bay.

"All the ones who said they loved me and pretended to be interested in me only to lie. I found them with other men in their apartments, hearing them talking about me and laughing at me. You're just like all the rest!"

I have no idea who he's talking about, but if I wasn't creeped out before, I damn sure am now.

“I’m sorry they hurt you, Clark, but I never want that for you.”

“You’re a liar,” he says, and I can hear in his voice that he’s crying.

Clark grips my breast and flicks my nipple, and revulsion rises in me.

“Clark, please don’t.”

“I bet that’s not what you say when that filthy biker touches you, huh? I bet you’re not begging him to stop. No, in fact, you’re probably saying, ‘Please, give me more, touch me there,’” he says in a girly voice, mimicking me.

“Clark, who hurt you? What were their names?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I want to find them and...make them pay.”

Laughing, he licks the side of my neck and whispers, “It’s too late. They’ve already paid, just as you’re about to.”

Elbowing him in the ribs, I manage to break free. Running, I head in the direction of my office because I know that I won’t get the front doors unlocked in time to make it out. He’ll catch me before then.

I’m running my ass off and screaming the entire time, knocking shelves down as I go, hoping that it will slow him down. My chest burns, and I know it’s a mixture of adrenaline and the pain from the cut.

I fumble while inserting the key into the lock, and just as I get the door unlocked, I feel a heavy weight crashing into me

and pushing me forward through the door. I hit the floor hard, knocking the breath out of me.

Clark grabs a fistful of my hair and jerks my head back, pressing the blade hard against my neck.

“You’ll die, bitch! If I can’t have you, he never will!” he seethes.

I hear a couple of pops and then the clattering of the knife to the floor. I hold my breath, expecting to die, but nothing happens for a second. Then I hear running feet.

“Nova!”

“Kai?” I whimper.

“It’s okay, baby. He’s dead.”

“Get him off me! Get him off me!” I scream.

I’m lying on my belly with my eyes still closed and feel the moment that the weight is dragged off me. Kai lifts me into his arms, and I wrap mine around his neck, burying my face in the side of his neck as I release a torrent of tears.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you now,” he mutters repeatedly.

Kai presses kisses to the top of my head and all over my face. He squeezes me tightly to him as he carries me out of my office.

I can’t even bother to look down at Clark’s body on the floor, but as we move towards the front of the store, I see someone standing there. It’s Raider, Kai’s VP.

“Get her home. I’ll get a crew in here, and I’ll handle the rest,” Raider grunts.

“Thanks,” Kai mutters.

He doesn't let me down until we reach my car, and he sits me inside the passenger seat and stares at me.

“Is he dead?”

“Yes, baby. He's dead.”

“I never expected...” I shake my head, shuddering at the thought of how often I'd been alone with Clark in the evenings.

“Shhh...just sit back and breathe. Let me take care of you,” he says, strapping me in.

When he sits in the driver's seat, I look at him through my blurry, teary-eyed gaze. “What about your bike?”

“My only concern right now is you.”

* * *

I was scared for Kai to leave me tonight, so he hasn't. He got a call about an hour after we arrived asking him to come to the clubhouse, but he told whoever was on the phone that he didn't want to leave me.

Not even fifteen minutes later, someone knocked at the cottage door. Kai had been lying in bed in his underwear, holding me while I cried. He got up and put his jeans on, but no shoes or shirt. He grabbed his cigarette pack and headed into the living room.

Normally, I might get on him about smoking inside, but I didn't have it in me to care tonight. After the fear and the shock subsided, I simply became numb. Existing in a space

where nothing could reach me was what I knew how to do best.

Kai hates it when I go to that place. I know he worries that I'll become suicidal again, but I won't. Life promises us no guarantees, so all we can do is fight to make each day better than the last. That's what I do now: fight to make each day better than before. I'm stronger and better than ever because I'm back with the man who loves me.

I know it will take time to get over this episode, but I know that I'll be okay. I know that I'll come out on top.

I lay in bed listening for a while, and all I hear is hushed whispers. Kai's is the only voice that I recognize. It isn't until the person is leaving that I recognize Whiz's voice saying, "Tell her I hope she feels better soon. Shit, man, I don't know what to say in situations like this. What happened to her was fucked up."

"Yeah, I know."

"I know Anarchy gave you shit about protecting her, but... glad you stood your ground, man. I know this went further than any of us wanted, but in the end, both of those bastards got what they deserved."

"I just don't think she'd have had to put up with as much as she did had Anarchy not been such an ass about this."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Nah. If he'd kept her here in the first place, hadn't sent her back to the store..."

“They might still be walking around, End Game. He has to make the tough calls. It’s why he’s the Prez.”

“You’re right.”

“Hey, get some rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Thanks for stopping by and giving me that information, man.”

“Any time.”

The door closes, and there’s silence for a while. I don’t hear anything, and I know Kai is in the other room smoking and dealing with his feelings about this. I had no idea that he’d caught hell from Anarchy about me.

My eyes tear up because it seems as if every time I turn around, I’m taking him through hell, and I don’t want to be that for him. I want to be his refuge the same way he’s mine.

The door finally opens, and I only see his silhouette in the dark. He’s leaning against the doorframe, staring at me.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“You crying?”

I sit up and wipe my eyes. “No.”

He chuckles, pushes off the door frame and saunters towards the bed.

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m fine, really. Just thinking that I don’t want to be the reason you catch so much grief.”

Leaning onto the bed, he says, “You’re not.”

Something scampers across the floor, and then a ball of fur pounces on the bed.

“Don’t think so, Raider. Not tonight,” Kai says, picking the kitten up and walking it back out of the room. He sets the kitten in the front room and races back to the bedroom.

He slams the door just before Raider returns.

“Damn, cat’s fast.”

I giggle. “He is.”

“Thought he was used to sleeping in a different room.”

“He is. He’s still new to this place, though.”

The bed sags when Kai climbs onto it with me.

“C’mere,” he beckons.

I scoot closer to him in the bed, and he pulls the hem of my t-shirt up and rubs his palm over my belly. It feels so still and quiet all around us, and that’s hardly ever true of the compound. I don’t feel the vibrations of the music that pulses from the clubhouse.

The only thing that I feel is Kai’s warm breath caressing my face as he sucks my lips and the pounding of his heart underneath my hand as I run my hand over his chest. He nudges my legs aside and positions himself between them.

Breaking our kiss, his pale blue eyes stare into mine as he tugs at my bikini panties and pulls them down over my hips, past the curve of my ass and then off my legs.

Kneeling between my thighs, he hooks both legs over his shoulders and parts my sex. His warm breath is a gentle kiss against me, and it's his nose that I feel first as he inhales my scent and purrs in contentment like a satisfied lion.

My back arches at the feel of his lips on me, his tongue slaking his hunger and stirring up my desire. His lips tug and then suck my pussy. The sound of the sheet ripping from the corner of the mattress fills the room as I grab it in my hand, pulling with all my might as I try to remain calm, struggle to maintain my composure, but slowly lose myself to the delirium that stalks me.

He slurps and sucks and then looks up at me.

“This pussy's so goddamned good. If this was all I ever ate the rest of my life, I swear it would keep me strong.”

“Let me see those muscles,” I sigh, arching my hips and pumping myself to his lips.

He slides a finger inside me, stroking and sucking at me. Just before I cum he pulls away and slides inside of me.

Biting his bottom lip, he narrows his eyes and says, “This pussy's so damn good!”

He lowers his chest to mine, our hearts beating in sync as they did when we were kids. His lips are warm against my neck, his breath a welcome breeze, and his tongue slicking a hot trail along my collarbone.

“I will never leave you alone again, Nova. I promise to never fail you.”

Turning his head to face me, I press my lips against his. “I know.”

Our bodies move in tandem with each other, and we take our time enjoying our connection. Kai is attentive to my body and my emotions as though he’s trying to expel my demons. And when it doesn’t seem they will surrender, his movements become unrelenting, not giving up or giving in until my entire being is focused on this connection we share.

My legs are hooked over his arms, and he swivels inside and slowly gyrates until he can take no more. Increasing his rate, I feel his dick growing heavier and longer inside of me as he pummels my insides.

“Kai!” I scream as he picks up more speed and thumps inside of me like a jackhammer on concrete.

“Say it’s mine, Nova,” he grunts.

“It’s yours, Kai!”

“Say it’s mine, Nova!”

“It’s yours, Kai!” I repeat.

He shakes his head, and I understand what he wants to hear.

“This pussy is all yours, Kai!” I scream as he roars.

He’s exercising restraint, not trying to cum. I know that it’s only a matter of time, though. When I finally give in and fall over the edge, he permits himself to do the same.

We roll over onto our sides, still connected.

Everything finally hits me, and I'm full of pain, and tears flow like a waterfall. Kai sits up on the bed and pulls me onto his lap, holding me. He doesn't shush me; he just rests his chin on my forehead and lets me cry.

His warm right-hand rubs circles on my back while his left one caresses my thigh. When I stop crying, we remain quiet for what seems like an eternity. Maybe half an hour passes before we slump down into bed.

I stare out the window at the moon in the sky overhead. It's the only thing that I can see on this black eerie night. Neither of us is sleeping, and I don't know if we can. We're both exhausted, physically and mentally.

After another long beat of silence, I speak.

"I never fit in," I say as we lay in bed holding each other.

"What do you mean?" he asks, kissing the top of my head.

"Will's world. My ex-husband and I loved each other, I guess, but I never became the trophy wife that he was seeking. I lived in a world where women were pampered and showcased. That was never me. I always felt fake."

"Didn't want to be a Barbie princess?" he teases.

"Don't get me wrong. I love a mani-pedi as well as the next girl. And shopping? Well, let's just say that I have to keep myself to a strict budget. But the golf clubs, the charity events, sitting on the boards of one cause or another, the balls and all of that was too much for me. Everyone was fake, and you could trust no one. The man cheated with a nurse who used to smile in my face daily, for crying out loud. The same nurse

who would make arrangements for Will's and my trips out of town and anniversary dates."

"You wanted something different than what you'd seen the last years of your teenage life."

"I did. Just wanted to belong somewhere and fit in, you know?"

He smooths my hair back from my face. "You know I do," he says before he kisses my forehead. "The MC...they're my family. This is where I fit in. No judgment or recriminations for who I am. I know they've got my back whenever I need them."

"Guess I'm just amazed that they came through the way that they did for me...with Clark and all."

"It's who we are, Nova. The Fiery Disciples may not be in the upper echelon of society. Some might even say we come from the dregs of society, but we're a family, and we take care of our own."

"That's good to know."

He sighs.

"What?"

"I know it's been years since we've been a couple. And I know people change a lot, especially through two marriages and adulthood, but I still feel like we're the same, Nova."

"We are different, Kai, but our hearts are the same. Our experiences have changed and altered our personalities some, but our hearts won't ever change."

“So, it’s not weird that I don’t want to go back to life without you?”

“Only if it’s weird that I feel the same. From the moment that I recognized you in my store, it was like time stopped, but my heart started beating again. I was just so damn scared, if that makes sense.”

“Glad to know there was a valid reason that you kicked my ass out of your life.”

“I didn’t kick you out. I just said that I needed space.”

“Yeah, well, no more space coming between us. You got it?” he asks.

“I got it.”

“From here on out, it’s you and me, with the MC having our backs. If you ever get scared, lonely, depressed, or just fucking pissed at the world, you tell me that shit cuz I wanna hear it. Got me?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“We hold nothing back from each other.”

“Okay.”

He pulls me close and kisses my cheeks, and after some time, I finally find peace, and I sleep.

CHAPTER 18

End Game

She has strength that she doesn't realize she has. I've watched Nova closely in the three weeks since the shooting, and while I'm protective as fuck over her, always will be, I know that she's going to be okay. There have been times since she re-entered my life that I wanted to handle her delicately, but I know she wants me to see her as strong.

She's not the same kid that she was when we first met, battling depression and struggling with abandonment. Nova is so much more than that, and I see it. Yet, I will always be who I am. Always protective as fuck over her because I know the ugly side of this world; I'm a part of it.

They say to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. The only ones I want in my circle are my brothers and Nova. It may be a hard lesson for her to learn because her heart is so open and beautiful, but she'll have to keep her circle small, too. She's too trusting and too open to see everyone as a potential friend, including psychopathic employees.

Anthony Carter was employed by Falcon for two years and never had any problems until Clark relocated to our area. Anthony was a computer genius, one of the best in the company, according to Falcon. He was able to cover his tracks, but Falcon eventually placed a bot in the system to track who logged in or out of it, shadow their movements and trigger a hidden camera to record images of the person logging in.

After we failed to capture the person at the house on the day of the fire and shooting, Falcon pulled the data to find out who had been accessing the system. Once he learned that it was Anthony, he performed a deep scrub of all of Anthony's personal devices, including his cell phone. That's how we knew Anthony wasn't behind the odd gifts, but someone else was.

Falcon, Terminator, and Bullet took Anthony from his home immediately and brought him to the dungeon.

When Nova and I returned to the compound after the shooting, I met with Whiz later that night. He'd uncovered disturbing news where Clark Stewart was concerned.

He was able to ascertain that Clark's real name was Jared Strong, and he had worked in multiple bookstores across the country. He would fixate on women who appeared lonely, looking for a love like the ones she read about in romance books.

Preying on these women, he would cultivate friendships with them and pretend he was the perfect man for them. No sooner than they welcomed him into their lives, he became controlling, dominating, and abusive until the women broke up with him.

That's when he would begin to stalk them. He would assault and kill these women and move on to another state, another urban bookstore, and another unsuspecting victim.

According to Whiz, the police in all these towns had open investigations into these murders.

Jared moved to Smokey Ridge from Washington State when he heard a new bookstore was coming to town. The town was the perfect size, like many of the stores he'd targeted before.

The only difference between this time and his prior behavior was that Clark fixed his attention on Nova before he fixated on a customer. Nova hired her staff prior to opening the bookstore, and she had worked extensively with Clark on setting up the store and his champagne bar, building a friendship with him before the store opened.

According to Anthony, his cousin Jared relocated to our area because he was growing serious about the woman that he'd been dating long distance, Nova. Anthony hadn't been aware of his cousin's movements prior to moving to Smokey Ridge.

Initially, Clark told Anthony that he needed to get into Nova's house because he wanted to surprise her for her birthday, but that she'd recently had a security system installed. When Jared hedged, Clark promised that it wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass. The next time he needed access, Anthony, who had growing gambling debt, capitulated when Clark paid him two grand.

“Where is he?” Nova asks, turning in the bed to face me.

“Who?”

“Anthony Carter.”

I smooth the lines from her forehead and press a kiss there.
“Thought I told you not to worry about it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s kind of hard when I don’t know if he might pop up behind me one day or sneak into my window.”

“Hey,” I say, cupping her face and turning her to face me. “I told you that I took care of him. Both Clark and Anthony are no longer your problems. You know that I shot Clark. I know you didn’t look at him after that happened, but trust me...he wasn’t breathing when I finished him.”

“Anthony?”

“He’s no longer breathing.”

“Where did you bury him?”

I hate that she’s plagued by paranoia now. I sigh and roll onto my back, propping my head on my arm.

“Why?”

“I don’t know...I just need to see...”

“No. You don’t. There are some things that I can’t show you or tell you, but trust me like you’ve never trusted me before, that they’re no longer breathing. I tortured the shit out of Anthony Carter before he left the earth. Only wished I could’ve done the same with Clark. I promise neither of them can come back to haunt you. Raider had a crew come in and clean up your store, take care of the body and all that. When you returned the next morning, there wasn’t a trace of what happened. Was there?”

“No.”

“It’s the same with Anthony. I wouldn’t lie to you, Nova.”

I rub my thumb over her soft, plump lips. “You trust me?”

She smiles and nods, and I see the truth in her gaze. “I do.”

“Good,” I whisper, leaning in and kissing her.

“I’ve never asked you about the night of the incident.”

She always calls it “the incident.”

“What about it?”

“How did you know that something was wrong?”

“The minute Anthony told us that his cousin was your champagne bar attendant, I knew there was a problem. He’d always been hanging out there with you most nights, so I knew he was probably still there. When I got there, I didn’t see a car other than yours.”

“His car was in the shop. He’d been riding the bus.”

“When you didn’t answer my text or my tapping at the front door, I went around back to the service door.”

“I never heard you knock.”

“Guess not. You were probably focused on trying to stay alive with that asshole. I picked the lock on the service door at the coffee shop, and I heard a lot of commotion, running and some other noise that I later realized was shit being knocked down. None of that mattered when I heard you screaming.”

“I just knew that if he got me again, he’d kill me this time. I just knew he would...”

She closes her eyes, and I know she’s recalling the moment he had that knife pressed against her neck. I couldn’t see it from my angle when I ran up behind them.

All I fucking knew was that that psychopath was chasing her. Crazy people are strong and unpredictable. I wasn't sure what he'd do to her, but I wasn't taking any risks on what he might or might not do. The moment that I had the perfect angle, I took the kill shot.

"But he didn't," I say, pulling her closer.

I don't tell her how scared I was when I learned who her stalker was, nor when she didn't answer my text, nor when my tapping on the door went unanswered. Instead, I tell her what I feel now.

"I'm just grateful that, for whatever reason, you came back into my world. I'm not about to let shit screw that up, even a dumbass psychopath like Clark. He'd have to be a dumbass to fuck with a Fiery Disciples' girl."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Would that have anything to do with the tattoos that some of the women around here wear?"

Lifting my head slightly to stare into her face, a slow smirk creeps upon mine. "You tryna be claimed, Nova?"

"Are you trying to claim me, End Game?"

Laughing, I brush my lips against hers and place my hand between her thighs.

"Don't know nothing 'bout you calling me that."

"Well, I prefer Kai, but I wanted to see how that felt on my lips."

“I’ve got something you can feel on your lips,” I reply, stroking her flesh.

She arches her hips and says, “Then let me.”

Reaching into my underwear, I pull my dick free. I sit up and move to the top of the bed kneeling beside her and rubbing the tip of my dick against her lips. She opens her mouth and slowly sucks me in, never breaking eye contact. I scissor my fingers inside her, and she gyrates slowly, moaning her pleasure around my width.

Slowly, I began pumping in and out of her mouth, working myself further and deeper into her warm heat. My eyes close in surrender when she twirls her tongue around me and prods the slit in my head.

“Fuck!” I growl, adding another finger inside of her.

Nova works my fingers, clamping her legs tightly around them and riding them hard as I increase the speed of my thrusts in her mouth.

I can’t control it, and as much as I want to get inside of her, it will have to wait because right now, all I want is to let go inside of her mouth. When she starts humming on my shit, it’s the end of the line for me. I’ve got to hop off this train.

Like a rocket catapulting into space, my nut bursts through my dick and shoots straight down her throat. Her eyes widen as she works to keep up with my release and not choke. I become one erect muscle from head to toe, filled with the tension of my orgasm.

I only realize that Nova has cum, too, when I finally return to my senses and feel my hand cramping. Looking down, I notice she's squeezing my fingers inside of her, and her breathing is just returning to normal.

"Sorry, I couldn't wait," I apologize.

I climb onto the bed with her, and she says, "We've got all the time in the world to do it as many times as it takes to get us where we need. However. Whenever. We want." She punctuates her last words with kisses.

"So, about that claiming thing," she says, smiling at me.

"Yeah, about that. You ready to get branded?"

Laughing, she hits me on the chest. "What am I? Cattle?"

"Well, I'm getting branded too," I point out.

"Where?" she asks.

"Where you want me to?" I reply, pulling her on top of me.

She rubs my cock and says, "How about here...mm, never mind. Don't want nobody else touching or looking at what's mine."

"Oh, it's yours?" I tease, lifting my eyebrows.

"I need to prove it to you?"

"Maybe we could work something..." My phone buzzes with the special alert assigned to council members.

We have to be on call whenever any of the council calls or texts us. Rolling over, I lift my phone from the nightstand. She rubs my back as I unlock my phone.

RAIDER: *Anarchy's been shot. Get to the Bay.*

I swear it feels like my heart stops. I hold my breath for several seconds. Then I remember to breathe. A bowling ball rolls around inside of my head, and I remember to respond.

END GAME: *WTF? Is he gonna be ok?*

RAIDER: *Don't know. Everyone's en route. Get there now!*

I feel sick. What the hell does he mean he doesn't know? How could he not know whether Anarchy's okay or not? Is that his way of telling me that he wasn't?

Maybe he didn't want to give us that news over the phone, knowing we'd all have to ride out. Maybe he's trying to make sure everyone is safe.

Who the fuck would shoot Anarchy?

Then it comes to me. Anarchy, Cannon, and Phantom went to meet with Aiello today. We weren't told the time or the place, just that they were going.

My mind is spiraling, and my head is thundering with rage, revenge, and disbelief. One of the only fuckers on this Earth that I know gives a shit about me could be dying!

I shake my head. There's no way that's true. Anarchy's the toughest motherfucker I know.

Another wave of nausea rolls over me, and I know it's related to the guilt I feel. I've been so pissed at him on how he handled shit with Nova's situation that I've been carrying a grudge.

Phantom always warned us against carrying negative energy. Always warned that it only attracted more.

I didn't listen to that bullshit, but now I'm regretting that I didn't.

Anarchy took me under his wing when I first came into the MC. The disrespect I've shown him lately by not obeying his orders has all been directly related to Nova. Before her, I'd never questioned his orders. But that's all I've been doing lately.

What if I don't get a chance to tell my Prez I fucked up. That maybe there was a better way of doing shit? That nausea rolls in my belly again, along with the clanging of cymbals in my goddamned head.

"Fuck!" I snarl, jumping up from the bed.

"What? Kai, what's wrong?" Nova asks when I grab my pants and slip into them without my underwear.

"Kai! You're scaring me!" she cries out as I continue dressing without answering.

It's not her fault. She didn't do any of this. It's not even her fault that I disobeyed direct orders. So, there's no reason to take it out on her.

Returning to bed, I cup her soft caramel-colored face in my hands.

Through a choked voice that hints of tears if I were capable of those motherfuckers, I say, "Anarchy's been shot, babe."

“What? How did that happen?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been summoned. You stay here and don’t leave for anything.”

“Kai, am I safe here?”

I see the fear in her eyes, and I know the paranoia she’s battling. I need to make her feel safe, but I don’t know how to convey to her my confidence that she’s safe. I just need her to trust me.

I inhale deeply, close my eyes and reopen them.

“How do I get you to trust me unconditionally, Nova?”

“I do.”

“What do you see when you look at me, baby? Right now.”

“Mixed with the pain in those blue depths? I see love. Your love for me is so brilliant and strong that it strangles the worry out of me.”

I nod. “Baby, I know that shit happens. And I know you’re probably thinking about our past right now, but I swear that I won’t ever take myself out of your life again. The only thing I’m going to do right now is check on Anarchy and see what’s going on with him. Then it’s right back to you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“And I’m safe here?”

“Anarchy was on a mission. He wasn’t here at this compound. There is no safer place in this world for you to be

right now than here. You got that?”

She nods, and I swipe her tears away with my thumbpads.

“Don’t cry, darling. If you want to, you can call Roxie, and she’ll come right over. The Ol’ Ladies are probably gathering at Marlo’s now. I’ll be back for you. And when I return, I promise I’ll work on building those happily ever afters you read about in those books of yours. I swear.”

“I know you will,” she says sweetly with half a smile.

I brush my lips against hers, press my forehead against hers and say, “I love you, Nova.”

“I love you, too, Kai.”

* * *

Continue the Fiery Disciples series and learn what happened to Anarchy in the next book in the Fiery Disciples series: Raider.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassie Verano pens romance for readers of all cultures and backgrounds. Her love of romance is borne from the beauty and joy she sees in the relationships around her. She enjoys creating fiction about women discovering true love and women who aren't afraid to explore their sexuality.

Cassie is the other half of the dynamic duo podcast Cozy Sips with C.a.T. with her co-host Tiye Love. They interview other authors on books, life, love, and sex.

Their show airs every other Tuesday at 7 PM CST / 8 PM EST. Catch it on YouTube at: <https://bit.ly/3S6INWC> or Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/CozySips>.

Read More from Cassie Verano:

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PROTECTED

**He's never said a word to her, but he'll burn the world
down for her.**

Life is damn good for Hail. Being Prez of the Lost Mavericks MC comes with many perks including the endless parade of women in and out of the club.

The thing is, Hail doesn't want any of those women. There's one woman he wants, and he's never spoken a word to her.

Mary Jay isn't looking for anything. She's got a plan, and she's sticking to it. That is until Hail walks into her world and refuses to leave.

Even before Mary Jay talked to Hail, she was protected.

CHAPTER 1

Hail

“There a reason why you’re staring at the door?”

I grunted and shook my head. Staring at the bar’s door was pretty obvious, but she was late. Every night at twelve-thirteen, she walked through the door and climbed the steps at the back of the bar to her apartment. Her eyes focused on her door, and she never looked at anyone.

She didn’t know I was watching, but I was.

I also had no clue about anything about her other than the time she got home from work. Well, I assumed she was coming home from work. I didn’t know that, either.

“He’s waiting for her,” Jersey chuckled.

“Her?” Tiger asked. “Who the hell is her? Did the prez get an ol’ lady, and we don’t know about her?”

“I know about her. You would know about her too if you paid attention to what is happening around you, Tiger.” Jersey waved his hand in front of my face. “Earth to, Hail,” he called.

I swatted his hand away. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” Again, I needed to be less obvious.

I wasn’t sure what it was about this woman, but something drew her to me.

“Who is she?” Tiger asked.

“Don’t know,” Jersey smirked. “Hail only stares at her, never talks to her.”

I curled my lip and let out a growl. “Fuck you.”

Tiger reached behind him and pulled out his wallet from his back pocket. “I got a hundo in my wallet that says you won’t talk to her.” He pulled out the hundred-dollar bill and laid it on the bar top. “You talk to her, and it’s yours.”

“Not interested in taking your milk money, Tiger,” I grunted.

“But I am,” Jersey called. “If Hail talks to whoever this chick is, then I get the money. If he doesn’t, then you can keep it.”

“So Hail does all the risk, and you get the reward?” Tiger laughed.

“He’s not interested,” Jersey pointed out. “Come on, you seem pretty confident that he won’t talk to her, so you don’t have anything to lose.”

The front door opened, and my world froze. *She was here.*

“Holy shit,” Tiger called. “If he doesn’t talk to her, then I sure as hell will.”

“Stay the fuck away from her,” I growled, “or I’ll string you up by your balls and use you as a punching bag,” I threatened.

“How the hell does he get to call dibs on her?” Tiger grumbled. “He doesn’t even know her name.”

“Because he has been watching her for *months*, brother. Like, day after day after day.” Jersey whistled low and shook

his head. “It’s like she makes him mute whenever she’s around.”

I glanced at Jersey. “And you’ve been watching *me* for months, apparently.”

Jersey shrugged. “I’m a watcher. I like to know what’s going on around me,” he explained.

She went through the crowd by the door and skirted around the pool table. At least she tried to.

She stepped to the side to avoid a guy bent over lining up his shot, but he quickly stood up and slammed into her.

“Oh, boy,” Jersey whispered.

“Where’s my beer?” Tiger asked. “I’m going to need refreshments for the entertainment.”

I was off my stool and halfway to the pool table when the guy whirled around and hollered at her to watch where she was going.

Everything blurred around me, and the next second I had the douchebag pressed against the wall with my hand clamped around his neck. “What the fuck do you think you are doing?” I growled wildly.

He was struggling to breathe and to free himself.

“Just let it happen, Jim. The more you struggle, the more he’ll kill you,” Jersey called. “You messed with the wrong woman.”

“I didn’t know she was yours,” he gasped. “I didn’t know, Hail.”

I had no idea who this guy was, but he knew me.

That was normal around town. Being the prez of the Lost Mavericks MC meant everyone knew me, but I didn't know them.

"So if she weren't mine, you would still have yelled at her?" I growled. "You like to be a douche to women who are just minding their business, and you slam into them?"

Jim shook his head. "No, no. It was my fault." He looked around me. "I'm sorry, lady. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm sorry."

I tightened my grip around his throat. "Don't fucking look at her."

Jim snapped his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Hail. I had a bad week at work and just snapped, man. I promise it won't happen again."

A hand wrapped around my bicep and gently tugged me back. "Please stop," a soft, feminine voice called. "He said he was sorry, and I don't think he'll do it again. Or maybe never even open his eyes again."

"I won't," Jim called. He plastered his hand over his eyes. "I will never open my eyes again, Hail. I'm sorry."

I looked down at the hand on me and followed the length of her arm till my eyes locked on her beautiful face.

"I'm okay," she whispered. "I should have paid attention better."

I shook my head. "*He* should have paid attention better."

“He’s right,” Jim called. “It was my fault, miss. I don’t know what I was thinking when I yelled at you.” I glanced at him; his eyes were still closed, and his head was tipped to the ceiling. “If you could just push me toward the door, I’ll be on my way home.”

“We got him,” Tiger called. “To the gutter with him.” Tiger appeared next to me and grabbed Jim. “Why don’t you take care of her?”

Tiger grabbed Jim’s arm, and Jersey grabbed the other.

“I don’t even know what happened,” Jim muttered.

Jersey patted his shoulder. “You made a mistake, man. A huge one.” They guided Jim toward the door, and I turned my attention to... hell, I didn’t know her name.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Uh, yeah.”

Her brown hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, her cheeks were flushed pink, and her green eyes were focused on me. Her clothes were never fancy and were typically a sweatshirt, jeans, and heavy work boots.

She was coming home from work whenever I saw her walking to her apartment stairs through the bar, but I didn’t know where she worked or, well, really anything else about her.

I knew nothing, but she was perfect.

“Are you sure you’re okay? He slammed into you pretty hard.”

“It wasn’t that bad, just surprising. I’ve dodged many pool players trying to get to my apartment. Jim was quicker than most.” She pushed her hair behind her ear and took a step back.

“You knew Jim?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Uh, I met him one minute ago. So, no.” She quirked her eyebrow. “He could use a *tic tac*, though.”

“He did scream right in your face, didn’t he?”

She wrinkled her nose and nodded. “That he did.”

“Let me buy you a drink to help you forget the past ten minutes,” I suggested.

“Uh, I’m okay. I need to get home.”

I glanced at the staircase in the back of the bar. “One drink won’t put you too far behind from going to bed.”

She smiled softly. “Thank you, but I don’t drink.” She tipped her head toward the front door. “And it looks like your friends might be needing some help.”

“Jesus Christ,” I grumbled.

Tiger still had a hold on Jim, but Jersey had been distracted by a tall redhead whose arm was draped over his shoulders, and her hand was snaking down the front of his pants.

“That happened...” she trailed off and tipped her head. “Fast.”

“Things tend to happen fast when the Lost Mavericks are around.”

Her eyes dropped to my cut and then looked up at me.
“You know the Broken Jokers?”

“They don’t have anything on the Lost Mavericks, babe.
You know them?”

She shrugged. “Uh, I think my dad used to hang out with
them before he died. I never did.”

I nodded and stepped toward her. “Sorry about your dad.”

She pasted a smile on her lips. “Uh, thank you. It’s been a
few years since he passed.”

“Your mom still around?” I knew we were standing in the
middle of the bar with people all around us, but it felt like it
was just me and her.

She shook her head. “She took off as soon as they cut the
umbilical cord. A crackhead and a baby aren’t a good
combination.”

“Sorry again, babe. Life didn’t really deal you a good
hand, huh?”

“No, not really.” She cleared her throat. “And I need to get
to bed.” Her eyes dropped to my name on my cut. “Hail.”

“And what about you?” I asked. “What is your name?”

She shook her head. “It’s not important.”

“I beg to argue that, babe. Everything about you is
important to me.”

“Oh boy,” she laughed.

I stepped close and cradled her arm in my hand. “How about I just call you mine?”

“Is it hot in here?” she wheezed. “I feel hot. Must be my sweatshirt. I better get upstairs and take it off.” Her eyes bugged out. “My sweatshirt that I have a shirt on underneath, I need to take off. Not get naked. I mean, I will get naked at some point, but then I’m going to put clothes back on right away. I just need to get out of these clothes from work.” She looked around. “Did I mention it seems hot in here?” she whispered.

“What’s your name, babe?” I asked softly.

“If I tell you, can I run away up the stairs?” Her eyes looked into mine, and it felt like she was looking into my soul.

“For tonight,” I replied. She could run right now, but I knew where to find her.

“Mary Jay. My name is Mary Jay, Hail. Have a good night, and try not to get into any more bar fights, okay?” She sprinted to the back of the bar and barreled up the stairs like she was being chased by a bull.

“Mary Jay,” I whispered. I liked it, but I like mine better.

CHAPTER 2

Mary Jay

What in the what was that?

How did that even happen?

How about I just call you mine?

Was the man trying to make me collapse right then and there? No one says things like that unless I'm reading a romance novel or watching a movie.

And boy, did the man look like he was ripped from the pages of a romance novel. Tattoos covered his arms, even peeked out of the neck of his shirt, and his dark brown hair was cropped close on the sides while longer on top, begging for my fingers to comb through it. He looked like a biker version doppelgänger for David Gandy.

Jesus criminy!

I pulled my sweatshirt over my head and tossed it over the back of a chair.

I had lived above Dive Inn for over five years, and I had never once had anything like that happen to me.

Sure, I had drunks who tried to hit on me when I was just trying to get to my apartment, but they were always innocent and easily distracted.

Not this guy.

He had swooped in from out of nowhere and was ready to beat the hell out of Jim just because he bumped into me. Well,

and yelled in my face, but I could have handled it.

I ran my fingers through my hair and took a deep breath.

Lost Mavericks MC.

I would, of course, catch the attention of someone in an MC. I had enough MCs in my life to be fine with never hearing those two letters together ever again.

It wasn't the Lost Mavericks I had dealt with, but I could tell they were just like other bikers I knew.

Hell, Hail's friends had managed to find a woman to stick her hand down their pants by only walking a few feet.

Crazy.

Meow.

"Tommy," I cooed. "Are you going to come out?"

Tommy meowed again, sauntered out from under the bed, and did figure eights through my legs.

"Did you miss me?" I asked. "Need to get your scent all over me since these pants aren't covered in hair?" Getting dressed was the last thing I did before I headed to work at the Cranston Produce warehouse.

Being covered in cat hair was not the best thing when I dealt with checking pallets of produce and loading them onto semis. *How about a furball with your watermelon and oranges?*

I leaned down and scratched the top of his head. "Missed you, big man."

He led me over to his bowl as if I had forgotten where it was while I was gone and cracked open a can of wet food.

My apartment ran the length of the bar downstairs and was relatively small, but it was home. There weren't a ton of places for rent in town, and I had been lucky to snag this place when I did.

The apartment was just one big open room. Well, except for the bathroom. That was thankfully enclosed at the other end of the apartment with a large tub and two-sink vanity.

My apartment was set up as separate rooms; there weren't any walls actually separating them.

I could turn the TV on in the living room and comfortably watch it from my bed.

Kitchen right as you walked in, the living room with a TV, couch, and recliner next, then my bed and two dressers until you got to the wall. On the other side of that was the bathroom.

I guess it was technically called a studio, but it was just home for me.

Tommy settled in front of his bowl and lapped up his late dinner.

I normally turned on the TV and tried to decompress before going to bed, but I knew the TV wasn't going to be able to hold my attention.

Not after the excitement downstairs.

“He was hot, Tommy,” I pondered out loud. “The kind of hot you see in the movies, not in a rundown bar in a small town.” I walked through the living room and face planted straight onto my bed. “Why was he so hot?” I muttered into the comforter. I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. “And he smelled good,” I whined. “Why?” I cried.

Hail was the exact opposite of what I needed in my life right now.

All I needed was to work as much as I could and keep my head down until all my debts were paid.

I scoffed and tossed my arm over my eyes.

They weren’t even my debts to begin with, but when my dad died, his debts landed squarely on me.

Thanks, Dad.

I didn’t even want to think about all the crap Dad had left me to deal with.

I loved the man, but boy, did he not make the best decisions when he was alive.

Tommy hopped onto the bed and sprawled out next to me.

“I’m going to have to figure out how to teleport into the apartment after work tomorrow night, Tommy. Hail said I could run away tonight, but something tells me I’m not going to be so lucky tomorrow.”

Anyone could tell that Hail was not the type of guy who would let you run when he wanted you.

“Lord,” I laughed, “as if that fine man actually wants me. Sexy probably just comes out of his mouth naturally.” I wasn’t anything special to him. He probably collected girls like they were bottle tops. Where there was one, there was twenty more.

“Yup, that’s it,” I called. “We are not going to think about Hail anymore, Tommy. Not one second more.” I rolled off the bed and quickly got ready to sleep. Sleep was good because my brain would shut off.

I turned off the lights and snuggled under the covers with Tommy.

I wasn’t going to think about Hail, but I sure as hell dreamed about him all night.

Good lord.

CHAPTER 3

Hail

“Am I the only one feeling déjà vu?”

“What?” Crank asked.

Tiger pointed at me. “Last night, Hail sat on that same stool with his eyes trained on the door until some hot chick walked in.”

My eyes were trained on the door. They had been for the past two months, and that wasn't going to change tonight.

Not after I had actually talked to her and found out her name.

Mary Jay.

The name suited her. It was traditional with a twist.

“You find out her name?” Tiger asked.

I nodded and grabbed my beer. “I did.”

“You gonna share it with us?” Tiger chuckled.

“You don't need to know her name.” It was pretty much all I knew about her, and I wanted to keep it to myself until I really got to know her.

“Betty,” Tiger guessed.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Help me think of a hot girl's name,” Tiger urged Crank.

“What the hell is a hot girl's name?” Crank asked.

Tiger wasn't going to guess it. No way in hell.

“Ruth,” Crank guessed.

Tiger reared back. “What the hell, man? Do you have a thing for hot grandmas or something? Next, you’re going to suggest Martha or some shit.”

Crank tipped his head to the side. “I could get behind Martha. She sounds sweet, but once you get her into bed, it’s a whole other story.”

“You know a Martha?” I asked.

Crank shook his head. “No, but I have a good imagination. I bet Martha’s and Ruth’s are damn good in bed.”

Tiger frowned. “I worry about you, Crank.”

Crank smiled wide. “I wouldn’t, brother. I’m good.”

“Not if you think grandmas are hot,” Tiger muttered.

The front door opened, and Mary Jay walked in.

“Later, fucksticks,” I called. I drained the last of my beer and beelined straight to Mary Jay.

It had been hell waiting all day and night until I could see her again. I was a little worried that she wouldn’t be here tonight, but I figured she had to because the stairs in the back of the bar were the only way she could get to her apartment.

I made sure with the bartender.

Jake, the bartender, had been a little hesitant to talk to me about Mary Jay, but he warmed up to me after he realized I wasn’t looking to mess with her.

He didn't tell me much because he didn't even know her. He knew she worked at the local produce warehouse, and from what he could tell, she pretty much just stayed in her apartment or was at work. Never stopped for a drink or anything.

Her eyes were directed at the floor, but she gracefully moved through the crowd.

"Mary Jay," I called softly.

She glanced up, and her eyes connected with mine.

"Hail," she gasped. "Uh, are you going to block for me or something?"

I couldn't help but smile. "You normally do pretty good on your own."

She tipped her head to the side. "Uh, okay?"

"I, uh, last night wasn't the first night I saw you."

She wrinkled her nose and frowned. "What?"

How was I going to tell her I had been watching her for months without sounding like I was a stalker or something? "I noticed you a few times. The club likes to hang out here."

"Oh." She nodded and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I never noticed."

"You would have to look at something besides your feet to notice anyone," I jested.

"Eyes down so no one makes eye contact. It's worked the past five years."

“Until yesterday,” I quipped.

She tipped her head to the side and smiled. “Yes, until yesterday.”

“Have a drink with me,” I offered. “Maybe play a game or two of pool.”

“I, uh, well, you see...” she stammered.

“One beer, one game of pool,” I bargained.

She glanced behind me at the stairs that led to her escape.

“Let’s start with the beer, and if you still want to take off up those stairs, then I won’t stop you.” I wasn’t going to let her run just yet. Last night, I had her for a few minutes; tonight, I was shooting for at least twenty minutes.

She chewed on her bottom lip and glanced around. “I don’t drink, but I’ll take a Coke.”

Hell yes.

CHAPTER 4

Mary Jay

Why was I doing this? I should have told Hail no and ran up my stairs.

But, no. Instead, I agreed, and now I was sitting on a wonky barstool while the bartender poured me a Coke.

“Where do you work?” Hail asked.

“Cranston Produce in the warehouse. Second shift.” Four to midnight Sunday through Thursday, I worked my butt off and then walked through the doors of Dive Inn like clockwork every night.

“You like it?”

The bartender set my soda in front of me and a fresh beer in front of Hail. “Well, it pays my bills, so I guess I like it.” I didn’t know anyone who actually loved their job. I didn’t have a problem working at the warehouse, but if there was a way for me to make money and not have to work there, you can bet your butt I would do it as long as it was legal.

Hail nodded and took a sip of his beer. “What else do you like to do?” he asked.

“Is this an interview?” I laughed.

“Getting to know each other, babe.”

“With only you asking the questions?” Didn’t seem very fair. “And why would you want to get to know me?”

“Well, I think that was you asking two questions right in a row.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to answer them?”

“Three questions,” he muttered.

I flattened my lips and turned slightly toward him.

“The first question you asked doesn’t apply since you asked me questions.”

“Fair enough,” I mumbled.

“And I want to get to know you because there is something about you.”

“Something about me?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure yet. Once I do, I will let you know.” He leaned back in his chair and maneuvered it to plant his feet on either side of mine on the rung of my barstool. “Now tell me about what you like to do for fun when you’re not working.”

“Hang out with Tommy.”

“He your boyfriend?”

I chuckled. “No, though he’s claimed me as his human.”

“Dog?”

I shook my head. “Thought about it, but having to go up and down those stairs whenever they need to go to the bathroom squashed that idea quickly.”

“I hope it’s a cat or a rabbit. Please don’t be a reptile.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Cat. No way in heck I would ever own a reptile. I would have the luck of the thing getting out of

his cage and trying to eat me while I slept.” Though I’m sure if I were ever late feeding Tommy, he would try to eat me alive. He was loyal to me, but he was also ruled by his stomach.

“You named your cat Tommy?”

I nodded. “Yup. It sounds less pathetic when I say I’m spending time with Tommy rather than Tinker Bell or something weird.” I nodded to him. “You thought he was my boyfriend, didn’t you?”

He took a swig of his beer. “You got me there, babe.”

“And speaking of Tommy, I really need to get up to my apartment. If he could use the phone, I’m sure he would have sent out an amber alert for me.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand. I’m just trying to spend some time with his human.”

I shook my head and smiled. “And have you figured out why that is yet?”

Hail shook his head. “Not yet. A game of pool might help me figure it out.”

“Is that so?”

Hail shifted then leaned forward and rested his elbows on the bar. “Or we can stay here. I don’t really care what we are doing as long as you’re close.”

“This doesn’t seem odd to you?” I asked.

“This what?”

“You and I. Whatever the heck it is, we are doing.”

He shrugged. “I don’t tend to question things that feel right. It’s served me well for the past twenty-nine years. It helped me land joining the Lost Mavericks and is a big reason why I climbed the ranks to prez at such a young age.”

“It just felt right?”

He nodded. “Yup. The club felt like the right fit, so I joined. I went from prospect to prez in ten years. Wanna know why?”

I tipped my head to the side and smiled. “Because it felt right?”

A sly smile spread across his lips. “Damn straight, babe. If something feels right, I don’t let it go. It becomes mine. Forever.”

There was so much more to what Hail was saying.

So much more that should scare me and make me want to run for the hills. But I wasn’t.

“Tell me what you are thinking, babe,” he asked softly.

I took a sip of my soda and really looked at Hail.

With every word he spoke, I saw more of him.

He wasn’t trying to spin some web of bullshit.

Sure, he couldn’t tell me what it was that drew me to him, but I felt it, too. Obviously, in the five years I had lived upstairs, I could have sat down with a different guy every night, but I never did.

Hail was different.

“I barely know anything about you, but something is gluing my butt to this chair so I can find out more.”

He drained the last of his beer and smirked. “Same, babe. Fucking same. Been watching you for two months, hoping whatever it is about you that keeps me coming back goes away. Trying to figure out what it is that you’re doing, I can’t live without.”

“I’m not doing anything,” I insisted.

“I know,” he grunted. “Ever since I joined the Lost Mavericks, I’ve been knee-deep in pussy. Women throwing themselves at me because of the cut on my back, willing to do anything to spend a little time with me.”

“Knee-deep in pussy, huh?” I giggled.

“Babe,” he drawled in an amused tone. “Is that the only thing you heard?”

I heard him. I knew what he was saying. He had his pick of women, and he was sitting here with me. “I heard you. I should be lucky the hot biker is willingly spending his time with me.”

“You think I’m hot?”

I rolled my eyes. “Is that the only thing you heard?” I mimicked.

A sexy smile spread across his lips. “Heard you loud and clear, but you’re not the lucky one, I am. I know I’m going to sound like a douche when I say this next thing, but it’s the damn truth.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

“In twenty-nine years, I have never had to chase anything.”

“Just had to crook your finger, and whatever you wanted came running?” I surmised.

“Something like that.”

“Then why didn’t you talk to me two months ago?” Hail took what he wanted whenever he wanted, and no one ever argued with him about it. Yet he waited two months to even talk to me. Why?

“You’re different from anyone I’ve ever laid eyes on. You have this air about you. You’re fine on your own and don’t need anyone to mess that up.”

“You got that from me just walking from the front door to the stairs?” He wasn’t wrong, though. I had been through a lot over the past few years, and I was finally at a place in my life where I was fixing my problems and could see the light at the end of the tunnel, even if that light was two years away. “I think I need to work on my poker face.”

“Nah, it helps keep the losers away. You did say you’ve never had any problem walking through this bar every night.”

“Until last night,” I laughed. “Does that make Jim the loser, and you saved me?”

“Thank god you came to that conclusion and not the one where I’m the loser.”

“The air you give off is anything but loser, Hail.”

His gaze held mine, and the air around us charged. “I’m an idiot for waiting two months to talk to you, Mary Jay.”

“Idiot is the last thing I would ever call you, Hail.”

“What would you call me?”

Mine.

I blinked slowly and stopped the word from shooting out of my mouth. “Nice.”

He tipped his head to the side. “Nice. I don’t think I have ever had someone call me that before.”

“I’ve never had nice before.” I shrugged. I caught a glimpse of the clock over the bar and frowned. “And I really won’t when I get up to my apartment. Tommy is going to be mad that his dinner is late.” I slipped off my stool and bumped into Hail. His arm slipped around my waist, and my hand pressed against his chest.

“I finally got you, and I don’t want to let you go, Mary Jay. Stay for one more drink,” he pleaded.

It was tempting. “Not tonight.”

“Then, at least let me walk you to your door,” he reasoned.

“You sure you can handle the twenty feet to the stairs?”

He slipped off his stool, and I stepped back. His arm stayed around my waist, and he held me against him. “I got you, babe.” He threaded his fingers through mine and led me through the crowd to the stairs in the back.

He didn’t stop there, though.

He climbed the steps with me trailing behind him, my hand in his, and we stopped on the landing in front of my door.

“Please tell me you at least have a deadbolt on your door.”

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the door handle and then the deadbolt. “I also have a chain on the other side I use when I’m home.”

“Thank god for that, babe. One of the reasons I stuck around until closing time was to make sure no drunk idiot decided to see what was at the top of the stairs.”

“I have a question. I asked it before, but you didn’t really answer it.”

He grabbed my hand again and stroked my palm with his thumb. “Hit me with it, babe.”

“Why did you wait so long? Why not talk to me sooner?” I asked. Hail had told me he was the type of man who knew what he wanted, and he wasn’t afraid to go after it. Not chase it, per se, but take it.

“I’m not good enough for you, babe. I know you deserve a hell of a lot more than I can give you, but I’m a selfish bastard. I tried to let you be, but I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“I live above a bar with my cat and work in a warehouse, Hail. I’m not some princess locked away in her castle.” I had never thought I was better than anyone in my life.

“I’m a biker.”

“Okay,” I laughed.

He tugged me close until the toes of my boots bumped his, and I splayed my hands on his chest to keep from tumbling over. “All I have to offer is a place on my bike and half of my bed, babe. My job is being the prez of the Lost Mavericks, and every day looks different.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

He reached up and trailed his fingers down my cheek. “You deserve a whole hell of a lot more than that.”

“Don’t you think I should be the one to decide that?”

“For two months, I did.” His eyes dropped to my lips. “But that all changed yesterday.”

“So what about today?” I whispered.

“Today, I’m a selfish bastard.”

My heart raced, and the electricity in the air hung heavily.

Time stopped, and there was only Hail and me.

Less than an hour I had spent with this man, and yet it felt like I had known him my whole life.

“I’ve been waiting two months for this moment, babe,” he whispered. “Tried to let you go every day, but every night, I was back wanting just a glimpse of you.” He inched close, and I took a deep breath, trying to calm the butterflies floating around my stomach. “I can’t wait any longer.”

Our lips met in a searing, electrifying kiss.

His arms pulled me tight against him, and his hands traveled over my body.

I held onto him as if he was the only thing grounding me to the earth.

I didn't want to let him go.

His lips moved over mine, and he pressed me against the door. My heart raced, and it felt like time stood still.

I couldn't wrap my head around how this had happened or how I got so lucky, but I wasn't going to question it too much.

"Hail," I gasped when we finally came up for air.

"I can't resist you any longer, Mary Jay."

"Okay," I whispered.

He chuckled low and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "Go inside and lock your door."

"Huh? I kind of like it out here." That kiss was just a taste, and I wanted more. A whole lot more. We had just been kissing, and now I was just supposed to go inside. Without him?

"I waited two months for this; I can wait a little bit longer until I truly make you mine."

My eyes widened, and a gasp escaped my lips.

"I wasn't joking last night when I said I was going to call you mine, Mary Jay." He reached down and twisted open the door.

I stumbled backward and looked up at him, dazed.

"I'll see you tonight, Mary Jay." He reached for the door and shut it in my face. I listened to his footsteps fade down the

steps and laid my hand against the door.

Well, that was not at all how I expected my night to go, but I didn't know what I was going to do if they all didn't end that way from now on.

Hail had kissed me.

Kissed. Me.

I wanted more. So much more.

CHAPTER 5

Hail

“This is new, but not.”

“Go back in the bar, Tiger,” I drawled.

“I don’t think I have ever seen you this hot and bothered over a woman before,” he pondered out loud. “She got a golden snatch or something? Like Harry Potter?” He tipped his head to the side. “Or was that a golden snitch?”

“You’re an idiot, Tiger.”

He plopped down on the bench outside the bar and kicked his feet out in front of him. “You’re right, but I do tend to keep things interesting around here.”

“Can’t argue with that.” I looked up and down the street. “But you can go keep things interesting inside. Not looking for a wingman.”

“What is it about this chick?” Tiger asked. “I get that she is hot, but so are a lot of other chicks.”

I pulled out a cigarette and stuck it in the corner of my mouth. Tiger tossed me his lighter, and I lit the end of the cigarette.

“She’s different, Tiger. I can’t tell you exactly what it is, but there is just something about her that I can’t let go.”

Tiger shrugged. “Can’t say I understand what it is you’re saying, but I guess I get it. If you’re gonna take an ol’ lady, then she should be different than all of the other pussy running around.”

I tossed the lighter back to him and shook my head.
“That’s your one free pass of calling her pussy, Tiger.”

He held up his hands. “Sorry, boss. Gonna have to give me a second to get used to you having an ol’ lady.”

She wasn’t mine yet, but it was only a matter of time before she was.

I knew that Mary Jay felt the same thing I did.

It was a feeling you couldn’t put into words and could only understand when you found it.

Mary Jay was it for me.

“This mean you’re going to live above the bar?” Tiger asked. “You think you’ll get free drinks?”

“Go inside, Tiger,” I laughed. “You can put your drinks on my tab.”

“Fuck yeah,” Tiger cheered. “If you’re going to be this generous because you’ve got an ol’ lady now, then I am all in favor.”

“Get out of here,” I chuckled.

Tiger jumped up and strutted through the front door of the bar with a holler, “Drinks are on Hail!”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered.

I pulled out my phone and sent off a quick text to Jersey, who was inside, to put a kibosh on Tiger spending all of my money.

“Hey.”

My head snapped up, and Mary Jay stood in front of me.

“Damn, babe, I didn’t even hear you walk up.”

She chuckled and nodded to my phone. “You seemed pretty into your phone.”

I hit send on my message and shoved my phone in my pocket. I took one last drag of my cigarette and tossed it on the ground. I snuffed it with my boot and reached for Mary Jay.

“We’re not going to be awkward with each other after last night?” she giggled. “I was fully prepared to say *um* fifteen times and struggle to find anything to say.”

“Nah, I was hoping we could just skip right over that and pick up where we left off last night,” I suggested. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close. I pressed a kiss to her lips, and she melted into me.

I had been slightly worried Mary Jay would spend our time apart talking herself out of whatever it was we were doing, but she obviously hadn’t.

“I have a long list of questions I need to ask you,” she whispered.

Or maybe she had talked herself out of this. “A long list, huh?”

She tipped her head back, and her eyes connected with mine. “Uh, yeah. Not like I need to ask them all tonight, but maybe we can hammer through a few.”

That didn’t sound too bad. “You wanna grab a drink?” If we could work through some of her questions, then we could

really pick up where we left off last night.

She shook her head. “Uh, no. I was thinking you could come upstairs. I know it sounds crazy, but Tommy about mauled me last night. I don’t think he would appreciate having to wait two nights in a row to be fed.”

“Is this like meeting your family?” I laughed.

“It kind of is because Tommy is all I have.”

I threaded her fingers through mine and tugged her toward the door. “Then let’s go, babe.”

We weaved our way through the bar, and Tiger let out a shout when we passed by the club bellied up to the bar, taking advantage of my bar tab.

“They seem like they are having fun,” Mary Jay called.

We made it to the stairs, and I glanced back at her. “That’s because they are drinking on my dime tonight.”

She looked back at the club. “Uh, they look like they can drink a good bit. That’s eight or nine guys, Hail.”

“Jersey will make sure they don’t get too crazy. That was who I was texting when you walked up.”

“Is he like your right-hand man or something?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s my VP.”

“Are they your only family?”

Standing at the bottom of the stairs was not where I thought all of the questions were going to happen, but maybe it was best to just get them out of the way.

“Uh, for the most part. My mom is still alive, and I have a bratty little sister who lives in Colorado.” I didn’t have the typical shitty upbringing like a lot of the guys in the club. Most guys join an MC because they’re looking for a place to belong, a family.

I had a family who loved me.

The club was just another place I felt at home.

“Where does your mom live?” Mary Jay asked.

“On the edge of town. She works at the library.”

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes bugged out. “Your mom is Sue Scott?”

“Yeah, babe. You meet her before?” Mom had been working at the Crest Falls library for the past twenty-seven years. I was pretty much raised among the shelves and shelves of books.

Too bad the love of reading never stuck with me.

I much preferred bringing my Hot Wheels tracks to the library and building huge, winding tracks that intersected and climbed the shelves of books.

She looked up at me and squinted. “I love your mom. When I was younger, she always helped me find books, and when I returned them, she talked and talked with me about them. She was a bright light in my dismal childhood.”

“She is pretty amazing, and I’m not really surprised you like her. The whole town does.” I pulled her up the stairs and

stood to the side as she unlocked the door. “Do I get more points since my mom is Sue?” I asked.

She pushed open her door and smiled wide. “I really think you should have started with, Hi, I’m Hail, and my mom is Sue Scott. Would have gotten through a bunch of hurdles.”

“Never would have thought my mom would help me to land a girl, but if it works, then I’m good with it.” I walked through the door and straight into her kitchen.

“Where did you go to school?” Mary Jay asked. “I don’t remember you.”

“You wouldn’t. I went to school in Branford. They had a better football team, and back then, that was all I cared about.”

“That would explain it,” she laughed. Before Mary Jay could even shut the door, a loud meow sounded from somewhere in the apartment.

“Tommy,” she sang. “I told you I wouldn’t be late tonight.”

I walked further into the kitchen and leaned against the counter. A plump yellow tabby cat slinked out from under the bed and headed straight for Mary Jay. “Please tell me you call yourself Mama.”

“What?” she laughed.

Tommy wove in between her legs and let out a few meows before Mary Jay picked him up and buried her face in his fur.

“Say it.”

“Say what?”

“Something along the lines of Mama is home.”

She moved over to the window over the sink and grabbed a can of cat food off the counter. “You have a mommy fetish?” she asked. She cracked open the can and walked over to a little food dish along the wall by the couch.

“I bet that wasn’t initially on your list of questions to ask me,” I chuckled.

“You would be correct.” She dumped the food into the bowl, and Tommy camped out in front of the bowl and dug in. “And yes, I do sometimes call myself Mama, but now I’m not going to do it in front of you.”

I raised my hands. “Fair enough, but for the record, I will not laugh at you.” If anything, I would toss her over my shoulder and ravish the hell out of her. “Kiss you, but not laugh at you.”

“I’ll file that information away for another day.” She watched Tommy eat and didn’t look up at me. “Here is the awkwardness I was expecting. Let’s watch Tommy eat.”

“There is nothing awkward between the two of us, babe.” I pushed off the counter and slowly stalked toward her. “Though I do think there are other things we could be doing besides watching Tommy eat.”

She kept her eyes on the cat, and I could feel her anxiety rise.

“Baby,” I cooed. “Look at me.”

“This is crazy, Hail. I can’t even tell you the last time I had anyone in my apartment, and now you’re here.” She looked

up, and her eyes were like huge saucers. “And the crazy thing is, if you were to leave right now, I don’t know what I would do. You’ve been in my life for an incredibly short time, but somehow, I don’t want you to leave, ever.”

Her words propelled me faster across the room, and I gathered her in my arms. I buried my face in her hair and inhaled. “Thank fuck, because I feel the same way, babe. I can’t tell you how much shit I have been getting from the guys for staring at the damn door downstairs, just waiting for you to walk in.”

“Stalker,” she jested.

“Call me whatever you want, babe, as long as you’re in my arms.” My heart raced, and I couldn’t go one more second without her lips on mine.

Our lips met, and just like the first time, it felt like coming home.

She leaned back slightly, her breathing uneven, and said, “This doesn’t make sense, but I’m not going to fight it, Hail. I’ve never really had anything good in my life, so I’m going to hold onto this for as long as I can.”

I looked into her eyes, which were filled with desire and vulnerability now. “I’ll do anything I can to make sure you only have good, Mary Jay. I don’t know what you’ve been through; I hope you tell me, but no matter what it is, know I will die before anything bad ever touches you again.”

“Hail,” she whispered. “I don’t know where you came from or what I did to deserve you, but I fully accept it.”

Her lips crashed into mine, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. I lifted her into my arms, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. I carried her to the bed and tossed her on top of the fluffy comforter. “Take your boots off, babe.”

She hastily tore through the laces and kicked her boots off the bed while I did the same. She pulled her baggy sweatshirt over her head and tossed it on the floor.

I knew I should take things slow with Mary Jay, but I wasn't thinking with my head right now, at least not with the head on my shoulders.

She clambered onto her knees and peeled my cut off my shoulders. I grabbed it from her and tossed it on the couch. “That doesn't go on the floor, babe.”

“Noted,” she laughed. “Respect the vest.”

I cradled her face in my hands and leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. “Three things I'll always respect. My club, my cut, and you, my ol' lady.” Her brow wrinkled, and I could see the wheels in her head turning.

“I am...” She cleared her throat. “Is that you...” She moved out of my reach and sat back on her butt.

“The second my lips touched yours last night, Mary Jay, you were mine. Mine means you're my ol' lady.”

“I suppose you did tell me you were going to call me mine,” she whispered.

“You good with that, babe?” She was mine, but I didn't want to scare her. Life moved fast when you were in an MC,

and that also was true for ol' ladies.

“That’s just like being your girlfriend, right?”

“Uh, sort of, but way more.” A woman didn’t become a member’s ol’ lady on a whim. It was pretty much like being married in biker. “I’m your ol’ man, and you’re my ol’ lady.” That didn’t really explain it much more, but it was just something Mary Jay was going to have to experience.

She launched herself into my arms, and I took a step back before she knocked us both to the floor. “Yes,” she laughed. “I might need to talk to some of your friends’ ol’ ladies to make sure I don’t mess up, but yes.”

“You’re the first in the Lost Mavericks, babe. You’re going to be the one setting the precedent.”

She cringed. “Uh, I’m gonna set the bar pretty low, Hail. I’m a hermit cat lady who only ever really leaves the house to go to work and the grocery store.”

I pressed a kiss to her lips. “The cat lady and going to work part is good. We’ll work on not being a hermit when you’re not working.”

“Already trying to change me,” she giggled.

Oh, fuck. I didn’t want to change a damn thing about her. “Babe, I don’t–.”

She launched herself at me again, and this time, she pulled me back onto the bed. “I’m joking, Hail. I think getting out of the house more isn’t a bad thing. Do you think I’ll be able to ride on your motorcycle with you?” Her eyes lit up. “We could get a carrier for Tommy, and he could go for rides with us.”

“Whoa, whoa,” I laughed. “I was good up until you wanted to bring the cat with us. You’re the only one who rides on the back of my bike,” I promised.

She laughed happily. “Fine, fine.”

I brushed her hair from her face. “You got any more questions before I make you mine?” I asked.

“Uh, no. But I would like to reserve the right to ask any if they pop into my head.”

“Mary Jay,” I growled. “I’m hoping I’m about to rock your world and keep you speechless.”

“Oh,” she gasped. Her eyes sparkled, and she looped her arms around my waist. She grabbed the hem of my shirt and tugged it over my head. “Oh,” she whispered. Her eyes raked over my chest, and she trailed her fingers up and down my back.

“Like what you see?”

“Love it,” she purred.

I leaned back and popped the button of my jeans. “Clothes off, now,” I ordered.

She didn’t hesitate. Not even a second. She clambered out of her clothes and sailed them through the air. “Done,” she chirped.

I tugged off my pants and pushed them off the bed. I moved back over her and caged her in with my arms. Her hands moved all over my body, trying to feel everywhere at once.

I trailed kisses and caresses over her breasts while my fingers parted the lips of her sweet pussy.

“Hail,” she whispered. “I’ve never...”

I froze, and my eyes connected with hers. She was a virgin?

“No! I have, I totally have done this before,” she babbled. “I meant I’ve never felt this way. It’s like my body is on fire, and you’re the only thing that can squelch the flames.”

“Thank god,” I chuckled. “If you were a virgin, we were going to have to go about this in a completely different way.” The way of me running for the hills because I was already being selfish by claiming Mary Jay. It would be a whole new level if she hadn’t even been with anyone before.

“My V-card was cashed in back in high school, Hail.”

I was glad she wasn’t a virgin, but I did not need to know any details. My fingers stroked her clit, and her eyes rolled back in her head. “No more talk about being a virgin,” I growled. “It’s just you and me right now.”

“Okay,” she sighed. Her legs fell open, giving me complete access to her body.

My fingers worked her clit, bringing her up and then slowing down when she got close to the edge.

She raised her arms over her head and thrust her hips up, begging for more. “Please, Hail, it feels so good.”

“Come for me, baby,” I urged. My fingers sped up, and her body hummed beneath me. I was the one doing this to her. I

was giving her pleasure while she was giving it right back to me. Just watching her was enough to send me right over the edge.

Her small, light moans were the exact thing that could drive a sane man crazy.

My lips trailed kisses along her jaw when my name ripped from her lips, and she finally fell over the edge.

“Hail! Oh my god!” Her hips bucked up, and a tremor rolled through her body.

“Yes, baby,” I praised her. “Give it to me.” My hand left her soaking wet pussy, and I positioned my dick at the entrance of her pussy. “Are you ready for me?” I didn’t want her to come all the way down. In a few minutes, I was going to come, and she was going to come along for the ride.

I pushed inside her and watched my dick fill her.

“Hail,” she mewled. “You’re so big.”

I braced my arms on the bed and slowly pumped in and out. “So fucking wet,” I growled. Her pussy was like a vise wrapped around my dick. Each move I made drove me closer to coming and filling Mary Jay. “Get there, baby. Your pussy is so good, I’m not going to last long.” I was like a fifteen-year-old having sex for the first time. Six strokes, and I was ready to blow my top.

“Oh god,” she groaned. “Please, Hail. You feel so good.”

I pick up my pace, slamming into her and getting closer to exploding.

“Harder,” she pleaded. “I’m so close.”

“You’re mine,” I growl. “You’re MINE!” Her pussy clenched tightly around me, and I empty my load inside her.

“Oh my,” she gasped. “Oh.” Tremors rock her body, and she tossed her head back as her second orgasm rushed over her.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me on top of her. I rolled to the side and gathered her in my arms.

“That was...” she trailed off.

“Amazing?” I offered. “Fucking phenomenal?”

“Either of those fit,” she sighed. She laid her head on my chest, and I grabbed the blanket to toss over us.

“You lock the door?”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed and burrowed into me. “Locked up tight.”

“Good. I don’t plan to get out of this bed at least until noon,” I mumbled sleepily. “You got plans tomorrow; cancel ‘em.”

“Just have to work at four, though one of us is going to have to get up to turn off the lights.”

Fuck. “We need to get you that clapper thing.” I tossed off the blanket, stalked over to the light switch, and plunged the apartment into darkness.

“Much better,” she called. “Now come back to bed.”

Mary Jay had burrowed under the blanket and tossed it to the side when I got close.

I slid into bed and pulled her to me. Her back was pressed against my front, and she sighed heavily. “Good night, Mary Jay.”

“What’s your real name?”

“I thought we were going to sleep,” I grumbled.

“That’s my last question.”

“My name is Hail, babe, but my mom calls me Kevin.”

She looked over her shoulder at me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, babe.”

“I like Hail better,” she confessed.

“Me, too, babe.”

She settled back into me and sighed. “What happens when we wake up, Hail?”

“Same as always, except I’ll be there.”

The only noise was our slow, steady breathing.

“I like that,” she whispered.

I like it, too.

A whole hell of a lot.

CHAPTER 6

Mary Jay

Running a few minutes late. Need to finish up some paperwork. I texted Hail. I turned off my car and looked around.

I'll be waiting.

It had been two glorious weeks since I had literally been pushed into Hail's world, and it had been fantastic.

But now I was thrust back into reality and back to taking care of my dad's debts he had left behind.

Which also meant I had just lied to Hail.

I wasn't stuck at work doing paperwork.

I was parked just one street away from my apartment, waiting for Trick.

A knock sounded on my window, and I jumped.

"Jesus, Trick," I grumbled. I rolled down my window and glared at him. "Next time, give some warning before you scare the hell out of me."

"You got it?" he asked bluntly.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the envelope from my passenger seat. "Same as always."

He grabbed the envelope and counted the bills. "Always good doing business with you, Mary Jay. Hobbs appreciates your eagerness to handle this matter."

The only thing I was eager about was getting the Broken Jokers MC out of my life. “Same time next month?” I asked.

He tapped the roof of my car. “Like clockwork, sugar. Enjoy your night.”

Trick headed down the street, and I took a deep breath.

Reality sucked.

Being wrapped up in Hail’s arms was way better than paying my dad’s debts in the middle of the night.

I cranked up my car, and my headlights shone directly on a man standing in front of me.

Hail.

Oh, shit.

He didn’t look so happy. Not like Hail was constantly smiling, but I could tell that he was wondering what in the hell I was doing.

He walked over to the passenger door and slipped into my car.

We sat in silence while I tried to figure out what to say.

“You know I’m the president of the Lost Mavericks MC, Mary Jay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Do you also know that guy you were talking to is part of the Broken Jokers MC? An MC I fucking hate with every fiber of my being?”

I did, in fact, not know that. “Uh, no.”

“You wanna know why I hate them?”

“Sure.”

“Because they don’t care about anyone but themselves. They take and take without caring about who they are taking from.”

I knew that firsthand. My dad had racked up quite the gambling debt with the Broken Jokers, and after he had died, they still expected to be paid. “Uh, I would believe that.”

“I’m trying really hard not to jump to conclusions, Mary Jay, and trying to think of any legit reason why you would be meeting with one of their members in the middle of the night when you texted me five minutes ago that you were stuck at work.”

Yeah, when he said it out loud, this really did not look good.

“Can I explain?”

He finally looked at me. “I think that would be a really good place to start.”

I could tell his anger was boiling, but he was keeping a lid on it.

“I wasn’t doing anything illegal.” At least, I didn’t think it was illegal.

“What did you give him?” Hail asked.

“Money.”

“Money for what?” he growled.

I held up my hands. “I really think that we should start from the beginning, okay?”

“You have five minutes, Mary Jay.”

I took a deep breath and started way at the beginning. “My mom left right after I was born.”

“I know that.”

I needed to speed this up. “My mom wasn’t a good person, so she left; the problem is she didn’t leave me with the best dad in the world. Sure, he loved me, but he never made the best choices when he was alive. I can still remember being two, and I used to suck on the dice he left lying around. Looking back now, how in the hell did I not choke on them?” I waved my hand. “That is beside the point.”

“I know he’s your dad, Mary Jay, but he sounds like a fuckstick if you have memories sucking on dice.”

I wasn’t going to argue about that. “Gambling. My dad was a gambler. It didn’t matter what it was. If he could bet on it, he would. I never really understood how bad it was until I got older, and he would get the shit kicked out of him every couple of months because he couldn’t make good on his debts. They would beat him up, give him another month or two, he would rack up more debt, and then would be back to kick his ass.”

“The Broken Jokers?”

“Well, yes, but there were others, too, but the Broken Jokers were the ones he could never seem to get ahead with. And then he died.”

“But his debts didn’t die with him,” Hail guessed.

“Yup,” I sighed. “It was not even two weeks after his funeral when Trick showed up at my door and informed me that my monthly payment was coming due.”

Hail slammed his fist against the dash. “Fucking assholes!”

“I’m taking care of it, Hail. As long as I pay them, everything is fine.”

“You shouldn’t have to be paying your dad’s debts, Mary Jay. They should have just forgiven them and left you alone.”

“It’s fine, Hail.”

He shook his head. “It’s not fine, Mary Jay.”

“Well, I don’t have any other choice, Hail, so this is how it is.”

He turned in his seat, and I could still feel the anger rolling off him, except it wasn’t directed at me anymore. “I’ll handle it.”

“What? What do you mean you’ll handle it? You just told me you hated the Broken Jokers, so I have to assume that the feeling is mutual.”

“It is,” he growled.

This didn’t make sense. “Then don’t go talk to them, Hail. What if they get mad you’re talking to them about my problem and then make me have to pay it all right now?”

“Your problems are my problems now, Mary Jay. You should have told me about this.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, sure, sure. I’ll tell the guy I just started seeing that I also owe over seventy-five thousand to the Broken Jokers. A conversation you would totally have over cereal and coffee in the morning.”

“I’ll handle it,” he growled. “Don’t even worry about it. You don’t owe another cent to the Broken Jokers.”

“Hail, you’re crazy. I don’t know what you think you are going to do, but this is not just going to go away.”

He cradled my face in his hands, and I finally saw the man I had been falling in love with for the past two weeks.

“I got you, Mary Jay. I’m not lying when I say your problems are mine.”

“I don’t want you doing anything that will get you in trouble.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to get into trouble.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

He brushed his thumb across my cheek. “I’m just going to talk to Hobbs and show him the errors in his ways.”

“Hail,” I whispered.

“Do you trust me, Mary Jay?” he asked.

I did. More than anyone. I was still trying to figure out how that could be since I was still getting to know him, but I did trust him. With my life. “Yes.”

“Then let me handle this.”

“You shouldn’t have to deal with this. It’s my dad.”

“And your dad should have made sure you didn’t have to deal with it. I’m going to rectify that.”

I slumped in my seat and broke down crying.

Hail gathered me in his arms and pulled me over the center console. “Shh, babe. Everything is going to be okay. This must be weighing on you so much. I don’t know how you’ve handled it for this long.”

I didn’t know how I did either, but I had. And now I had Hail to help. “I’m sorry.” I buried my head in his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“It’s going to be okay, Mary Jay. You’re protected by the Lost Mavericks now.”

CHAPTER 7

Hail

“Of all of the clubs her dad could have fucked with, it had to be the Broken Jokers?” Crank gazed at the Broken Jokers clubhouse and curled his lip. “Fucking degenerates.”

I wasn't going to argue with him on that.

Hobbs and the Broken Jokers were a level below scum in the biker community.

This morning, after waking up next to Mary Jay, I knew I had to get shit in motion. The longer the Broken Jokers thought they could take Mary Jay's money, the more power they had.

Not any longer.

She, of course, tried to plead with me just to leave it alone, but I couldn't.

It was one thing for the Broken Jokers to expect to be paid by Mary Jay's dad since he was the one who had racked up all the debt, but it was something really fucking nasty to stick that debt on Mary Jay.

“We could just blow this hell hole up and call it a day,” Hollow suggested.

Forty raised his hand. “I am all for that.”

“Second that,” Showtime added.

“We're not blowing up their clubhouse,” I grunted. This was not the first time blowing up the Broken Jokers clubhouse

had been suggested.

It was actually the seventh time.

“We’re not sinking to their level,” Jersey agreed.

“Can I at least punch Trick once?” Yellow pleaded and pointed to his nose. “Just one good right hook to straighten out that nose of his.”

I shook my head and pushed my sunglasses on top of my head. “No. I promised Mary Jay I wouldn’t do anything illegal.”

“Is that what happens when you get an ol’ lady?” Line asked. “You make stupid promises and can’t have fun anymore?”

“Yeah, but you also get laid on the regular without having to worry about whose bed you are going to land in,” Forty pointed out. “I think that outweighs not being able to have illegal fun.”

Trick walked out the front door and motioned to us. “You guys gonna come in or just sit around talking like a bunch of chicks?”

“Just one punch, Hail. That’s all I want, and I can die a happy man,” Yellow pleaded again.

“No,” I growled. “Let’s just get this shit over with. We offer to take over the debt, and we head back to the clubhouse.”

“And if they say no?” Showtime asked.

I glanced at Yellow. “Then Yellow gets his wish.”

Yellow rubbed his hands together. “I hope they tell us to kick rocks so then I can smash in Trick’s face with one.”

We filed into the Broken Jokers clubhouse and gathered in their common room.

“This place is gross,” Forty muttered next to me. “How the hell do they live like this?”

“With syphilis. That is how they live like this.” Line tried to move a cup that was on the table, but it didn’t budge. “No one touches anything,” he whispered loudly.

“What the hell are you blabbering about?” Trick called.

I glanced at Line and shook my head. We did not need to start this meeting on the wrong foot.

“Uh, nothing. I was just commenting on your decorating.” He flicked the cup. “It’s really something.”

“Who the fuck cares about decorating?” Trick growled.

“I guess the real question is, who cares about living in their own filth, right?” Yellow called.

“You don’t like the clubhouse?”

All eyes turned to Hobbs. He had walked out from god knows where and was leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. “You didn’t seem to mind sleeping here when the Broken Jokers were your family, Bronc.”

“It’s Yellow now,” Yellow growled. “And you guys were never my family. I was a prospect for three weeks.”

“And then you punked out and ran to the Lost Mavericks with your tail tucked between your legs,” Trick laughed.

“Fucking pussy.”

Yellow lunged toward Trick, but Showtime and Line grabbed him.

I shouldn't have brought Yellow along. I knew he wouldn't have been able to control himself if Trick stared in on him.

“Knock it off,” Hobbs called.

I sliced a glare at Yellow, and he held up his hands.

Hobbs pushed off the wall and moved to stand in front of me. “What can I do for you, Hail? If I remember correctly, you hate me, and I hate you.”

“That hasn't changed, Hobbs,” I grunted.

“Then why the sudden visit to my clubhouse?” Hobbs asked.

I looked around and tipped my head to the side. “You lose some members?” I asked. Besides Trick, there were only two other guys hanging around.

Hobbs shrugged. “It's hard to find loyal people these days. Trick is my righthand man, while Dink and Rex round everything out.”

Only four members in the Broken Jokers total. Pathetic.

I had at least four or five people a week asking how to get into the Lost Mavericks, and I turned them all away. “I wouldn't know about that. Loyalty is something the Lost Mavericks don't lack.”

“So you just came here to do a head count?” Hobbs hocked a loogie onto the floor and wiped his nose with the back of his

hand.

I shook my head. “Came to talk to you about a debt.”

Hobbs tipped his head. “Really?”

“Mary Jay Box. Her dad racked up some gambling debts with you, and now you’re trying to soak her for it after he died.”

“What the hell does that have to do with you?” Trick demanded.

I glared at him and folded my arms over my chest. “She belongs to me now, so her debt is now my debt.”

“Nope, nope,” Trick called. “That is not how this works.”

“Shut up,” Hobbs called. “When the fuck did you hook up with the Box girl? Trick collected from her last night, and she never mentioned you.”

“Trick should really pay better attention to what is going on around him,” I suggested. “I found out about you taking advantage of her last night when I saw her with Trick.”

“She’s not getting out of what she owes us,” Hobbs insisted. “Her dad knew if anything happened to him, we would go after her.”

That’s just another reason to dislike Mary Jay’s dad. I know she loved him, but man, did he fuck her over.

“Mary Jay is mine, so now her debt is mine. You will not talk or see her ever again.”

Hobbs laughed loudly. “You really think you are going to come into my clubhouse and just tell me what to do?”

“When you fuck with something that is mine, then yes, that is exactly what I am going to do. Leave Mary Jay alone, and I will pay her debt.”

Hobbs snickered. “She must be a good piece of ass if you’re willing to pay a hundred grand for her.”

He was trying to rile me. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me upset. “She only owes you seventy-five grand.” I nodded to Jersey, who stepped forward.

“We have twenty grand today, and we’ll have the other fifty-five to you by the end of the month.” Jersey pulled out an envelope and held it up. “You get the last payment, and you never talk to Mary Jay again.”

Hobbs cleared his throat and squinted at the envelope. “There is interest.”

I shook my head. “No, there fucking isn’t. I shouldn’t even be paying you this, but I know you’re like a fucking roach that won’t go away. We pay you; you slither back into your hole.”

“And what happens if I say no?” he asked.

“We blow up your clubhouse.” I pointed at Yellow. “He’s hoping you say no.”

Yellow winked at Hobbs.

Hobbs growled like a dog but held out his hand. “The fifty-five better be here by noon on the thirty-first, or I’ll be the one blowing up your clubhouse.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

Jersey handed Hobbs the money, and he ripped it open. “Get the fuck out!” he shouted. “And don’t be a minute late with your last payment.”

I shook my head but didn’t say anything. We weren’t going to miss the deadline to pay Hobbs. We already have the fifty-five set aside for him, but I wasn’t about to pay him all at once. He could wait.

We filed out of their hell hole of a clubhouse and headed to our bikes.

“That went well,” Jersey called.

It went the way I figured it would go.

Hobbs was a complete fuckstick, but he wasn’t dumb.

He knew if he didn’t take the deal I made, he would be dead by the end of the day.

He got his money, and Mary Jay got peace of mind.

Some would say he got the better end of the deal, but I would disagree.

Mary Jay, happy and safe, was all I needed.

CHAPTER 8

Mary Jay

He was there.

Just like always.

“So you didn’t wind up in jail, or you managed to get bailed out before I got off of work.”

Hail was sitting on the bench outside the bar with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and a beer in his hand. “I promised you I would be here when you got off work.”

He had, and he had kept that promise. “Does that mean things went well for you today?”

He reached his hand out to me, and I placed mine in his. He pulled me to him, and I straddled his lap. “Things went exactly as planned, babe. You don’t have to worry about the Broken Jokers ever again.”

“Really?” I asked.

He nodded and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I wasn’t joking when I said you were protected by the Lost Mavericks.”

I laid my hands on his shoulders and looked into the eyes of the man I loved. “How did I get so lucky?” I whispered.

“I’m the lucky one, Mary Jay. You can’t tell me any different. Now, tell me you missed me, and then I’m going to introduce you to your new family.”

I tipped my head to the side. “I missed you, and I don’t know if I’m ready to meet your friends.”

“Family,” he corrected. “And they’re your family now, too.”

I had met a couple of the guys in the past weeks, but not all of them. Now, I was going to meet every last one of them all at the same time.

“So not only do I get you, but I also get a whole new family?”

Hail smiled and cupped my face with his hand. “Yeah, babe. You have a new family that will always protect you.”

“Lucky,” I whispered.

He shook his head. “Protected.” He pressed a kiss to my lips. “Forever.”

* * *

I hope you enjoyed Mary Jay and Hail’s story. Stay tuned for more stories about the Lost Mavericks...

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestselling author Winter Travers is a devoted wife, mother, and aunt-turned-author born and raised in Wisconsin. After a brief stint in South Carolina, following her heart to chase the man who is now her hubby, they retreated up North to the changing seasons and to the place they now call home.

Winter spends her days writing happily ever afters and her nights being a karate mom hauling her son to practices and tournaments. She also has an addiction to anything MC-related, puppies and baking.

Read More from Winter Travers

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STEPHANIE MORRIS

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DEDICATION

To the ARC reviewers who said that Trigger and Harley must
have a story.

You were right...

CAPTIVATED

*A bond forged in the fires of danger becomes an
unbreakable chain...*

There's no escaping...

Harley has had a rough life but tries to hide the shadows in her eyes with a smile. Her only goal in life is to build herself back up. She is determined to avoid any distractions that get in her way. Regrettably, Trigger didn't receive the memo...

Trigger never thought he'd live long enough to think twice about anything he's done as the enforcer for the Ravens MC. But that changes the instant he crosses paths with Harley. He's seen the pain reflected in her gaze because, usually, he's the one inflicting it. But for once, he wants to be the one to soothe the hurt. So he doesn't hesitate to offer his protection when danger follows her into the haven she's created for herself.

The only thing is, he doesn't plan to walk away even once she is safe...

PROLOGUE

“Fuck, Harley. I’m sorry I couldn’t get back to you sooner.”

She stirred at the anguished voice that spoke, pain racing through her. When she moaned, a hand covered her mouth. Panic filled her, and she tried to move away, only to cry out in pain.

“Shh...Harley. You have to be quiet. Let me help you before Ice comes back and finishes the job.”

She stiffened at the name of the man who tormented her for longer than she could remember being invoked.

“Do you understand?”

She gave a slight nod as she tried to open her eyes, only to find she couldn’t. Ice had hit her with his fist, evidently hard enough to swell both of her eyes shut. Instead, she tried to focus on placing the voice, but she couldn’t.

“I need to move you. Do you think you can be quiet?”

She shook her head, knowing it was impossible. While she didn’t know where he would move her or how far, there was no way she could keep from making any sound.

“Damn,” he muttered before the sounds of rustling reached her ears. “I have a bandana. It’s clean. I’m sorry that I have to do this. Open.”

The material pressed against her lips was softer than she expected, but it was still uncomfortable.

“Bite down and try your best to stay quiet.”

That was as much warning as she received before being swept into someone's arms. It took all of her strength not to scream. But the way she stiffened must have been a clue.

“Just hang on. It won't take long.”

Whoever the man was, he was a person of his word. A few minutes later, she was placed on a blanket in the back seat of a car. She was covered with another light one before the door clicked closed. But instead of hearing a car start as she expected, the person helping her climbed into the front, disengaged the parking brake, and the car began to roll.

After what seemed like an eternity, the car stopped, and then the ignition turned over. She didn't miss her rescuers' exhalation of relief before the car picked up speed.

“Let me get some distance between us and the compound, and then I will stop and try to make you more comfortable.”

The irony of his statement struck her. She was in so much pain; the only way that would happen was if he could give her something to make it all go away.

Flashbacks of the beating she'd been on the wrong end of began to roll back in her mind. Ice had always had a bad temper, but something had set him off in a way she'd never experienced.

He'd entered the clubhouse and yelled for her. Realizing immediately that he was in a mood, she rushed over. Ice was always mean if you made him wait. It hadn't done any good. The first punch landed before she'd come to a stop in front of him.

Even if others had been surprised, no one dared come to her rescue or get in the way. Not even when she'd fallen to the ground, and he'd kicked her.

Tears filled her eyes as she wondered how she'd sunk so low that this had become her life. How had she gotten mixed up with a man like Ice? The unfortunate thing was once she had, there'd been no escape.

She'd tried...

Even then, that beating hadn't been as bad as this one.

"Just a little bit further. Okay?"

She tried to speak to indicate that she understood, but it came out as a grunt. Tears filled her eyes, and she squeezed them shut, allowing the moisture to escape and trail down her face. As she began to fade from consciousness, she made a vow to find out who her savior was if she survived.

She needed to thank him for being brave enough, the one thing she'd never been able to do. Get away from Ice.

This person was taking a considerable risk. Everyone knew you didn't cross Ice and live to tell the tale. She prayed that both would have a different outcome than those who hadn't.

CHAPTER 1

Harley gasped as she sat upright, the horrible nightmare she'd just escaped fading to the background as she realized it was just a dream. She slammed her hand against the mattress in frustration as she tried to calm her breathing.

All the progress she'd made over the past year had been wiped out in seconds. Most of them she couldn't remember. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and looked around the room she'd called hers since the Ravens had taken her in.

She chuckled under her breath at the description that severely downplayed how she'd come to be in the company of the Ravens. Pushing herself into a standing position, she stretched before walking over to the small window and pushed the curtain aside.

She hadn't slept long. The sun was getting ready to set. Meaning she'd be on shift soon. That was the only reason she'd lie down to nap. Raven parties had a way of not ending until the sun rose. She needed to be able to stay alert until things winded down.

Walking back to the nightstand, she picked up her cell phone and confirmed that she had woken up earlier than planned. Turning off the alarm she'd set, she gathered up her outfit for the night and the items she would need to shower before exiting her room and heading toward the communal bathroom at the farthest end of the hall. It was the one least likely to be occupied.

Her bathroom streak of luck was still with her, and she hustled inside and locked the door. While she didn't need to rush, she wasn't going to hog the bathroom like some of the other sweet butts did. Being a bitch for no reason didn't appeal to her.

Not all of them were mean, but most were—especially if they saw you as competition.

After a quick shower, she brushed her teeth before changing into her standard work outfit. A graphic tank top and jeans. She gathered her stuff and opened the door only to find a hand raised, ready to knock.

“Hey, Ginger,” Harley greeted.

“Hi, Harley. You're up early,” she replied.

“Yeah, I didn't sleep well, so I thought I'd take advantage of the empty bathroom,” she admitted.

Ginger frowned. “Everything okay?”

“All good,” she confirmed. “Now go on before someone is banging on the door before you are done.”

“Thank you. See you downstairs in a few.”

Harley entered her room and tossed her dirty clothes into the laundry basket before pulling a pair of clean socks out of her drawer. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she kicked off her house shoes and pulled them on before sticking her feet into her combat boots. Once they were laced, she located a brush and ran it through her still-damp hair before pulling it into a ponytail, then twisting it upward, securing it with a clip.

A short time later, she headed downstairs and made her way through the clubhouse, greeting a few of the members and prospects she saw on the way. She stepped behind the bar, and her mind went into work mode.

She began doing an inventory of what she needed to bring from the back. The irony of how comfortable she felt in this environment was not lost on her, even after the complete shit show that had gone down about six months ago.

The Prez of the MC that Blue had grown up in had taken her. Fortunately, it hadn't taken the Ravens long to get her back, but she'd been banged up pretty well. Blue also hadn't been the only victim. Santos, one of the Raven members, had been stabbed in the chest, and Harley had received a hard knock to the back of the head, resulting in a mild concussion.

It was traumatic for everyone, but some good had come out of it. Blue had finally bit the bullet and said yes to being the old lady of Stone and Rock, the Prez and V.P. of the Raven. Yes, both of them—a little unconventional. Then again, not much was conventional in their world.

Blue married Rock three months ago, followed by a commitment ceremony to Stone. Harley hadn't even tried to hide that she'd cried her eyes out over how happy she was for her friend. She'd had a shitty life before the Ravens as well and deserved all the happiness her heart could handle.

The only part of that day that had rattled Harley was that she'd ended up catching the bouquet even though she'd done everything in her power not to. Even worse, Trigger, the biggest pain in her ass, had caught the garter without even

trying. It landed around the neck of the bottle of beer he'd held in his hands.

What she remembered most about that moment was his intense gaze as he removed the garter from his bottle before tucking it into his back pocket. She'd turned red at the hoots and hollers that rang out but refused to turn tail and hide—even though she should have.

After everything she'd gone through with Ice, she would never get involved with another man—let alone one that belonged to an MC.

Unfortunately, Trigger didn't understand that.

His face had been the first she'd been able to see after the swelling in her eyes had gone down. She would never forget it because, as dangerous as he looked, a gentleness in his eyes made her feel safe. That made him even more of a threat than Ice. She couldn't recall when she felt safe or protected with the Vipers.

When she came across Ice at the bar she'd worked at, she'd been at her lowest point. Barely had enough clothes to make it through the week without washing, lived in a two-bedroom apart with five other people, and never went anywhere outside a reasonable walking distance.

She realized now that Ice was a cold-blooded predator that had recognized it and taken full advantage of it. Never would she be that vulnerable to another man. That's why she had to stay far away from Trigger. He was a serious threat to that goal.

“What has you so deep in thought?”

Shock filled her at the sound of her friend’s voice. She spun around with wide eyes.

“Blue,” she exclaimed before embracing her friend. “Oh man, I’ve missed you. How was the trip? I wasn’t expecting you back so soon?”

Blue squeezed her tightly before pulling back. “It went well. That’s why we are back early.”

Harley nodded, unable to stop smiling. She didn’t know all the details—nor did she want to—but she knew that the Ravens had started making a few moves in the old Slayers territory. They were splitting it with the Undertakers.

Because the Slayers was the club that Blue formally belonged to, Stone and Rock strategically used her presence to ease the way.

“We just made it back not too long ago, but I wanted to stop by and see you before you got too busy. Don’t be surprised if you see me behind the bar tonight.”

“Ha!” Harley scoffed. “You will be lucky if Rock or Stone let you out of their presence long enough. It’s my understanding that the honeymoon phase lasts at least a year.”

Blue shook her head before giving her another brief squeeze. “I’ve missed you. See you back here in a bit.”

“Sounds good. I need to get a move on, or Everest will have my ass. If you all are back, there’s going to be a party tonight.”

“Yes. There’s a lot to celebrate,” Blue replied cryptically as she walked away. “See you in a bit.”

Harley grinned as she wrote down the last thing she needed to stock on her notepad before looking at Candy. “Make sure we have enough glasses while I go to the back and grab what we need.”

“On it,” Candy confirmed.

Harley’s steps were lighter as she went to the room where the extra liquor and beer were kept. It was going to be a fun night.

CHAPTER 2

Trigger rolled the cigar between his thumbs and fingers as he held it over the flame to ensure it was evenly lit before placing it between his lips and taking a good draw. It felt good to be home again. More importantly, the shit that they'd needed to clean up because of the Slayers was finally done. Not a moment too soon because that meant he could turn his attention to the woman who needed it most—whether she realized it or not.

Life hadn't been the same for him from the moment she was discovered outside the gate of the compound. The only thing she'd been able to tell him that night was her name.

Harley.

Between that and the backpack that had been left with her, Link, the Ravens Secretary had been able to figure out the rest.

He still didn't know how Harley had ended up mixed up with someone like Ice. The best he could figure was she hadn't known. Before her dealings with the Vipers Prez, Harley hadn't seemed to have any connection to an MC. Ice had found the perfect prey.

He wondered if she knew how lucky she was to have made it out alive. But according to Harley, she'd had help. Otherwise, she wouldn't have.

So far, Link couldn't figure out who it could have been. But at least now, they had a detailed file on every member of the Vipers. They couldn't use any of it now because that would be declaring war. While he was more than willing to do so

because of what they'd done to Harley, he couldn't ask the club to back him if he did.

There was something more important he had to take care of first...

He had to get Harley to accept his claim.

She was his and had been from the second he'd seen her. But the timing had been bad. Her body and mind had been broken by a man who walked in the same world that he did. As kind and gentle as everyone had been to Harley, it had taken her months to accept that the Ravens would hurt her the way the Vipers had.

In a way, she still hadn't.

Harley tried to avoid him at all costs. She wasn't rude or mean about it. She just gave him a wide birth. At first, he'd been offended by her behavior, and then he'd realized why she'd singled him out. He was the biggest risk to her. The attraction wasn't one-sided, and that scared her. Not that he could blame her after her experience with Ice.

But he was nothing like that asshole. He didn't believe in abusing women, and if your ass ended up on the wrong side of his gun, you deserved it.

He'd had the chance to prove that to her six months ago when he'd taken care of her as she'd recovered from her concussion. But the second she'd been cleared, she'd put even more distance between them. Something he hadn't liked yet hadn't been able to do much about because they'd had club business to take care of.

With the Slayers out of the way, the Ravens and Undertakers had agreed to split their territory before anyone else could move in. That also meant that they needed to create some additional alliances. Some voluntary and others by force. But with the Undertakers and Ravens as a united front, the smaller MCs knew they didn't stand a chance.

Regardless, as the club enforcer, he had to be there. It was his job to protect anyone wearing the patch. If someone had to come to see him, the time for talking was over.

But that also meant that for the past three weeks, he hadn't had enough time to slow down to corner Harley. He planned to make good use of his time now that he was back. He'd been nice. Trying to give her time to come to grips with the inevitable but that hadn't worked out in either of their favor.

It was time he pulled a move out of the playbook that his Prez and V.P. had used with their old lady. Make it clear to her that she was his, and things would be much easier for her if she just accepted that.

Blue had put up a hell of a fight before giving in, realizing that Stone and Rock would not let her go—nor did she want them to.

The three of them had almost gotten on his nerves with their over-the-top happiness. But he wasn't going to say shit because soon enough, that would be him and Harley if he had anything to say about it.

“Stop smiling. You're scaring everyone.”

Trigger chuckled as he pulled the cigar from his mouth and looked at Grimm. “Not everyone.”

Grimm stopped next to him and exhaled heavily before rolling his shoulders. The sound of bones cracking filled the air, and Trigger shook his head.

“You really should see Doc about that?”

“Getting old?” Grimm scoffed. “Doc will just laugh his ass off and send me away with a bottle of whiskey.”

“Nah. His ass is too cheap for that. You would only get a six-pack of generic beer at most.”

Grimm laughed as he leaned up a post. “I’ll make sure to tell him you said that.”

Trigger groaned. “Don’t. He is still pissed at me about questioning his treatment plan for Harley.”

Grimm cleared his throat. “Speaking of, are you making an official claim?”

Tension filled Trigger, and he took a draw off his cigar to control it. “You challenging it?”

“Fuck no,” Grimm replied with a choked laugh. “I like all of my organs where they are. But your ass was moody as shit the entire time we were away. Time for you to do something about that, don’t you think?”

“No, you are just a nosey asshole who probably lost a bet and had to come out here to give me your version of a pep talk.” He paused to inhale deeply before releasing the smoke. “Which sucks ass by the way.”

Grimm shot him the finger. “Fuck you. If your ass weren’t so grumpy, I wouldn’t have to do this sort of shit.”

Trigger shook his head over the fact that he’d pretty much predicted what had happened. “Don’t worry, I’ll be making my move.”

Grimm grinned. “This shit is going to be more interesting than watch than Stone, Rock, and Blue were.”

“Fuck you. What’s the bet?”

Grimm frowned. “What?”

Trigger’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “Don’t play dumb. I know there’s money floating around over how things will do down between me and Harley.”

Grimm shook his head. “No one is betting against you. We know you’re relentless, and so does Harley. While she won’t go down without a fight, she knows you are good together.”

“So there is a wager?”

“Paranoid fucker,” Grimm grumbled as he pushed away from the wall. “There isn’t a bet against the two of you getting together.” He stepped over the threshold of the clubhouse before pausing. “However, there is one about the number of times she will try to shoot you with your gun before you lock her down.”

This time, Trigger laughed even though he knew he probably shouldn’t. A few months ago, Harley made the threat during one of their altercations. The irony was she was probably the only woman bold enough to make good on it if she could.

For some reason, that turned him on way more than it should.

He was so fucked...

CHAPTER 3

Harley hummed under her breath as she popped the caps off a couple of beers before placing them on a tray. Then she poured six shots of tequila and sat them down.

“Thanks, Harley,” Candy called out.

“No problem,” Harley replied on autopilot, her mind already on the next set of drinks.

“Harley!”

She looked up at the sound of someone yelling her name, ready to tear their ass a new one, when she spotted Roman, one of the prospects.

“What’s up?” she asked, not bothering to hide her puzzlement as he stepped behind the bar.

“Everest sent me over to relieve you for your break. Said Blue’s asking for you.”

She looked over and spotted her friend sitting at the table that she usually occupied. Blue gave a small wave, and Harley grinned.

“Seven beers and three whiskey and cokes for Axel’s table,” she called out over her shoulder as she grabbed a beer, then stepped out from behind the bar and headed toward the only true friend she had in the world.

While she didn’t drink much, every once in a while, she had a taste for hops, so she indulged.

“I’ve missed you,” she admitted as she sat down.

“Me, too,” Blue stated as she reached across the table and squeezed Harley’s hand. “You look more rested than when we left.”

Harley shook her head as she scoffed. “I don’t know how.”

“The dreams are back?” Blue probed.

“More like nightmares,” Harley grumbled. “What gets me is that it’s not about our attack. It’s about the night that Ice almost killed me.”

“It makes sense,” Blue replied. “I had nightmares for weeks. I scared the hell out of Rock and Stone. I’m better now, but I still have moments. Had a few during the trip with the memories that it stirred up.”

Harley’s eyes widened. “Damn. I didn’t even think about that. Are you okay?”

Blue smiled as she bit her lip bottom lip. “I had a bit of good news to keep me distracted the entire time.”

Harley scowled playfully. “You’d better not start bragging about all of the great sex you are having with Rock and Stone again.”

Blue laughed. “No. It’s more than that.” Blue leaned closer to her. “I’m pregnant,” she revealed right as a raucous cheer from the men filled the room.

It took a minute for the words to sink in, but the second they did, Harley screamed as she jumped to her feet. A second later, Blue joined her, and they embraced.

“I’m going to be an aunt,” Harley exclaimed.

Blue laughed as she squeezed her tighter. “And a kickass one at that.”

Harley was surprised when tears filled her eyes. “Shit, Blue. You are making me all emotional. You know I hate that.”

Blue cupped Harley’s face between her palms and brushed away the tear that escaped. “I know, but if there was ever a reason for you to shed happy tears, this is it.”

Harley looked down to get a better look at her friend. “How are you feeling? Any morning sickness? When did you find out?”

“I’ll answer all of your questions,” Blue replied. “But first.”

Harley was shocked when Blue placed her hands on her stomach. There was a slight curve there.

“You’re already showing?”

Blue nodded. “A little. That’s why we rushed the trip a little. Rock figured it out before I did. According to him, I’ve been insatiable, and my breasts are sensitive as hell.” Blue stepped back and motioned for them to retake their seats. “Once we did the math, we realized that between our wedding night and honeymoon, Stone knocked me up. So, we had to start the territory takeover as quickly as possible. Rock and Stone were nervous about me being out and pregnant.”

Harley laughed. “Damn. You are in trouble. Rock will chomp at the bit as soon as you pop this one out.”

Blue shook her head as she rolled her eyes. “You know those jerks entirely too well. But you are right. The assholes

have a bet going between the two of them. I've already talked to Doc about birth control. I'm not having two babies back-to-back."

"Ha! Good luck," Harley teased.

"Don't jinx me. Please," Blue begged. "It truly was a surprise. I was barely off birth control, and I didn't think the timing was right. It appears it was. Stone, Rock, and I wanted to keep it to ourselves a little longer, but we knew we could only keep it under wraps for so long."

"But you're feeling okay?"

She nodded. "Rock and Stone don't allow me to ask for anything. Other than the fact that I am always sleepy now, I can't complain. No morning sickness. Just sore boobs and can't get enough sex."

Harley grimaced. "Okay. Enough with the oversharing."

Blue chuckled. "So, I guess I can't expect you to be in the delivery room?"

"There won't be enough space. Rock and Stone will be there."

Blue shook her head. "I need you on standby. One of them is going to get queasy or pass out. You saw how they were when I was injured."

"I can honestly say that I don't think I will do any better, but if you need me to be there, I will be."

Blue reached out and squeezed her hand. Several seconds of quiet passed between them. This was the last thing she'd

expected to hear from her friend tonight, but she was so happy for her.

“I am so happy for you, Blue,” she whispered.

“Thank you. Now you know what this means, right?”

Harley reached for her beer and rolled her eyes. “Just made it back and already starting shit.”

“Not me,” Blue replied, holding her hands up innocently. “Only stating the obvious. Trigger kept tabs on the entire time.”

Harley sat up straighter in her chair. That was news to her. “He did?”

“Yep,” Blue nodded as she sipped her water. “Checked on you at least once a day. Put the man out of his misery. The two of you are made for each other.”

Harley shook her head. “Look, I know I gave you a lot of shit about Rock and Stone when they were after you, but that was different.”

“How?” Blue asked.

Harley opened her mouth to respond, but no sound came out, and Blue chuckled.

“Exactly. The man has you at a loss for words. You always have something to say.”

“Kiss my ass,” she grumbled.

“Trigger might have something to say about that,” Blue countered.

Harley sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “That asshole has a lot to say about everything, and I’m sick of it. He’s trouble and a threat to everything I’ve managed to rebuild.”

Blue’s expression softened, and Harley groaned. “No. Don’t give me that look.”

“If anyone understands your fear, it’s me,” Blue stated softly.

Harley shook her head. “I can’t. While it may only seem like I’m joking when I say that I will shoot Trigger with his own gun, I’m not. If he did something to hurt me, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him.”

“I know,” Blue agreed. “So does he, but you are forgetting something important. Trigger would never do anything to hurt you, and he’d kill anyone if they tried.”

Harley pressed her lips together to keep from responding. Her friend was right, and there was no use in denying it.

CHAPTER 4

“Harley, can I have a word?”

Harley squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her lips together to keep the profanity threatening to spew out from doing so. The man she'd nearly become a magician to avoid had finally cornered her.

Still, she continued to wipe down the bar. It was a ritual she and Blue had started upon discovering no one else had done it in what had appeared to be a long time. While it was necessary, it was also therapeutic to her.

A memo that Trigger hadn't received; otherwise, he wouldn't be standing behind her risking his life.

“I'm a little busy right now,” she replied, proud of how sane and calm she sounded.

“I'm sure it can wait. Everyone knows that this bar is the cleanest it's ever been since you and Blue started taking care of it. You also started early, so you're almost finished.”

She paused in mid-wipe. “Stalking me, are you?”

Trigger chuckled to her dismay. “No. If I were stalking you, you'd never know.”

“So, I've heard,” she muttered. “However, as sexy as you think that's supposed to be, it isn't. Trying to keep tabs on me is the number one way to turn me off. I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime.”

“Why do you keep fighting the attraction between us?”

Every muscle in her body stiffened. He had no clue how explosive that question was. Or perhaps he did. She remained silent, giving the bar one last wipe before returning the towel to the bucket.

As expected, when she turned, the bar was empty. The few people she had finagled into helping her had disappeared like the cowards they were.

“It’s pretty arrogant of you to assume that I am interested in you,” she replied as she leaned against the counter she’d just cleaned and folded her arms across her chest.

“So you’re telling me that you haven’t fantasized about me? It’s not my name that you are calling out as you stroke your clit?”

She rolled her eyes before turning to pick up the bucket of dirty water left over from cleaning.

“If you need something to fuck other than your hand, there are plenty of willing women around here.”

Trigger appeared before she could step from behind the bar and yanked the bucket out of her hands. Water sloshed over the edge as he slammed it onto the counter.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” she asked.

Instead of responding, he crowded her. The first thing she noticed was how damn sexy he was. Trigger was on the slim side. A swimmer’s build but more slender. His hair was cut close to his head with light sideburns trailed downward into a beard that fell between trim and slightly rugged. Even so, it didn’t disguise his chiseled cheekbones.

His nose was firm but looked like it had been broken a time or two. Then there was his mouth. She honestly didn't know which she wanted to feel on her body more. His lips or his beard. Either way, it would probably count as a win. Both would be a jackpot.

She realized she was letting her thoughts go down a path they shouldn't. She met his intense hazel gaze head-on.

"No," he replied. "I'm trying to talk some sense into you, but if you would prefer that I fuck it into you instead, that can be arranged."

She shook her head. "Just when I thought we were going to be able to come to an agreement."

"We already have," he countered. "You just aren't willing to admit it."

Exhaling heavily, she closed her eyes briefly. "This is a train wreck waiting to happen. We are like oil and water. You need someone submissive who won't challenge you and will do whatever you say without complaint. I'm not her."

He placed his hands on the counter beside her, trapping her neatly against him. But she knew he would let her go if she asked. Only she didn't want him to. A pesky fact that she was going to ignore.

"What gives you the impression that I want a woman like that?" he asked. "Or are you just saying shit with the hopes that I'll walk away without a fight?"

She brought her hands up and placed them against his chest with the intent to push him away. The second she did,

she realized her mistake. It was the first time she'd ever touched him, and it would be the last. The only problem was she didn't seem to be able to lower her hands.

The air between them became thick with anticipation. Touching him seemed to ramp up the attraction simmering between them for far too long.

Trigger leaned in, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin of her earlobe. She shivered, her senses heightened by his tantalizing proximity. His fingers traced a path down her arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Her breath hitched, a mixture of nervousness and excitement coursing through her veins.

"Harley," he whispered, his voice a low, velvety whisper that sent a shiver down her spine. "I'm making it known to you first that I'm officially claiming you as mine.

Their eyes locked, the intensity of their connection igniting a fire that couldn't be contained. Trigger's hand cupped her cheek, his thumb caressing her lower lip. Her heart raced as her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt.

Without warning, he closed the remaining distance between them, his lips crashing onto hers in a searing kiss that left her breathless. His mouth was warm and demanding, a promise of the passion that had been brewing beneath the surface. She responded with equal fervor, her fingers sliding up his chest to grip his shoulders.

Their kiss was a symphony of desire, a rhythm that matched the beat of their racing hearts. Trigger's hands slid down her back, pulling her impossibly closer until there was

no space left between them. The sensation of his body pressed against her sent shockwaves of pleasure through every inch of her being.

She held him to her as if afraid he might disappear. His lips trailed a blazing path down her jawline, igniting sparks wherever they touched. He nipped at her collarbone, his actions both tender and electrifying, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her veins.

Their lips met again, this time with a slow and sensual exploration that left her even more intoxicated with need. Trigger's hands roamed over her curves as if memorizing every inch of her body. Her breath hitched as his fingers grazed her breast, the electric touch sending jolts of desire straight to her core.

Harley's inhibitions melted as the kiss deepened, replaced by an urgent hunger that demanded satisfaction. Her hands explored the contours of Trigger's body, tracing the hard lines of his muscles and reveling in the sensation of his skin beneath her fingertips. With a fierce passion, she pressed closer to him, her lips leaving a trail of heated kisses down his neck.

Trigger's fingers found the clasp of her jeans and undid it. However, the sound of her zipper made her stiffen as if a bucket of cold water had doused her.

"No," she mumbled as she pushed away from him.

To her amazement, Trigger took another step back, putting additional distance between them. She pressed her fingers to her mouth, still tasting and feeling Trigger there.

She'd just screwed up big time.

If only she could turn back the hands of time. But she couldn't, which meant this train was moving full speed ahead whether she was onboard or not. However, something told her that she stood a better chance of coming out sane if she was on it instead of in front of it.

Boy, was she fucked.

CHAPTER 5

Trigger watched Harley rush away from him, knowing he'd pushed as far as he could today. The last thing he'd expected was to kiss her, but it had felt like the right thing to do in the heat of the moment. The fact that he hadn't bent her over the bar and fucked her until neither of them could move was testament to his restraint.

And not just because she had a banging body, either. Yes, the way her jeans curved around her ass begged for him to grab it all the time. The graphic tees and tanks that she wore emphasized yet covered the breasts he wanted to lavish attention on. But it was her brown eyes that had sucker punched him the first time he'd seen them.

The only way he could describe the shade was as cinnamon. But the shadows he'd seen in them made him want to protect her with every fiber of his being. She did a good job hiding her fear from most by covering it up with her spunk, but she hadn't fooled him.

Then, once he'd discovered that she had been mixed up with Ice, it all made sense. While she'd settled some, she was still a flight risk. There was no doubt that he'd have to sleep with one eye open around her. Not because he was afraid she would kill him, but because he knew without a doubt she would run. More than likely straight into danger and then he'd be the one having to murder someone.

“Whatever you do, don't hurt her. She's more fragile than most realize.”

Trigger turned at the sound of Blue's voice. He was surprised to find her alone. Rock and Stone had been extra protective since finding out she was having their kid.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," she replied. "Thank you for respecting her boundaries. I know that doesn't always come easy."

Trigger remained quiet as he rubbed the back of his neck. To say he was frustrated would be putting it lightly.

"It doesn't," he admitted. "Is she going to try to run?"

Blue walked over to the bar and sat down on a stool. "It depends on how hard you push. You scare her, with good reason. To her, you are everything that Rock and Stone used to be to me."

He reached inside his cut and pulled out a cigar. "What's that?"

"Something that I wanted more than anything in the world but was afraid to reach for because I wasn't used to having anything good. Didn't even know if I deserved it."

He frowned at her loaded statement as he removed the wrapper. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Nothing that I can tell you without breaking the rules of friendship," she admitted. "But everything she will tell you if you ask, and she feels she can trust you with the information."

Trigger pulled out his lighter, then froze. "Fuck, Blue. Sorry, I almost forgot."

She smiled. “I don’t expect you to stop smoking because I’m pregnant. We just need to do it in a more ventilated area.”

“Is that why you’ve stopped coming to the clubhouse?” he probed.

“Yes and no. I am still here. I just don’t come into the main room. I tend to hang out in the kitchen.”

“But if we stopped smoking, you could?”

She nodded. “Yes, but I’m not making that demand of anyone. I don’t expect anyone to change simply because I’m expecting.”

“You shouldn’t have to. You’re Prez and V.P.’s first lady. It’s a given. I’ll put the word out.”

Blue shook her head. “Don’t do that. I told Stone and Rock not to mandate it either.”

Trigger stared at her, and Blue laughed.

“Damn, you all are stubborn. It’s okay. Really. Besides, my mini-me keeps me so exhausted that I don’t last long once the sun goes down. I feel bad because it means that either Rock or Stone must also call in early.”

“Your mini-me?” Trigger quipped.

“Yep,” she replied. “I’m definitely the prettiest one of the trio, so I’m hoping that any kid I have looks like me.”

The corners of Trigger’s mouth curved upward. “I’m sure they’ll have something to say about that.”

“We don’t,” Stone interrupted as he entered the room. “Sorry, Blue. I know you asked for twenty minutes, but the

thought of my enforcer hogging you for that amount of time just didn't sit right with me."

"Prez," Trigger greeted with a chuckle.

Blue rolled her eyes before tilting her head to meet Stone's kiss. His hand slid down to Blue's waist. A move that had become more common since they'd returned to the compound.

"It's okay. Trigger and I were finished," Blue admitted.

"Everything good?" Stone asked.

Trigger nodded. "I told Harley that I'm making my claim official."

Stone grinned. "She okay with that?"

"Fuck no," Trigger grumbled. "I'm sitting here now trying to figure out what prospect to put on watch now to trail her ass."

"Calamity," Blue and Stone replied in unison.

Trigger's eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "Something going on that I should know about?"

"He's about the only prospect completely immune to Harley's charms," Blue admitted. "The rest she would probably be able to guilt into letting her at least get a head start."

"Calamity it is," Trigger muttered. "It appears I also need to have a word with the rest of the prospects and explain what it means if they aid her in any way."

Stone chuckled. "I'm just glad you are finally making it official. It's not like everyone around here didn't know, but

still.

Blue shook her head. “I don’t know why you are so excited. You must have forgotten my response to you and Rock once both of you made it known that you are officially claiming me.”

Stone gripped the back of her neck and pressed his forehead to hers. “It doesn’t matter how it started. Just matters how it ended.”

Blue grinned. “It’s not over yet. Our story is still unfolding.”

Trigger groaned playfully. “The two of you needed to get a room.”

“Not without me,” Rock interjected as he came around the corner.

“Fuck,” Trigger mumbled. “It’s like a damn love nest around here.”

Blue’s laughter was cut off as Rock drew her into his embrace and kissed her soundly before releasing her.

“Jealous,” Rock teased as he sat next to Blue.

Trigger shook his head. “Nope. Happy as hell for the three of you. Shit, everyone is. What the three of you have may be a little extreme to some, but it works for the three of you, and so who gives fuck.”

“Speaking of which, it’s time to have a party. A celebration regarding the successful expansion of Raven’s territory,” Stone stated.

“We discussing it at church tomorrow?” Trigger asked.

“Yes,” Stone confirmed.

“Good. That gives me time to come up with a plan to lock Harley’s ass down in case she runs.”

He exited the clubhouse to the sound of Stone, Rock, and Blue’s laughter. They wouldn’t be for long. Harley was his. The explosive kiss between the two of them proved it.

CHAPTER 6

The raucous beat of hard rock music echoed through the dimly lit bar area of the clubhouse, mingling with the clinking of glasses and the low rumble of conversations. Trigger leaned against a wall, his gaze scanning the scene before him.

Behind the bar, Harley worked hard, popping the caps off beers and pouring drinks. She was well within her element. He didn't know who made a better bartender between her and Blue. Truth be told, it was both of them. Unlike some of the bar keeps they'd had in the past, neither of the women imbibed the product at all, let alone until they were falling drunk.

As the thought entered his mind, a sweet butt stumbled by, giggling as she fell into the arms of a member of the Savage Souls. They'd invited several clubs tonight as a show of good faith. Truth be told, it made his eye twitch. He wasn't happy about inviting people he didn't know into his home, but he would suck it up for the good of the club.

He knew he should be mingling more, but he couldn't because Harley hadn't been herself for the past hour. Her brown eyes wary as she kept a cautious eye on the people milling about the room.

Then, it was his turn to stiffen when he saw an idiot approaching the bar. If memory served him right, his name was Piston, and his predatory grin revealed his intentions all too clearly.

Trigger's grip on his beer tightened as he sensed Harley's discomfort. He'd been in enough brawls to recognize trouble

brewing, and he wasn't about to let anyone intimidate her.

Piston's slurred words carried over the music. "Hey there, beautiful. You looking for a good time once you're done back there?"

Harley's lips tightened into a forced smile as she glanced over her shoulder. "I already have plans."

Trigger's jaw clenched. He had a reputation as a man of few words, but he was ready to speak the language of violence if it meant protecting Harley.

Piston's laugh was oily, his gaze lingering on Harley's form. "You do, huh? How about you make new ones and spend time with a real man?"

Trigger's fingers flexed, his knuckles turning white. He downed the rest of his beer in one gulp and placed it on a table. The wood creaked under the pressure, but amazingly, the bottle didn't shatter. But the dumb ass in his sights was too enraptured with Harley to notice impending danger.

Harley's shoulders stiffened. "I'm not interested, and if you're smart, you will walk away now before you get hurt."

"Ah, a mouthy bitch. Just the way I like 'em," he stated as he lewdly adjusted himself.

Harley shook her head as she exhaled heavily. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Her gaze met Triggers briefly. "Don't kill him, and don't get blood all over the floors. I want to get in bed at a reasonable hour if possible."

Trigger grinned as he pulled his gun out of the holster he wore at his side before slipping his cut over his shoulders and

down his arms. Axel appeared out of nowhere as if he'd been waiting for shit to pop off and took both items.

He rolled his shoulders as he stepped closer, Piston finally becoming aware of his presence. The man spun on his heels, his eyes widening briefly before a cocky smirk fell into place.

"I believe she asked you to back off," Trigger stated, his voice low and dangerous, a growl that cut through the chatter.

Piston's grin faltered, but he stood his ground, fueled by liquid courage. "I don't see why I should. The whore ain't wearing your cut. She's free pussy."

Trigger's eyes bore into Piston's, the silence between them escalating the tension in the room. People surrounding them seemed to sense the impending storm and grew quiet, their gazes fixed on the confrontation unfolding.

Harley's fingers tightened around the bottle she held in her hand, and for a moment, Trigger thought she might use it as a weapon. However, he hoped she wouldn't because he needed to defend her honor, and he couldn't do that if he didn't know she was safe.

With a sudden movement, Piston lunged at Trigger, his fist aimed at Trigger's jaw. But Trigger's reflexes were lightning fast, honed from years of surviving in the unforgiving world of outlaw motorcycle clubs. He ducked under the punch while extending his fist, connecting with Piston's stomach in a powerful blow.

The impact echoed in the bar, a dull thud that was drowned out by the gasps of some of the sweet butts and party girls.

Piston staggered back, wind knocked out of him, his bravado finally crumbling. But he wasn't about to give up so easily. He swung wildly at Trigger again, his blows fueled by alcohol, frustration, and embarrassment.

Trigger danced around the punches, his movements fluid and calculated. With each dodge, he countered with a precise and targeted strike. The sounds of bones meeting flesh and grunts of pain filled the air, punctuated by the occasional crash of a barstool being knocked over in the fray.

In a last-ditch effort, Piston reached for an abandoned pool cue. As insane as it was, Trigger let him swing, deflecting the blow but still taking a hit to the upper thigh because Piston was so unsteady. Trigger reached for the stick without hesitation, yanking forward as he did, sending Piston crashing to the ground.

The pain and surprise in Piston's eyes were mirrored by everyone in the clubhouse, who watched in shock and awe as the fight took an unexpected turn. Trigger seized the opportunity, delivering a final blow that knocked Piston out cold.

The room was silent for a beat. The only sound was the heavy breathing of the combatants and the hum of electricity in the air. Trigger turned to Harley, his gaze softening as he took in her defiant expression.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice surprisingly gentle as he approached the bar.

Harley nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

Trigger's lips curved into a tired smile as he brushed a strand of hair from her face, his touch gentle. "Anytime."

As the tension in the room began to ease, the music slowly returned, its driving beat serving as a backdrop to the aftermath of the fight. The clubhouse, just a scene of chaos for a few seconds, now held a different energy.

Trigger accepted his cut and his gun from Axel, slipping both back on. The second they were in place, Harley held out another beer to him.

"That one is on the house."

He chuckled as he took the bottle and downed a good swig. Several members of Rebel Kings came forward to pick up Piston off the floor.

Ox, their V.P. stopped near Trigger. "Sorry about that show of disrespect. Piston is a reliable road captain, but he can be a bit of a hot head."

"It's not me you need to apologize to," Trigger replied. "It's my woman. While she'd not wear a cut with my name on it, everyone around here knows she's mine. Make sure Piston is aware of that when he comes around and that *he* apologizes to her."

He didn't take his gaze off Harley the entire time he made the public claim. When Harley agreed, he knew the tides had turned. Now he just had to make sure her ass didn't run.

CHAPTER 7

“Where is she?” Trigger demanded as he stepped into the home that Stone, Rock, and Blue shared.

Stone’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead, and Trigger held his hands up non-threateningly.

“Sorry, Prez, but you scared ten fucking years off my life with that call. You said that Harley needed me, then hung up. What’s going on?”

Instead of responding, Stone turned on his heels and led the way through the family room and down the hall to the guest bedroom.

Trigger braced himself for the worse. It wasn’t like Stone to be so tight-lipped. After a light rap against the door, Stone turned the knob and pushed it open, revealing a sight Trigger hadn’t expected.

Harley and Blue were on the bed together. Blue sat reclining against the headboard while Harley lay curled against her, fast asleep.

“Stone,” she whispered shouted. “I told you we are fine.”

Stone folded his arms across his chest as Blue barely got the words out without yawning. “What Blue means is that she’s tired but won’t leave Harley because she can’t without knowing her friend is okay. But what my woman is too stubborn to admit is that she is exhausted and needs some rest.”

Blue rolled her eyes but didn't stop stroking Harley's hair. "If you were a woman, you'd understand."

Trigger looked back and forth between Stone, still trying to figure out what the fuck was going on.

"It's that time of the month," Blue stated as if understanding he was still confused.

Trigger frowned. "Why is she here and not at the clubhouse?"

"Because I borrowed her heating pad and forgot to return it. She made it over but was in too much pain to walk back," Blue supplied.

"How long has she been out?" he asked.

"Since she passed out," Stone answered.

A growl rumbled from deep within his chest. "Passed out? As in fainted? Why the fuck didn't you call me before now?"

"Harley didn't want us to," Blue replied. "Which is why I don't know why Stone went and did just that."

Stone shrugged. "You and our baby always come first. Harley will forgive me. Now, let Trigger take over so you can take your nap. You can barely keep your eyes open."

Blue's eyes drooped closed briefly even as she shook her head. "I'm fine."

Trigger stepped forward, his gaze still on Harley curled up peacefully against her friend. What he wouldn't give to have her that relaxed around him.

“I’ll take care of her, Blue. I promise. You know I would shoot myself before I purposely hurt Harley.”

“Doesn’t mean that you won’t,” Blue grumbled as her hand stopped moving against Harley’s head. “She’d better be okay when I wake up from my nap.”

Trigger nodded as he placed his gun on the nightstand before slipping off his cut. As he sat down in the chair to pull off his boots, Blue began to ease out of the bed. Harley stirred, and Blue froze. Once she’d settled again, Stone helped Blue to her feet.

She moaned softly and placed a hand against the small of her back. It had only been a month since they’d officially announced Blue’s pregnancy, but she looked like it now. While the curve of her stomach was still slight, there was no doubt that she was carrying a baby.

A pang Trigger didn’t expect filled his chest as he imagined Harley carrying his child. Before he’d met Harley, he’d honestly expected to be a bachelor for life. Now, he wanted what Stone, Rock, and Blue had. He just needed to convince Harley that she did, too.

Stone stared at Blue, his expression full of concern. “Come on. Let’s get you comfortable.” Stone looked over at him. “You okay?”

Trigger nodded. “Yeah. We’ll be fine.”

Stone took Blue’s hand and pulled her toward the hallway. Blue stopped as they stepped over the threshold. “The heating pad is on a timer. It’s off now. She prefers the medium heat

setting. Depending on her pain, she likes it on her lower back or the lower part of her stomach. Any extra supplies she may need are in the bathroom.”

Trigger rose to his feet and slipped his belt from between the loops as he nodded. “Got it. I will take care of her. I promise. Get some rest. You are dead on your feet. Can’t help me take care of her if you go down too.”

Blue wrinkled her nose at him. “I can’t believe you’re guilt-tripping me.”

“Is it working?”

“Like a charm,” she grumbled, then yawned.

Trigger chuckled as they disappeared from the doorway. Then he closed the door and turned to the woman still on the bed. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen her asleep, but she seemed more beautiful to him every time.

He was pulled from his thoughts when she emitted a low moan of discomfort. With a few strides, he crossed the room and gently crawled onto the bed beside her. She immediately drew closer to him as he stretched out. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her until she settled again.

Spotting the heating pad beneath her, he touched it and found it cool. It didn’t take him long to figure out how to operate it. Once it was on, he exhaled heavily and closed his eyes. It felt so good to be there like this with her, even if she wasn’t feeling well.

Slowly, he began to relax until he drifted off. It wasn’t until a low sound of pain filled his ears that he jerked awake.

He immediately reached for Harley, only to find the spot beside him empty. His eyes snapped open, and the low light outside the window told him several hours had passed.

He looked around until he spotted Harley pacing back and forth across the room, her face contorted with pain. Instinctively, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and pushed to his feet.

“What can I do?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

Harley offered a strained smile, sweat glistening on her forehead. “Just cramps. They’re hitting harder than usual. I can’t take any more of the heating pad right now. I’m too hot. Took a pain pill. It just needs time to kick in.”

Trigger’s expression softened as he walked to the wall and flipped on the ceiling fan. Cool air automatically began to circulate the room.

“Come get back into bed. It will probably help if you are off your feet.”

Harley automatically shook her head. “I’m fine. Blue shouldn’t have called you.”

Trigger’s expression softened as he approached her. “She didn’t. Stone did because Blue was exhausted but wouldn’t leave your side.”

To his surprise, tears filled her eyes. “I should have just stayed at the clubhouse.”

He pulled her into his embrace. “No. You did the right thing. The only thing you were trying to do was get your heating pad. You weren’t planning to stay. No one is blaming

you for anything, so dry your eyes. Stone is caring for her, and I'm doing the same for you." He leaned back to look at her. "Will you let me do that for you?"

She stared at him for a long time. "It doesn't mean anything if I do."

"Yes, it does," he said with a chuckle. "So stop fighting it."

Slowly, he moved backward, tugging her with him until he reached the bed. It didn't take him long to get them arranged on top of the covers until she was curled against his side. She shifted as if trying to find a position that would help alleviate her pain.

"Harley, are you wearing a pad or a tampon?"

"Tampon. Why?"

He kneaded the tense muscles in her lower back, smiling when she exhaled softly in what sounded like relief.

"Because the heating pad isn't an option for you right now, and you're still cramping."

He could see the moment that she understood the alternative that he was offering because her entire body stiffened.

"You asshole," she growled as she hit his arm and tried to pull away. "If you ever think I'm having sex with you, especially right now, you have another thing coming."

He grabbed her hands before she could land another blow. "I don't know what type of selfish bastard you think I am, but sex is the last thing on my mind when you are hurting."

Puzzlement filled her gaze. “But you—”

“I’m talking about giving you relief, crazy woman. Believe me, I’m not thinking about putting my dick anywhere near you right now. Not because I’m squeamish about blood, either. But because you are clearly suffering. But I don’t doubt that a good nut is exactly what you need.”

Harley rolled her eyes. “It sounds so caring and romantic when you put it that way.”

His gaze was unwavering as he met her eyes. “Yes or no?”

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Then he realized her pupils were dilated. His idea appealed to her more than she wanted to admit, but he wouldn’t make a move until she did.

Harley’s voice was tinged with arousal as she responded. “Yes.”

“Give me a second,” he replied before slipping off the bed.

He quickly crossed the room to the bathroom, turning on the light before closing the door. He washed his hands before snagging a washcloth off the hook and running it under hot water. While he let the towel cool, he opened the medicine cabinet, praying that he would find what he needed. When he spotted the lube, he silently thanked Rock and Stone for being the oversexed bastards that they were.

Loaded with everything he needed, he exited the bathroom, half expecting Harley to be gone. Instead, she still lay in the bed, her gaze finding his as he stepped back into the room.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I’d just used it right before you woke up.”

He didn’t miss the tremor in her tone. Placing the towel and the lube on the nightstand beside his gun, he fought back a chuckle at the sight. Crawling back into bed with her, he pulled her close again.

“It’s okay if you change your mind,” he tried to reassure her.

“I haven’t. This is just weird as fuck, and I’ve never done it before,” she mumbled.

“If it makes you feel better, I haven’t either,” he admitted.

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she remained quiet.

“So, how do we do this?”

“Slowly,” he replied before brushing his mouth against hers. “How sore are your nipples?”

“I’d punch you in the face if you touch them right now.”

He laughed but pulled away some. “Then you are in charge of those. I’ll handle everything else.”

He reached for the waistband of her pants and finally took stock of what she had on. She’d walked across the compound wearing pajama pants, a tank top, and no bra. Gritting his teeth, he fought the urge to roll her over and spank her ass. The way she felt, it wasn’t the time to do it. She’d shoot him with his own gun, no doubt about it. It was something they’d revisit later. Instead, he focused on doing what he hoped would make her feel better.

“Pants on or off?”

“Off,” she whispered.

“Panties?”

“On.”

He made quick work of her pants, leaving her with just her T-shirt and underwear on.

“Close your eyes and take a deep breath,” he instructed.

As she did, he uncapped the lube and put a generous amount on his fingers before reaching for her and pulling her close.

“If I need to stop, just say the word, and everything ends.”

She nodded and closed her eyes, exhaling softly. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Instead of replying, he lowered his mouth to hers, his mouth brushing hers in a tantalizing teasing kiss. It was soft and fleeting, a whisper of what was to come. When she wasn’t wracked with pain, he’d be able to take her like he wanted, but right now, she needed gentle, and that was what he’d give her. Then she surprised him by pulling back.

“I need more,” she whispered. “Help me to forget the pain.”

Trigger slid his hand upward to the nape of her neck, his touch sending a shiver down her spine. “I’ll give you everything you need,” he murmured, his voice a velvety promise.

With a deft move, he cupped the back of her head, pulling her in with a fierce hunger that left both of them breathless. Their lips met in a heated clash of desire, the tension between them finally breaking free. Harley's fingers wound into the fabric of his shirt, pulling him impossibly closer as their mouths moved in a dance that spoke of shared longing and unspoken yearning.

Their kiss was a symphony of contrasts, a blend of urgency and restraint that left them both intoxicated with need. Trigger's tongue traced the seam of Harley's lips, igniting sparks that spread through his veins like wildfire. She parted her lips with a sigh, inviting him deeper, her body arching against his with a plea for more.

Trigger slipped his hand into her panties, finding her neatly trimmed, wishing he could see what he was doing. But this wasn't about him. It was about making sure she got what she needed to forget her discomfort. This was a way for him to prove to her that being with him wouldn't lead to the chaos she thought it would.

The instant he touched her clit with his lube-slicked fingers, she broke away from the kiss with a gasp. Harley's nails dug into his chest as she moaned.

He didn't stop stroking her as he lowered his mouth to her throat, trailing kisses downward. "That's it," he whispered. "Let me make you feel good."

She turned more toward him, giving him better access to play. When her hand drifted away to caress her breasts, he

knew she was completely with him, and it wouldn't be long before he pushed her head first into the release she needed.

He pressed his lips to hers again in an attempt to mute the sounds of pleasure flowing more freely with each caress. It didn't take long for her muscles to tense. She pressed her face against his chest as her hips began to rock back and forth.

“That's it,” he coaxed.

“Trigger, please don't stop,” she begged.

He didn't know why she thought she had to ask because he didn't plan to.

A few heartbeats later, she stiffened against him before her body jerked against his. When her mouth fell open, he slammed his mouth against hers just as the first cry of exhalation escaped. He held her through every twitch and jerk until she settled against him with a sigh.

She remained quiet, and it wasn't long before her breathing began to slow before evening out. Once he was sure she'd fallen asleep again, he removed his hand from her panties and reached for the towel. After gently cleaning her, he went to the bathroom to wash his hands.

When he returned, she hadn't stirred. He would let her get more rest before waking her. He wasn't sure when she'd last eaten. The only thing, she'd be having the meal at his place—and if he had his way, she wasn't returning to her room at the clubhouse.

CHAPTER 8

“Fuck,” Harley muttered to herself as she scrubbed a counter in the clubhouse kitchen.

She was in over her head. Trigger had slipped under the exterior of the hardened shell she’d erected when she hadn’t been paying attention.

It had probably started from the moment she’d met him, if she were honest, but last week had cemented the deal. After she’d awakened the second time in Stone, Rock, and Blue’s home, Trigger had helped her redress before whisking her off to his place, heating pad in tow.

He’d remained by her side, their conversations becoming more personal and intimate. How he listened to her, laughed at her jokes, and seemed genuinely interested in her thoughts fueled the growing realization that her feelings for him were more profound than she had ever acknowledged.

Then, there was the other side of him that left her even more confused. He’d practically held her hostage until he had to go for a supply run. When he’d left, it had been with that threat that she was at his place when he returned. He hadn’t been gone for thirty minutes before she packed her bag defiantly and returned to the clubhouse.

Much to her surprise, Calamity hadn’t tried to stop her. Instead, he’d followed her across the compound to the clubhouse and set up post there. She barely made it through the night before repacking her bag and returning to Trigger’s place.

As much as she hated it, she'd gotten used to sleeping next to the asshole. So even though he wasn't in the bed next to her, his scent was enough for her to get a restful night of sleep.

It was during the waking hours that she couldn't get any peace. As many runs as Trigger had been on when she'd been with the Ravens, none bothered her more than this one. It was the first time she'd been consumed with thoughts of his safety, so she found things to keep her busy throughout the day so that she was exhausted by the time she fell into his bed at night and had no choice but to sleep.

As she wiped non-existent specks of dirt away, she ignored the sounds of the usual clubhouse hustle and bustle unable to get her thoughts off Trigger. She's always admired his dedication to the club, the way he put everything on the line for his brothers and the club. His commanding presence and quiet strength had drawn her attention from the beginning. But as she watched the minutes tick by, she realized that her feelings for him ran deeper than she had ever acknowledged.

A sigh escaped her lips as she turned and leaned against the counter she'd just spent an insane amount of time cleaning for no reason. Her heart felt heavy with an emotion she couldn't quite describe. She had never been one to shy away from her feelings, but this was different—a vulnerability she hadn't anticipated.

She looked up as Blue walked in. "There you are. I've been looking for you."

Harley grinned. "You found me."

“You don’t get to be a smart ass when you’ve been hiding from me,” Blue retorted.

Harley tried to hide her grimace as she picked up the towel she’d been cleaning with.

“Uh-uh,” Blue grumbled as she walked over and snatched the damp cloth away from her. “What’s up with you? You’ve been acting weird lately.”

Harley rolled her eyes. “I always am.”

“True,” Blue agreed. “But even this is a new level of strangeness for you. What gives?”

Harley glanced at Blue, her expression a mixture of longing and uncertainty. “Just thinking about Trigger.”

Blue raised an eyebrow, a knowing smile playing on her lips. “You’ve got that look. The ‘I’m thinking about someone special’ look.”

Harley rolled her eyes, her cheeks flushing slightly. “You’re imagining things.”

Blue laughed softly. “You can’t fool me, Harley. I’ve seen how you’ve looked at him this past week.”

Harley sighed, her gaze returning to the entrance of the compound. “Blame that on my hormones. He suckered me in at a time when I was weak.”

Blue stared at Harley silently until she caved.

“Okay, maybe it isn’t just my hormones.”

Blue nudged her playfully. “Well, you’re not alone. You know Trigger is crazy about you.”

“He’s insane,” Harley mumbled.

“No more than Stone and Rock and look how that’s working out for me.”

Harley shook her head. “I can’t do it. Whenever I even think it’s possible, I automatically think about Ice. I just can’t allow myself to go there.”

“How do they compare?” Blue asked.

The question caught Harley off guard. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s start with something simple. How do you feel around Ice versus Trigger?”

“Probably not a good comparison to start with as I feel anxious around both of them.”

“For the same reason?” Blue asked with an expression that showed she already knew the answer.

But before she could reply, the sound of motorcycles approaching drew Harley’s attention. Her heartbeat quickened as she recognized the familiar roar of engines. Trigger was returning from his supply run.

She looked over at Blue who smiled knowingly. “Come on. Let’s go greet them.”

Harley’s feet moved faster than she would ever admit as she walked through the clubhouse. Just as made her way through the front door, Trigger parked his ride with practiced ease and dismounted, his hazel eyes scanning the area before landing on Harley.

Their gazes locked, and a rush of emotions swept over Harley. She had missed him more than she cared to admit, and the sight of him now brought relief and joy.

Trigger approached her, his confident stride a contrast to the softness in his eyes. “Hey.”

Harley managed a small smile, her heart fluttering as she met his gaze. “Hey,” she parroted. “You okay?”

“Good as can be expected,” he replied, his voice a low rumble. “I need a shower. You coming back to my place?”

She shook her head. “As if you don’t already know the answer to that. Calamity’s been my bodyguard from the second you left. I know he’s reported my every move back to you.”

One corner of his mouth curved upward, the uncharacteristic grin making her heart skip a few beats. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Good,” he replied before pulling her close and pressing his lips to hers.

She ignored the catcalls, allowing Trigger to kiss her until she was breathless before pulling back.

He studied her silently for several minutes as if trying to figure something out before grabbing her hand and pulling her toward his bike. She waited until he was on before swinging her leg over the back, then settled against him.

“Don’t get too carried away,” Rock called out. “Cookout starts in about an hour.”

“Got it,” Trigger replied a second before the engine rumbled to life, and she wrapped her arms around his waist. She hung on as he took off.

It didn’t take them long to make it back to his place. He turned off the engine, holding the bike steady until she climbed off. Then, he quickly dismounted behind her.

“Let me just take a quick shower, then we can head back to the clubhouse and help prepare for the cookout.”

She paused in mid-step. “I can go back and—”

The rest of her words were cut off as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again. She clutched his shoulder at the intensity and amount of desperation she felt within it. Several minutes later, he pulled back, and she gasped for air.

“I want you here,” he stated. “We’ll return to the clubhouse afterward, but I want you here right now.”

She studied him for several minutes. “I hope you don’t expect me to join you in the shower.”

“Fuck yeah,” he answered with a chuckle. “But you aren’t ready for that, so I won’t push.” Then his expression sobered. “I just need you close right now.”

“Okay,” she whispered at his heartfelt words before following him into the house.

He left her in the living room while he went to the bedroom. She walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of

water. Pressing it to her head, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to relax. She didn't know how he was intense all the time but he was.

After drinking the water, she rinsed the glass and put it aside. Bracing her hands against the counter, she stared out the kitchen window and looked over the compound. When she'd discovered that Trigger had a home away from the clubhouse, she'd been a little shocked, mainly because most of the single members bunked in a room upstairs.

But now that she'd gotten to know him better, she understood there was more to him than she'd realized. That was probably part of the reason why her feelings were starting to grow. She didn't know how long she stood there, but several minutes later, she heard Trigger's footsteps behind her. He wrapped his arms around her.

"You ready to go back to the clubhouse?" he asked before placing a kiss against her neck.

She nodded. "Yes. I'm starving."

Trigger stepped back and released her. "It smells like they've already fired up the grills. Let's go."

She let Trigger take her back to the clubhouse, and several people were already there. They drifted apart as they pitched in to help prepare things, but their gazes met several times.

As the night wore on, the music grew louder, and the compound came alive with energy. Conversation and laughter filled the air. Harley found herself drawn to Trigger like a moth to a flame. He was her anchor in this sea of emotions, his

presence a source of comfort amidst the chaos. That's why she stood there and watched him when he started in her direction.

"You ready to talk?" he asked when he was within hearing distance.

Her breath caught in her throat as she met his gaze. "Sure"

Even as she agreed, her heartbeat began to race with nervousness.

"I have something for you," he stated.

He reached into a pocket of his cut and pulled out a jewelry box. Instinctively, she took a step back.

"No," she whispered.

Ignoring her, he flipped the lid on the box to reveal a pair of blue and white skull earrings. Shaking her head, she refused to accept them.

"I can't accept those," she mumbled.

She knew what they were and what it meant. Harley's heart pounded in her chest, her emotions swirling like a storm. This was the moment she had been both dreading and hoping for.

On one hand, the gift represented how strongly he cared about her. On the other hand, it meant he had no intent to let her go, whether she wanted him to or not. That frightened her more than anything. If she accepted the gift, it would be an official signal to everyone that she was his. While it wouldn't give her old lady status, it would come damn close.

Trigger's fingers brushed against hers, sending a jolt of electricity through her veins as he pressed the box into her hand. "Yes, you can."

Tears welled up in Harley's eyes, her heart swelling with joy and uncertainty. She reached out, her fingers intertwining with his, her voice soft but filled with sincerity. "Do they have a tracker?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It's your choice if you wear them or not, but if you do, I will be able to find you no matter where you are."

"I guess I should be happy that you aren't trying to hide it," she joked as she studied the earrings for several minutes. "Do all of the old ladies have trackers?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "They all know. The only one who didn't know when she received hers was Blue."

His truthfulness reassured her and worried her at the same time. He wasn't being deceptive, yet his honesty about something so possessive frightened her.

"I don't want to fuck this up, Trigger. Right now, it feels nice. I don't want to put labels on this. I feel like it might jinx things."

One corner of Trigger's curved upward. "Harley, the only person in denial about you being my old lady is you. Bets are going about how long it will take you to admit it and if you will try to shoot me with my gun before you do."

She rolled her eyes. "Assholes."

He chuckled. “Yes, we are, but we’re good ones. Keep the earrings. When you’re ready, put them on.”

Harley looked at the gift for several minutes before handing the box to Trigger. “Hold this.”

He did as she asked, and before she could second guess herself, she picked up the first skull, removed the fastener, and put it through her ear. Once they were both in place, she looked at Trigger, who grinned broadly.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

CHAPTER 9

Trigger couldn't find the words to describe the emotions surging through him when Harley stood before him, wearing the jewelry he'd given her. She had accepted his claim. Not as his old lady, but close enough.

He pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to her, not pulling back until they were both breathless. Then he let out a loud whoop, causing several heads to turn their way. Her eyes widened as if she realized he was getting ready to do something crazy.

“Trigger, don't—”

But her warning came too late. He'd already leaned forward and planted his shoulder into her mid-section before straightening, leaving her draped over his shoulder.

She shrieked and smacked his shoulder. “Trigger, if you don't put me down, I swear I'm going to shoot your ass.”

Instead of heeding her warning, he spanked her curvy bottom, making her jerk against him and cry out. Catcalls and whistles trailed them as he walked away from the group toward his place.

“This is bullshit, Trigger. Don't make me regret putting these earrings on,” she complained.

He laughed as he kept moving. “If you still feel that way tomorrow morning, I'll let you walk away, no questions asked—if you can walk.”

“Jerk,” she grumbled before relaxing.

It didn't take them long to reach their destination without her struggling. Surprisingly, she didn't protest as he unlocked the front door before closing it and secured it behind them. Then he carried her straight to his bedroom before bending down to lower her to the bed. She hit his shoulder as soon as he crawled over her.

"Don't make a habit of that," she grumbled.

"Why not?" he asked as he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him until their positions were reversed. "You like it."

"That's beside the point," she mumbled.

It would be easier to focus on that tidbit of revealing information if her breasts weren't pressed right up against his chest. Plump and ripe, the sensual weight of them sizzled through him, making another part of his anatomy take notice.

It swelled even more than it already had during the stroll back to his place.

She noticed.

Trigger shrugged helplessly. What could he say? He wanted her. He'd made that plain enough over the past several months. His having a hard-on, particularly when she was nuzzled so closely up against him, shouldn't come as any real surprise.

She bit her bottom lip, smothering some sort of noise, then dropped her head against the curve of his shoulder. Her warm breath fanned over his neck, eliciting another burst of reaction, and he felt his dick stir against her, seeking her like some carnal divining rod.

To his everlasting joy and torment, she scooted closer and slid her nose along his throat, breathing him in, then pressed her lips against him, tasting his neck. And the hell of it? He had to let her. They were still on shaky ground, and he knew that one of the things that made her back away quicker than anything else was feeling like she wasn't in control.

Trigger bit back a curse as she slipped farther up along his body but somehow managed to get an arm around her, then slipped his hand up under her shirt, touching her sleek, warm skin.

So soft... Softer than he'd dared to imagine.

She answered him with another retaliation of her own, sliding her hand along his jaw, then turning his head and pressing her lips against his. Her kiss was slow and thorough, laced with an undercurrent of desperation and urgency. Her entire little body hummed with it, vibrating like a struck piano wire. She shifted, drawing herself more closely to him, and ran her hand down over his chest, then lower still as she cupped him through his jeans.

He would have come up off the mattress if she hadn't held him down, stilling him with a deeper kiss. Stroking him through his jeans, she sucked his tongue into her mouth, mimicking a more intimate act, and he felt an ooze of pleasure leak from his dick, a warning of what was to come.

Literally.

It was mind-boggling. But strangely thrilling, he had to admit.

Not content to merely touch him through his clothes anymore, he felt Harley's hand at the button on his jeans, felt it give. She couldn't lower the zipper without it giving them away, but she'd used the silent breath he'd sucked in as an opportunity to slide her hot little fingers over the head of his penis, coating him with his cream.

Trigger clenched his teeth so hard he feared they would crack.

She was trying to kill him, he decided. She was trying to make him have a heart attack.

Rather than let her torture him, Trigger decided a little torment of his own was in order. He carefully nudged her onto her back, then followed her down with a kiss. She tasted like beer and seduction, like heaven, and he wanted to sink into her so desperately that his hands shook from the effort of holding back. He wanted to slide his dick deep into the heart of her, nestle his hips into the perfect cradle of her wider ones, and slake his lust in her soft, welcoming body.

He just *wanted*.

He found the hem of her shirt, then edged it up, pushing it over her warm, silky skin until he found the lacy edge of her bra. He expertly popped the clasp in the middle, silently thanking the brilliant designer who'd thought of that plan, then felt the cup give way and snag on her nipple.

With a brush of his fingers, it was out of the way, and her plump, lush breast was in his hand, the beaded nipple thrusting against his palm. He ached to taste it, to feel it rasp across the roof of his mouth.

“Trigger, I need you. Stop holding back,” she begged.

He stilled at her heartfelt plea, and then he was on her. She shrugged off her shirt, removed the bra in the process, and lifted her hips so he could get her jeans off. Fuck, she was beautiful. Full, lovely breasts, crested with rosy crowns, the sweet curve of her belly, and a neatly trimmed thatch of dark curls nestled between her thighs.

He didn't know where to start or which part he wanted to taste first. Rather than wait on him to figure it out, she leaned forward and drew the shirt over his head, then bent forward and pressed her hot mouth against his chest, licking a path along the upper ridge of his right pec. She hummed appreciatively and slipped her greedy hands over his belly and around his back.

Trigger groaned, lowered his zipper, and shucked his pants and boxers. She moaned when she saw him, a tiny little mewl of feminine affirmation, of desire, and something about that sound tripped an internal trigger.

“I've wanted you like this for so long,” he breathed, sliding a hand down the middle of her belly, dipping his fingers into the heat between her thighs, gratified when she inhaled sharply and arched up into him. He palmed her right breast, then bent and pulled her into his mouth. “I can't wait any longer. Are you ready?” he whispered, blowing over it, making her shiver.

“Yes. Please. I want you inside me,” she said, spreading her legs, a silent, desperate invitation.

Trigger reached over to the nightstand and dug out the box of protection before ripping into it. He quickly donned a condom before crawling back over her. She spread her legs, inviting him in. He nudged her weeping folds, found her gaze, and fastened his on it. “Look at me,” he said, his voice raw and broken. Every muscle was clenched and ready, bracing him for the unknown. Because this was different—she was different—and every iota of understanding and intuition he possessed told him that when he took her, when he made her his...that was it.

He’d be lost. There’d be no him without her.

Her brown eyes caught his and clung. Desire, hunger, fever, and something tender and gentle—affection, maybe?—glinted back from him, reflected in her gaze. A soft smile shaped her lips, and she sighed as she arched up and pushed herself against him.

“I need you,” she said, her voice frantic, desperate. “Please.”

I need you...

Not just want, but *need*.

And he understood because he needed her as well. He had to have her. It wasn’t optional. It never had been.

With a guttural groan and a sigh of relief, Trigger pushed into her and slid home, burying himself to the hilt in her heat. Sensation rocked through him. The balls of his feet tingled, his stomach shook, every hair on his body stood on end, and his chest squeezed so tightly he could scarcely breathe. The world

dimmed to black and white, then zoomed back into colors so bright he wondered if he'd ever really seen them before.

She tightened her muscles around him and rocked up, drawing him farther into her body. Her breasts grazed his chest, her soft hands slipped over his back, greedily eating up his skin, and she bent forward and kissed him, her mouth soft and inviting.

She was gorgeous, simply, heartbreakingly beautiful.

And above all else, she was *his*.

* * *

About damn time, Harley thought as Trigger, hovering above her, poised at her center, the head of his latex-covered penis sliding against her weeping folds as he paused mid-thrust.

At last.

It felt like she'd been waiting forever for this moment. While she'd been fighting her attraction to him for months, her whole life had hinged on the next few seconds, the instant his body met hers.

His tortured gaze bored into hers, pinning her thoroughly. Desire had dilated his pupils, making his eyes a glorious midnight blue, and the way he looked at her, the possessiveness she saw in his gaze as he stared down at her as though she were the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen...

It was enough to make one a little emotional, and she blinked back tears, her throat tight.

She'd begged. She'd said please.

And she wasn't ashamed.

With a low moan that sounded as if it had been wrenched from his soul, he pushed back into her...and the rest of the world faded away. Harley sucked in a breath, instantly tightening around him, holding on to him.

He felt magnificent. Right. *Huge*. She arched her hips, meeting his torturously slow, rhythmic thrusts, savoring every thick inch of him as he invaded her body. He bent his head and suckled her breast, pulling at her nipple with his lips, licking it with his tongue. And with every determined sensual assault against her breasts, he plunged into her, seemingly trying to sever the invisible chord that ran between the two.

"You have damned near driven me crazy," he said, thrusting into her over and over again. She could feel the cool sheets on her back, his hot body at her front, and her breasts bounced on her chest, absorbing the impact of his magnificent frame as it slid repeatedly into hers. "I've wanted you since the instant I saw you," he confided as though it were somehow her fault. "Then the want turned to need, and I knew—I *knew*—that I wouldn't be able to help myself. That nothing would keep from taking you, having you."

She wrapped her arms around him, bent forward, and licked his male nipple, anchoring her legs on his hips so that he could come closer and hold her tighter. "I've wanted you, too," she said. "Needed you, too. I looked at you and...melted," she said, laughing softly. "I wanted to lick you from head to toe, fantasized about sucking on your bottom lip."

He moved faster and faster, pistoning in and out of her, his balls slapping against her tender flesh. “Do it now,” he said, lowering his head so she could do just that. She pulled that sulky lip into her mouth, slid her tongue over the soft, plum-like skin, and sighed with satisfaction as another wave of sensation bolted through her.

Fire licked through her veins, burning her up from the inside out, and she bucked frantically against him. She could feel the first quickening of release as it sparkled deep inside her, and every thrust of his body acted like a bellows, fanning the flame, building it higher. She clung to him, arched into him, whimpered, and thrashed as she came closer and closer to the inferno that waited for her. And then, without warning, the blaze swept through her, sucking the oxygen out of her lungs, tearing a long, keening cry from her throat as she convulsed around him.

Trigger pounded into her, milking the release, drawing every bit of pleasure from her body. His lips peeled away from his teeth, his beautifully muscled chest heaved, and then suddenly, she felt him tense, felt every muscle in his body atrophy as his seed flooded the latex barrier. It pulsed inside her, spasm after spasm, triggering belated delight deep in her core. He angled deep and held steady, his shoulders shaking as the orgasm broke over him.

He bent and kissed her, his eyes soft, his smile sated, and her heart gave an involuntary little squeeze.

“Definitely the perfect woman,” he said. He carefully rolled off of her and made his way to the bathroom. She heard

the water run briefly before he returned. When she spotted the towel in his hand, she automatically reached for it, but he held it away.

Realizing what he planned to do, she tapered down her instinct to fight him for control. Instead, she laid back and let him clean her. He had a way of disarming her that should piss her off. Instead, it turned her on. The thought made her chuckle.

“What’s funny,” he asked, dropping down beside her. He propped up on his elbow and peered at her through the darkness.

She gestured to where they were. “Just this,” she said. “It’s not how I imagined we’d, you know,” she trailed off.

She could see his eyes twinkling in the faint light, the dimple in his cheek. “Really? How did you imagine the first time?”

“With my back against the wall, in a dark part of the clubhouse, we’d managed to sneak off to. Or me bent over a hard surface, you with your pants around your knees, gripping my hips as you take me until my eyes roll back in my head.” She rolled her head toward him, smiled, and lifted a brow. “If you have a smart-ass comment, keep it to yourself.”

“No wisecrack. I’m just really turned on by that idea. Would you like to make that happen?” he asked, his hand coming up to play with her breast. He circled her nipple with his thumb, making goosebumps pebble over her skin.

Harley released a faltering breath. “I’m not an exhibitionist.”

“That wasn’t a no,” he said, circling her breast. “I’m pretty sure I can make that happen without an audience.” He slid a line down to her belly button. “If you want to do it,” he added, sliding a finger down her cleft over her still-sensitive clit. His gaze tangled with hers. “Any objections?”

She shook her head, quivering in anticipation. “N-none at all.”

CHAPTER 10

Harley stared into the distance as the coffee beside her was getting cold. Her thoughts were far from the caffeine jolt she usually needed to start the day. Instead, her mind was consumed by a persistent tug of war between her emotions and her convictions.

Harley had prided herself on the discipline and focus she'd exhibited over the past several months. Something that had been missing from her life until she found a haven with the Ravens. As a woman who had carved a small space for herself in a male-dominated world, she was used to putting up walls and suppressing any hint of vulnerability. Yet, one person had breached those defenses—the infuriatingly attractive and enigmatic Trigger.

She had been fighting an attraction she hadn't anticipated. From the moment she had laid eyes on him, there had been a spark—an inexplicable connection that she was desperate to deny. After all, he was everything she was supposed to avoid—reckless, unpredictable, and, worst of all, a constant reminder of her vulnerability.

Harley had convinced herself that the best action was to distance herself from Trigger. She had buried her feelings deep within, determined to focus on her work and keep her emotions in check. But as she stood outside his home, her resolve wavered, wearing the earrings he'd given her.

She'd snuck out of bed about thirty minutes ago. There was no doubt in her mind that he'd awakened the second she was no longer beside him, but it was as if he sensed that she

needed some space after the intense night they'd shared. She'd lost track of the number of times he'd pushed her headfirst into full-body convulsing orgasms, but it didn't matter. No one else had ever been able to do it. It was getting more challenging by the minute to deny the pull she felt towards him.

Even when she'd put the jewelry he'd given her on last night, she hadn't known how much of a difference it would make. But this morning, she was starting to grasp the significance of what it meant.

As if she'd summoned him with her thoughts, the backdoor opened, and her heart began to race, her nerves jumbling with conflicting emotions. Looking over her shoulder, she spotted him in the doorway. His rugged features were softened by the natural light of the sun rising for the day. His smoldering eyes seemed to strip away her carefully constructed façade, leaving her vulnerable and exposed in their wake.

Trigger, the epitome of the charming yet enigmatic bad boy, exuded an aura of danger that intrigued and unnerved her. Still, she couldn't deny the inexplicable pull towards him that she couldn't deny.

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Had enough time alone with your thoughts?"

The corners of her mouth twitched as he jumped straight to the point in his characteristic way. But she had to keep her defenses firmly in place. "Yeah, but we probably need to talk."

"Figured you would say that," he replied. "I'm going to grab a cup of coffee. You want a refill?"

She shook her head, and he turned on his heels. Her gaze was immediately drawn to the double skulls covering his back. She'd finally discovered where his traditional Raven's tattoo was after he'd dragged her back to his place to take care of her.

Harley was sure he had the most prominent club tattoo, and for a man like Trigger, it made perfect sense. As the club's enforcer, he had to put his body on the line in ways others probably didn't have to consider.

It also wasn't the only ink he had. Twelve tattoos had been etched into the skin. The most prominent being the skulls on his back, the Kraken on his right arm, the atomic explosion on his left arm, the matching triangles of destruction on his lower abdomen, and the word boomerang across his chest stretching from one side of his collarbone to the other. All of them had a special meaning and were all part of him.

A few minutes later, he returned with a cup in his hand. He sat it down next to hers as he stopped.

"I forgot to do something earlier," he stated before reaching out to grab the back of her neck. He leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss that was both teasing and intense. The sensation was electric, a jolt of desire that left Harley breathless and hungry for more. His mouth moved against hers in a rhythm that mirrored the cadence of their heartbeats, a dance of tongues that spoke of shared longing and unspoken yearning.

Harley reached for him, her touch a mixture of desperation and surrender. His hand slid to the small of her back, pulling

her impossibly closer until there was no space between them.

As the kiss deepened, their inhibitions crumbled, leaving only a raw and unfiltered connection that defied reason. Trigger's lips trailed a path of fire down Harley's jawline, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin of her neck. She gasped, her fingers tightening in his hair as a rush of pleasure coursed through her veins.

"Trigger," she breathed, her voice a seductive plea that hung in the air.

He met her gaze with a mixture of hunger and tenderness, his fingers tracing the curve of her spine as if mapping every inch of her body. "Harley," he replied, his voice a velvet promise that sent shivers down her spine.

Then he released her and sat down next to her.

"Look," he began, his voice earnest, "I know things can get intense between us. But you can't ignore the undeniable connection that we have."

Harley's heart pounded in her chest, her defenses warring with the pull she felt toward him. "Trigger, you come from a world that has left a stain so dark on my soul that I'm not sure it will ever go away. It's not as simple as a matter of attraction for me."

He nodded, understanding in his gaze. "I get it. Nothing about the life I live is easy. It takes a strong person to be able to handle it. But you are mine. You were from the moment I laid eyes on you. I can't let you go. I won't."

The emotions in his words struck a chord within her, resonating with the turmoil she had been feeling. She had been so focused on maintaining control that she had forgotten that sometimes, the most powerful emotions were the ones that defied logic.

Harley looked off into the distance and tried to collect her thoughts before she spoke. “I have no idea who my father is. My mother bounced from boyfriend to boyfriend. When they started paying attention to me, I left as fast as I could.” She paused as memories she’d tried hard to forget flooded her mind. “I struggled for years. Working whatever job I could land. Living with roommates, I didn’t know. Keeping the amount of things I owned low in value to keep them from getting stolen.”

She reached for her coffee and took a sip. It was barely lukewarm, but it served as the distraction she needed. “Five years ago, I ran into Ice at the bar I worked at. He reeled me in, and I didn’t stand a chance. At first, he laid the world at my feet. Whatever I wanted was mine. Then, he started to show his true colors. He became controlling, manipulative, and verbally and physically abusive. I won’t go into details because you saw me when I arrived.” Her voice trailed off, and she tried to figure out her next words. Then, she realized honesty was the best way to go. “Ice broke me. You would destroy me. I can’t let that happen.”

As difficult as it had been to say the words. Now that they were out, it felt free to open up and reveal pieces of herself she had long kept hidden. It was hard as hell to talk about her

struggles, her fears, and the weight of expectations that she carried.

“Then there is Ice. The fear that I experience every day over the thought that he will discover I’m still alive and try to finish the job.” Harley hesitated. Her fingers brushed the rim of her coffee cup, her gaze fixed on the swirling liquid within. “I’ve been fighting this attraction between us. It scares me—I’m afraid of losing control. I can’t afford to be distracted.”

“Harley?”

She looked up at him, shocked at the emotion that filled his gaze. “I can’t say I understand how you feel, but I’ve seen things you can’t imagine. I also know you are right. There are monsters out here. Ones that would tear apart the very fabric of your world. As insane as Ice is, he is on the low end of the monster scale.” He reached out, his fingers brushing a strand of hair from her face. His touch was surprisingly gentle, a stark contrast to the reputation he bore. “I’m not asking you not to be afraid. I’m asking you to let me protect you, to keep you safe from the coming storm.”

She met his gaze, her eyes searching his as if seeking a truth she desperately needed. “And what if you can’t? What if the fallout is too much for even you?”

His jaw clenched, his fingers curling into fists. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll destroy anyone who tries to harm you. I’ll burn the world to ashes before I let them lay a finger on you.”

The sincerity in his voice, the fire that blazed in his eyes, sent shivers down her spine. In that moment, she saw past the

reputation, past the darkness, and glimpsed the depth of his devotion. “Promise me you’ll be careful too. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

He cupped her face in his hands, his touch surprisingly tender. “I’ve survived worse than you can imagine, Harley. And I’ll keep doing it if it means you’re safe.”

“Trigger, I can’t promise you anything,” she said, her voice wavering.

He smiled a genuine and reassuring expression. “I don’t need promises, Harley. I just want a chance.”

With a nod, she offered him a small smile. “Okay, Trigger. Let’s see where this journey takes us.”

CHAPTER 11

Trigger timed his attack perfectly. He opened the door, reaching out and dragging his unsuspecting victim into the room. Harley barely had time to scream before he covered her mouth. Not wanting her completely afraid, he turned her in his arms and backed her toward the desk a few feet away.

Her eyes widened when she spotted him. She reached up to grab his hand, and he allowed her to pull it away.

“Damn it, Trigger. Why are you lurking? You scared the shit out of me.”

Instead of responding, he backed her up until she bumped into the desk, crowding her as he did.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, puzzlement filling her expression.

“You and those fucking shorts. Don’t ever wear them again unless it’s only for me.”

Before she could say anything, he pressed his lips to hers, kissing her with every ounce of pent desire that had surged through him from the moment he’d entered the clubhouse and spotted her behind the bar.

He’d never seen her in the denim shorts that she had on. The way they hugged her curvy ass, he’d remember. The strange thing was, unlike most of the sweet butts that walked around showing as much as they could as a form of temptation, Harley’s shorts covered her fully, stopping at mid-thigh. But the way they hugged her ass was sinful.

Before Harley, he would have never considered himself to be an ass man. But now, there was no denying it. When his lungs started to burn, he pulled back, leaving them both gasping.

“If you weren’t such a good kisser, I’d punch you for that,” she rasped.

He grinned. “So violent.”

“That’s nothing compared to what I will do if you don’t take me back to your place so we can finish this. I’m off the clock.”

“Who says we have to wait that long?” he asked as he lifted her onto the desk behind her.

“Absolutely not,” she hissed. “These clubhouse walls are paper thin.”

He chuckled because he couldn’t deny what she was saying. Instead, he reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head before going for the clasp on her shorts. She knocked his hands away before taking over the task while grumbling under her breath.

It wasn’t until she lifted her hips and slipped the shorts off that he was spurred into action.

Fuck.

He was so done for.

Harley reached for his shirt, pulling his mouth down to hers. She pushed her tongue into his mouth with a whimper that pounded need through him.

His hands grasped her hips, and he slid her ass forward to the edge of the desk and onto his rock-hard erection.

“I take this as a yes?”

He wasn't going to let her hide. He ground his hips into her, one hand cupping her breast, his thumb honing in on her puckered nipple. He wouldn't allow her to hide her growing feelings for him. With each day that passed, it became more and more apparent. She wasn't even trying to return to her room at the clubhouse anymore.

Her head fell back. She spread her thighs wider and pressed her slick heat closer. “Yes. I want this. I want you. I don't want to wait.”

Her sincere gaze burned into his while she waited, poised, like him, on the edge of a new precipice. But he was as powerless to this physical need as she seemed. He slanted his mouth across hers, pouring his passion, his honor, and his commitment into the kiss that stole a throaty gasp from her throat.

He shrugged his cut off and placed it on the back of the chair beside the desk. As soon as he was back in front of her, she impatiently grabbed the hem of his shirt. His hand slipped between them, his fingers probing beneath her drenched panties. He pressed his mouth to hers as he found her clit, primed and plump, and rubbed the pad of his thumb there as he tore his mouth from hers and said, “Do you trust me...to make this good enough for you that when we make our walk of shame, people will still be jealous?”

Fuck, what was wrong with him? Why push this? She was ready, begging him.

Her hips jerked, and she reached for his belt.

“Yes.” Her mouth traced his jaw, his neck, and between his pecs. She groaned, her face buried in the hair on his chest. “Yes, Trigger, I do.”

Appeased for now, he ripped at his fly, the scent of her arousal as potent as the hit of his morning coffee, his stamina at its limit.

“Quick... Hurry.” Her frantic hands freed him from his boxers, shoving his clothing over his hips as she returned her mouth to his with nibbling kisses that drove him perilously close to the edge.

He left her briefly to reach for his wallet to locate a condom. When he returned, tearing into the foil with his teeth as he crossed the room, she’d shimmied out of her panties.

She didn’t seem to care any more than he cared that her ass was crushing paperwork underneath it, and they were in jeopardy of knocking things to the floor.

Within seconds, he filled her, and they groaned together, chests heaving as if they’d held their breath for too long. The rightness of it, of her, made his head swim—euphoria or trepidation? He couldn’t tell and didn’t want to look too closely.

Then he set a pounding pace that drove them both to a torrid climax that left Harley wailing loud enough for the whole clubhouse to hear.

And by the time they'd regained enough bodily function to redress and make the walk back to his place, Harley held her head high as they made their way by a barrage of whistles and cheers. Her cheeks might have been red from embarrassment, but it didn't take away from her smile or blissed-out expression.

CHAPTER 12

Trigger leaned against a weathered wooden crate, waiting for one of the prospects to finish the inventory while he supervised. Training the recruits wasn't his favorite activity, but it was necessary if they wanted to keep the club going.

Also, it went without being said that if the enforcer didn't trust you, you didn't stand a chance of wearing a patch.

He was pulled from his thoughts when his phone vibrated. He was alert when he saw Link's name on the caller ID.

"What's up?" he answered.

"Everything going okay?"

Trigger frowned. "Link, I know you didn't call me for a social chat about something I can handle with my eyes closed. Cut the shit."

Link exhaled heavily, causing a chill to travel down Trigger's spine. Instinct made him put his index finger and thumb into his mouth before emitting a shrill whistle. Once he had everyone's attention, he gave them the universal sign to *hurry the fuck up* before turning his attention back to Link.

"Whatever it is, don't tell me now. I need a clear head on the road. We will be back there in a few. Just tell me that she's safe."

"She is," Link replied, not even trying to hide the fact that they were discussing Harley.

They'd been watching the Vipers since Harley was abandoned on their front step, even more so after what had

happened with Blue and the Slayers. So if Link was calling, something major was brewing.

“Keep her that way,” Trigger warned. “We’ll be back in a few hours.”

“See you then,” Link replied before hanging up.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and went over to help. It was clear that they needed to get back as fast as possible. The message he had received had cut through the stillness—a stark reminder that danger could creep into even the most hidden corners.

Thirty minutes later, they were on the road and returned to the compound. While he’d wanted to cut the trip time in half, he stuck to the speed limit—for the most part—and three hours later, they pulled up to the compound.

He tried not to panic when he didn’t see Harley. She was safe, and Link had promised to keep her that way. He knew he could trust his brothers to honor their word. It also made him realize she was a woman who had defied his expectations, who had managed to see past his rough edges to the man he had tried to bury. She was a force of nature, independent and fearless, and he couldn’t deny the magnetic pull he felt towards her.

Then he spotted her running toward him. The expression on her face had him swinging his leg over his bike and starting in her direction. He braced himself when she launched herself in his direction.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, running her hands over him as if searching for injuries.

When he began to chuckle, she looked at him like he’d gone crazy.

“What?”

“I thought something was wrong with you,” he admitted. “You looked frightened.”

“I am,” she stated. “You weren’t supposed to be back this early. That’s why I wasn’t here. Even though I came when I heard you all pulling in.” She paused, looking around as if trying to account for everyone. “Did everything go okay?”

He nodded, unsure how much he should reveal when he didn’t know much. “Yeah. No trouble at all. Which is a part of the reason why I’m here.”

She frowned as she picked up on his words. “What’s the other?”

“Link called. I don’t have all the details, but it sounds serious.”

Some of the tension left her body, but he knew it wouldn’t remain that way if he told her the rest. Harley was a fighter who refused to be confined by the expectations placed upon her. But now, realizing she was in danger ignited a fire within him. He would protect her at all costs.

“Oh...okay. Well, I’ll be at your place waiting for you.”

Before she could step away, he pulled her into his embrace and pressed his lips to hers. He kissed her like he’d been gone

for a week instead of a day. When he released her, she was breathless but smiling.

“I missed you, too,” she murmured.

“See you in a bit,” he replied.

He released her and watched her walk away before joining the band of brothers he knew stood waiting for him. The second he entered the clubhouse, he knew it was bad. If all of the officers were present, it was serious.

Stone stood as Trigger walked over. “I’m going to break protocol and leave it up to you as to whether you want to call Church to order or if you just want to meet with the officers.”

He studied his Prez, trying to read him. “You know what’s going on?”

“Yeah. Link filled me in,” Stone stated.

“Am I going to lose my shit?” he asked.

Stone nodded without saying anything.

Trigger closed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists as he tried to control his immediate reaction. “No church. Just officers. We’ll fill the others in later on whatever is brewing.”

“Let’s do this then,” Stone stated before turning his attention to the members milling around the room. “We are not on official lockdown, but keep your heads on a swivel. Understood.”

A chorus of “Yes, Prez” filled the room.

Trigger led the way into the smaller meeting room large enough to hold all the officers. He sat and tried to clear his

mind so that he could logically work through things he was about to hear.

Then Link walked in with a folder and put it right in front of Trigger as Rock closed the door. At that moment, he wondered if this was what it had felt like for them when Blue had been in danger. If it had, he was amazed that Stone and Rock hadn't set everything on fire because that's exactly what he wanted to do.

“What am I getting ready to look at?” he asked Link before reaching for the folder.

“A complete shit show. The short version is Ice is looking for Harley. He has money on her head, but she has to be brought back to him unharmed.”

“How much?” Trigger asked.

“One hundred thousand.”

“She's worth way more than that,” Trigger muttered, even though he knew it was enough to get a rat to turn. “Why is he making a move like this now?”

“That's where the story gets real interesting,” Link admitted. “This appears to be part greed and part ego. You know Ice's reputation. Harley is the only one who managed to get away—even if it was with help. That's the ego part. The greed part is he wants in on some of the new territory we've acquired. He knows that the partnerships are new, and he's probably trying to see if there are any weak links. While he may not be able to flip an entire club, if he can turn one or two members, that's all it would take to start trouble.”

Trigger thumbed through the information Link had gathered. “Does Ice know that she’s here?”

“No. However, I can’t guarantee that he won’t find out,” Link stated. “I also can’t tell you how long it may take with a bounty.”

“This also puts us in an interesting situation,” Rock added. “We have to keep Harley out of view. While we can’t do anything about the people who have already seen her, it’s best that she not be around when we handle business concerning the territories we’ve acquired.”

His V.P. didn’t have to elaborate as to why. They didn’t know the loyalty of the new clubs. If any of them decided to rat out Harley for the money or in an attempt to create an alliance with the Vipers instead of the Ravens, it would be a disaster.

“So no working the bar or being in the clubhouse when we have company,” Stone instructed.

Leaning back in the chair, he exhaled heavily. “This is going to gut her. I need to be the one to tell her.”

“She gonna run?”

He looked over at Everest. “If you’d asked me that a month ago, my answer would have been yes. Now, my gut tells me no, but this is going to send her into a weird headspace. This is the one thing she’s been trying to avoid.”

“You know Blue will do whatever she can,” Rock added.

Trigger dragged his palm down his face before slamming it on the table. “Fuck! She doesn’t deserve this.”

“You’re right,” Stone agreed. “We will figure out a way to handle this without putting Harley in danger. She’s one of us, and we take care of ours.”

Trigger looked down at the folder again, his anger threatening to boil over as he stared at the images—the chilling reminders of a threat that he couldn’t disregard.

Harley was a woman who had burrowed into his heart. He was a man whose past was a tapestry of mistakes and missteps. But Harley had seen beyond his façade, and now, the thought of something happening to her struck him like a blow.

“I’m going to kill this fucker the first chance I get,” Trigger promised.

“Kill shot is yours,” Stone promised.

As much as he was looking forward to that, the guarantee was hollow. It wouldn’t change what he had to do.

“I have to tell her. The sooner, the better.” He looked over at Everest and Viking. “I’m sure she probably won’t be in for a few days. That’s probably best, as we’ll have company this weekend.”

“Yeah,” Trigger grumbled as he pushed back from the table. “Let me go break this to her now. I will probably be out of commission for the rest of the night.”

“Give us a shout if you need anything,” Viking offered.

“I will,” Trigger replied as he left the room.

But the truth be told, there was nothing anyone could do right now. This was going to devastate Harley. He exited the

clubhouse and climbed onto his bike before starting the engine. As he drove the short distance to his place, he thought about the sparks that had ignited between them, the banter, and the moments that had left a lasting impact.

At first, he'd fought against his growing attraction, convinced that he was too rough around the edges to deserve someone like her. But now, the reality that she was in danger wiped away his reservations.

He came to a halt outside of his sanctuary. Confirmation that Harley was meant for him because she was inside, and he still considered it to be that.

He dismounted his bike and moved towards the front door, his footsteps purposeful and measured. If he appeared calm, perhaps Harley would take the news better.

Just as he reached the door, it swung open. Instinct made him want to go for his weapon, but Harley came into view, and he relaxed.

“Hey,” she greeted. “Is everything...no...nooooooo...”

She backed away from him, telling him that perhaps he hadn't hidden his emotions as well as he thought he had. It was when the tears filled her eyes before they began to stream down her cheeks that he sprang into action.

Closing the door behind him, he secured it before moving toward her and pulling her into his embrace. He didn't even waste his breath trying to console her. There was nothing he could say. Instead, he just held her.

CHAPTER 13

Trigger jerked awake. He wasn't sure what had awoken him. Hell, he hadn't even remembered falling asleep. The last thing that he could recall was holding Harley on the sofa. He shot upright when he realized his arms were empty.

"I'm here."

He turned his head in the direction of her voice. She was curled up in a chair near the window, wrapped in a blanket. He relaxed once he saw she was okay.

"How long have you been up?" he asked.

"Not long. I had to use the bathroom."

He reached for his cell phone and grimaced when he spotted the time. "Have you eaten?"

"Not since lunch, but I'm not hungry. I can't eat right now."

"You need to," he countered as he swung his legs around so that he was sitting.

After a few minutes, he pushed to his feet and groaned. "I'm too old to be sleeping on the couch."

She didn't respond, but he saw how the corners of her mouth twitched at his statement.

"I'm going to take a quick shower. Then I'll heat some of the leftover casserole you made yesterday."

"I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere," she promised.

The words settled him some, but he didn't waste time. He took a quick shower feeling a lot better once he had. When he returned, he found Harley sitting in the same spot. He went into the kitchen and pulled out the leftovers. She joined him a short time later.

When she started helping, a little more of the tension swirling within him dissipated. While it wasn't a complete one-eighty, it was enough to show him that she hadn't completely shut down as he feared she would.

He didn't pressure her to talk as they ate, but he knew she was thinking—a lot.

Before it was all said and done, he would get her to express her thoughts. One thing he was all too familiar with was being alone with your thoughts and allowing them to eat you from the inside out.

Once they were finished eating, he pushed to his feet and began cleaning up. When she started to help, he stopped her.

“Go take a shower and get ready for bed. I have this. Meet me back in the living room once you're finished.”

When she left the kitchen without arguing, it took everything in him not to throw the plate in his hand and yell. But he had to keep it together for her. No matter what. She was clearly distraught by the news he'd shared with her earlier.

He would never forget the way she collapsed in his arms. The guttural scream that she'd emitted before her knees gave out. One that must have carried around the compound because several of his brothers had texted him. He'd only returned one

—to Rock and asked him to let everyone else know that he had it handled but that he would call if that changed.

Not knowing how much time he had, he finished putting everything away and headed for the living room. He'd just settled onto the couch when Harley returned. A glance at her face told him that she'd cried again at some point during her shower. But even with red-rimmed eyes and splotchy cheeks, she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

He held his hand out to her. "Come here. Tell me what you need right now."

"To forget," she whispered as she walked over to him. "I can't shut my mind off. I just...I don't know. Make me forget. If only for a little while. Please."

His stomach clenched in anger, every thump of his heart promising retribution the moment he had a chance. He tugged her into his arms, ready and willing to give her something else to focus on, if only briefly.

"I'll give you anything you want, Harley."

He covered her mouth with his in a slow, lazy exploration of dueling tongues because he meant what he'd promised. He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck and held her mouth to his. Without breaking the kiss, he scooped his arms around her waist and lifted her so she was plastered against him from shoulders to thighs. He kissed her until they were both panting hard.

He twisted his mouth away with a groan. "Fuck, you're so sexy. Get naked."

To his surprise, she shook her head. “I need something different tonight. Everything feels so out of control. I want to...”

Her voice trailed off, and uncertainty filled her expression, but he knew what she was saying. Any other time, he would make her ask—possibly beg. But tonight wasn’t that night. She needed to be in control of something, and he could give that to her—temporarily.

He shifted until he lay flat on the cushions, dragging her with him so that she was draped over his lap. His hands settle on the swell of her hips. He wanted her close, at arm’s length, the turmoil surrounding them leaving him craving a deeper connection.

She smiled a sexy half-smile once she realized he was on board. “Touch yourself for me.”

Ever since she’d walked in on him jacking off in the shower in an attempt to keep from mauling her when she’d been too sore for sex, she hadn’t stopped talking about it. Even going as far as to whisper how much it had turned her on in his ear during times when he was balls-deep in her.

He lifted one eyebrow, biting back his eagerness to comply. “You want that?”

She nodded, her breath hitching. “I liked that you couldn’t stop yourself when I walked in on you. You wanted me that much even when you couldn’t have me.”

Something in his chest surged anew at her stark honesty, her embracing what she wanted. She completely dismantled

him. “I want you more now.”

“Show me,” she demanded, reaching for the hem of her T-shirt.

Fuck, what was she doing to him?

He yanked at the drawstring on his pants and released his cock, his heart thumping when her aroused stare dropped to his crotch. He gripped himself, lazily tugging while he shoved his pants down his thighs with his free hand. He stared into her eyes. “I want you, Harley.”

She licked her lips. “I see that. But do you trust me?” Her bold question hung in the air as she moved away from him to slide her pajama pants down her legs. She tossed them aside before crawling back over him.

“Yes.” The truth of that single word surprised him, but it wasn’t a lie or false assurance to get laid.

“We’ll see,” she says, wriggling free of her top, swiftly adding it to the pile of discarded clothing on the floor until she was gloriously naked and every muscle holding him together strained her way.

“Look at you,” he croaked, his eyes gorging on her naked breasts, her tight nipples, and the sweet haven at the top of her thighs. His chest tightened with repressed need. The need to go to her, to touch her and make things one hundred percent right for her, where words failed him because he wanted to give her what she needed. This is about her—her pleasure, her being in control, and him letting her do whatever she needed to, no matter what it costs him.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered.

He groaned the effort to be everything she wanted weakening his will to give her what she wanted without interfering. She chewed her lip, her stare still torn between his face and his hand pumping his cock.

She joined him then, her hand slipped between her thighs, and her fingers found her clit, her whole body jerking in confirmation and her eyes half-drugged with lust as they sat face-to-face. Open, exposed, and vulnerable.

“The sight of you is almost too much.” He struggled to talk, the vision of her pleasuring herself while his dick was in his hand so good, but he didn’t want to rush this. He wanted to show her that he cared about her despite the shit show currently surrounding them.

She swayed, flush staining her chest, and he became jealous of the slick fingers between her legs. He wanted to be the source of her pleasure. He wanted her moans, her ecstasy, and her orgasm so that she could see the way he felt about her and her beautiful seduction without words.

He pumped faster, the needs of his body growing harder to ignore.

She rushed him then, the slam of her naked body colliding with him, almost making him hit his head on the arm of the couch. While the pain would have been worth it, he managed to catch himself as her mouth slammed to his, as he wrapped an arm around her waist. She sank into their kiss, a lazy, decadent feast of lips and tongue and her sexy little moans.

Then she pulled and reached for his arms. He watched with fascination and mounting excitement as she placed his palms flat on the cushion on both sides of him.

“It’s symbolic—I know you could easily move them if you wanted to.” Her hand delved between her legs, gripping and tugging his cock. “I’m going to make you feel good.”

She smiled and held his face between her palms, her fingertips gliding into his beard with such tenderness that he went completely still.

He wanted to lift his hands and hold her, but he’d made a promise. So he gave her his words instead. “It’s okay to let someone be there for you, to hold you up or catch you when you fall. You don’t have to be strong alone. It’s okay to trust again. That’s why I’m letting you do this to me. To show you that this goes both ways.”

She rose a fraction, her eyes hypnotizing, and slid the head of his bare cock back and forth through her wet folds, the friction almost too good. Her hand slid across his chest, her fingertips trailing through his chest hair until her nails dug into his clenched pec.

Her voice when she spoke was a hypnotic, lulling tone. “You’re so powerful. Strong and in control. You make me feel small, somehow cherished, just with a look or a simple touch. I want you to feel the same way.”

The fantastic torture to the head of his cock continued as she rocked her hips over him, and it took everything in him not to plunge inside the tight, wet haven that awaited him. To take

over, to block out her words, her caring until the pleasure swallowed everything else.

“You take care of everyone,” she murmured, “carry more than your share of the load.” Her finger covered his mouth, stopping the interruptions sitting there. “For the next few minutes, you’re mine to do whatever I choose with. Don’t speak unless it’s to tell me how good something feels.”

And before he could agree or disagree, she pushed off his lap, slid lower, then took his cock into her mouth. His hips bucked—he couldn’t stop them—and she smiled, humming out encouragement and gripping the base of his erection until his vision tunneled.

Everything stopped.

Because everything became Harley, the amazing things she was doing to him, and the feeling of letting go and being worshipped.

His entire body was board-stiff under her, every muscle clenched as she sucked him down and watched his every reaction. Just when he started bucking his hips up off the sofa, chasing the paradise she promised, she stopped, sliding into position over him, and sank downward until he was buried to the hilt inside her sweet, tight pussy.

He groaned aloud, his mind blank, every brain impulse focused on the firing of pleasure centers. With a crunch of his abs, he sat up, wrapped his arms around her, and dragged her closer so he could bury his face against her wild heartbeat and ride out the shock waves of ecstasy buffeting his body.

Her hands clutched his shoulder, and she held him tightly to her chest as her hips made the smallest of rocking motions. “You fill me, Trigger. You feel so good, and I’m going to make you come.” He clutched her tighter, speechless, certain nothing in his life so far compared to this moment.

He raised his head, kissing her until she pulled away for breath, her rhythm choppy and uncoordinated.

“Come with me,” he demanded.

At her nod, her whimper, he dove for one of her nipples. At the first scrape of his facial hair over the sensitive bud, she cried out and squeezed his dick. He nuzzled her breast, laving all his attention on the nipple—sucking and licking and scraping until she was a panting, writhing mess, undulating in his lap while she clung to his shoulders, a fearless goddess guiding them towards oblivion.

She smiled, the mind-blowing sight almost better than it felt to be deep inside her. He crushed her close until her breasts flattened against his chest and rubbed his lips over hers, needing more, needing everything.

She pulled away, ducking from between his arms, pushing them over his head. “Lie back.”

He followed her command, sliding back onto the sofa, his hands itching to grab her ass and shunt her with him.

But she was there. She braced her arms beside his head on the sofa, her pleasure-drunk stare latched to his, shifting the organ dead center in his chest.

She started to rock again, tossing her long hair back and forcing her breasts forward. He gritted his teeth against the pleasure of her riding him, her moans of ecstasy growing more vocal.

“Trigger.” She groaned his name, reaching to cup both her breasts with her own hands.

His restraint broke. He couldn’t take anymore, couldn’t watch and not touch. He couldn’t deny himself the act of pleasuring her as she drove him close to the edge. He was greedy for her. He grasped her ass cheeks, gently parting them, and slipped his fingers between her opening so he could feel himself sliding inside her tight sex with every rock of her hips.

“That’s right, take what you want from me. Take what you need.” He wanted more hands to explore every inch at once—she was so fucking tempting—but he consoled himself with the two he had, filling one with her perfect breast while the other caressed her backside.

She started to rock her hips in earnest, finding her rhythm again, and the sight of her above him, the feel of her clamped around him, making him close to blowing. He bit back a curse. His jaw clenched as he willed away the urge to give in to the sharp sensation of pleasure bathing his dick. She was driving, but he wasn’t going anywhere without her.

His thumb and forefinger rolled her nipple as she picked up her pace. She took his other hand, sliding it back between her cheeks.

“Touch me here.”

He obeyed, feathering a fingertip lightly over her tight pucker so she was dragged back into a sensual haze he never wanted to see end. And then he was lost, no longer caring who was in charge or who was letting go, as long as they finished together.

“Harley, you trust me, don’t you?”

She nodded on a strangled whimper. “Yes.”

The glaze to her eyes told him she was too far gone to care whose fantasy this started as and who was in control.

“I trust you, too.” Giving her what she wanted was the easiest thing in the world.

She cried out, her ass bumping up and down on his lap. “Yes, Trigger.”

With every downward stroke, his finger skirted her rear, each fractured cry, each moan telling him he was right on target to amp up her pleasure while staving off his own. He wanted her ruined, as she’d ruined him; he wanted her broken and desperate and out of her mind because that’s where his head was.

“Touch your nipples,” he ordered because he needed both of his hands to finish this the way he wanted to. She obeyed, her finger circling and pinching where his left off, and he gripped both of her ass cheeks, adding upward tilts of his pelvis to her down-strokes so every thrust dragged a cry from her arched throat.

“Trigger, please.”

“I’m there, too—come with me.’ He pulled her cheeks apart, grinding their hips together while his fingers probed deeper into her crease to stimulate more nerves.

She cried out, her orgasm wracking her entire body rigid, and he felt her spasms around his dick and against the tip of his finger.

He bucked up into her tight, claspng warmth a handful more times, joining her with a roar of release that surpassed any he’d ever experienced.

By the time speech was possible again, they’d been sprawled on the sofa in a naked tangle for several minutes. A furnace bubbled inside him, but he spied goose pimples on Harley’s arm, so he tugged the blanket from the back of the sofa over them. And even though he’d complained about the sofa being uncomfortable earlier, as his eyes drifted shut, he didn’t care that he was probably about to fall asleep on it again. He was right where he wanted to be.

CHAPTER 14

Harley slowly came awake as an unsettling sensation nudged at her subconscious—an itch of unease that pricked her senses. Her eyes fluttered open, heavy with sleep, and she tried to make sense of her surroundings in the dimly lit room.

Several of the clubs that the Ravens were building alliances with were at the compound tonight. In light of recent events with Ice, that meant she had to stay out of sight. It bothered her because, once again, her tormentor had inserted his brand of control over her life. On the other hand, she had a chance to spend the evening with her best friend, vegging out on junk food and watching a few movies until neither of them could keep their eyes open.

Wanting to be in Trigger's bed when he returned from the gathering, she went back to his place. With Calamity and Jingles keeping watch, she'd felt safe—but not anymore. Something was wrong.

The room was cast in shadows, the silence oppressive and haunting. She blinked, trying to shake off the fog of sleep. Then, she noticed the chilling presence—the unmistakable feeling of being watched. Panic surged through her, and she tried to sit up, but a hand clamped firmly over her mouth, stifling her scream.

“Shhh, Harley,” a sinister voice hissed in her ear, sending a shiver down her spine.

Don't make a sound, or I'll hurt you.”

Harley's heart pounded in her chest as she stared wide-eyed into the darkness. The hand over her mouth was cold and gloved, the touch sending shivers down her spine. She wanted to fight back, to call for help, but fear held her in its grip.

A masked face hovered above her, eyes gleaming with a vicious intensity. She felt the weight of his body pressing her into the bed, the cold metal of a blade pressing against her throat.

“Be a good girl and come with me,” he whispered, his breath hot against her skin. “Ice wants to have a word with you.”

Desperation surged within her, and she fought back with every ounce of strength she had. She bit down on the gloved hand that covered her mouth, tasting the metallic tang of blood as she struggled to break free. But the stalker's grip was unyielding, his strength unnatural.

With a sudden surge of energy, Harley kicked and thrashed, trying to free herself from his hold. She elbowed him in the ribs, landing a blow that sent a grunt of pain escaping from his lips. But he was quick to recover, pinning her down with a brutal force that stole her breath away.

“Stop fighting,” the stalker hissed, his voice laced with menace. “I don't want to hurt you, but I will.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she realized the gravity of her situation. She was trapped, defenseless, and the man who had terrorized her every thought was now closer to having her back in his grip. She tried to scream again, but the attackers'

gloved hand clamped down on her throat, cutting off her air supply.

Her vision began to blur as she gasped for breath, her struggles growing weaker by the second. Darkness surrounded her, and she knew she was losing the battle. Her mind raced, and she thought of Trigger, their love, and the desperate hope that he would find her in time.

Her attacker continued to tighten his grip, his gloved fingers closing around her throat with deadly intent. Her struggles grew weaker, her world fading into darkness. She could feel the cold embrace of unconsciousness beckoning her, and with a final, desperate burst of strength, she clawed at the stalker's face.

He cried out in pain, his grip loosening for a fraction of a second. It was all the time Harley needed. With the last reserves of her strength, she managed to break free, gasping for precious air as she stumbled away from the bed.

Her assailant's mask had been torn in the struggle, revealing his twisted face—a visage contorted by madness and anger. He lunged at her again, but this time, Harley was prepared. She grabbed a nearby lamp, swinging it with all her might and striking the stalker on the side of the head.

He staggered back, dazed and disoriented, giving Harley the chance she needed to escape. She fled from the room, her heart racing as she rushed downstairs, her voice finally finding its strength as she screamed for Trigger.

But her cries fell on deaf ears as no one came. Her attacker, recovering from the blow, pursued Harley with a

chilling determination. He cornered her in the dimly lit living room, his gloved hands reaching out to grab her once more.

Harley's desperate fight was in vain as the stalker overpowered her. With a cruel smile, he silenced her cries with a sharp blow to the head.

CHAPTER 15

The clubhouse buzzed with voices, the atmosphere thick with tension as Trigger tried to focus on the discussion at hand. But his thoughts kept drifting back to Harley. She was never far from his mind, especially since threats had recently surfaced that jeopardized her safety.

She was at his place with two of his most trusted prospects. They were tasked with keeping her safe, to ensure that nothing happened to her while he was tied up in this meeting with the different clubs. But a gnawing feeling of unease had taken hold of him, a gut instinct that refused to be ignored.

A glance at his phone told him that it was five minutes past time for them to check in. Excusing himself from the table, he stepped away to send a text to Calamity and Jingles. A couple of minutes passed, and neither man responded. Trigger immediately walked back to the table and stopped next to Rock.

“I have to go. Something is wrong. Calamity and Jingles are not answering their phones.”

Rock stood and signaled to Everest and Grimm before leaning over to say something to Stone. Then he turned and led the way out of the clubhouse, not speaking until they were outside.

“When was the last time you spoke to them?” Rock asked.

“About twenty minutes ago. Calamity said that Harley was in bed and that everything was okay. He was supposed to

update me five minutes ago. I texted him instead, with no response. Same for Jingles.”

Nothing else was said as they quickly made their way across the grassy area to his place. The moonlight cast eerie shadows among the trees. He couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong, that his worst fears were coming true.

When Trigger arrived at his home, his heart plummeted. The scene that greeted him was one of chaos and violence. Jingles and Calamity lay unconscious on the ground, their faces bloodied and bruised. Calamity's shoulder looked strange, telling Trigger that it was probably dislocated. Fury welled up within him as he rushed to their side, checking for signs of life. They were alive but incapacitated, unable to speak due to their injuries.

Trigger couldn't help but feel responsible. He had entrusted Harley's safety to them, and now they lay battered and broken.

His home hadn't fared any better. The interior was in shambles, with furniture overturned and shattered glass strewn across the floor. It was clear that a brutal struggle had taken place here. Calamity and Jingles had put up a hell of a fight. They'd been outnumbered.

His voice trembled as he called out for Harley, the desperation evident in his raw, hoarse cry. “Harley! Where are you?”

Silence was his only response, a haunting void that seemed to mock him. Trigger moved through the wreckage, heading

straight to his bedroom, hoping to find some sign of her. But there was nothing—no trace of Harley.

His phone buzzed, and Trigger's heart raced as he retrieved it from his pocket. The message that greeted him was chilling—an image of Harley, bound and gagged, her eyes filled with terror.

Rage surged through Trigger, a white-hot fire that threatened to consume him. He knew that this was a message from whomever Ice had kidnapped Harley, a sadistic taunt that left no doubt about Harley's perilous situation. He would do anything to protect her, to bring her back to safety.

He made his way back downstairs, the expressions on his brother's faces telling him that they already knew.

“We need to get Link. They've taken Harley.”

* * *

The air was thick with tension as Trigger brought his bike to a stop. For the first time that he could recall, the Ravens had broken rank as they rode. They'd allowed him to lead the way since it was his woman that they were on the way to rescue.

Either Ice was a complete idiot or too arrogant for his own good. Truth be told, it was probably both.

After realizing Harley was missing, Trigger asked Link to activate the locator in Harley's earrings. While she might have protested receiving them as a gift, she hadn't taken them off since he'd given them to her. While no one doubted that Harley was being delivered to Ice, the question had been to what location.

While they'd had at least a thirty-minute head start, they were surprised to see that locator pinged at an abandoned warehouse that the Ravens used on occasion just on the other side of town. That sort of boldness was asking for death, and Trigger had no problem dealing with it.

Even so, it had taken another thirty to round up enough backup that they could trust. It was obvious that they had a traitor in their midst. Someone had fed the Vipers enough information to fill them in on the perfect time to strike and where they could find Harley. Once he figured out who it was, they'd been on the receiving end of the same treatment that Ice was about to get.

His heart raced with a mix of fear and anger as he contemplated the task ahead. The woman he cared about, Harley, had been taken by a twisted asshole, and the time for talking had long passed. The only way to bring her back was to fight, to unleash the violence that always simmered beneath the surface.

Beside Trigger stood his brothers, united by a code of honor and fierce loyalty. The tension in the air was intense as they prepared for what would undoubtedly be a brutal confrontation.

The warehouse was shrouded in shadows, the light from the moon casting an eerie glow over the scene. They didn't need it, though. This was their territory—an ugly reminder of the danger that had infiltrated their world. With a silent nod, Trigger signaled to his comrades, and they fanned out, surrounding the building.

The entrance was dark and foreboding, a gaping maw that seemed to swallow all hope. Trigger's grip tightened on his gun, his knuckles white against the cold metal. He took a deep breath, his heart pounding with a mix of determination and anxiety. This was it—the moment of reckoning.

Without a word, Trigger kicked open the door, the hinges screeching in protest as they swung open. The room beyond was dimly lit, shadows dancing on the walls, and the stench of fear and desperation hung heavy in the air.

And there, in the center of the room, stood Ice—a man whose obsession had spiraled into madness. His eyes gleamed with a sickly intensity as he held Harley captive, a knife pressed against her throat. She looked pale and terrified, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and hope as she met Trigger's gaze.

She appeared to be in one piece, but he could already see bruising on her face. Someone had hit her. He didn't know if it was at the hands of Ice or the person who had taken her. Either way, they'd all signed their death warrant.

“Let her go,” Trigger's voice was low and dangerous, his gaze locked onto the man who had taken the most precious thing in his life from him.

Ice's laughter echoed through the room, a chilling sound that sent shivers down Trigger's spine. “Ah, you've come to play hero, I see.”

Trigger's grip on his gun tightened, his fingers flexing as a surge of anger coursed through him. He took a step forward,

his eyes never leaving Harley's frightened form. "This ends now. Let her go, and I might let you walk out of here alive."

Ice's grin widened, his fingers tightening around the knife. "Oh, I don't think so. She's mine, you know. I've waited so long to get her back into my grasp."

"Told you her pussy wasn't worth it."

Trigger's attention was drawn to a dark corner. A second later, Piston appeared, his expression just as sinister as Ice's. At least now he knew who one of the traitors was.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Trigger muttered more to himself than anyone else.

Without warning, Piston raised his arm. Trigger beat him to the draw and fired off a shot before dodging for a cover pallet of wood. His thoughts automatically went to Harley. The last thing he'd wanted to do was involve her in the middle of a shootout.

He peered around the corner and spotted several people using whatever they could find for makeshift cover. Meeting the gazes of several Ravens, he communicated with a few hand gestures. They'd come up with a plan before leaving the clubhouse that he prayed would work.

Once he'd silently relayed the message to as many people as he could, Trigger counted to five before getting into position to make a run for Piston.

The second his cover fire sounded out, he was on his feet, running toward his target. Halfway there, Piston showed just how much of an idiot he was by raising his head. Trigger took

the shot with deadly accuracy and kept moving until he was close enough to dive for another pallet.

Just as the shooting stopped, he was distracted by a cry of pain that he recognized as Harley's. He peered around the barrier and spotted Ice using her as a barrier.

"You are a fucking coward," Trigger yelled out in anger.

"Tell your men to put their weapons down, and I'll let her go," Ice called out.

"And a liar," Trigger countered. "How about you man up, and the two of us can settle this? Not that you have a choice. By my calculation, most, if not all, of your men are dead or wounded. So, let's settle this. Just me and you."

"You're full of shit," Ice bit out. "We both know that as soon as I drop this knife—"

A loud gunshot filled the room, followed by another scream, and Trigger was on his feet, immediately moving toward her. Then he froze. Harley had fallen to the floor, a lifeless Ice crumpled beside her.

But the man standing there holding the gun was one he didn't recognize. Instinctively, Trigger raised his arm to fire.

"No, Trigger. Stop! He saved me," Harley cried out hoarsely.

Trigger frowned, his finger itching to take the shot.

"Please. He saved me. He's the one that brought me to you that night."

As Harley continued to plead, the man in question placed his gun on the ground before kicking it away. Then he clasped his hands behind his head before taking a step back from Harley. He didn't resist even as Everest reached for him.

That spurred Trigger into action, and he rushed over before scooping her up into his arms. She clung to him, tears streaming down her face.

"Please don't hurt him," she begged one more time before burying her face into his chest and wrapping his arms around his neck.

As much as it pissed him off to hear her pleading for a Viper member's life, he would let it stand for now. Giving a slight nod to Everest, he turned his attention back to the woman in his arms.

"Harley," his voice was rough with emotion, his fingers gentle as he reached out to touch her face. "You're bleeding. We need to check you out. Okay?"

Her body trembled against his, and her grip on him was fierce and desperate. At first, he wasn't sure if she'd heard him. Then she nodded.

"Thank you for coming for me."

Trigger held her close, his heart pounding against his chest as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'll always come for you, Harley. I won't let anyone hurt you."

He found a spot where she wouldn't be able to see the gruesome scene surrounding them. Instead, he focused on

trying to figure out where the blood was coming from and how bad the wound was. Deacon and Viking appeared by his side.

“What are we looking at?” Deacon asked.

“Not sure yet,” Trigger admitted, and he began to examine Harley.

It immediately became apparent that Ice had nicked her neck with the knife. Fortunately, it wasn't too bad. The bruising on her face and the hand prints on her neck were worse. He accepted the antiseptic and gauze, dousing the bandage with it before touching it to Harley's wound. She hissed in pain but didn't flinch.

Once it was clean and he'd wiped some of the trailing blood away, he pressed a cleaned bandage to it and secured it with tape. He'd barely finished when Harley began running her hands over him.

“Are you okay?”

He grinned. “Not a scratch.”

She closed her eyes and hugged him briefly before pulling back. “Calamity and Jingles?”

“Took a hell of a beating, but they are recovering.”

Sadness filled her expression. “I had no idea they were under attack. I was upstairs asleep. I would have called you. I swear.”

Trigger cupped her face between his hands. “No. This isn't your fault. But it's over now. Ice chose his fate.”

Her eyes widened. “Nitro. Look, I know he’s a Viper, but he’s one of the good guys. I promise. He’s the one that hid me from Ice and helped me to escape.”

“Were the two of you...”

His voice trailed off. He couldn’t finish the question. Not sure he wanted to know the answer. While a shared relationship worked for Stone, Rock, and Blue, it wasn’t the life for him.

Harley rolled her eyes. “No, you dumb ass. There is and never has been anything between me and Nitro.” She exhaled. “Even tonight, he risked his life and ran interference. Told Ice it would be better to wait until you got here before doing anything to me. Best diversion tactic ever. So you can’t kill him.”

Trigger rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to hide his frustration. “I guess not.” Then he pulled her into his arms again. “Thank fuck you are okay. I was scared out of my mind when I realized you were missing.”

Harley tapped her earlobe, both earrings still in their rightful spot. “I guess I won’t complain about these too much now.”

Trigger laughed before briefly pressing his mouth to hers. “Good,” he replied when he pulled back. “That’s one less thing I have to hear about for the rest of our lives.”

Harley slapped him across his pec muscle even as she smiled. “This still doesn’t mean that I’m your old lady.”

She jumped when he slapped her on the ass in response.
“Trigger!”

“Just reminding you who you belong to,” he replied.

Harley shook her head before pressing her forehead to his chest. “Take me home, Trigger—and prove it.”

EPILOGUE

Three months later

Trigger watched the woman he'd come to love more than life fawn all over Blue's expanding stomach. At a little over seven months pregnant, she was almost nothing but stomach. So there was hardly a time when he didn't find Harley belly whispering.

While Stone, Rock, and Blue knew the gender of their baby, they refused to share the news with anyone. Blue had a gender reveal planned in a few days, and her baby shower was in two weeks. Harley complained about her friend keeping the info from her, but Blue wouldn't budge.

Not that the trio were the only ones keeping secrets. Today was probably going to be the second-best day of his life if things went as planned. The first had been the second he'd met the woman standing across the room from him.

Catching the eye of Stone, he knew it was time to get this show on the road.

"Harley!"

She looked over her shoulder and glared at him. "Why are you yelling like a crazy man?"

"Because I'm insane," he joked. "Come here. I have something I need to ask you."

She arched a dark brow in his direction but started across the room instead of spewing profanity at him as he'd expected.

A lot had changed between them since the night she'd been kidnapped.

Harley was a lot more relaxed. Her laughs came a little easier, but she still threatened to shoot him with his own gun whenever he pissed her off. Nights were still a little rough, but whenever she woke from a nightmare, she always reached for him. Simply put, he fell more in love with her every day, and he knew she felt the same. Now, he just had to get her to admit it.

His heart pounded with a blend of nervousness and determination as the woman who had captured his heart stopped before him. Her eyes shimmered with emotions—love, anticipation, and a touch of uncertainty. Telling him that, once again, he wasn't doing a good job of keeping his expression unreadable.

He pulled her into his arms and brushed his lips against hers, once, twice, and then again a third time for luck before pulling back.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” he asked.

Tears filled her eyes as she gasped. Then her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. He tried not to smile as she struggled to speak, but he continued, not wanting to give her a chance to.

“When I first met you, I thought I was invincible. I rode through life like a wild storm, not caring where the road would take me. But then you came into my life, and suddenly, everything changed.

He leaned closer to her, his intense gaze locked onto her.

“I’ve been through hell and back and seen things that would make most people run the other way. But then I met you...a woman fighting her own battles, defying the odds, and challenging me to be better.”

He tenderly touched her cheek, his fingers brushing against her skin. “I used to think love was a weakness, a distraction. But damn it, I was wrong. You, my beautiful rebel, you’ve shown me that love is the most powerful force in the world. It’s what makes us human, what gives life meaning.”

He took her hand, holding it tightly, his grip strong and reassuring. “I’ve battled internal and external demons, and I’ve come to realize that you’re the light that guides me through the darkest nights. You’re the reason I fight, the reason I survive, and the reason I want to be a better man.”

He smiled when she took a shuddering breath. “I love you more than words can ever express. It’s not just about the adrenaline rush of our wild rides or the danger we’ve faced together. It’s about how you see through the tough exterior I’ve built around myself and reach the heart within.”

He paused, brushing his lips against hers again. “I promise you, from this moment forward, I’ll be there for you, no matter what. I’ll protect, cherish, and love you with every beat of my heart. You’re my ride or die, my partner in this crazy journey we call life.”

Then he stepped back and went down on one knee before reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the jewelry box and

flipped up the lid, fighting back a smile when her gasp filled the room.

“Will you be my old lady, my partner in crime, my forever co-pilot on this wild ride of life?”

It was his turn to be shocked when she knelt to join him on the floor, cupping his face between the palms of her hand. “You know I hate getting emotional. But I’d be lying if I said you hadn’t stolen my heart. Now you want to make it official as your old lady?”

A small, tearful smile tugged at her lips. “You’ve shown me a world I never knew existed, a world where love is fierce and passionate, where the journey is just as important as the destination. I’ve been through thick and thin, and every moment and adventure has been worth it.”

Her eyes shimmered with tears as she continued. “I don’t want to be anyone else’s old lady. I want to be yours, and only yours, now and forever. I want to share in your adventures, face the challenges together, and cherish the love we’ve found in this wild, unpredictable world.

She pressed her lips to his before pulling back with a huge grin. “Yes, my love, a thousand times yes. I’ll be your old lady, your partner in crime, and your forever co-pilot. I choose you, always and forever.”

Realizing she’d said yes, he removed the ring from the box and slipped it onto her finger. A loud cheer went up around the room as soon as it was in place. He stood before assisting her to her feet.

He grinned as he pulled her into his arms. “Not to take advantage of your agreeing mood, but...”

There were a few chuckles as he turned her to face the group. He didn’t miss the shock that filtered over her expression as she realized how many people had joined them.

The Stone stepped forward, holding a cut in his hands, and a hush fell over the crowd. Trigger’s gaze never left Harley, his fingers brushing against hers reassuringly. The president’s voice echoed through the air, his words a blend of tradition and honor.

“We’re here today to witness a sacred bond—one that’s forged in the fires of loyalty, brotherhood, and love.”

Trigger’s heart raced. This moment had been a long time coming, culminating in everything they had been through. He had always been somewhat of a lone wolf, but Harley had changed everything. She had become his anchor, the reason to fight, love, and belong.

Stone’s eyes met Trigger’s as he handed him the cut, and a knowing smile played on his lips. With a nod, he signaled to Trigger, giving him the cue to take the next step. His fingers trembled as he held it, his emotions threatening to overwhelm him. This was it—the moment he had been waiting for.

He turned to Harley, his gaze intense and unwavering. “Harley,” his voice was rough with emotion, his heart on full display. “From the moment you walked into my life, everything changed. You’ve shown me what it means to love, to belong, and to fight for something greater than myself.”

Trigger's fingers trembled as he stepped closer to Harley, his movements deliberate and filled with purpose. He held out the cut, the club's colors emblazoned on the back—a symbol of loyalty and unity. But the patch on the back held the most significance—a declaration of his devotion to her.

“This represents more than just a club,” his voice a whisper, as his gaze locked onto hers. “It's a promise. I promise to always be by your side, protecting, loving, and fighting for you. You're not just my old lady—you're my heart, my forever.”

Tears spilled down Harley's cheeks as she presented her back to him, offering one arm, then the other as he helped her put it on.

As the crowd erupted into cheers and applause, Trigger and Harley stood locked in each other's embrace, their love a beacon of light in a world shrouded in darkness. Trigger had chosen her and made her his old lady; at that moment, they were bound by an unbreakable love.

Amidst the celebration, Trigger's gaze never wavered from Harley's. They had faced serious challenges and had overcome obstacles that would have torn others apart. But they had found a fierce, unyielding, and undeniable love in each other. The world's weight faded into the background as they held each other, leaving only the two of them and the promise of a future built on love, loyalty, and unwavering devotion.

* * *

I hope you enjoyed Trigger and Harley's story! If you want to catch up on how Stone, Rock, and Blue got together, check out

their story

[Consumed](#)

Oh! If you want to discover what happened to Nitro, stay
tuned for his story...

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie, a three-time USA Today and four-time EMMA Award-winning author, crafts dynamic stories blending vibrant energy with compelling narratives. Her heroines, whether edgy or soft, mirror real women navigating life's challenges. Stephanie is addicted to creating unputdownable books that capture the essence of resilient women striving to make a living and persevere.

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SUE BROWN

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SWEET REVENGE HE WANTS SEDUCTION, I WANT REVENGE.

They're both hiding secrets from each other. Will their sweet, gentle relationship survive when they find out the dangerous truth?

Carly gave her heart to a handsome man over a shared bear claw. If she'd known the truth about Dominic, maybe she'd have run. By day, she's a gentle schoolteacher with a heart of gold. But she's got a mission, to avenge her father's murder.

Dominic is the president of one of Sleigh's MCs. But he keeps his risky life a secret from the woman he's fallen for in a big way. He's taking their relationship slowly.

Too slowly for Carly's liking. As their relationship heats up, she wants passion and excitement, and he's giving her sweetness and tenderness.

What happens when their secrets are exposed to the cold light of day and their love is tested by loyalty and love to their families as well as each other.

With her desire for revenge burning hotter than ever, will Carly be able to follow through with her plan, or will she choose to forgive and forget? Will Dominic survive her desire for sweet revenge?

PROLOGUE

A woman stood in the center of the bar, aiming a Sig Sauer P320 at my heart.

“Carly?” I barely got the word out.

I stared at her, unable to believe what I was seeing. She was dressed in leather from head to toe, her long blonde waves spilled over the black leather jacket, her blue eyes icy. Her expression was just as dangerous as the gun pointed at me.

Even while my upstairs brain processed the danger I was in, my dick told me how hot she was in leather.

Damned hot!

But this was Carly. My sweet girl. I’d left her this morning after fucking her until we’d forgotten our names. Now she wanted to kill me?

What the fuck?

The men around me were still, no one moving. One wrong move could get us all killed. But I knew they were armed and would protect me to the death. Carly could kill me, but she’d die too. From her expression she knew that.

“Carly, I don’t understand,” I said, making my voice as calm as it could be.

“I know. But you will...before you all die.” Her cold, flat voice sent tendrils of ice through my body.

Where was the sweet, laughing woman I knew I was falling in love with?

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Sweet revenge,” she said calmly.

I stared at her. “Revenge? What for?”

“For the death of Daniel Dawson.”

I stilled, I heard a hitch of breath behind me, and from the way her eyes narrowed, she noticed.

“Danny Dawson?”

“You remember him,” she said sarcastically.

I had the feeling I was about to leap into quicksand. “I do, but how do you know him?”

“He was my father,” she stated, her head held high, the Sig Sauer steady, aimed at the center of my chest. “He’s dead. But you know that. You’ve known it from the moment you met me.”

I shook my head. “Your name is Rivers. I had no idea you were Danny’s kid.”

“Rivers is my mom’s maiden name. She asked me to change our name after he died. She didn’t want anyone coming after us.”

Her mom had a point. There were plenty in the city who wanted to get revenge on Danny Dawson. His family would have been the next best thing.

“I told you I’d get revenge on the man who killed my father,” she said, her voice cold and hollow.

It had been a throwaway comment over a cup of coffee and a bear claw. I didn't think she was serious.

"I've waited three years to find out what happened to my father," she snarled. "And now I know."

CHAPTER 1

Three weeks before

I gave my heart for a bear claw. Maybe if I'd known what was going to happen next, I might have stayed in bed. But on the other hand, I *really* like bear claws.

"I'm going to the bakery, Mom," I called out as I stomped my feet into my bright pink Doc Marten boots.

During the week I was sensible Ms. Rivers in plain blouses and skirts. At the weekend, I was Carly, all bright colors and floaty dresses and Doc Martens. My kids who saw me around the city always gaped at me. My mom shook her head, but I'd seen her eyeing my boots more than once. I'd bought a pair for her birthday in her favorite teal green and they were hidden in the back of my closet, the one place she never ventured into.

"See you later," Mom said from the kitchen doorway. "I'm meeting Uncle Raoul and Uncle Marty for coffee. They have some papers of your father's."

I stopped, halfway out the door. "Do you need me to come with? I don't need to go to the bakery."

She smiled at me, but I saw the sadness in her eyes that was always present when she talked about Dad. Like me, she'd never gotten over his death. "I'm fine, sweetheart. You know what Marty is like when he gets talking."

I nodded. I loved Dad's friends, but boy could they talk.

"You go get your treat," she continued. "Hurry, or you'll miss them."

I finished lacing up the boots, walked over to kiss Mom on the cheek, and hurried out of the door.

A bear claw was my Saturday morning treat for getting through the week at the school, but I'd overslept this morning and arrived at the bakery later than usual.

I pushed open the door, inhaling the usual aromas of sugar and cinnamon and freshly baked bread.

The woman behind the counter smiled at me expectantly. "Morning, Carly. The usual?"

"Yes, please, Martha."

There was one bear claw left, and it had my name on it.

"A bear claw please."

I turned to see who was about to take *my* bear claw and looked up...and up. My mouth fell open. He had to be at least six and half feet. He towered over me, and I was five foot seven.

Danger!

This man was all danger. My best friend, Janey, would be drooling over him. My senses screamed out to take care. My body had no such concerns and wanted him to take me over the counter. My pussy dripped at the sight of him, all dark and brooding, with steel-gray eyes, framed by dark winged eyebrows and thick lashes. His skin was tanned and weathered a little, like he spent more time outside than indoors. He wore a navy Henley and faded jeans under a battered black leather jacket.

You are so hot, and you know it!

My mouth watered. It had been a long time since I'd met a man who provoked such strong emotions in me.

Martha and the other woman behind the counter glanced at each other and then at us, clearly expecting one of us to give in and choose something else. Well, it wasn't going to be me.

He glowered at me. "I think you'll find I ordered first."

"I always have a bear claw on a Saturday," I informed him, "and I was the one who ordered first." I wasn't too sure if I had gotten there just before him, but I determined to have my treat.

"We have other cakes and pastries," Martha said. She seemed to be aiming that between us, not sure who to talk to.

There was a deathly silence for a moment, and I was aware of the tsking from customers behind us. We were holding up the line. It had gotten ridiculous, and I was about to give in when Mr. Tall, Dark, and Deadly spoke with a huff.

"I'll take a chocolate donut."

I tried not to smirk.

He definitely wasn't happy with his substitute, but he paid for the donut, and his server handed over the box.

Martha gave me my box and I paid too. I stepped aside and the line shuffled forward. I watched as the man headed toward the door.

On a sudden impulse I called out. "Hey, donut man."

He turned to glare at me and I raised the box. “Want to share the bear claw over coffee?”

What was I thinking?

He narrowed his eyes, as if he wasn't sure if this was a joke on him. Then he smiled and wow, it was as if the sun had suddenly risen in the small bakery. Mesmerized, I forgot how to breathe. Even the two women behind the counter gasped. He went from deadly to delicious with laughter lines around his eyes.

“That would be...nice,” he said.

We found a table, ordered coffee, and asked for plates to share both the bear claw and the donut. I was aware of the interest from Martha and her co-worker. They'd be teasing me for weeks.

I snickered as I sat down, and he looked at me.

“Nice? What were you really gonna say?”

“You don't want to know,” he assured me. “I'm Dominic, by the way.”

“Carly.”

I held out my hand. He gave it a firm shake. His hand was warm, and I could feel callouses. I liked men who worked with their hands. I wasn't keen on soft and pampered hands. I leaned forward and he smelled gorgeous too, like a woodsy bodywash, but not overpowering. On a scale of one to my ideal guy, he ticked all the boxes, and my pulse raced just at the attraction I felt for him.

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” I said before I bit into the pastry.

“It was a whim,” he admitted. “I don’t eat sweet food. I prefer spicy and savory. But I walked past and saw the bear claw. My mom used to make them for us. It took me back to being a kid.”

He looked sad and I guessed his mom wasn’t in the picture anymore.

“I come here every week,” I said, “but usually earlier in the morning. I overslept today. If it hadn’t been for my mom I’d never have woken up.”

“Your mom called you?”

I pulled a face. “I live with my mom. Does that put you off?”

Some guys were funny about a twenty-six-year-old still living with her mom, but Dominic gave a wry chuckle.

“I live with my twin brother, although we have different apartments, or we’d kill each other.” His lips glistened from the glaze, and I really wanted to lick it off.

I tore my gaze away from his full mouth. “I used to have my own place, but my dad was murdered, and Mom needed me, so I moved back home.”

I used not to talk about my dad, but then guys got weird about that too, so now I just rip off the Band-Aid and see if they stay.

Dominic stayed but he gave me the pitying look I was used to receiving. “I’m so sorry. Was it recent?”

“Three years ago. I’d just gotten my first job as a teacher. He went out one evening and never returned. The cops turned up on Mom’s doorstep the next morning. They’d found his body in an abandoned building. Mom hadn’t even realized he was missing. She thought he’d worked through the night.”

“It must have been hard for you and your mom.”

That was an understatement. My world fell apart when Mom called me in floods of tears to give me the news.

“They never found his killer, but I will. I’m gonna get justice for my dad.”

It was a vow I made every morning and every night. I would find my dad’s killer and get my revenge. It would be so sweet.

Dominic studied me intently and I shifted under his gaze.

“What?” I asked.

“Sometimes getting your revenge isn’t as satisfying as you think.”

“You speak from experience?” I asked, making my tone light.

“I do.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Gonna share with the class?”

He shook his head. “Never on the first date.”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself, aren’t you, mister...?” I paused. “I don’t know your last name.”

“Dominic Woods. And you are?”

“Carly Rivers.”

We shook hands again, then laughed because this time it was sticky from the glaze and sugar. I reached into my bag and pulled out a pack of baby wipes, which I opened and offered to Dominic.

“Thanks.” He eyed the pack with a curious expression as he took a wipe. “Do you have kids?”

“Teacher,” I reminded him. “I always carry wipes. Kids are always covered in dirt and food and things I don’t want to name.”

“I don’t know much about kids,” Dominic confessed.

“No kids of your own?”

“No kids, no wife or girlfriend, or boyfriend, at the moment.”

It was nice to know. I didn’t share. “Same here. I haven’t dated much since Dad died.”

“Do you think that might change?” he asked and from his intense gaze, my answer was important to him.

“I think it could,” I said.

We stayed for another coffee. I had nowhere particular to be and Dominic was entertaining company. He launched into a convoluted, and I suspected highly redacted, tale of one of his staff trying to flirt with a client, only to discover the client’s

husband did not appreciate his attention. It seemed to involve a circus trapeze and a trampoline. I had no idea if it was true or not, but it was the best Saturday morning I'd had in forever. I didn't regret my decision to share the bear claw with the handsome guy in leather.

CHAPTER 2

Cam scowled at me over his beer bottle. “Carly’s the wrong woman for you, Dom. Ditch her now before she becomes a problem.”

I raised an eyebrow at my second. “Oh?”

I sat in the scruffy office in my chair, feet up, biker boots crossed on my desk.

“You’re spending more time drooling over her pussy than focused on us.”

“Cam.”

He shrugged, not bothered by the edge to my voice. “You know I’m right.”

There was only one man who’d dare to challenge me and that was my younger brother. Younger by twenty minutes. Still, twin brother or not, I was still the president of the Sleigh Ink MC, and he didn’t get to call me out on the best thing that had happened to me in years.

“You think I’m gonna ditch the one woman who’s been interested in me in forever because I’m not paying attention to the pussies in my crew?”

Cam scowled at me and I knew I was going to get shit for talking smack about our crew.

“One, the brothers aren’t gonna stand for it. Masters is talking. You know what he’s like.”

Cam was the vice president. He knew everything about the club. He was also the one person who could defy me and still

keep breathing.

“Masters is all hot air,” I snapped.

“And two,” Cam continued, ignoring me, “does she know who you are?” He gave me a grim nod when I didn’t answer. “I thought not. Dominic, she’s not right for you,” he said, almost pleading now. “Carly needs a librarian or the clerk at the gas station. Not the head of the biggest MC in the city.”

“We’re not the biggest.”

Cam waved his hand impatiently at the correction. “What does she even think you do?”

“I told her I own an auto shop,” I admitted reluctantly.

“Yeah, and that’s the truth, but not the whole truth. She’ll be asking you to fix her car next, and then what? You know nothing about cars. Girls like her deserve the boy next door. Not the bad boy covered in ink. Has she even seen your tats?”

“You know she hasn’t.”

Because I took Carly home every night and left her at the door with just a kiss. I huffed. Cam was right. I was the archetypal bad boy behaving like a gentleman, because I was trying to find a way to tell her who I really was. And yeah, I knew she was ready for me to take it to the next level. But the minute I took off my leathers, she’d know all there was to know about me. My body was a road map of my life with Sleigh Ink.

I leaned back in my seat and glowered at my brother. “Who told you to talk to me?”

“What makes you think—?”

“I’m not fucking stupid, Cam. You’ve not shown any interest in me and Carly over the past two weeks. You’ve been too busy sniffing around Dee, and now suddenly you’re all worried about the club? Who was it? Tony, Masters, Drake?”

“Tony,” he admitted reluctantly.

Not a surprise. Tony was the oldest member of Sleigh Ink and managed the auto shop. He should have been in my place, but we all knew he wasn’t strong enough to deal with the constant turf wars. He’d swallowed down his resentment and Cam and I treated him with respect, but it meant I couldn’t put a foot out of line. There was only the club, and if I wanted to stick my dick somewhere, then it had to be one of the girls who hung around Sleigh Ink. Not an outsider, who was too good for us.

“And Masters and Drake,” Cam finished.

I chugged the rest of my beer instead of yelling the angry words threatening to spill out. They were senior members of Inkers, and I couldn’t dismiss them. As I put the bottle down, I caught Cam giving me a speculative look.

“What?”

“You really like her.”

I couldn’t hold back the quick grin as I thought of Carly, and Cam’s slate-gray eyes, the same color as mine, widened.

“Fuck, Dom, you *really* like her.”

I gave a reluctant nod because Cam was the one person who would know if I was talking bullshit. Even though it was just after lunch, I contemplated another beer, but headed to the ancient coffee machine instead. I had a date with Carly later and didn't want to be wasted when I met her. She didn't drink much so I'd toned down my drinking habits instead.

Maybe Cam had a point. I was changing already, and I hardly knew the girl. I scowled at the coffee pot. I could have a beer, but I didn't want to waste the coffee grounds. It was a thing that the whole club knew and probably mocked me for behind my back. They weren't stupid. They didn't do it to my face.

Cam and me, we grew up hungry. Pops did his best. I don't remember our mom. She went out one day and never reappeared. That story I told Carly about making bear claws? It wasn't our mom who made them. She'd been long gone. It was the previous president's missus. Pops kept the roof over our heads, but food was in short supply. One meal a day if we were lucky. So yeah, I hated waste.

"You gonna make the coffee or just growl at it?" Cam disturbed my dark memories.

"Yeah, sorry. I was thinking."

"About Mom?"

It was fucking crazy how my brother knew what I was thinking all the time. He seemed to have some freaky twin sixth sense which I did not possess.

"And being hungry," I admitted.

Cam nodded. “At least now we eat like kings.”

We did. I made sure of that, and Cam had always backed me. No one went hungry in the Inkers. The guys, their families, and anyone they knew who needed help. Three of the men who’d joined us could cook. They weren’t trained chefs but the kitchen of the club house was never closed. We could send meals out at a moment’s notice. I wasn’t Mother fucking Theresa, but I made sure we were fed.

As I handed Cam a large cup of strong, black coffee, he looked at me and, to my surprise, there was no judgement, just concern.

“I don’t want you to get your heart broken, Dom.”

“Like that’s gonna happen,” I scoffed.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” he insisted. “You fuck ‘em and throw them out of your bed. You never have relationships because they interfere with club business. You told me over and over never to fall in love. And look at you now. You barely know this woman and you’ve got a goofy smile just thinking about her.”

I made a scoffing sound in the back of my throat, but Cam just gave me the death glare, and I subsided. “Yeah, I like her.”

“So what’re you gonna do about it?”

“Call a meeting. I’ll talk to the club.”

“You’ve got a lot of talking to do,” Cam insisted. “Masters is talking about challenging you for the presidency.”

“And I’ll kill him if he does,” I snarled over the rim of my coffee cup. “He’s weak. He’s all bluster.”

“But he’s got supporters,” Cam said.

I bristled but I understood the warning was necessary. Masters did have supporters within the club. Older members who didn’t like the way the club was heading. I never understood why they didn’t stay with the Riders. I guess it was loyalty to Patch, the previous president.

When we split, Inkers had stayed small-time criminals. Guns, small arms, and money mainly. Never drugs. Patch was old-fashioned and refused to have anything to do with drugs and girls. One of the reasons we split from the Riders was because he wanted to get away from the eastern European crime families, new to Sleigh, who urged us to traffic women. The Riders were interested, Patch was not.

When I took over, I steered various club businesses legit with his blessing. We weren’t angels, but I kept the criminal business on the downlow. Only some of the club knew about it, Masters and Tony among them.

Times were changing in Sleigh. The new county sheriff couldn’t be bought. I knew, I’d tried. Nearly ended up in county lockup for that. It came with a warning from Sheriff Brock he’d wouldn’t turn a side eye like his predecessor. If we stuck a foot out of line, he’d be waiting with the handcuffs.

We didn’t need the shit right now. We were involved in two turf wars in the city. Sleigh Ink was among the largest, but the newest and least influential club in the south of the city. The Riders mainly ignored us, but the Devils and Snakes were

ready to destroy us if they got the chance. Patch had been a mean bastard on a good day. He formed the new club and made it clear if anyone came after him, he'd gut them where they stood. His reputation was enough, he was left alone. I, on the other hand, was still earning mine.

I heaved a sigh. Cam was right. Now was not the time to fall in love with some sweet girl from the 'burbs. Even thinking about her made me smile.

I glanced up to see my twin studying me. "What?"

"You know if this was any other time, I'd be pleased for you."

I nodded because I did. We'd always been close, right from the start. We'd been twins, brothers, but more than that, best friends. And neither of us had minded about the women who passed through our lives. Most had been fleeting, some had stayed for longer. But Cam and I were there for each other. One day we'd have our old ladies and kids would be running everywhere.

One day. We were thirty-four now. Time was running out. I wanted to settle down and have a family before I was too old to run after my kids. Well, maybe more of the latter than the former. A vision of sweet, blonde-haired little girls looking just like their mother, and dark-haired little boys like me.

Fuck, this wasn't the right time. And if I did fall in love, I needed a woman who could be by my side, not one who didn't know who I was.

“Church tonight. I’ll talk to everyone. Reassure them.” I fixed Cam with a hard stare. “And tell them anyone who challenges me is a dead man.”

And that includes you, my brother.

It was unspoken but from the way the muscles corded in Cam’s neck, he understood.

Cam left the office, promising he would arrange the meeting with the committee and church, and I’d better know what the fuck I was gonna say to the men.

I sighed, sat back in my chair, and stared up at the stained ceiling. I should get one of the prospects to redecorate the office. Maybe Barn would do it. I knew what the problem was. Going legit meant keeping our heads down, fewer fights at the bar, keeping the turf wars on the downlow. The men were bored, and they were going to look for a fight, either with the Riders, Devils, or Snake crews, or with me.

Most likely it would be me. Physically, none of the crew would stand a chance. I was six feet five of pure muscle, at the top of my game. I worked out in the boxing ring every day. The only person as strong as me was Cam. But there was more than one way to bring down a president. If Masters or Tony gained enough support, then they could force me out.

I thought about that for a moment. Would it be so bad? I could take the bike and leave, take a road trip. Cam would probably come with me. He wouldn’t want to stay on his own. He had nothing to keep him here.

But I had challenged for the presidency after Patch retired and won. The club had been my whole life since I was a scrawny teenager begging to become a prospect, first the Riders and now Ink.

“Are you gonna be a pussy and give up at the first sign of trouble?”

I asked the ceiling the question. The trouble was I didn't have an answer.

The other way they could bring me down was with a bullet. Tony wouldn't have the balls, but Masters...he was a nasty piece of work, a scrapper. Patch had told me to never turn my back on him and I'd listened.

There was one other reason I didn't want to go, and she was five feet seven (if she stood on her tiptoes), blonde-haired, blue-eyed, a bundle of energy I'd just met. I smiled just thinking about Carly Jane Rivers. If I left the club, I'd have to leave Sleigh. But Carly was an elementary schoolteacher. She couldn't just walk out in the middle of the school year to take a road trip with me. Besides, she had family here. I hadn't met them yet, but she talked about her mom all the time. She couldn't leave.

I scrubbed a hand through my hair and blew out a long breath. Cam was right. I had to quit thinking with my dick and start using my head. The club came first. Always. And I was the president. It was time I acted like it. I had to tell Carly we were over.

CHAPTER 3

I shivered as I left the warmth of the school. The wind was cold this evening. Mom had told me to bring a jacket, but I'd left in a hurry and of course I'd forgotten. I jogged to my car in the school parking lot, my bag tucked under my arm. It was late as usual. I was always the last out because I liked to get my work done before I went home. My car was nearly always the last one in the lot apart from the janitor.

I paused before I opened the door. I had the strangest feeling someone was watching me. I stopped and looked around, but I couldn't see anyone.

"Huh, I must be imagining it," I muttered and opened the car door. This wasn't the first time I'd felt someone was watching me. I hadn't paid too much attention before, but now I was tired and just wanted to go home and rest. I didn't need some weird stalker causing me problems.

The past few days had been difficult. School had been frantic, and Dominic had said he was busy too. He'd had a strange tone in his voice, and I wondered if he were ghosting me, but I'd let it go because my head was tied up in problems with my class. I'd call him when things calmed down for us both.

Hair prickled on the back of my neck. What the heck? I wasn't psychic or anything, but I wasn't imagining this. I stopped and turned on my heel.

There, in the shadows of the store opposite, was a figure standing still. He was tall, much taller than me, and broad, and

he was watching me. I was sure of it. That sense women have when they're in danger, I had it. I should get in the car and drive home. Only I wasn't like that. I was stupid enough to decide to confront the man. My mom always said I had no idea of self-preservation. Even as a kid I'd walked into danger without a second thought.

I dumped my bag in the car, slammed the door shut and locked it, then stalked over the road. It wasn't until I was much closer that I thought how stupid this was. I had nothing to protect myself if he tried to attack me. But I wasn't cold anymore. My blood was frantically racing along my veins, my heart pounding so hard I was surprised the man couldn't hear it.

“What do you want?” I called out.

Then the man moved, and my heart leaped. It was Dominic. Even in the dim light, his face partially obscured by the shadows, I could tell it was him from his high cheekbones and broad frame.

“Carly.”

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, unable to believe my eyes. I stood there, unable to speak, feeling a tingle of excitement and anticipation running through my body as I took in the sight of him. He was dressed in leathers and biker boots and as he stepped forward, I realized he was holding a motorcycle helmet in his hand.

“I wanted to talk to you,” he rumbled.

“You could have picked up the phone,” I pointed out, making my tone teasing and light.

When Dominic’s eyes met mine, they lit up and a warm smile crossed his face. It was like being back in the bakery again when his smile lit up the store.

“Carly,” he said softly.

He held out his arms, the motorcycle helmet still in one hand. But I didn’t care. I stepped into his space, and he enfolded his arms around me. I sighed and rested my head on his chest, hearing the *thump thump* of his heart beneath my ear and inhaling his usual woody aroma. It was his bodywash. He’d told me when I asked. I inhaled again, relieved to absorb him. Even the smell of leather and motor oil was familiar now. I was warm in his embrace. I had missed this. Missed him.

“At last,” he murmured. I guess I wasn’t the only one missing being together.

“You could’ve come for a hug before.”

“Busy, remember?” he rumbled.

But someone had been watching me, I was sure of that. I raised my head to look into his eyes. I needed to know for sure.

“Have you come to see me, but hidden, like you were tonight?”

“I wasn’t hiding,” Dominic grumbled.

“You were, but whatever. I’m sure someone’s been stalking me. I could feel it. Just like I could tonight.”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t me. I’ve been tied up with my businesses.”

I thought he just had the auto shop. I was about to ask, but he continued.

“When did this start?” he asked, his brow furrowed. “The feeling someone was watching you?”

He sounded worried and I was relieved. It wasn’t just me.

“Just over the last week. Normally when I leave school. I’ve been working late into the evening.”

“I’m gonna find out who is doing this,” Dominic growled. “No one scares my girl.”

I wanted to say I wasn’t scared. But yes, I was, it was unnerving knowing someone was hiding in the shadows. The idea that I was also his girl? I liked that a whole lot.

“Don’t get into trouble,” I said.

The grunt he gave could have meant okay, yeah right, or several other things. I let it go.

“I’ve got to go,” Dominic said regretfully. “I’ve got church, I mean a meeting, tonight.”

“Church?”

“I’ll explain another time,” he said and bent to kiss me.

It wasn’t a chaste kiss, or a goodbye kiss. It was a I’m going to show you how much I’ve missed you kiss. He placed one hand on my butt and held me against him, almost off the ground, smiling against my mouth when I yelped.

I sighed into his mouth. “Come home with me.”

“I can’t, but next time, I promise.”

I guessed that would have to do. “You’d better,” I said fiercely.

He walked me to my car and as we said our goodbyes, Dominic gave me one last kiss. It was a kiss full of love and promise, and I felt like my heart might burst with happiness.

“I was supposed to say goodbye to you tonight,” he murmured.

Fear coiled around my heart, and I pushed back from him. “What the hell? You want to break up with me?”

God, I was such a fool. I should have realized when he ghosted me all week.

He huffed. “That’s the last thing I want to do, baby.”

“Then—?” I stared at him, bewildered. I was so confused. He kissed me like he wanted to take me to the moon and back, and then said he wanted to break up.

“It’s a difficult time for me, Carly. I’ve just taken over the family businesses. I should be focused on that, not thinking about you all the time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked. “I can’t stop thinking about you either.”

“You can’t?”

As I looked up at him, I was sure that was relief in his eyes. “You’re hard to forget.”

Dominic pressed his lips together. “Likewise,” he muttered.

I didn’t want to say it, but I had to know. “I know you don’t want to break up with me, but I know when family and life comes first.” I cupped his jaw, feeling the bristles rasp against my palm. “I understand if you need to take a step back. I can wait, I promise.”

Dominic shook his head. “That’s the last thing I want to do, baby. I want to be with you all the time, you know that. You have me wrapped around your little finger.”

“Then—”

“He’ll have to get over it.”

I wanted to ask, “Who will?” but his mouth reclaimed mine as he pushed me against the car. I wrapped my arms around his neck and forgot about the question.

CHAPTER 4

I couldn't hide my huge smile as I tidied up my classroom at the end of the day. Just receiving a text from him made my heart race a little faster. I'd only known Dominic for a couple of weeks but it felt like a lifetime. I thanked whatever guardian angel had put us in the same bakery at the same time to squabble over buying the last bear claw. He and I were meant to be.

I pushed the final book into the bookcase when a familiar voice called out.

“Are you done, Ms. Rivers?”

I looked over my shoulder and grinned at Janey York, another teacher, and my best friend at Sleigh South Elementary.

“I'm so done, Ms. York. Let's go home.” I stood and brushed dust off my butt and knees.

Janey groaned. “I wish I could. I've got papers to grade.”

“Did mine earlier,” I said smugly. I didn't tell her it was in case Dominic invited me out.

“I wondered where you were at lunchtime.”

I'd spent all lunchtime grading papers, but it was worth it. I was done. Even if I didn't go out with Dominic I could relax for the evening in front of the TV.

“I'll walk you out,” she sighed. “Think of me when you're drinking your wine.”

“I will,” I agreed, unless I was distracted by the most gorgeous man to ever rock a leather jacket. “Next time you’ll have to join me at lunchtime.”

“Some of us like a break,” Janey pointed out.

“Some of us like our evenings,” I snarked in return.

She sighed again. “You win. Next time I’ll join you. What are you doing this evening?”

I hesitated too long. Dammit. She caught it of course.

“Carly?”

“Hmmm?”

“Tell your Aunt Janey who you’re going to spend your evening with!”

We reached the doors, and I stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine, blinking after the dim light inside the school.

“Oh wait, you don’t need to tell me,” she said suddenly.

I was about to ask her what she meant when my attention was distracted by two students kicking a soccer ball around in the yard.

“Boys, pick the ball up and go home.”

For once they did as they were told without protesting.

Janey nudged me. “So...Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Who is he?”

“Ah, that one.” I smiled but I didn’t need to turn around, still checking until the boys were out of the gate. I knew

exactly who she was talking about. There was only one man who'd be watching me. I was surprised he'd come here to meet me. We'd kept our meetings on neutral territory so far.

“His name is Dominic.”

Janey wolf whistled, but quietly. There were still students within earshot. “He’s gorgeous, all brooding alpha. Does he have a soft heart under that hard body?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “We’re taking it slowly.”

Too slowly for my liking. I’d been trying to persuade him to throw me on my bed and have his wicked way with me, but so far he’d been resistant to my charms. I started to worry he wasn’t that interested in me, but then he’d kiss me, his strong arms around me, holding me close against his wide, muscular chest, and I’d feel just how interested he was. So why was he holding back?

I turned to smile at him, then frowned. “That’s not Dominic. I don’t know who that is,” I admitted.

Janey gave me a what the heck stare. “This isn’t your man? You’ve got two hot men at your feet?”

This guy was tall, dark, and gorgeous for sure. He had the same dark eyes, high cheekbones, and tousled hair. But it wasn’t him. I knew that, even at this distance.

“He looks like Dominic but it’s not him. Maybe it’s his brother? Dominic said he had a twin.”

“Well, he’s sure interested in you. He’s not taken his eyes off you for the past ten minutes.” Then the man shifted, and

she hissed, grabbing my upper arm, and holding almost painfully. “Carly!”

“What? Let me go.” I tried to tug my arm away but she held on.

“Do you see the patch on his jacket?”

I squinted and nodded. “Yeah.”

“He belongs to the Sleigh Ink motorcycle club.”

“How do you know that?”

Janey bit her lip. “I have a friend, Eric, he joined the Sleigh Riders after he left high school. Sleigh Ink split from them. There’s no love lost between them.”

“So this guy, whoever he is, belongs to a motorcycle club.”

I couldn’t understand why she’d gone so pale.

“Yeah.”

“What’s that got to do with my Dominic?”

“Because Eric told me Sleigh Ink had a new president and vice president. Dominic and Cameron Woods. Twins. The old guy, Patch something, retired.”

I swallowed hard, then licked my lips. My nice quiet world had suddenly gone topsy-turvey. My perfect gentleman, the guy who owned an auto shop down on Madison and West, was in one of several MCs that dominated the city.

Did it have to be Sleigh Ink? I wasn’t as naïve as I made out. My Dad had hated the Inkers and warned me to avoid

them. I didn't want anything to do with any MC, but especially not them.

“Carly.”

I glanced up to see Janey regarding me, her expression knowing. I took a deep breath. “Can you handle the kids? I want to find out what Cameron wants.”

Without waiting for an answer, I stalked toward the man. As I got closer, I could see how alike he and Dominic looked, even down to the same brooding intensity, But I'd known he wasn't my man. His eyes were the same steel-gray framed by thick dark lashes and he had Dominic's full mouth. But this man didn't call to me the way Dominic had from the beginning.

“Cameron Woods?” I called out.

He stood, shoulders straightening to attention as I approached. “That's me. Who's asking?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know who I am. You were the one staring at me. What do you want with me?”

“I've come to see who my brother is screwing.”

What the— I made a show of looking around, praying no kids were in earshot. “Who is she?”

His expression darkened, his eyebrows knit together. “Listen—”

“No, you listen, Mr. Woods.” I pointed a finger at him. “This is where I work. You're on school property and you're

trespassing. I don't know what you want. I'm going to ask Dominic later, so you'd better have your story straight."

I saw something in his eyes. I don't know what. Maybe the dawning of respect in his expression. I hoped so. I didn't really care. I just wanted him to leave.

"You're gonna tell my brother I was here."

"Yes," I said shortly. "I don't appreciate being stalked where I work."

"I can see why Dom likes you," he said unexpectedly.

I tried to ignore the burst of warmth in my heart at the thought of his brother liking me. I liked Dominic too. I more than liked him.

Then he turned and I saw a line of ink peeking out from his collar and the Inkers patch on his jacket. I pressed my lips together. If what Janey said was true, it didn't matter what I thought about Dominic, or he thought about me. We were done.

I pointed to the patch. "Do you belong to Sleigh Ink?"

He looked surprised and wary. "You know about us?"

"I do now," I said grimly. I glanced over my shoulder at Janey who wasn't hiding the fact she was watching us.

"She knows us?"

"She has a friend, Eric. In the Riders."

I saw the confusion, then "Oh, you mean Tater."

"Tater?"

“We all have nicknames. Tater’s a good man. Solid. We’d have liked him to come with us, but he was loyal to Ratty.”

I nodded, but I had no idea what he was talking about and in truth I didn’t care. “I take it back. I’m not going to tell your brother about this conversation.”

Cameron raised an eyebrow. “You’re not?”

“No. You are. You can tell him we’re done. I can’t go out with him.”

His expression darkened again. “You’re dumping my brother?”

“Yeah.”

I turned to walk away, but he grabbed my arm and stopped me.

“No.”

“Let go of me.” I yanked my arm, but he held on tight.

“You can’t dump my brother.”

“Is this some macho bullshit? Only a man can end relationships? That’s bullshit, man.” I tugged but Cameron refused to release my arm. “Let go of me,” I repeated. “What’s your problem anyway? No one knows I exist.”

Cameron huffed. “He’s already told the crew about you and said he’d introduce you. He’s crazy about you.”

He did? He is?

I shook my head. Dominic was a club member. I was a teacher. My mom would have a meltdown if she ever

discovered his identity, and my principal would fire me on the spot. “He lied to me.”

“He didn’t tell you because he was worried how you’d react. I guess he was right,” he drawled.

My temper, which I usually kept well under control because I was a teacher, flared like a summer fire catching alight. “You don’t get to lay that on me, mister. I wasn’t the one who lied.”

“He didn’t lie.”

“Yeah, he did. By omission. But you’re not the person who should be here.” I pulled away, stumbling back a few steps.

“Ms. Rivers, is everything all right?”

I groaned as I heard the barked question from Mrs. Standish, my boss, principal of the school, and all round badass. I turned to see her stalking over to me. She was in her late fifties, immaculately dressed in a navy pantsuit with a cream blouse, with iron-gray hair which never moved. I mean it. I’d seen her in high winds and her hair never stirred.

“Get out of here,” I hissed, turning back to Cameron, “before she calls the sheriff.”

“Cameron Woods, is that you?”

Seriously? I caught his expression. Half-smirk, half-panic. The badass guy in front of me wanted to bolt.

“Mrs. S.” Cameron turned to my principal. “It’s been a long time. You’re looking as young as ever.”

I cringed, because really?

“Don’t try sucking up to me, young man. What are you doing here harassing my staff?”

“Carly is going out with my brother. I invited her over tonight to meet the club.”

My jaw dropped. I was going to kill him. He’d just lost me the best job I’d ever had.

Then I caught Mrs. Standish’s skeptical expression. “Uh-huh. Does Dominic know about this, or did you decide to poke your nose in where it’s not wanted.”

“Mrs. S,” Cameron protested, “how could you say such a thing?”

“You have form. Remember Jilly Peters?”

I wanted to laugh as his cheeks flamed, but I also wanted to know who Jilly Peters was.

“It was fifth grade, Mrs. S. I didn’t mean to upset her.”

“You convinced her you were Dominic,” she snapped. “Because you already had a girlfriend and wanted her too.”

I raised an eyebrow. “In the fifth grade?”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I liked the girls.”

“So you stole Dominic’s girlfriend?”

“Oh no, he didn’t know she existed. He was more interested in bugs than girls. He only found out when suddenly all the girls wanted to talk to him.”

I laughed out loud at the thought. “So what happened?”

He grimaced while Mrs. Standish scowled at me.

“Mrs. S snitched on me. She told both my girls, and they dumped me and became best friends. They still are.”

“At least they had good sense,” Mrs. Standish said. It sounded snide and I realized it was aimed at me.

“I didn’t know who Dominic was,” I protested. “I met him over bear claws in the bakery.” My cheeks heated because could that sound any lamer?

Cameron snorted. “Good to see you again, Mrs. S. You take care of my brother, Teach.” Then he swaggered away.

“Ms. Rivers?”

I focused my attention on the principal. “Mrs. Standish?”

Her expression was steely as she stared at me. “Stay away from the Woods brothers. You don’t want to get involved in an MC. Not now. They’re bad news.”

I’d never dealings with an MC before now, but I knew about the Inkers because of my dad. It was a shame. I liked Dominic, but being involved with the president of the Inkers? My dad would be rolling in his grave.

“I won’t allow trouble in my school, Ms. Rivers,” she warned, her eyes hard as she focused on me.

“Understood, Principal Standish.” And as much as I bristled, she was my boss. “I’ll talk to Dominic. I owe him that.”

She inclined her head and stalked away. I took a deep breath and caught Janey watching me across the yard, her

expression worried. I mopped my brow with an exaggerated gesture, and she laughed.

I turned but Cameron had gone as if he'd never been there. Now why did he check me out? I pulled out my phone and called Dominic.

“Hey, babe.” His deep voice rumbled through my body. “Have you finished?”

“Did you send your brother here?”

I knew he hadn't, but I had to ask.

“Cam?”

“Do you have another brother? Oh wait, you have many brothers.”

“Carly, what do you mean?” He sounded wary now. So he should.

“One minute my best friend is telling me my boyfriend is president of Sleigh Ink and the next your brother turns up to check me out and spar with my principal. You can guess how that went down.”

“Cam did what? He talked to Mrs. Standish. Is he still breathing?” He sounded more impressed by that than how angry I was.

“Oh yeah,” I drawled sarcastically. “At least he was honest about why he was there. Unlike you. *You* missed out the other family businesses.”

I was pissed and he had to hear it in my voice.

“I'm on my way. We need to talk.”

“I don’t think so, Dominic. Not tonight.” I sighed. “I need to think.”

“Carly—”

I disconnected the call. Fuck, why did he have to be part of the Inkers? Of all the badasses I hated in the city, this MC topped the damn tree.

“You look upset,” Janey said. “Want to talk?”

I pressed my lips together. “No, I’d rather drink.”

She smirked at me, her eyes sparking with mischief. “On a school night, Ms. Rivers? I’m in.”

“You haven’t finished your grading,” I reminded her.

Janey tapped her chin. “Let me see. Drinking and you telling me all about the duplicate of that handsome guy who just left, or grading papers. Which would I rather do?”

I handed her my keys. “You drive.”

CHAPTER 5

If Cam had been anyone except my twin, I'd have beaten him to a pulp for upsetting Carly. No, that was gonna happen anyway. He'd gone to cause trouble and I knew the reason why. He still didn't think Carly was the right girl for me, so he forced my hand. Now she knew who I was, and I wasn't sure if we were still a couple or if she'd dumped me.

When he'd gotten back to the club, I was waiting for him, Drake, the sergeant at arms, by my side.

"How much trouble am I in?" Cam asked warily when he spotted the two of us.

"You screwed up, Colt," Drake snapped contemptuously, using Cam's club nickname. He was shorter than us, not much taller than Carly, but he was a fierce bastard with a fiery temper. No one wanted to get on his wrong side, not even us. "You disrespected your brother and the club."

I hated that Cam had stepped over our boundaries as twins, and even more, that he could have caused trouble for the Inkers. I wondered if he were jealous of me and Carly. He hadn't had a girlfriend for a long time, longer than me. Was that why Cam had gone to visit her? Because he wanted to cause trouble.

Cam stood straighter. He knew I couldn't let it go. If it had been just me, we'd have worked it out in the boxing ring like we had in the past, but he'd dragged the club into the mess. I knew, even if he didn't, that Carly had an issue with the Inkers

from something she'd let slip. I'd been working my way up to discussing it. Now he'd forced my hand.

"You and me, we'll talk in the ring," I growled at him.

Cam winced. I was going to make him pay and he knew it. "And the club? What's my punishment? Are you going to strip me of my patch?"

Drake looked at me and I nodded. This was down to Drake to enforce.

"No." Drake said. "Ace pointed out this was personal, and you lost sight of the damage you could have done." Then he gave a wicked grin.

Cam's look of relief changed to wariness when he saw that grin. "What do I have to do?"

I walked away, leaving Drake to break the bad news. I had other plans for the evening. It was time to make nice with my girl.

The furious bellow from Cam was deeply satisfying though. He'd think twice before screwing me around again.

• • •

I rode over to Carly's house, but it was dark and there were no cars in the drive. I knew Carly's mom worked late into the evening, but Carly was usually home. I wasn't sure what to do now. I checked my phone. It was nearly ten o'clock. Where was my girl?

I debated riding around the city to find her. Was that stalkerish? I wanted to talk to her, not scare her. But I needed

to know she was okay.

Just as I made the decision to cruise the local area in the hope that I found her, I saw lights in the mirrors of my bike. I waited to see who it was. It pulled up behind me. I didn't recognize the vehicle, but Carly stepped out, still wearing what I'd come to realize as her school clothes. Sensible skirts and modest blouses. What she didn't realize was they molded her figure and she looked so hot.

Carly stopped when she spotted my bike. "I don't want to talk to you. We're finished." My girl was a little drunk from the way she swayed. "Not that we ever got started," she mumbled. "You only wanted me for my bear claw."

I took a deep breath. This was going to be harder than I'd anticipated.

"Please. One coffee. Let me explain and then I'll go home."

She squinted up at me. "One coffee?"

I grabbed her as she swayed, worried she was going to fall on her ass. "I'll make it. You need it."

"I didn't drink that much, but I feel so wobbly."

"You're not used to it," I suggested.

Carly mumbled something as she tried to fit the key in the lock. I wasn't sure what she said but watching her try to open the door was painful. I took the keys, undid the lock, and guided her into her home.

"I need water," she muttered and headed into the kitchen.

I leaned against the cabinets and watched her chug down two glasses of water. I hoped the water wasn't going to make a return appearance. "How much did you have to drink?" I asked.

She wrinkled her brow, taking so long to answer that when she spoke, I burst out laughing.

"Two glasses of white wine...I think."

"You're drunk on two glasses of wine?" I asked incredulously.

"You know I don't drink," she snapped.

"I'm sorry," I soothed.

She huffed and grumbled which was pretty adorable. I eased her into a chair, then I made the coffee following her instructions. She sighed when I filled a huge cup of the dark brew and put it in front of her.

"I need this," she admitted.

I sat opposite her and drank mine slowly. If I was going to explain, I wanted her to be sober enough to hear it.

When we'd finished the pot, she regarded me across the table. "You didn't know your brother was going to visit me."

"No."

"Do you know why he did?"

"We don't usually have secrets from each other," I hedged.

"You meet each other's girlfriends?"

"We don't have girlfriends. There are women at the club."

She raised an eyebrow. “You what? Fuck them?”

I gave a curt nod. I wasn’t going to sugarcoat it for her.

“Do you share women?”

“Sometimes. But we don’t sleep together.”

There were no crossing swords no matter how much the women begged. Even the thought made Cam and I want to hurl.

Carly gave me a long, cool look even if her eyes were unfocused. “You won’t share me.”

I huffed. “I know. That’s why I was taking my time, to get to know you. For you to know me before I mentioned the club.”

“Do you think Cam is jealous?”

I should have expected she’d be perceptive. “Maybe. But it doesn’t excuse what he did. He put your job and the club in jeopardy.”

And our relationship, but I let that go for now.

“Are you going to talk to him?”

“He and I will talk in the boxing ring. It’s the way we work out our differences. But he’ll be punished by the club too.”

I saw the curiosity in her gaze.

“He’s got to dig out the latrines,” I said.

Carly’s lips twitched. “I bet he wasn’t happy about that.”

“The vice president digging out new latrines? No, he’s not happy.”

“Good,” she said. “Good.” She stood up, this time without swaying. “I need the bathroom.”

“How do you feel now?” I asked when she returned, now in yoga pants and an oversized hoodie.

“Between the water and the coffee, I feel fine, but I don’t think I’ll do that on a school night again.”

“I’m sorry I drove you to drink.”

I meant it to be amusing but she studied me for a long moment. “Don’t do that again, yeah?”

“Drive you to drink?”

“Lie to me like that. If you lie to me again, we’re finished.”

I looked down at my girl, a fierce expression telling me she was deadly serious.

“I won’t lie to you again,” I promised.

Carly rubbed her temples. “I need fresh air before I sleep.”

“The stars are bright tonight.” I noticed them on the way over.

“Take me outside and show me the stars,” she begged.

I didn’t think I’d ever been asked to do something so innocent before. The women I knew wanted the club’s protection and my dick. Carly wasn’t like that. She was right about one thing. I’d never share her with anyone, *especially* not my twin.

I held out my hand and Carly placed it in mine, as trusting as a child. “Let’s look at the stars.”

This woman made me feel like the good man I hadn’t been in years. Was I going to let her down?

CHAPTER 6

We spent a long time staring up at the stars, me leaning against his muscled body as I pointed out the constellations to him. His warm hands spanned my belly. It was comforting and made me horny at the same time.

“You know a lot about the stars,” he rumbled in my ear, warm breath blowing across my chilled skin.

“It’s useful being a teacher. I know a little about a lot of things.”

I thought he’d laugh at that, but he said, “I can see that,” and left it at that. I was disappointed but then he turned me around and kissed me, his tongue gently exploring my mouth.

Every touch and every kiss sent my heart racing faster, and I was sure the neighbors could hear it pounding. His hands slipped under the hoodie and moved up my back, hissing when he discovered I wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

His soft caresses sent shivers down my spine, and his lips never left mine. His large hands spanned my waist, and then finally slid up my front so that his thumbs brushed my nipples.

I moaned in the back of my throat as he cupped my breasts and gently teased the hard nubs.

We stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity. Dominic stroking my breasts, then sliding down to cup my ass. Our lips and tongues caressing as we explored each other’s mouths.

I thought for one moment he would lay me down in the grass and give me what we both wanted. I could feel his arousal against my belly, and he hissed when I flattened my palm against it.

But, to my disappointment, he took my hand away, and kissed me long and hard under the stars.

“I’m going home,” he said. “Good night, sweet Carly.”

I was real tired of this and wondered if we were ever going to get further than heated kisses, but when I challenged him, he told me it would happen when we were both sober and willing. I protested but he caught my chin and made me look up at him.

“I’ve never wanted anyone like I want you, Carly Rivers. And yeah, my intentions are strictly dishonorable...”

I blushed at that although he couldn’t see it under the moonlight.

“But if I’m gonna corrupt you to the dark side, we do it together.”

I wasn’t sure that strictly made sense, but I still had the wine buzzing in my system, so I let it go. I reached up to kiss him one more time and then watched him ride down the street, his taillight vanishing as he turned at the intersection.

* * *

We carried on like that for a while longer. School got frantic as we approached Christmas and when I was free, Dominic was dealing with business issues. I didn’t ask what they were. He’d made it clear it was club business. But it meant we didn’t see

much of each other except at the weekends. We always met for bear claws and coffee at the bakery.

One night, just before the end of the semester, he turned up at my doorstep looking exhausted, but he said he wanted to see me, and fuck the club.

“I’d rather you fucked me,” I quipped.

Dominic gave a wry laugh. “I’d have to be awake to do that. I’m hungry,” he added, sounding hopeful.

Mom was at home and nursing a cold, so I took him to a little Italian restaurant around the corner from me.

I saw the elderly owners’ eyes widen when I walked in with Dominic behind me. As soon as we sat down, one of the owners was there, greeting us both by name and offering drinks.

Dominic regarded me across the table. “I can see you want to say something.”

“Do you take money from this restaurant?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

I blinked. I hadn’t expected him to be so honest, but that meant my father was right. They were bleeding money from the local businesses.

“Chiesa and Luca’s son is an Inker. He told me his parents’ restaurant was about to go bankrupt. I offered to provide a loan and gave them business advice.” He smiled at the couple who beamed at him. “They’re a lovely couple. Cam and I eat here often.”

I bit my lip, not sure what to say. I want to talk about my dad and what he told me. I want to ask him if it was true, but he patted my hand and I let the subject drop...for now.

Over plates of Chicken Alfredo pasta Dominic told me pre-teen kids from Sleigh Ink had been causing trouble with their neighbors.

“They’re bored,” he admitted. “It’s hard to know how to deal with them. I’ve got no experience. Members of the club I can deal with. Kids are beyond me.”

“Can their parents talk to their teachers? Maybe get some ideas.”

“Most of the time they don’t go to school.”

I don’t know what made me do it but “I can help you,” came out of my mouth before I could stop it.

His eyes lit up. “You would?”

“I’m a teacher,” I warned. “Not a babysitter.”

“I’d pay you,” he said, digging into his pasta.

I’d need to think about that. The last thing I wanted was to be unwittingly laundering dirty money.

But Dominic was tired, we could thrash out the details later.

First, I needed to talk to someone who knew them better than I did so I made an appointment to see Principal Standish just before the end of the semester.

She stared at me across her desk. “You want to teach the kids from Sleigh Ink?”

I nodded, then said, “Dominic says they’re struggling.”

“They don’t turn up to school,” she said sharply.

“Yeah, I thought that was the case. You seem to know them.”

She huffed and tapped her desk with her pink-tipped nails. “I’ve been attempting to teach kids from the MCs for years. Dominic and Cameron were among the first. Some survive the school system, some don’t. The Riders and the Snakes are good at sending their kids to school. The Inkers are new, and frankly, Ms. Rivers, they could improve.”

Survive. That was an interesting way of putting it.

“What happens to the ones who don’t go to school?”

“They get reported but that’s the last I see of them.”

I hummed as I thought for a moment. “Dominic knows they’re struggling. He wants to help.”

The principal gave me a long, cool look. “By using you as their unpaid teacher?”

“He’s offered to pay me.”

She sniffed. “That’s a start.”

“I don’t know if it’ll work,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I’m qualified, but if I try and encourage them back to school, that’s a good thing.”

“I can help,” Mrs. Standish said, surprising me. “I have lesson plans for kids who need extra help.”

I smiled at her gratefully. I had a feeling I was going to need all the assistance I could get.

“I see you’ve ignored my advice to stay away from them.”

I wanted to tell her I was desperate to spend more time with Dominic and if this was the only it was going to happen, then I’d teach the MC kids, because I knew I was a damn fine teacher. But if I did, would that be the quickest way to lose my school job?

So I smiled and said, “It’s early days.”

She pressed her lips together. “These aren’t good men. You know that.”

“They might surprise you, Principal Standish.”

“In thirty-five years of teaching, no one has ever surprised me. Least of all Dominic and Cameron Woods.” Her voice was brusque. “If I can’t convince you to stay the heck away from the club, at least I can offer you help with the lessons.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at her, and I really meant it.

The day school ended for the vacation, I set my alarm for early the next morning.

It was time to take the bull by the horns. If Dominic wanted me in his life, then I was going there on my terms. I settled down to sleep. I couldn’t wait to see Dominic’s face the next morning.

CHAPTER 7

I flung open the door, growling “Fuck off,” before it was fully open.

Then my mouth went dry. It was Carly.

Only not the Carly I knew. Gone was the light blouse and pretty skirt. This girl was dressed in leather boots, skinny jeans and a tight T-shirt cut low enough to show her perfect cleavage. No bra. I could tell that from her taut nipples.

I blinked, trying to wake up. “Carly? What are you doing here?”

“I thought you wanted a teacher? I need to prepare.” She sounded like she wanted to be confident, but the nervous bite of her bottom lip gave her away.

I blinked. “Wait? What?”

“We talked about it a week or so back. You said you needed a teacher because the kids here were falling behind.”

“Yeah, but I thought it was a discussion.”

We’d gone for a late dinner and talked for a long time about the club, which we were doing more often now. Since Carly had decided she wanted to be part of my life, she wanted to know everything about the Inkers, including all the members and their families. The fact she wanted to know about us made my heart soar. She was the right woman for me, no matter what my brother thought.

“I’m on vacation,” she pointed out. “If you want me to do this, no time like the present.”

I still hadn't woken up. It was...I squinted up at the big clock over the bar. It was six thirty in the morning. Geez, this was the middle of the night. No one was awake now.

I stared at her incredulously. "At six in the morning?"

Carly nodded. "Six-thirty. And it takes time to get ready."

She talked about school, but her eyes raked over my virtually naked body. I'd rolled out of bed in nothing but tight sleep shorts. It was obvious she liked what was on display from the way she licked her lips.

I stood back and waved her in. She stalked past me, head held high, unaware of my grin as she walked into the dim light of the club. Was she here to teach or had she gotten fed up waiting for me to move our relationship along?

Then she stopped short. I peered over her head to see what she was regarding and groaned inwardly. The club had been left a mess from whoever had been working the bar last night; Moley hadn't cleared up as instructed. Dirty glasses covered every available surface.

Dammit. They knew the rules - I'd stumbled in through the back door last night after the evening with Carly and hadn't noticed until now.

She turned to me and waved at the bar. "I can't work like this."

I had folded my arms across my chest. Her eyes had locked on the gesture. She licked her lips. Someone *really* liked what she saw.

"You wanted to work here. You tidy up."

I stared down her incredulous look.

If she questioned my authority, this wasn't going to work. I'd been careful of her feelings up to this point. But this club was my territory, and I was the king. She said she was here to teach. Now the ball was in her court.

"You expect me to clear up the bar?"

"I repeat: you said you wanted to teach here."

Her offer to teach had thrown me for a loop. Maybe I didn't expect her to turn up, and not at six-thirty in the morning, but here she was.

We had another staring competition. She wasn't going to back down easily. If she was going to be my woman, she was going to make me work for it.

Carly would soon learn that I could take any challenge she threw at me.

"Okay," she muttered, staring at the bar.

I breathed easier. To her back, I said, "I'll be down later."

When she turned back to me her eyes were narrowed and deadly. "You aren't going to help?"

"Nope. You woke me up at dark thirty. I'm going back to bed."

"But I needed to know about the kids."

"Later." I waved my hand and headed for the stairs.

I grinned as I heard a muffled scream.

I didn't go back to bed, but I took my time in the shower. I heard clattering and banging from below and hoped I still had a club left by the time I returned downstairs.

I soaped my arms and chest. My cock had hardened as I thought of her spitting at me like an angry cat. It was a real turn-on. I jacked myself lazily, contemplating rubbing one out then, my balls tightening in anticipation. But I let go with regret. I wanted to save this for my woman downstairs. I imagined her hot mouth around my dick again or burying it inside her tight hot pussy. My pleasure could wait a while.

I headed downstairs an hour later, now dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. The bar was empty, but I could hear noises coming from the kitchen. I looked around, shocked at the transformation. It hadn't been so clean in years. Every table was wiped down and empty of glasses, the bar top was clear and smelled of polish. Even the seats were free of dirt and grime.

I shook my head in amazement. I had to admit cleaning wasn't top of my priorities, but even I could see the difference. Carly had worked miracles in such a short time. My club had been missing a woman's touch.

I headed to the coffee machine, and even that looked as if it had received a clean. The pot was full, and I picked a cup from the shelf above and filled it to the brim. I drank the hot brew, feeling the caffeine burn through me, driving away the last of the sleepiness.

Then I wandered into the kitchen, to be confronted with Carly's tight round ass and long legs as she bent down to the

dishwasher. My dick hardened at the mouth-watering sight, determined to drill through my pants.

I must have made a noise because she stood up so suddenly, she swayed. I leaped forward and supported her.

Carly looked up at me, her face flushed from bending over.

“I didn’t know you were there. I thought you were sleeping.”

“I couldn’t over the noise.” I gave a smug smirk at her guilty look. She had been making the noise deliberately. But I had to be honest. “The bar looks amazing.”

Her flush deepened with the praise.

“Seriously, I’ve never seen it look so good.”

Carly scowled at me. “I’m not making a habit of it.”

I grunted.

“You’re not paying me to clean. And I’m not taking that on, no matter what you think.”

I’d work on that. Maybe it was time the patch bunnies who hung around the club earned their keep.

She turned and closed the dishwasher, setting it going. “I need coffee.”

“I need to bury my cock in your pussy,” I said hoarsely. “I’m done being a gentleman. I need to fuck you.”

Her eyes widened in shock, and I heard her gasp. I hoped she wanted this as much as I did, or I’d just made a big mistake.

“Now?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“Here.”

At her eager nod, I undid her jeans and shoved them down her slender thighs, dropping them where they lay. I lifted her up onto the kitchen counter, also cleaned, before she had a chance to argue.

Carly gasped and clutched onto me. “What if anyone comes in?”

“At this time?” I said pointedly.

My club partied late and got up late. That was one of the reasons the kids’ schooling suffered.

Then I pulled my cock out of my jeans and pressed it against her panties. A small moan escaped her before she clamped her mouth shut and stared up at me.

“No one will see,” I said quietly.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. This is my fucking club, remember?”

“Still. I’m not sure I want to risk it.”

I pressed my hips against her. She groaned and moved her hips, pressing her tits against my chest. Oh yeah, she’d take that chance.

I groaned at the contact. They were so perfect. I had to taste them. Leaning down, I covered them with my mouth, lapping at the nipples through the cotton of her top.

She pushed against me, her mouth open, her breath coming in gasps. Her hands clutched at my chest. “Dom, please.”

I loved the begging. I wanted to hear more.

I slid my hand down to cup her pussy through the cotton of her panties. She was already wet. I slipped a finger under the elastic, and she gasped and moaned. I grinned in satisfaction, sliding my finger along her slit.

I pulled her panties to one side and slid my finger into her pussy. She was so wet, but tight. I felt her muscles clench around my finger and pulled it out.

“What are you teasing me for?” she moaned.

I slid two fingers back into her.

“Not teasing you. I want to take my time. Drive you wild.”

Then she looked up at me, her eyes midnight dark with lust. Fuck taking time. I wanted to bury my dick inside her now. I tugged her panties down her slim legs and pulled them off. Then I lifted her leg and studied her. She was so wet that her juices dripped down her thighs. Her clit was peeking out from its hood, red and swollen.

“You’re beautiful,” I said hoarsely as I brushed it, and she blushed and gasped.

I bent to lick her clit and she cried out, her hands clutching at my head. I gripped her ass and pulled her closer. I’d wanted to taste her since the moment I first saw her and now I had my chance. Why had I waited so long? I licked her again and she moaned, her hands tight in my hair. I sucked her clit into my mouth and pressed my fingers against her tight entrance.

“Fill me,” she moaned, and I grunted my agreement, but first, I wanted to make her come.

I slid my fingers into her pussy and fucked her with them. Her juices coated my fingers, and I could feel her muscles tightening around my fingers as she approached her orgasm. I slid my fingers out of her and replaced them with my tongue. Her taste exploded in my mouth. So sweet, so delicious. Like honey.

She cried out, her hips bucking as she rode my face. Her juices flowed over my tongue, and I lapped them up. I wanted more. I stood, unzipped my jeans, shoved them down my thighs, and pulled her butt forward, thankful for my height because I could bury my cock inside her pussy in one thrust. Carly screamed out my name. Now it was my turn. I was going to ride her. She was made for me.

CHAPTER 8

At fucking last!

I threw my head back and cried out Dominic's name. I was half-naked on his kitchen counter, my tits bouncing as he rode me. Where was my modesty, my sense of propriety? Where was Ms. Rivers? I wanted to laugh but all I could focus on was his dick thrusting into my pussy like he never wanted to stop.

And I didn't want him to. I loved his cock inside me, dominating me, stroking my pussy. I wanted him to keep fucking me. I gasped and moaned every time he slid back in. We were both covered in sweat, his mouth covered in my juices. This was a marathon, not a hundred-yard dash.

"I need you," Dominic gasped.

I parted my lips to answer him, but all that came out was a long drawn-out moan.

He kissed me then, hard and fast. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back with a force that surprised even me, biting and sucking his lower lip, tasting myself. I thrust my tongue into his mouth. Dominic returned my passion, our tongues dueling. He wrenched his mouth away, panting, and I gave a moan of protest.

"You like it when I fuck you, don't you?" he demanded.

"Yes." Because, yeah, I needed this.

"And when I take control, you like that too, don't you?"

"Hell yeah."

I loved it when men took me hard enough my brain went on hold.

“And when I fuck you like this, hard and rough, do you like that too?”

“Too many fucking questions.” I could barely speak the words.

That seemed to satisfy him. He knew the answers.

I loved everything he did to me, and I wanted to do everything he told me to do. I was his, and he was taking me. But he needed to know this was okay. I appreciated that.

If I hadn't already been on the verge of coming, the next thrust, his cock buried deep inside me, would have sent me over the edge. I cried out as I started to come, and I knew Dominic could feel it as my pussy gripped his cock as hard as I could, milking it as my orgasm started to build.

“That's right, baby,” he ordered. “Come for me.”

I started to climax again, and I felt my pussy clench around Dominic's cock. I couldn't help it. I was coming so hard, and it was the best feeling I'd ever had in my life. I didn't even know it could be that good, all my senses narrowed to the thick cock inside my pussy.

“You're made for me,” he gasped out as he thrust several times more. Then Dominic started to come too, his cock throbbing inside me, filling me up with his hot cum. The sensation of him coming inside me sent me over the edge again.

And then, we were done, not caring about the mess. We had both climaxed, and we stayed there, holding each other, my head buried into the crook of his neck, for a long time without saying anything. I think we were both just too exhausted to speak. He traced lazy circles on my back, and I never wanted to leave his arms.

* * *

Dominic guided me upstairs into the shower when we could walk and talk again, with the promise of a bacon sandwich and coffee afterward. That sounded amazing.

I wondered if he'd join me despite his offer, but he left me to clean up alone. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed. Maybe a little of both. I washed away the sweat and cum with his woodsy soap. I hissed a little as I cleaned my pussy. It had been well used. I couldn't remember the last time I had been fucked like that.

When I got out of the shower, I found my clothes hanging over the towel rail along with a clean towel. I dressed, glad my clothes weren't dirty, then headed downstairs. I hesitated as I spotted we weren't alone anymore.

Eyebrows raised when a couple of the guys spotted me, but one of them bounced over and shook my hand.

“Hey, I'm Moley. The barroom looks amazing.”

Dominic snorted. “It's Moley's job to clean up in the morning. And no, Carly isn't gonna do this every morning.”

I gave Moley a nod. “Today only,” I insisted.

He huffed, but he grinned at me as he bounced away.

“He should be Roo, not Moley,” I said as I joined Dominic by the coffee maker.

“His choice.” He grinned down at me. “Word’s got around about you being Teach for the day. We might have more kids than I expected.”

“Bring it on,” I said.

God, I was that naïve. I thought he was talking about ten kids, not twenty-five. Two hours later, I stared at the kids tumbling into the room, screaming and running around.

“Is this too much?” he asked. “I can send some away.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll deal. There might be some yelling at first.”

Dominic grinned at me. “I’ll deal.”

* * *

Three hours later I sent the kids off to one corner to have a snack. One of the guys had waved at me to say he had food for everyone. I was glad of the break. I think we were all tired. I needed to rethink the idea of how I was going to teach the kids if I did this again. They were diverse ages, and I couldn’t manage them all without a plan. It was something I was going to have to talk to Dominic about.

I hadn’t seen him since breakfast. When I asked about him, the guys said he was away from the clubhouse. In meetings. They didn’t expand and I had the feeling they didn’t want me to ask.

Tank, who produced the sandwiches and chips for the kids, was like most of the guys I'd seen, and covered in tattoos. Under his tank he had two full sleeves of ink and, from what I could see, a full back tattoo of a phoenix. It was stunning and I said so. To my amusement, the huge, balding guy blushed at the compliment.

"Thanks. Not everyone likes them."

"They're works of art," I said honestly, and he blushed even deeper.

"Does all the club have ink like this?"

"Most," he said. "It's our thing. We got our own studios in the city."

"As well as the auto shop?"

Tank laughed. "We've got multiple businesses. Dominic funds startups for members who want to own their business."

I didn't want to ask if that was how they laundered money. I knew from bitter experience the Inkers had legal and illegal businesses. It was something I didn't want to share with him.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Tank pointed to a tattoo of a dagger and brushes on his right bicep. "This is the club ink. We've all got that. It's not the same as the club patch."

A memory tingled. A witness to my father's murder. My mouth went dry. A dagger and paint brushes. That's what the man said. My father was killed by a man with a tattoo like this on the side of his neck.

“Even Dominic?” I asked carefully. Then it was my turn to blush. I hadn’t gotten him naked. I’d only been focused on his cock.

Tank nodded. “Ace got his tattooed down the nape of his neck.”

I breathed easier. It wasn’t Dominic. I wasn’t sure if I’d been able to cope if had been him.

“I think I’ve seen it before,” I lied. “I’m not sure who. It was down one side of his neck.” I traced a line.

Tank beamed at me. “That’s Colt.”

“Colt?” I was sure I hadn’t heard that one before. They seemed to use the names and nicknames interchangeably.

“Ace’s brother, Cam. He had his on the side of his neck. He said he wasn’t going to hide it from anyone. Colt’s a stubborn son of a bitch, but he was like that from the second he walked in as a prospect. Didn’t let anyone give him any bull.”

My mind was racing. Cameron Woods was my father’s killer. After three years, I’d finally found the name I was looking for and it was Dominic’s twin brother. I’d had him facing me and hadn’t known. He must have laughed at me. Humiliation swept over me.

You’re a dead man walking, Colt.

My heart ached for what I was going to lose. I’d really thought Dominic and I had a chance together, but my father’s killer had never been brought to justice. Today that changed.

I deserved an Oscar for the performance I put on that afternoon. The kids loved me and when they left, their moms and dads hoped I'd be back tomorrow.

I said nothing. There would be no tomorrow.

Dominic still hadn't returned by the time I left. I was glad. I wasn't sure I could face him.

I drove home, relieved to see Mom's Prius wasn't in the drive when I arrived. There was no way she understood my desire for revenge upon my father's killer. She wanted to let it go.

I headed into the office, a tiny room Mom used when she worked from home. I tapped the code for the gun safe. Dad had taught me to shoot from a young age, a fact I kept to myself. He always said it was important for me know how to protect myself.

Today I was going to avenge him. I wouldn't live to tell anyone, but I'd die knowing his killer was dead.

CHAPTER 9

Present Day

The meeting was long and frustrating. When I took over the Inkers, I thought I'd be focused on club matters. These days, it seemed I was dealing with city politics.

Not with the local politicians of course, but the people who ran the city, the gangs, crime families, and the clubs. I had no issue dealing with them. They were less corrupt than the politicians who wanted kickbacks to grease the city wheels.

I was glad to get out of the Devils clubhouse and take the ride across the city to our patch.

"It's time we talked to the Riders," I said as we entered the clubhouse, "otherwise Echo's gonna start a war. Another one."

Echo was young and the president of the Sleigh Devils, west of the city. It was a small club. We'd had good relations with the previous president, but he'd retired to tour the country and Echo had taken over. He was new to the role and determined to make his name by creating tension between the other clubs. I'd done the same thing when I took over. Sensibly I'd listened to the experienced men in my club and sat my butt down and zippered my mouth. Echo didn't seem to be following the same advice.

Cam and four other men followed me into the darkened room.

"We knew it was coming, Ace," Cam said, flicking the light switch. "He thinks he's invincible."

“We were just as stupid when we took over the club, Colt,” I said.

We rarely used our nicknames when we talked to each other, but yeah, as Ace and Colt, the new president and vice president, we were convinced we could rule the city.

“But we listened,” he pointed out, and thank God we did.

“Patch—” I stopped in my tracks, ignoring the muttered cursing behind me.

A woman stood in the center of the bar, aiming a Sig Sauer P320 at my heart.

“Carly?”

I stared at her, unable to believe what I was seeing. She was dressed in leather from head to toe, her long blonde waves spilled over the black leather jacket, her blue eyes icy. Her expression was just as dangerous as the gun pointed at me.

Even while my upstairs brain processed the danger I was in, my dick told me how hot she was in leather.

Damned hot!

But this was Carly. My sweet girl. I’d left her this morning after fucking her until we’d forgotten our names. Now she wanted to kill me?

What the fuck?

The men around me were still, no one moving. One wrong move could get us all killed. But I knew they were armed and would protect me to the death. Carly could kill me, but she’d die too. From her expression she knew that.

“Carly, I don’t understand,” I said, making my voice as calm as it could be.

“I know. But you will...before you all die.” Her cold, flat voice sent tendrils of ice through my body.

Where was the sweet, laughing woman I knew I was falling in love with?

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Revenge,” she said calmly.

I stared at her. “Revenge? What for?”

“For the death of Daniel Dawson.”

“Danny Dawson?”

“You remember him,” she said sarcastically.

I had the feeling I was about to leap into quicksand. “I do, but how do you know him?”

“He was my father,” she stated, her head held high, the Sig Sauer steady, aimed at the center of my chest. “He’s dead. But you know that. You’ve known it from the moment you met me.”

I shook my head. “Your name is Rivers. I had no idea you were Danny’s kid.”

“Rivers is my mom’s maiden name. She asked me to change our names after he died. She didn’t want anyone coming after us.”

Her mom had a point. There were plenty in the city who wanted to get revenge on Danny Dawson. His family would

have been the next best thing.

“I told you I’d get revenge on the man who killed my father,” she said, her voice cold and hollow.

It had been a throwaway comment over a cup of coffee and a bear claw. I didn’t think she was serious.

“I’ve waited three years to find out what happened to my father,” she snarled. “And now I know.”

“Carly—”

“You’re the one responsible for his death.”

“But I didn’t—”

“I know.” She surprised me with her interruption. “It wasn’t you who pulled the trigger.”

“How do you know?”

“Tank told me.”

I blinked at the mention of one of my valued crew. “Tank told you who killed your father?”

Only two people in the club knew the perpetrator. Me and the one who’d pulled the trigger.

“Tank described the tattoo. I recognized it from the witness’ description.”

I frowned. As far as I knew there was only one witness, an elderly man walking his dog late at night, and his description was sketchy at best.

“You know now?”

“Who?” I demanded.

She traced a line down her neck and looked behind him. My mouth went dry, and I turned slowly to face my twin.

Cam gave me a resigned look. “We always knew this was a possibility, Dom.”

Yeah, we did. But after three years, I thought we’d put distance between us and the murder of Daniel Dawson.

I turned back to Carly, staying in front of my brother and focused on Carly. “Don’t do this. You’re not a killer, Carly.”

Carly’s eyes flickered toward Cam, but the gun was still trained on my chest. I wasn’t moving. I didn’t trust her.

“You don’t know what I’m capable of,” she spat through gritted teeth. The ice had melted in the fire that raged through her.

“I’ll turn myself in,” Cam said, his voice low.

“I’m gonna kill you first,” Carly said with deadly intention.

“No, you won’t.”

A woman’s voice distracted Carly for a second, but the gun didn’t waver.

Carly’s brow furrowed. “Mom? What are you doing here?”

I heard the click of heels, then a middle-aged woman joined me at my side. She was tall, her blonde hair fading to ash, dressed in faded jeans and a flannel shirt. Now I looked at her closely, I could see the resemblance between the two women.

“Miriam.” I nodded my head in greeting.

Carly asked, “You know each other?” The betrayal and hurt in her voice was obvious.

“I came to stop you doing something stupid when I realized you’d taken your father’s gun.”

“He killed Dad, your husband,” Carly cried out. “Don’t you want revenge?”

“Dominic didn’t kill Danny. Are you going to murder the man you love when you know he’s innocent?”

The irony of a woman I barely knew pleading for my life didn’t escape me. Innocent wasn’t a word that could ever be applied to me. I had too much blood on my hands. But I wouldn’t let anyone hurt my brother, by blood or in arms, not even Carly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tony and Drake take in the situation. They were both armed. This could go south real quick. I needed to take charge before everyone I loved was dead.

I focused all my attention on the leather-clad woman in front of me.

“You gonna kill me, Carly?” I asked quietly.

CHAPTER 10

The Sig Sauer wavered. I sobbed in frustration, but I didn't lower the gun, still aimed at Dominic's heart. I needed justice. To take revenge on the man who killed my father. But Dominic hadn't been the one to murder him.

“Get out of the way, Dominic,” I begged. I didn't want to kill the man I loved, but he knew the truth. I was entitled to my revenge.

Dominic shook his head and took a step forward, his hands held out in a gesture of peace. “I know you're better than this,” he said softly.

My hand shook. I felt as if I'd been punched in the gut. I'd waited so long for this moment.

“He killed my father.”

“I did,” Cam said coldly, “and I'd do it again.”

I raised the gun again.

“Jesus, Cam, shut up. I'm trying to keep you alive here,” Dominic snapped.

“She needs to know the truth,” Cam said.

I thought he was talking to Dominic, but I realize he'd aimed it at my mom.

“Don't you speak to her,” I snapped, anger flaring again.

But Dominic focused his dark, intense gaze on me. “Put the gun down, Carly, and we'll talk. All of us.”

“But—”

“There are things you need to know, baby girl,” Mom said. “I should have told you sooner, but I never thought you’d meet Colt.”

I frowned at her. She was talking like she knew Cameron and Dominic.

Dominic reached out and took my father’s gun from me, placing it carefully on the nearby table. I lurched for it as Drake picked it up and stepped out of my reach.

“That’s mine,” I snarled. “Don’t you dare touch it. Dad gave it to me.”

“Carly, I’ll take care of it, ‘kay?”

Drake looked at me like he wanted me to know he meant it. “We cool?” he asked Dominic.

“Yeah, we’re cool,” Dominic confirmed. “You’ll get it back, Carly.”

I gave one short nod and wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly very cold and feeling exhausted.

Dominic stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly. I gripped the collar of his leather jacket and hung onto him as if his strength was the only thing keeping me together.

“I can’t forgive what he’s done,” I murmured into his chest, my voice barely above a whisper. “I know he’s your brother.”

“Twin,” Dominic amended, his warm breath brushing over my ear. “He’s my twin.”

I listened to his rumble in my ear knowing he'd never understand, never let me seek justice for my father.

"I know you want revenge but killing him won't bring your father back."

I leaned back to look at him, knowing I must look a mess. "And if it was Cam that was dead, would you want to kill the man who murdered him?"

He hesitated and I knew I'd scored a point.

"I want justice."

"Carly, you've got to listen to me," my mom said.

I turned on her, betrayed by the one person who I thought would understand that I needed justice for my dad, but my mom interrupted before I could say a word.

"We—" Mom licked her lips. She was really nervous. I was surprised because Mom was never nervous. I'd always envied her confidence. I'd never had her ability to take on the world. But now she was uncertain, and I didn't know why.

"Your father was part of Sleigh Riders."

I stared at her. "That's not true."

"It's true, baby. I'm sorry, I know you don't want to hear it but it's true."

I shook my head. "No, it's not true. I don't believe you."

"Your mom's telling the truth," Cam said. "Your dad and I occasionally worked together."

I swallowed, the lump in my throat making it difficult to breathe. “My dad ran a restaurant. We used to live above the restaurant.”

Dominic reached out for me, but I wrenched away, ignoring the hurt look in his eyes. I couldn’t have him touching me, not now. Not in a room full of people where I was the only one who didn’t know the truth.

I hated all the pity I could see in their eyes.

Mom’s shoulders slumped. She seemed to have aged a decade since this conversation started. I wanted to comfort her, but I couldn’t. I needed to know the truth.

Cam stepped out from behind Dominic. “Sit down,” he said, easing Mom into a seat.

She rubbed her eyes and gave him a wan smile. Then she focused on me. “I told your father from the moment you were born that I wanted to keep you away from the Riders. I wanted you to have a normal life. He didn’t like it, but I was adamant. I told him I’d leave him if he didn’t agree.”

I nodded, knowing just how stubborn my mom could be.

“He hated it,” she admitted. “He was a Rider all his life.”

“We wouldn’t have let you do that,” Dominic growled, and the men around him nodded. “You’re in or you’re not.”

Mom ignored them, her attention on me. “He agreed as long as the Riders could visit. They were his family and friends.”

“But you said no.” I said.

She shook her head. “I agreed to that. They were my friends too. I knew them all.”

I wrinkled my head. “But Dad’s friends are all like him. Uncle Raoul and Uncle Marty...”

“They run the Sleigh Riders.”

My jaw dropped open.

“Raoul is the president. Marty is the VP,” Dominic said.

“You’re lying,” I accused.

“He’s not,” Mom said.

“She’s not,” Dominic said.

I glared at them both. When had I become the bad guy in the room? There was a wall between me and them.

Mom reached out to me, but I ignored her hand. “Your dad was the enforcer, baby. You don’t want to know what he did.”

I stared at her, betrayed. I couldn’t believe what she was saying. She was my mom. They were married for nearly thirty years. They were high school sweethearts. “Dad owned a restaurant.” I said it again, needing everyone in the room to hear. Their expressions didn’t change. Dominic’s could have been steel from the way it pierced through me. “He was a good man.”

“He was a good father,” she said, and I noticed the change in words. “Baby, he loved you so much.”

It was too much. I didn’t believe her; I *couldn’t* believe her.

I swung on Dominic and Cam. “How did you get involved?” I demanded.

“I asked them to help me,” Mom said wearily.

“Why?”

“Your father was ready to cause civil war in the city, Carly,” Dominic said. “And he didn’t care who was hurt. Miriam knew it had to be stopped.”

I stared at her. I felt ready to pass out. “You’re lying. Sleigh Ink was bleeding us dry. He wanted to stop that. He told me.”

Dominic glowered at me. “She’s not. We’ve done our best to keep good relationships with other clubs. Cam has worked real hard to keep that working. With all the clubs. We didn’t want war in the city. None of us did.”

I didn’t believe him. I couldn’t believe him.

I turned to Cam who had his arms crossed across his chest. He didn’t move, aside from a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“I’m sorry, Carly, but you’ve got to listen to us.”

“But why did he lie to me?” I was so bewildered; I could barely listen to my mom. My dad had been a straight as a die kind of guy.

“Something happened,” Mom said. “He couldn’t cope.”

Dominic stepped forward and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe he was trying to protect you. Maybe he thought you didn’t need to know the truth.”

My mother held out her hand to me, but I ignored it and her hurt expression. “Your father loved you, Carly,” she said softly. “But he made some bad choices.”

I pulled away from my mother, my face twisting in anger. “He was trying to protect us,” I spat out. “From Sleigh Ink, from everything.”

“No.” My mom was adamant.

“I have the proof,” Cam said. “I can show you.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how you convinced my mom, but nothing you say will convince me. I’m going to the cops.”

“You’ve got to stop her,” Drake said, barring the doorway.

I looked at him then at Dominic, and my lip curled.

“Gonna give the order to have me killed too?”

Because Cam may have killed my father, but Dominic would have given the order.

His stony expression gave me the answer I needed and, heartbroken, I turned to leave.

CHAPTER 11

I couldn't let her leave. Knowing the eyes of my men were on me, Cam, Drake, and Tony, I knew I had one choice. It was my duty to the club. I'd kill the woman I loved before she went to the cops.

Yeah, I didn't want her to turn in my brother, but it was beyond that. She would endanger every MC in the city, and there were cops and politician just salivating for just that one break, the new sheriff being one of them. It would be a fucking domino of disaster. I wasn't going to let that happen.

Then I saw Miriam's distraught expression. She knew the law. The Riders enforced it rigidly. She'd been married to the enforcer. Miriam had watched her husband die, unwilling to back down from his path of destruction. Now she was going to watch her daughter die from sheer stubbornness.

And it will kill me to lose the woman I love.

If I chose Carly, then I would lose Sleigh Ink, and we'd both die. Cam wouldn't let us walk out of here alive. And Cam would lose his twin.

"Carly, wait," I barked.

Carly twitched and for a moment I thought she'd listen, but the stubborn woman headed for the door. I couldn't help thinking she'd make a great old lady if I could turn her onto our side.

"If you don't believe us, will you believe Raoul and Marty?"

I knew how much she loved the two men. She'd talked about them over coffee and bear claws. I'd never put it together, connected the names. I should have known from the start who she was, but I'd been enchanted by her. I hadn't dreamed for a moment she was Danny Dawson's kid.

She hesitated and I breathed easier. There was no way Drake would let her out of the door. He looked like a soft old teddy bear, but he was anything but.

She turned to face me. "You'd call them?"

"This affects all of us, Carly," I said, and I watched her process it for a moment.

My girl wasn't stupid. I knew that from our first conversation together. I understood Carly's need to believe in her father's innocence. I knew how hard it was to let go of a loved one, especially when they'd done wrong. But Carly's mother was right, her father was a part of Sleigh Riders, and he had been about to commit a heinous act that would have affected hundreds of people, and innocents would have gotten caught in the crossfire.

"I'm sorry, Carly." I kept my voice low and soothing. "But your father wasn't who you thought he was."

"Let me talk to her," Cam said.

"No, I don't want to talk to you." Carly flinched away, clearly not ready to forgive him, still not ready to believe her father was ready to bring down war on the city.

But Cam stepped forward, keeping his voice soft and steady as I'd done. "I know this is hard to hear, Carly. But it's

the truth. Your father was involved in some really bad stuff. Stuff that could have hurt a lot of people.”

“You’re all involved in ‘bad stuff’.” She made air quotes sarcastically.

“Yeah,” Cam said, “but some of us are trying to change the way we live, and your father wanted to drag us back to the old ways.” At her blank look Cam said, “Trafficking women. Your Dad was in talks with an Albanian mob who transport women across the country.”

I hoped Carly would listen, but Carly shook her head, tears streaming down her face.

“I can’t believe it,” she whispered.

“I know. But you have to accept it, Carly,” I said gently. “Your father made some bad choices. But that doesn’t mean you have to make the same ones.”

“But that wasn’t why he died, was it?”

“No. But that’s not my tale to tell.”

Miriam was going to have to step up and be honest with her daughter for once in her damn life.

Carly looked up at me, her eyes searching my face for any sign of deception, then she looked at Cam. But she found none. Both of us regarded her steadily. Our words were true and honest, and she knew it.

Slowly, she nodded her head.

“I’ll try,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s gonna take time. I need to think. I’m not going to the cops.”

I wondered if I was the only one who heard the unspoken “Yet,” and then I saw Cam’s unhappy face. He heard it too.

I stepped forward and took Carly’s hand. “We’ll be here for you, baby. We’ll help you get through this.”

Carly pulled her hand away. She shook her head. “I need to get out of here.”

The rejection stung but I understood. She was hurting. I wanted to enfold her in my arms. But she didn’t want me at that moment. I hoped she wouldn’t walk away from me forever, I really did.

“I’ll take you home,” her mom said. “We need to talk.”

“I can drive you,” I said but Miriam stood up, weariness still in every movement.

“I’ll do it. I’m sorry for the intrusion. I just couldn’t let my daughter do something she’d regret.”

I nodded, my gaze softening. “Thank you for coming.”

I was sincere and I wanted her to know that. This confrontation could have ended with either Carly or I dead. Or both.

Drake stood back as Miriam guided Carly out of the clubroom. Carly didn’t look at me again.

When the two women left, we all headed for the bar. Drake poured us all bourbon and we sat in silence.

Then Cam spoke. “What do you think she’ll do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, honestly.

“What if she goes to the cops?” Drake asked.

“Then I’ll deal with her,” I said, looking each man in the eye. They needed to know I would step up, despite the fact it would break my heart. I received a nod from them and the tense knot inside me eased.

“She’s got our club and every other club in the city in her hands,” Cam said. “She could send me to the pen for life.”

Tony drained his glass and barked out a laugh. “I didn’t think the prissy schoolteacher had it in her.”

Nor did I, to be honest.

“She was ready to shoot you, Cam,” Drake agreed.

Cam nodded. “You should marry her.”

Drake blanched. “Me?”

I slammed my hand on the bar, making the glasses and my men jump. “Anyone touches her, and they’ll be dead before the next breath.”

“Like any of us are that stupid,” Cam muttered under his breath.

I scowled at him. “I don’t want anyone getting it into their head that she’s not mine.”

“As Cam said, we’re not that fucking stupid,” Drake said. “I hate the fact you let her walk out.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I snapped. “Shoot her and her mom where they stood?”

Drake shrugged. “It would be safer.”

From the look on their faces, Drake wasn't the only one who thought so.

Shit! I ran my hands through my hair. "I trust her."

"She was gonna shoot you, man," Tony pointed out.

"And you'd do the same to her," I shot back.

"We're Inkers," he declared.

"And she belongs to the Riders," I pointed out. "She just didn't know it."

"We need to talk to Ratty and Cog."

Raoul and Marty needed to know where we stood. If we'd done anything to the two women, it would have been declaring war on the Riders.

Drake raised a glass. "Beer?" he asked me.

Hell yes.

I nodded and moved away to make the call, but I didn't leave the bar. My men deserved to hear the call.

"Ace," Ratty rumbled. Raoul, Ratty. I should have guessed.

"Ratty. We have a situation."

"Tell me," he ordered.

"Carly tried to shoot Cam to avenge her father."

There was a long pause, then "She knows?"

"Yeah, Miriam told her."

"Dammit." He was always a master of the understatement.

“She’s threatened to go to the cops,” I said.

“She does that and we all go down.”

“Yeah.”

“Does she know about the Riders?”

“She knows and about her uncles, Raoul and Marty.”

Ratty huffed in my ear. “She’s gonna kill us.”

I barked out a laugh. “That’s your concern?”

He was silent for a long moment. “Carly’s a good girl.”

“Who’s just had the bottom drop out of her world. If she does something stupid, then we’re all screwed.”

“And what are you gonna do to make sure she doesn’t, boy?” He snapped like I was one of his crew. “You wanna make her your old lady, then bring her into line.”

My hackles rose. No one called me boy. “You’re the ones who lied to Carly her entire life.”

He huffed out a sigh. “Yeah, Cog and me, we’ll handle that. But you want her? You’ve got to step up, son.”

“I ain’t your son and I’ll do what I have to. But she’s been betrayed by more than just me.”

“You’re the only one who hasn’t betrayed her,” Cam said as he joined me. “You didn’t know who she was.”

He nodded at the phone, and I put it on speaker. “Ratty, it’s Colt.”

“You okay, boy?” Ratty asked.

I rolled my eyes and Cam just snorted. Ratty was never going to change. He'd known us since we were in diapers.

"I'm good."

My twin was a liar. That's what he was. He was far from good. His face was pinched and his eyes hooded.

"Should we talk to the others?" Ratty asked.

"No," I barked. "We do that, and it puts Carly in more danger. The Devils want blood. You know that."

"Agreed," Ratty said.

There was silence and I realized they were waiting for me to answer.

"I'll talk to her," I said.

"When?" Cam demanded.

I huffed out a breath. "I don't know."

"Don't leave it too long," Ratty warned.

"You deal with your own apology, old man."

"Fuck you," Ratty said, laughed, and disconnected the call.

CHAPTER 12

I retreated to the porch to sit in the swing seat, huddled under an ancient blanket. The seat creaked as I swung to and fro. I had visions of me being an old woman, sitting here, wondering what had happened with her life.

“Are you going to sit out here all night?”

I looked over my shoulder to find Mom hovering in the kitchen doorway.

“Maybe. It’s not like I’ve got anything to get up for.”

No boyfriend now. Just an empty life.

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself,” she snapped.

I turned away, staring at the house opposite, barely visible in the twilight. I had a right to feel sorry for myself. She’d just ripped the goddamn rug from underneath me.

Then I heard a long sigh. “Carly, baby, I’m sorry.”

She joined me and I didn’t have much option except to shuffle up and let her snuggle under the blanket.

“I know you’re angry with me,” she said quietly.

I stayed silent. What could I say? Yeah, I was angry. Beyond angry. I was furious.

But I wasn’t sure who I was angry at. Dad, for not being who I thought he was? Mom, for lying to me my whole life? Cam, for killing my beloved dad?

Or was I really angry with Dominic for not having my back?

“All of the above,” I said.

“Baby?” She sounded confused. She wasn’t the only one.

“It’s okay, I was just thinking.”

“Talk to me, Carly.”

I took a long time to answer, but I knew Mom would wait for me to process my thoughts. “I just don’t see why you lied to me all my life.”

She sighed. “I wanted you to have a normal life.”

“Look how that worked out.”

“You were fine until you met him.”

Meaning Dominic.

“Did you think I was gonna go through my entire life and not find out my Dad was a killer who was ready to bring down the city I lived in.”

“Your father loved you,” Mom snapped. “You can hate him for getting it wrong, but never think for one moment he didn’t love you.”

“I know he did.” I expelled a long breath. “I know Dad loved me.”

I’d spent my entire life secure in the knowledge my father loved me. I was the center of his universe. Even on my first day teaching, he’d walked me to school. I’d been mortified but the other teachers had been kind about it, especially when Dad produced food for the whole teaching faculty. I was golden, at least until this week.

I leaned my head on Mom's shoulder. "What did Dad really do for the Riders? And don't tell me I don't want to know, because I do."

'Have you watched Drake work?'

"No. Dominic kept me away from the club."

"He did?" Mom sounded surprised.

Dominic's behavior fell into place. "He treated me like Dad did."

"He didn't want you to know what he did."

"Yeah." I sat up and looked at Mom. "But now people have got to quit treating me like I'm gonna fall apart by knowing the truth. I'm working in the dark, Mom. I deserve to know the truth."

Mom pressed her lips together and even in the darkness I could see her face was pinched. "For most of his time, he was the sergeant at arms in the Riders, like Drake. It's a senior role."

"But what did he do?"

"He was the one who enforced the rules, made sure the meetings went smoothly, dealt with any of the club who go into trouble."

I had a feeling there was a whole lot Mom was leaving out. "But he wasn't that the whole time?"

She sighed. "The Riders became the largest and most successful club in Sleigh, thanks to Raoul, Marty, and your

Dad. They needed more members stepping up to the senior roles. And the restaurant was taking off.”

“You mean shifting more money.”

Mom was silent for a long time. “Your Dad knew any successful auditor would trace the money. So members ate and drank there and then the public started to come. It was a full-time operation, and we couldn’t keep up. Danny had to make a choice and he chose the restaurant. Someone else had to take over the SAA role. Your Dad stepped down to be the enforcer, but he wasn’t needed often. No one wanted to go up against him.”

“People were scared of him?”

I couldn’t believe it. Not my Dad. He was the sweetest guy ever.

“They knew the club rules were strictly enforced.” Mom insisted.

“Did he murder them?”

Her hesitation was too long.

“Mom.” It came out as a breathy sob.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Danny never talked about it. On my insistence,” she added.

The house opposite was cloaked in darkness now. The only thing I could see was a pale light in one of the upstairs rooms.

I sat for long moments, processing what she said. However she said it, my dad was a killer. I knew that from what she wasn’t saying, as much as from what she did.

“And then he went off the rails?”

Dominic hadn't talked about this at the club, but I knew there was a missing piece.

“Yeah.” Her voice was as breathy as mine.

“Why?”

“A boy was killed by another club. Not the Inkers. He'd been a prospect in the Riders but had to move. Your dad helped him find a new club. He had contacts all over the city. Snail had been there less than a month when we got word, he'd been killed carrying out club business.”

“Snail?”

“He wasn't speedy.”

“Is that why he was killed?”

“I don't know,” Mom said.

I raise an eyebrow. “Club business?”

“Yes, but I know it affected your Dad. He felt guilty that he'd suggested the move to Snail.”

I furrowed my brow. “But why did Dad go off the rails?”

“He couldn't stop thinking about it. It consumed him, day and night.”

I thought about the time up to my dad's death, but I realized I'd been excited and involved with my new teaching job and hadn't spent much time at home. I'd missed what was happening to my beloved Dad.

I took Mom's hand. "I'm so sorry you had to handle Dad, but you should have told me.

She looked at my hand. "And I'm sorry I didn't confide in you. I should have discussed it, then maybe we wouldn't have gotten this far."

"Did he have to die, Mom?" I asked in a quiet voice. "What about going to the hospital, getting him sectioned?"

But that wasn't the way MC's worked. I knew that much.

Mom took a long time to answer. "What no one's told you is he went after Snail's new club, the Devils. He wanted to burn them alive in their clubhouse. Men, women, and children. I called your Uncle Raoul and asked him to help."

"Then how did the Inkers get involved?"

"Because Cam and I were meeting with Raoul and Marty about the situation when Miriam called Raoul."

Dominic!

He was at the bottom of the stoop, hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed on her.

"I think that's my cue to leave," Mom said, pushing the blanket toward me. "You tell my girl the rest of the story. I'm going to bed."

I looked between the two of them, thinking this should be a joint discussion.

"I can't do it," Mom said, her voice raw.

"I'll tell you everything you need to know," Dominic promised me.

Mom brushed the top of my head with her lips and kissed me. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Then she was gone. Dominic stayed where he was.

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you coming up here?”

“Do you want me to?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t want to have this discussion at shouting distance.”

He jogged up the stoop and joined me. I raised the blanket, and he sat down, covering himself. He was solid and warm, and I really wanted him to enfold me in his arms.

As if he heard me, Dominic did just that and I leaned into his hard strength.

We sat there for long moments before he spoke.

“Are you sure you want to hear the rest of the story?”

I raised my head and looked into his eyes. “If I’m going to be your woman, then yeah, I have a right to know.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you do. Miriam called Raoul and told him what Danny planned to do. She’d guessed and called us quick enough we could stop him.”

I snuggled under the blanket, appreciating the solid warmth of Dominic’s body. “Mom said he tried to burn Snail’s new club down.”

He grunted. “With everyone inside.” He felt my full body shudder and held me tighter. “We had to stop him, Carly. If it hadn’t been Cam, it would have been me or Raoul or Marty. Danny refused to back down.”

“But why? That’s what I don’t understand. My dad was a gentle man. He never raised a hand to me.”

“Danny and Miriam did the wrong thing by hiding you from the Riders. You have no idea about the world he lived in. He blamed the Devils for Snail’s death. He was right and wrong. Snail wasn’t the right choice for the job.”

“What was the job?”

“Collection day.”

I stiffened because I knew what that was. My father had blamed the Inkers for bleeding him dry on collection day. I wanted to ask if that was true or another of his lies.

“Danny had no business interfering in another club’s business,” Dominic continued. “He should have kept his nose out. He knew better.”

“So why did he?”

“Carly, if I tell you this, there’s no going back. There are no take backs, and you have to realize I’m telling you the truth.”

I sat up and stared him, his face all chiseled planes and shadows in the dark. “I need to know.”

I had a horrible feeling I knew what was coming next.

“Snail was his son.”

CHAPTER 13

“No!”

Carly’s denial cried out in the darkness, the pain hurting me as much as her. The hits just kept coming and she couldn’t take it.

“I’m sorry, Carly, but I said I’d tell you the truth.”

“My dad...he couldn’t...I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth,” I insisted. Damn Miriam for making me tell my girl the bad news. She and Danny should have been honest with their daughter a long time ago. “He had an affair. It lasted a short time, a couple of months, but Snail was the result. Miriam knew. Danny was honest with her. She insisted Danny support Snail and his mom. He agreed as long as no one ever told you the truth.”

“Did they think I’d never find out?” she gasped. “That it was better to find out from a stranger?”

That was a punch to the gut, but I understood. I wasn’t family.

Carly collapsed and I hauled her against me. She buried her face in my chest and her shoulders shook.

I hugged her tight against me. It was one blow after another. I knew she was ready to fall apart. I let her cry out her grief until she was exhausted against my chest, calm apart from the occasional shiver.

“Baby, do you need a tissue?”

She nodded.

I eased her back against the seat and headed into the house. The kitchen was empty, just the dim lights under the cabinets illuminating the room. I spotted a box of tissues on the dresser and returned with it. Carly sat up, her tired face streaked with tears. I plucked out a tissue and instead of handing it to her, I wiped her eyes and cheeks, then took another tissue and held it to her nose.

“Blow,” I ordered.

She made this weird snorting noise but did as she was told. We repeated the process, and she managed a shaky laugh.

“I didn’t expect a guy like you to take care of me.”

“Taking care of my men and the club is my job,” I pointed out, not able to hide the edge to my tone.

I knew what people thought of us, but I didn’t care. The club, the men, and their families, was my world. I wanted Carly to be part of that world, but would she be able to accept me? She had to become part of my world. I wouldn’t give up the club for anyone. I startled at the soft touch of a hand on my cheek.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” she said softly, her fingers lightly brushing against my cheek. “I know you’re a good man.”

The corner of my mouth quirked up in a slight smile as the tension that had been building between us dissipated.

“Just a man,” I murmured and leaned forward to brush my lips against hers.

I was as complicated as any man, but she'd learn that about me over time. If she gave me the chance.

"I'm so confused," she confessed.

"I know. It's hard to believe everything we've thrown at you, but it's true. You've got to believe me."

Carly hugged herself. "I don't want to believe you."

I ran my hand down her back, and she curled into me, needing the chance to connect. I could feel that by the desperation in the way she hung onto me, as if she was scared I would pull away.

The kiss deepened as our hands roamed over each other's bodies. Under the blanket, I pulled her against me, glad of the darkness that cloaked our loving, my hands gripping her hips as she entangled her legs with mine. It was awkward and uncomfortable, and I didn't really care as I pulled away from her lips to kiss down her neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin there. She moaned softly, her fingers tangling in my hair as I continued to worship her body. I needed her as much she needed me, desperate to feel the connection between us.

But then the sound of a Hog cut through the night. Lifting my head, I looked down the street to see the single light coming toward us. My gut instinct was they were coming here, but why and who at this time of night? Carly must have thought the same because she disentangled from me under the blanket.

I motioned for Carly to stay put and stood as the bike rumbled to a stop in the street behind my own bike. As expected, I was met with the sight of one of my crew, a member of the club, climbing off the bike.

He jogged up the drive and as he reached me, I noticed his normally ruddy face was pale and drawn. His hands shook as he handed me a piece of paper.

“Dig, what’s wrong?”

“Read it.”

I took the paper and read the familiar scrawl. The bottom fell out of my world, and I could barely breathe. “You know this is true?” I demanded, my voice hoarse.

Dig nodded. “Yeah. I was there. Tank asked me to fetch you.”

“What’s happened?” Carly asked, dropping the blanket, and joining me at the stoop.

Dig kept his eyes focused on me. “Cam’s in trouble.”

I nodded. “I need to get to the club.”

“What’s happened to Cam?” Carly said sharply.

I handed her the paper, and she scanned it. “Cam’s gone missing.”

“Who took him?”

I took a deep breath. “We don’t know yet, but we’ll find out. I have to go.”

She clutched at my arm. “This wasn’t to do with Mom or me, Dominic. I didn’t talk to anyone after I came home.”

I admitted, it had been my first thought. I nodded once. “Did you talk to anyone before you came to the club?”

She shook her head. “When I overheard you talking to Cam, I came home to get the gun. But I was determined to kill Cam. I wasn’t gonna talk to anyone about what I was going to do and why.”

She had a point.

“Talk to your mom. Maybe she knows who could have done this. It could be one of the Riders.”

Unlikely, but a possibility. Or the Devils.

“I will. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Thanks, but I need to handle this.” I gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before saying to Dig, “I’ll see you back at the club.” I didn’t want to say her reception would likely be hostile after the stunt she pulled this evening and I needed to focus on my brother.

Dig looked between us before nodding and jogging back to his bike.

I turned to Carly and tugged her into my arms. “I have to go, babe.”

She clutched at my shoulders and stared up into my eyes. “I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

Me, not Cam. She still hadn't forgiven Cam. I understood that. But if anything happened to Cam, I'd never forgive myself for not being at the club.

I kissed her mouth, then left her, my mind now focused on my brother. If he was murdered, there would be no forgiveness.

"They'll be in the ground before they take their next breath," I swore out loud.

Then I looked over my shoulder to see Carly watching me, a worried expression on her face. Had she heard that?

Please God don't let it be her.

As I rode my bike toward the club, my mind was racing. Who would have taken my brother? We were careful, we made sure no one knew how Carly's father was murdered. Did someone turn on us? Was there a mole in the club? Was it about that or something else entirely?

Digging out my phone, I tried Cam's number, but it went to voicemail as I expected. There was nothing I could do here. I needed to get home.

When I arrived at the club, the place was buzzing with activity. I could see the worry etched on every member's face.

Tank strode toward me. "Where the hell have you been?" he snapped.

"You know where I was," I snarled. "Tell me what you know."

“He went out for takeout two hours ago and didn’t return. When we couldn’t reach him, we went looking for his bike. We couldn’t find that either.”

“You don’t think he just took off for the evening?”

“After what happened today?” he asked pointedly.

Dominic nodded. It didn’t matter it was Carly, she’d gotten past the guards. Cam would have been working on improving club security the second they got her out the door. Disciplining the guards would come up at the next meeting.

Fuck, where was my twin?

CHAPTER 14

I didn't hear from Dominic for two days and my nerves ratcheted, ready to snap from the lack of information. I begged Mom to talk to the Riders. She was reluctant, but eventually she agreed.

I paced up and down the wraparound porch while she made the call.

Her expression was somber when she joined me.

"Well?" I demanded.

"Raoul and Marty know nothing. The Inkers have locked down tight. They offered their help, but Dominic refused. He said they'd deal with this in-house."

I cursed and apologized quickly at Mom's reproachful expression.

I threw up my hands in frustration. "I can't just wait here for him to remember I exist."

She gave me a steady look. "That's unfair, Carly. Cameron is his twin."

"And he killed Dad," I shot back.

"And you know the reasons why."

The fight drained out of me, and I slumped against the railing. "I know."

Mom put her arm around me. "Put aside your feelings for Cam. What do you want to do?"

"I want to help Dominic."

“Then go to him.”

“What could I do?”

“There are a group of men who need feeding and taking care of while they find one of their own. I don’t know much about the Inkers, but Raoul said not many of them are married.”

I gave her the side-eye. “You want me to cook for the club?”

She shrugged. “Why not? You can cook and they need to focus their efforts on finding Cam.”

I nodded slowly as I thought about what she said. “Dominic might not want me there.”

Mom hugged me tight. “You won’t know until you go there. Now, let’s raid the freezer and see what food we can take them.”

I huffed. “I don’t know about this. Dad would hate the idea of you feeding the Inkers.”

“He’s not here so you don’t have to explain you’re in love with their president.” Mom’s voice was brusque, and I knew there was no arguing with her. “Do you want me to come with you to deliver the food?”

I thought about it for a moment, but I shook my head. “I need to do this myself.”

“Good girl,” she said, smiling at me.

An hour later I approached the club house gates with a loaded trunk of food. The gates were locked and as I drew up,

four men appeared out of the darkness and surrounded the car, all of them with guns, none of them looking friendly.

“What do you want?” one of them snarled.

“I want to see Dominic.”

“He’s busy,” he snapped.

“I want to see him.”

“He hasn’t got time to see you. No whores tonight. And not you.”

“I’m not...” I took a deep breath. I knew how these men viewed women who weren’t their wives. “Look, I don’t want to cause trouble. I’ve got food in the trunk for everyone. I didn’t think you’d want to cook.”

I saw the guy turn to look at the man behind him who just shrugged.

“I could eat,” the one who’d talked to me said.

“We haven’t eaten in hours,” the other one agreed. “Everyone is too busy to cook.”

“Wait here,” the first guy said.

I nodded and watched him talk into a radio. Then the gates opened slowly, and he waved me through. I started the car and drove to the club house.

Dominic waited for me on the stoop. I cut the engine and turned to look at him. His expression was shadowed in the darkness, and his body language radiated fatigue. He needed to shower and change his clothes, but now wasn’t the time to suggest it. Food first.

“Hey, Carly, this isn’t a good time.” He sounded as exhausted as he looked.

I jogged over to him, but I didn’t touch him even though I wanted to take him in my arms. But I knew his men were watching, so I merely said, “I’ve brought you food. I thought you might be hungry.”

“Food for me?” he queried.

“For everyone.”

I saw approval in his eyes. He was pleased I’d thought of his men.

Thank you, Mom. I had to remember Dominic had a whole other family I needed to think about.

I waited for him to ask me if I could cook, but then I remembered a conversation we’d had over sticky pastries when I told him how much I like cooking to decompress after a hard day at school.

He just nodded.

“Mom filled the trunk.” I waved at the car.

“That was kind of her.”

“There’s a casserole ready to eat. It just needs heating up. I’ll do it for you if you want.”

“We could do it.”

“I’ve got hot biscuits too.”

Someone in the clubhouse moaned. “Ya gotta keep this one, Ace. Just keep the guns away from her.”

Dominic snarled at him and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Thanks, Carly. I could eat.”

He turned and waved to someone. Two guys appeared from the club house.

“Ozzie and Barn will help you unload.”

I eyed the two men. “Barn?”

“He never shuts doors,” Ozzie, presumably, said as he opened the trunk. “Damn, this looks good. Have you really got hot biscuits?”

“I have,” I promised.

“Homemade?” Barn asked, his eyes excited. He looked barely twenty, with light brown, almost straw-like hair, sticking up everywhere.

“I made them just before I left. I didn’t have time to do anything else.”

“I need to get back to the office,” Dominic said.

“I’ll bring you food when it’s done,” I promised him.

We unloaded the trunk, and I asked Barn to show me the way to the kitchen. I was very careful not to demand any attention from Dominic. I wanted to show him I could help.

Barn chatted cheerfully as we stowed the food away. Ozzie had disappeared somewhere.

Finally we were just left with the chicken casserole and biscuits.

“How many men are here now?” I asked.

Barn's relaxed expression changed. "Ten on site. Twenty searching for Cam. Dom's gotten the whole club, including prospects and former members, hunting for him."

I needed to thank my mom for providing me with enough casserole to feed a small army. "Okay. I need to make more biscuits. We'll do this in shifts. Can you help me, Barn?"

"I'll try," he said cheerfully. "The guys who usually cook are hunting for Cam."

I bit my lip and then asked, "Why aren't the women here helping you?"

"We're kind of a younger club. Most of us aren't married. The whores...women," he said hastily, "they don't spend much time here. Ace has been so focused on finding Cam, he's forgotten the fact we need to eat."

I didn't point out women could search too. I got it, they didn't think of women like that. I'd work on that.

With Barn's help, I got food out to the gates and into the offices where the senior members of the club were in a meeting. I let Barn deliver the food. I stayed in the kitchen. Then everyone else ate while I made new biscuits.

As members of the search party filtered in, defeated and unhappy, during the evening, they were all fed.

One guy approached me, looking nervous. "I...uh...I'm a vegetarian."

I was prepared for that. "Give me fifteen minutes. I brought veggie chili."

“And biscuits?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course.”

“Are you staying?”

“For as long as I’m needed,” I said, not committing to anything.

An hour later a shout went up from the office. Barn, two guys from the search party who were eating, and I, stared at each other.

They rushed to the office. I stayed where I was. I heard excited talking, then Barn rushed in.

“They’ve found him. They’ve found Cam. He wasn’t taken. He was in a traffic accident. He didn’t have ID on him, so he was treated as a John Doe in the hospital.”

I slumped against the table and sent up a quiet prayer of thanks for this having a happy ending for Dominic. No matter my feelings about Cam, I didn’t want Dominic to mourn the loss of his twin. I knew what it was like to grieve.

“I’m gonna go home,” I said. “There’s enough food for everyone who comes back. But you call me if you need more.”

Barn eyed me speculatively. “You don’t want to stay and celebrate?”

I shook my head. “This is for the club.”

“You’re a good woman, Carly Rivers.”

I picked up my keys and he patted my shoulder as he walked me out.

I drove away with his last words ringing in my ears.
“You’d make a great old lady for him.”

CHAPTER 15

The only order I gave to Tony and Masters before I left for the hospital was simple.

“Find the man who did this.”

They gave me grim nods.

If this was an attack on the Inkers, I was ready to bring war down on the city, and the club was with me to a man.

I wished Carly had stayed. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted her in my arms. But she'd thought about me and my club before herself. She was an amazing woman.

I wanted to vomit when I saw my twin in the hospital bed. Cam was a mess. A truck had driven across an intersection on a red light, collided with Cam and sent him skidding across the road into a wall. He was a mass of road rash on the outside and broken bones on the inside.

It was touch and go at first, the doctors said. I might have arrived too late, but Cam was as stubborn as me and he held on, although the doctors warned me recovery would take months, maybe longer. It was then I realized just how close I'd come to losing him.

It was another four days before I was ready to leave Cam in the hospital alone. While I was there, Masters joined me by Cam's bed.

“We've found him,” he growled. “Tony's watching him now.”

I took a deep breath, ready to give the order. “Who is it?”

He pressed his lips together. “He’s eighty-five.”

“You’re sure?”

“He’s an old guy who was more interested in his hoagie on the passenger seat, than on the road ahead,” Masters said.

“Did you approach him?”

“Tony did. He was fucking terrified when he discovered who he’d nearly killed.”

“He knew us?”

“He’s lived in Sleigh his whole life. He knows the MCs.”

I scrubbed my hand through my hair, grimacing at the greasy feel.

“Leave the police to deal the dude.” I saw the disapproving expression on his face. “He’s eighty-five. We take him out, we’ll have the cops on us.”

Masters shrugged. “He nearly killed Cam.”

I knew he wouldn’t approve, would think I was going soft, but I didn’t care. I didn’t have the bandwidth to deal with an old guy who made a mistake, and also take care of Cam.

“I need you to focus on the Devils. What’s Echo doing now?”

Masters broke into an evil smile. “Don’t worry, Ace. We’ve got a mole in the Devils.”

“Nothing happens without my approval,” I warned.

He grunted which could mean yes or no. I let it go. Cam was my focus. And Carly. I needed to see her.

She had created an issue, which I discovered when Barn visited the hospital.

“Your old lady’s kinda taken over, boss.” Barn grinned at me.

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

Barn’s grin turned into a smirk I didn’t trust. “You’ve been here with Cam. Carly has kept the club running. She feeds us despite the fact we told her we can cook just fine, and she’s teaching the kids. She’s gotten some of the women to clean the clubhouse and help with the cooking.”

Women, not whores. I noticed that.

“What about the business?”

“Taken care of.”

I grunted. Barn was barely more than a prospect. I’d talk to the senior members of the club.

But first I wanted to talk to Carly. She refused to come to the hospital, and I knew it was to do with Cam. Instead, she stayed at the club from morning ‘til night.

I missed her. It had been over a week since I had her in my arms. But I didn’t want to leave Cam. Then Miriam turned up.

“What are you doing here?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m going to sit with Cam while you take a shower, eat, and sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re rank,” she said bluntly. “Carly’s waiting back at the clubhouse.”

I scowled at her, but she looked pointedly at the seat I was in. I stood with a growl. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“No, you won’t. Carly’s organized shifts. You need a night in your own bed. Ozzie is downstairs waiting to drive you.”

“My bike.”

“You need sleep, or you’ll be the one in the hospital bed.”

Miriam gave me a cool look when I opened my mouth to argue. I stalked out of the ward, growling under my breath.

Ozzie waved at me from where he leaned against his old, battered Chevy.

“She threw you out?”

“Yeah,” I snarled.

Ozzie laughed and looked at his phone. “Tank won the bet. He said you’d be out in five minutes.”

I snarled again and flung myself into the truck. It was a mess, as usual, but I didn’t care. I leaned against the window as he drove out of the parking lot, and the rumble of tires lulled me to sleep.

The next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder. I grumbled and tried to push them away.

“Dominic?”

I cracked open my eyes to see Carly’s worried expression. The driver’s side was empty, Ozzie nowhere in sight. “Hey.” I

coughed and tried again. “Hi. Am I home?”

I sat up and realized we were outside the club. I hadn’t realized we’d stopped.

“Yeah, come on. I’ve got dinner for you.”

My stomach gave a loud, piteous rumble, and she laughed.

“Eat. Then you’re gonna take a shower and sleep.”

“I should get back to Cam.”

“No. Mom’s taking care of him. He’ll be fine.”

I was too fucking tired to fight with her. She was right. I needed time to recover. I hadn’t slept in...I had to think about it. A week?

Carly steered me through the clubhouse. It was like a normal night. Men played pool in the corner. Tony yelled at the slot machine. A woman I didn’t recognize draped herself over Barn. She was too old for him. But something was different. I looked around. It smelled different. Cleaner. Like when she’d cleaned the bar that morning. I couldn’t even remember when it was.

Barn spotted me and leaped up to hug me. Then it was a sea of the guys, hugging and thumping me on the back.

“We’ve got news,” Tony muttered in my ear. “Echo’s planning a coup on the Snakes.”

“Fuck no. When?”

“Not yet. He’s not ready, but if he succeeds, we’re next.”

“In his fucking dreams,” I growled. “I’ll bury him before he lays a hand on my club.”

“We need to meet.”

“Yeah.” I needed to get back to business. I was the president. If Cam would be out for months, I needed people to step up to protect the Inkers. No one took my club. “You and Masters come here early tomorrow morning.”

He looked pleased and I saw he’d been waiting for my reaction. I didn’t need a coup in my own club. I needed to step up too and one way was to bring these guys online.

I looked around for Carly and found her by the stairs, waiting patiently. She took my breath away. For the first time since I woke up, I saw the tight T-shirt which molded her curves, and the long line of her skinny jeans.

Tony thumped me on the back. “You did right bringing Carly in to help.”

“You think it was my choice?” I said ruefully.

He let out a belly laugh. “It’s the way it always is. Don’t let her walk over you though. This is club business.”

I studied him for a moment, and he met my gaze. Was this the breakthrough? He approved of my relationship with Carly. Both he and Masters were family men.

“She tried to kill me,” I pointed out.

“Cam killed her father. My girl would have killed you first and asked questions later.” At my nod, Tony added, “We want the club to survive. She’s the right woman for us all.”

“I’ll tell her that.”

“You do that. Now eat and shower. You smell worse than my teenager,” he grumbled and shoved me in the direction of Carly.

“Club business?” she asked when I reached her.

“Yeah. Another club has ideas above its paygrade.”

“Do the Riders know?”

I studied her. She was a Rider by birth even if she hadn’t known it. Would this create tension?

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Worry about it tomorrow.”

Then she steered me up the stairs and I was in my room above the bar, at the small table and she produced a plate of something that smelled like heaven.

Carly laughed when I mumbled that. “It’s Mom’s pot roast. I didn’t make this. I’ll tell her.”

I didn’t reply. I was too busy scarfing it down.

“Seconds?” she asked, the minute I finished.

“Hell yes.”

The second plate was as large as the first and I only slowed as it was almost clean.

She took my plate, and I slumped in the seat. I might have dozed, I wasn’t sure.

“Shower before you pass out,” Carly said.

“I could just sleep here,” I mumbled.

“Then I can’t sleep with you.”

I raised my head. “You want to sleep with me?”

“I do. But not until you’ve showered.” She wrinkled her nose.

I huffed but then I sniffed my armpit. She had a point. It was probably over a week since I’d last showered.

I stumbled into the bathroom, stripping wearily. I wanted to ask her to join me, but there was no way she’d want to be next to me.

The hot water felt so good, and I leaned against the tiled wall and closed my eyes.

“Okay, Ace. I’m going to wash you down, then you’re gonna sleep.”

I startled as I realized Carly was in the shower with me, her naked body pressed up against me. “I fell asleep?”

She chuckled at my confusion. “You did. You need to wash before the hot water runs out.”

“I’m so tired,” I confessed.

“Like I don’t know that,” she scoffed. “I’ll wash you. Just stand there like a good boy.”

“I ain’t never gonna be a good boy.”

She needed to know that. I was never going to turn into a librarian or a fucking barista.

“I can live with that,” she said. “Now turn around and close your eyes.”

I did as I was told.

CHAPTER 16

I smoothed bodywash over Dominic's broad, muscular back, the woody scent aromatic in the confined stall. His exhaustion was evident in his slumped shoulders and pinched face. As I massaged his tight muscles, he let out a low groan of relief.

"You're so tense," I murmured, turning him around to massage his shoulders and chest.

I couldn't help but notice the way the water droplets caught in the hair of his muscled chest, then trailed down to his abs. I spent time looking at the ink covering his body.

"One day I'll tell you what they all mean," he murmured.

"I'd like that," I said.

A heat began to build in my core as I finally had the chance to run my hands over his hard body. I cleaned every inch of him, from his head to his toes, washing away the grime of the past week, then cleaning him again until he smelled of shampoo and soap.

He sighed into the tiles as I pressed a kiss to the dagger on the nape of his neck. "I feel so much better."

Feeling emboldened, I stepped closer to him, pressing my chest against his back. He tensed at first, but then relaxed into my touch. I brought my lips to his ear and whispered, "Let me take care of you, then you can sleep."

Without waiting for a response, I turned him around and dropped to my knees, wincing at the hard surface, but then I

took him into my mouth, and I didn't care about my knees. His fingers threaded through my hair as I worked him with my tongue, the taste of soap and musk filling my senses.

He grew harder in my mouth, and I was ready to drive him over the edge, but he pulled me up and pressed me against the cool tile wall, his hands roaming over my body.

“You're mine.” With a growl, he lifted me up and impaled me on his hard length. I felt my head hit the wall as I braced myself against his hard thrusts, his fingers digging into my hips.

I had one hand on his shoulder as I brought the other to my clit, gasping as I rubbed myself, his movements becoming harder and faster, his thighs slapping against my ass.

“Oh, God,” I gasped out. “Right there. Just there. Don't stop.”

He grunted as he drove into me, my moans of pleasure growing louder. I could feel the tension building as he thrust again and again, my body quivering. I pressed my face against his strong shoulder, biting back a cry as he brought me to my climax.

We stood there a moment, panting, pressed against the tiled wall.

“I need a nap now,” I confessed.

He gave an unsteady groan. “I need to sleep for a week.”

I turned off the water and tugged him out of the shower stall. I dried him off and then me.

Dominic looked at me on my knees drying his calves. “I can think of better things for you to do on your knees.”

“Done that already,” I pointed out. “Now you need to sleep.”

I herded him into his bedroom, and he collapsed on the bed with a groan.

“I should call the hospital,” he mumbled into the bedding.

“I’ve done that already,” I told him. “Cam is fine. Mom is there and Barn is going to replace her. Sleep.”

“Come to bed with me. I need your body around me. It’s been too long.”

He was probably going to be asleep before I dried off, but I wanted to be in his arms too. I threw the towel into the bathroom and climbed into bed with him, tugging the covers over us. We tangled our legs together, my hand resting over his heart. Dominic was out like a light, snoring lightly. I took longer to fall asleep. I listened to the noises of the club downstairs as I thought about Dominic. He needed me. Tonight proved that. But could I live this life? I wasn’t sure about that.

* * *

I woke up to an empty bed and the sound of a hushed conversation in the bathroom. Not fully awake, I listened for a moment.

“No, he’ll come here. We’ll make a cabin for him. He’s not going into any facility. He’d hate that.” Dominic went silent

for a moment. “How long have we got? Okay, that’s doable. Yeah, I’ll be over later.”

Dominic appeared in the doorway of the bathroom, naked, and utterly edible. I wanted him to pin me on the bed and make me forget my name. But first, I needed to know why he was scowling.

I rolled out of bed and walked over to him, placing my hand on his chest, his skin still warm. “What’s the matter?”

“That was Ozzie. The docs think Cam needs to go into a rehab facility.”

“And you don’t?”

“We take care of our own. We’ve got land. We can build him an adapted cabin.”

“That quickly?”

“There’s an unused cabin and we have guys who can remodel it. And we have physical therapists and nurses.”

“You do?”

Dominic must have heard the surprise in my voice because he grinned. “We do. Inkers come from all walks of life. And Cam’s gonna come home and let his family take care of him.”

I swallowed hard. “I can’t...not yet.”

He cupped my chin and tilted it, so I stared into his stormy eyes. “I know. But he’s my brother, by blood and by the bonds of the club. He comes back here.”

I knew he was begging me not to make him choose between me and his brother. I wouldn’t do that. I’d find a way

to live with Cam in my life. It would just take time. “Are you coming back to bed?” I licked my lips, just to let him know what I was hoping would happen.

“I can’t,” he said regretfully. “We’ve got a meeting in thirty minutes, then I need to get to the hospital.”

“Then you’ve got time to take me against the wall and fuck my brains out before I make you coffee.”

He tsked and swatted my butt. “Ms. Rivers, where’s my sweet teacher gone?”

“You saying you don’t want to fuck me?” I raised an eyebrow.

He spun me around forcefully, so I faced the wall. I stuck out my butt and gave him an encouraging wiggle.

I could hear him chuckling as he thrust hard into me. I moaned and would’ve fallen if I didn’t have my hands on the wall. He gripped my hips, and I waited for his cock to go deep.

“Is this what you want?” he asked.

“Yes,” I panted.

“You want me to fuck you hard?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Beg for it.”

“Fuck me, fuck me hard,” I whimpered. “Harder.” I fell forward.

He let go of my hips, and I could feel his hands on my ass. He smacked it hard, then reached around and rubbed my clit.

“Tell me you belong to me.” He smacked me again.

“Yes, yes,”

“Say my name.” Each demand was punctuated by a smack.

“Fuck me,” I begged. “Fuck me, Dom.” He thrust hard into me. I pushed back. “Yes, yes, yes.” He kept thrusting. “Yes.” I panted. “Yes.”

“Come for me.”

“Yes, yes.” I screamed, and my orgasm ripped through me.

“That’s it, baby.” He smacked my ass one last time. “Good girl.”

I shook through my climax as I felt him come hard inside me.

We leaned against the wall for long minutes until Dominic sighed.

“I’m going to be late.”

“I’ll make coffee,” I panted.

He kissed the nape of my neck and eased out of me. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

I turned and reached for him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Make me yours, Dominic.”

He looked down at me. “You know what you’re asking, yeah? It’s not just me. It’s me and Cam and the club. You don’t know the way we live. It ain’t an easy life, especially for the women.”

“I’ll learn,” I promised. “As long as you buy me bear claws and take me on the back of your bike, I’m yours.”

Dominic held me so tight I couldn’t breathe. “I never thought I’d have this with anyone.”

“You just have it with me,” I warned. “I don’t share.”

He gave me a blinding smile. “Get dressed. I need to tell the guys.”

I huffed but with a smile, so he knew I was happy. It was time to introduce the president’s old lady.

EPILOGUE

Six months later

“Don’t forget the donuts,” Cam yelled after us.

“Like we would dare,” I muttered.

“Be nice,” Carly scolded, not bothering to hide her amusement.

“I should have put him in that facility.”

She outright laughed at me, because no matter how much of a pain in the butt Cam was, I’d never have sent him away from home. I was lucky to have him back home. I swear he only survived because he’s a stubborn son of a bitch.

The first night he’d returned, he cried in my arms, thanking me over and over for bringing him home. I cried too, so fucking happy to have my brother here. My tough as nails twin had begun to think he’d never get out of the hospital. Carly and the guys had left us alone to give him a chance to decompress, and I’d thanked her later.

“Of course,” she said, like it was a given.

And for her, it was.

She and Cam had forged a tentative relationship because of me, and I didn’t want to do anything to rock that, but I knew it was fragile. They didn’t have much to do with each other.

Carly had given up her job at the school to help with the club and their kids. She said she’d never worked so hard.

However, I was ready to kill my twin. Cam was driving me fucking crazy with his demands. He was sick of being in the wheelchair, confined to the cabin, and he wanted his role in the club back.

He was even fed up with the women who came in daily to take care of him and the cabin. Over the six months many of the women had told me bluntly they couldn't deal with his temper. Now four older women were left who shared the schedule and ignored his tantrums. One of them was Carly's mom, to Cam's mortification. I wasn't sure that was a great idea, but Carly told me to leave Cam to them, and it seemed to be working.

Masters and Tony had effectively split Cam's role and it worked. It also made me realize how much Cam had done for me and the club.

“What are you thinking about?” Carly asked as we headed toward the Hog.

“Huh?”

“You're frowning.”

“Cam wants to take an active role in the club again.”

“But you like Masters and Tony in the VP's role?”

“I do,” I admitted. “They work well together and with me. Cam and I were too alike. I need someone to tell me when I'm screwing up. Cam did that too, but these guys don't hold back.”

She furrowed her brow. “Cam won't be able to ride yet?”

“Not for months, no matter what he says,” I agreed.

“Cam’s good at inter-club politics in the city.”

“Better than me,” I said ruefully.

“Then create a position for him.”

“He’d hate that.”

“Not if it was a real position. Uncle Marty is semi-retired, but he does something similar. We could head off the other clubs before they start any trouble.”

My girl had a good point. It had taken a lot of talking to stop the Devils from trying to take over the Snakes. Even now, the Devils didn’t know where their president had gone. He vanished one night. But we knew. The presidents from the Riders and the Snakes and Inkers, we dealt with Echo. The Devils replaced Echo with Joker. I knew him well and trusted him to keep the Devils in their place.

I knew Carly suspected what had happened, but there were still things that were confidential club business and she understood that. I think her mom had a lot to do with Carly’s respectful attitude.

“What will I do?”

“Take care of me and your men.” Then Carly laid a hand on her flat belly and my mouth went dry. “And your baby.”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Two months.”

I’d suspected, but now it was confirmed. “I’m going to be a daddy.”

Her eyes glistened as she nodded. “You’re going to be a daddy.”

I frowned. “We need to get an SUV.”

Carly shook her head.

“But—”

“Take me on the Hog for the last time,” she begged.

“One last time and I go real slow.”

We knew better than anyone else how someone’s life could change by a moment of inattention. I was still getting that SUV tomorrow.

The sun was high in the sky by the time I parked the Hog half a block away.

“You rode like my grandpa,” she teased as we walked along the sidewalk, deep in conversation as we discussed the addition to our family.

“I don’t care. I have someone special to take care of.” I gently patted her belly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a woman who’d been scowling at our leathers suddenly relax and give us a huge smile. I guess I’d just made our impending arrival obvious.

“It could be two someone specials. There are twins in my family too,” she said, oblivious to the interaction. “Mom has twin sisters.”

Whoa! Twins! That would be amazing.

“The guys will lose their shit when they find out.”

“Wait a little while longer, yeah? Maybe just tell Cam now.”

“I should tell Masters and Tony. They’re going to guess soon enough.”

It occurred to me if the two men wanted to stage a coup within the club, now was the time to do it. Cam still fragile and me focused on Carly. They might get the support from the other men. That was a worry for another time.

“Especially if I get morning sickness,” Carly said, unaware of my thoughts.

“Have you been okay so far?” I asked anxiously.

Carly held up crossed fingers. “All okay so far.”

I slung my arm across her shoulders as we walked. “We need to get baby leathers.”

She chuckled. She knew what I was like.

We arrived at the old-fashioned bakery where I’d wanted to take her forever. I’d promised her a day away from the club and this is where we were going to start. Most Saturdays we went to the bakery where we met, but this was somewhere new.

Its wooden sign creaked against the wind, advertising the sweet smells within. As we walked through the door, I couldn’t help but drool. The sight of the shop, with its shelves and counters lined with all sorts of pastries and cakes, was almost too much. How many donuts did one store need?

Carly looked around in awe, her eyes widening as she took in the display. “Oh wow, this is amazing!” she said.

I smiled. “It certainly is. I’ve heard they have the best bear claws in the city.”

Carly laughed. “If that’s true, then I have to try one.”

The two of us walked up to the glass counter where we were greeted by a friendly older woman with a head of silver-white hair. “Good morning,” she said, her voice warm and inviting. “What can I get for you?”

I smiled. “We’d like two bear claws and a dozen glazed donuts, please.”

The woman nodded and reached into the glass case behind her. She pulled out two golden-brown bear claws, their tops dripping with sugary glaze and filled with a thick, creamy filling. “Here you go,” she said, handing them to Carly.

Carly passed one to me, then bit into her bear claw, the sweet filling oozing out and coating her lips. I wanted to lean down and lick her mouth, but we were in public.

She closed her eyes as she savored the flavor. “Mmm, this is delicious!”

I chuckled. “See, I told you they were the best in the city.”

Carly smiled and licked her lips. “You were right.”

We smiled at each other, both lost in the moment and the taste of the bear claw. Suddenly, without warning, Carly leaned forward and kissed me, licking my mouth. She clearly didn’t care about public displays of affection.

The old woman behind the counter watched the two of us, a knowing smile spread across her face. She cleared her throat and handed me two napkins and the box of glazed donuts I'd almost forgotten about. Cam would have never stopped grumbling if I came home without them.

"Well," she said, "you two better get going. Have a good day."

I thanked the woman, and we stepped out of the bakery, our sticky fingers entangled.

"I want to get married," I said.

Carly stopped suddenly. "You want to get married?"

"Yeah, with the whole club there, and your mom and the Riders, and Janey, and whoever you want to invite."

I'd been thinking about it for a while, but my attention had been focused on Cam. But knowing we had a baby on the way, it was time Carly and I made it official.

Although from her wide eyes and her parted lips, it was the last thing she'd been thinking about.

"You don't want to get married?" I asked, worried now she didn't want the same thing as me.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, I don't know."

That wasn't reassuring, then she took my wrist in her sticky fingers. "I want to marry you, Dom, but not because of the baby, but because we both want to."

I realized I hadn't so much proposed as launched into more plans for the future.

I handed her the box of donuts and went to my knees. Her face was a picture, but what the hell, I was committed now.

“Carly Jane Rivers, will you be my old lady until the end of time?”

She nodded, her eyes glistening. “Yes,” she said. “You and me, until the end of time.”

I got to my feet and drew her into a gentle kiss, which turned more heated as she parted her lips.

Unexpected applause made me raise my head. The woman from the bakery stood in the doorway, holding another box, and beaming from ear to ear.

“Congratulations.”

She handed us the box and disappeared inside the bakery. Carly opened it up and burst out laughing, then turned it so I could see inside. There were two more bear claws with a sugarpaste ring on one finger of each claw.

“How did she do that?”

“I don’t know, but I think we’ve just gotten our first gift.”

Then she looked up at me, her expression serious. “I know what I’m getting into, Ace.”

She wanted me and our baby. But Carly wanted Sleigh Inkers too, and that meant more to me than a hundred yeses. She was ours.

* * *

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**VENDETTA: A MAFIA
ASSASSIN DARK ROMANCE
LARA NORMAN**

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VENDETTA

Creed's job is to protect her, but his agenda is to take her hostage.

As a trained hitman, when the boss says jump, my only response is how high. Still, I'm shocked when he tells me to kidnap his oldest friend's daughter with the intent to kill her if daddy doesn't pay the ransom on time.

Infiltrating their home and befriending everyone down to the family dog is simple. Taking Nova Arden against her will proves a bigger challenge than I could have anticipated. For one thing, she won't go down without a fight, which only heightens my lust. Second, she's determined to make her own deal—and the prize is enough to shock me.

When the call comes in, can he pull the trigger, or will he risk it all to save his target?

PROLOGUE

Creed

Exhaling silently, I eased my finger over the trigger and tugged it gently, treating it more like a lover than a means to an end. I barely took the time to witness the destruction my bullet caused, grabbing my rifle and its stand in a smooth motion before plucking my spent brass off the rooftop and hightailing it out of there.

The death of the man bleeding out below didn't faze me in the slightest. All I wanted now was a cigarette and a healthy three fingers of Glenfiddich to finish out my day. Though I wouldn't say no to a good, hard fuck, there was no one I could call at the last minute to fulfill my needs in that department.

Metal clanged against metal as I descended the fire escape, checking the ground below me the instant before I made the final jump. My shins protested the extra few feet as I landed, sprinting for the corner and the waiting car. Since I didn't trust anybody, I didn't have a getaway driver idling that shit for me. Too bad for me because the early spring evening had decided to be a coldhearted bitch, and I shivered in my leather jacket. Tossing all my gear into the backseat, I hurried to jump in the front so I could get the fuck out of there.

Shoving the key in the ignition, I peeled out to the tune of wailing sirens. Apparently, the jackhole had friends and family who gave enough of a fuck to call the authorities.

They couldn't do anything for him now. If he hadn't met the devil the instant my bullet pierced his frontal lobe, he was

certainly dead by now. Maybe the grieving widow could put him on life support and pretend to herself he'd make a full recovery one day if she only believed it hard enough.

Snorting, I fished a cigarette out of the pack in my pocket and pinched it between my lips. I just managed to light it and turn the corner simultaneously, taking the back roads to my house.

My cell rang at the same time as my garage door closed behind me. Seeing Jensen Marsh's name light up on the screen pissed me the hell off.

In lieu of a standard greeting, I barked, "Don't I always call you once I'm done?"

"Oh, I forgot you had a client tonight." It was unusual for my boss, head of the mafia cartel in the area, to forget anything, much less a scheduled hit. "Listen, Creed, I need to ask a favor."

Taking another drag, I blew out loudly against the speaker while closing the car door behind me and going inside. "Unless this favor comes with a payout, you know my answer."

"It's important."

"I'm all ears." Shouldering the phone, I finished my cigarette and stubbed it out so I could pour the scotch I'd sat there envisioning for hours on that damn rooftop while my fingers threatened to go numb on me.

"It's about the Ardens."

“Your best buddy, Cassius Arden?” Now he had my attention. What could he possibly want me to do with them?

“The very same.” He paused, leaving me enough time to wonder what the fuck was up. Jensen and Cassius had been friends for decades, and that was saying a lot when one of them was a criminal and one was a politician. “I need you to go undercover as his daughter’s bodyguard.”

That wasn’t in my wheelhouse in the slightest. “Is she in trouble?”

“You could say that.”

I’d swallowed down most of the scotch by then, letting the warmth spread through my otherwise empty chest. “I’m not interested in babysitting someone’s brat.”

“There’s money in it.”

“There’d better be.” Just him fucking asking me was offensive. “Why her and why me?”

“It’s part of a bigger plan, Creed. I can’t go into the specifics right now, but I need you to start off as her bodyguard and then I’ll give you further instructions down the road.”

“Unless you want one of the Ardens dead, why would you choose me for this particular favor?”

“Who said I didn’t want one of them dead?”

For several long seconds, silence wrapped around me like the whisper of a bitter wind. “You want your closest friend dead?”

“As I said, I can’t go into specifics right now. Are you in or not?”

I settled in my favorite leather chair, the one with the view of the city outside my wall of windows. “How much is the payout?”

“Hundred upfront, and fifty every month until I give you the next set of instructions. Once you move forward with the rest of my plan, I’ll drop a million in your offshore account.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You’re giving me hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep an eye on a kid for a few months?”

“She’s not a kid, for one thing. Daddy wants her protection bumped up over the summer, so he’s looking to train fresh meat now.”

“How old are we talking?” This conversation required another cigarette, which I pulled out and lit while he replied.

“Just turned eighteen, and you’re not to touch the fucking merchandise, Cruz. Not one fingertip.”

Chuckling, I sucked on my smoke and blew it out in his ear. “I don’t play with little girls.”

“All I’m saying is, the job doesn’t entail helping her become a woman.”

Ew. “So, I follow the princess around the city all day, and then what?”

“And then you infiltrate the family so deeply they consider you one of them. A long-lost brother, a cousin, what the fuck

ever. You suck up to them until they trust you enough to be her primary guard, and then you wait for my call.”

I could tell he was on the verge of hanging up on me in frustration, so I needed to give him my answer. One on hand, it wasn't in my normal job description, but on the other hand, it was a shit ton of money.

Naturally, I had to needle him a little. “You sure it's worth the money, Marsh? You won't change your mind later and renege on me when you remember your decades-long bromance with Cassius?”

“Have I ever fucked you over, Creed Cruz?” he bit out.

“Fine, I'll play babysitter for your friend's daughter. But don't bring this type of work to me again. I'm a fucking hitman, not a daycare center.”

“Understood. For the record, this is a special project that I can't trust giving to just anyone. That's why I picked you.”

Interesting. “Fine. I'll expect the first payment immediately.”

“It'll be in your account by morning.”

“Tonight's target is taken care of, by the way. Since you forgot to ask.”

He sighed heavily in my ear. “Thanks.”

I hung up, finishing my cigarette and my scotch. What could Jensen Marsh have up his sleeve that he'd pull me from killing his enemies and put me on security detail for his friend's little princess instead?

CHAPTER 1

Nova

“Move over, kid.”

Throwing popcorn at Creed’s face, I scooted over so he could sit beside me on the couch. We were about to watch a movie in the living room attached to my bedroom suite, which was secretly one of my favorite pastimes. I didn’t know how in God’s name I’d gotten so lucky when Daddy hired the new bodyguards, but this guy had no idea how big my crush on him was.

I could never tell him. It’s one of Daddy’s biggest rules that the staff couldn’t touch me.

As if. Rolling my eyes, I turned to face the screen. Someone like Creed had zero interest in me, which was why my attraction had to remain a secret. But he was so darn hot, I could barely stand to look at him. His black hair was always combed neatly when he arrived in the mornings, but he messed it up almost immediately after arriving. He claimed it was because I stressed him out, but I tried very hard to listen to all his instructions.

The last thing I wanted was Creed telling Daddy I was misbehaving, especially since he might rotate the guards so I didn’t have the same ones anymore. I couldn’t handle that. In my head, Creed Cruz was my personal bodyguard, there to protect me from Daddy’s enemies because he wanted me safe. Not because he was paid well and was part of a unit of several guards who rotated regularly.

These days, Creed practically lived here. I should have had the type of secret service-style bodyguards provided to Daddy—since he was a senator—but he didn't trust anyone. Hence the five guys who rotated watching over me, who Daddy had vetted through his best friend. Though he'd been in my life since I was a baby, I didn't actually know much about Jensen Marsh. He would pop in if we were having a party, then disappear with Daddy to smoke cigars and have drinks in the study. Mother said that type of activity was strictly for the men, and I was not allowed to even enter the study if my parents had friends over.

Despite having a legion of men to keep me safe, Creed was here the most. Daddy liked him a lot, even going as far as calling him son occasionally. I would love to have him as a big brother—only not really. Can't throw yourself at your big brother.

“Seriously, kid? This one again?”

Frowning down into my bowl, I wished I had the nerve to tell him I'm not a kid. He preferred to call me by that nickname instead of Nova. “It's my favorite, you know that.”

He grunted instead of commenting, and I noticed he moved further away when I settled into the cushions. *Can't touch the merchandise.*

Every night, he and I did something together after dinner. We played board games, and he taught me to play poker. Or we watched a movie, made snacks, and settled together on my only couch. He rarely looked me directly in the eyes, and never touched me. Not even an accidental brushing of

fingertips. Part of me tried to rationalize it by saying he didn't like to be touched by anyone, but I'd witnessed my mother resting her hand on his shoulder, and he didn't flinch away. My dad shook his hand, and he loved to let our toy poodle, LuLu, sit on his lap.

So it was just the idea of touching me that he loathed.

By the time the movie credits rolled, I couldn't stop yawning. I wanted to ask Creed to carry me to bed, but I didn't. Instead, I struggled to keep my eyes open as I trudged through the short hall where my bathroom separated the two rooms of my suite.

"Nighty-night," he said sarcastically, closing the bedroom door behind me.

Ugh. One day, I would tell him how I felt. Maybe I would have to be older and more street savvy. Maybe once I no longer needed him to guard me, then I could tell him how much I wanted him to see me as a grown woman. But Daddy was determined to treat me as an immature child who couldn't make her own decisions, much less date a man. Even though I was now closer to nineteen than eighteen, they all treated me like a child.

And now, I was headed to college in a few weeks. What I wanted and what was going to happen were not the same thing. I wanted to be a photographer, specifically shooting wildlife, but my parents insisted I go to Grandview Women's College so I could become a faceless drone in the privileged society my parents reigned in. Even then, I sincerely doubted they would see me as an adult, capable of her own thoughts

and opinions. The last thing I wanted to do with my life was to become a photojournalist, stuck writing the society pages and the who's who of Hidden Hills. Taking pictures of Sally Waterston and her newest beau, asking who made her dress, and having to pretend to give a crap made me want to gag. If I were honest, they'd probably try to marry me off to someone they owed a favor to rather than allow me to work.

Since Daddy was otherwise known as Senator Arden, we had personas to uphold. He'd ingrained it in me since I was in diapers, and there was no straying from that vision of his. Manners, interacting in society, and presenting myself well were the only things they cared about. Individual thoughts, dreams, and goals were nowhere to be found.

Stripping off my clothes, I changed into pajamas covered in cartoon cats and sat on the foot of my bed. Gazing down at myself, I realized why Creed never looked at me twice. My legs were long, but I wasn't at all well-endowed, with flat breasts better suited to a preteen, and a slender waist. My nanny used to say I had the opposite of childbearing hips, and that I'd struggle to birth babies when I got to that age.

I was kind of glad she was no longer needed at the house.

My best feature was my hair; a soft strawberry blonde I inherited from my mother. Along with that, I'd gained her large brown eyes, but I longed for turquoise eyes like Creed's. Though they were too pretty for a man, they somehow fit his rough, streetfighter face.

Scrambling up to my pillow, I sighed heavily. My pink cat pajamas weren't beguiling; they didn't entice anyone and

didn't present me as a full-grown woman. By design—my parents' design—everything in my life was meant to infantilize me. Even the family dog wore little pink outfits every day. My mother enjoyed dressing her up like a four-legged doll, and I suppose that's what she did with me too. College was my best hope at an escape, however tightly controlled it might be.

I fell asleep dreaming of Creed taking me away from here, to some place exotic where we could carve out a life for ourselves.

I woke with disappointment in my heart, knowing none of my dreams would ever come to fruition.

By the time I'd dressed and gone down to breakfast, Creed stood by the dining room doors. As far as I knew, he went home at night, but sometimes it appeared he lived here full time. Standing sentry with his hands folded in front of him, he didn't so much as glance at me as I entered the room.

In my head, I screamed, "Look at me! I'm right here in front of you!" In reality, I sat at the table and unfolded my napkin over my lap.

Our housekeeper came in with platters of food, setting it all on the table and then leaving again. Mother and Daddy weren't there yet, but I didn't hesitate to take food while it was hot. Since there was no one to tell me I was taking too much and that I would only get fat if I had that much bacon—AKA my mother—I piled my plate high.

"Save some for your parents, kid."

Startled, I lifted my head to find Creed watching me. Feeling guilty at getting caught being greedy, I hastily shoveled half the eggs back on the platter, feeling my face flush deep red.

“I was joking.”

God, I was such an idiot. Why did I care what he thought? “My mother usually makes some comment about my weight if I take too much food.”

“What weight?” he asked with amusement. “You’re a stick.”

Yeah, I know. An ugly, curveless stick. I just shrugged instead of responding out loud.

Next thing I knew, Creed was leaning over the table, dumping scrambled eggs on my plate. “Eat.”

“I . . .” But I didn’t know what to say to that. “Thanks?”

“Christ,” he muttered, returning to his post at the door.

Great, now he made me feel incredibly childish. Hiding food from my parents before they arrived for breakfast. I felt like an imbecile.

But I ate the eggs quickly so they wouldn’t have the chance to see how much food I had on my plate. Three pieces of bacon and a croissant later, I sat back in my chair completely sated.

“You’re not a bird, so stop eating like one.”

“It’s easier to go along with what they say than to listen to their constant criticism.”

Neither of us made eye contact as we spoke. Creed spent more time with me than my family members did; he entertained me, he guarded me, and he drove me places. He walked alongside me wherever we went, and yet I wouldn't call us friends. That was because he kept things strictly professional.

So professional it made me ache.

“Do you have plans for today?” he asked gruffly.

“I'm supposed to go to the college library and buy my textbooks.”

“When do you expect to be ready to go?”

I bit my lip, worried I'd somehow offended him. “Um, long enough to brush my hair and change?”

“Are you asking or telling?”

That rude statement brought my head up, my cheeks flaming. “I'm telling you I'll be ready when I'm ready,” I said coolly.

Creed smirked, nodding but not responding.

Fleeing the dining room, I got ready for the day. I didn't wear much makeup, but I always put on mascara. Otherwise, my eyelashes disappeared on my face since they were so pale. I tried to pick a cute outfit, knowing it was only me and Creed today.

And knowing that trying to impress him was futile.

He was silent in the car, which was typical. At his insistence, I rode in the backseat because it was supposedly

safer. Safer from what, I couldn't guess. Nobody had ever targeted me or my parents.

“Anything after this?” he asked as he pulled into the parking lot.

“We'll see.” I was still salty over the way he'd spoken to me earlier.

All he did was grunt, turning off the ignition and getting out of the car. I waited for him to open my door as he typically did after checking the surrounding area. Once he did, I headed inside the library with my shadow at my back.

The selection of textbooks sat near the front, so I pulled up my syllabus on my phone and checked the titles against those on the table. Creed stood near me, but he watched the door and the rest of the building instead of me.

While I was checking out, his phone rang. With my brows raised, I watched him take it out of the interior pocket of his leather jacket. Despite the heat outside, he wore that jacket every single day.

“Now?” I heard him snap.

Before I could listen in, though, I had to pay for the books and pick up the enormous bag. I expected Creed to help me, but he was furiously whispering into his phone.

By the time I made it to the door, he'd hung up. “Good news?” I asked bitingly.

“Not particularly.”

Well, I wasn't a complete bitch. I kept my mouth shut as he took the bag of books from me and put them in the trunk of the car. Climbing into the backseat, I waited for him to get in before speaking again.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

Why did he have the ability to make me feel so foolish? Folding my arms, I stared out the back windows as he drove. The scenery passed, so familiar to me.

Until he took a turn I wasn't expecting. "Where are we going?"

"This way."

My heart thumped a bit too painfully in my chest. "Is Daddy okay? Did something happen to my mom?"

"No."

His curt answers were not making me feel safer. "I'm serious, Creed, where are we going?"

"We're going wherever the fuck I take you," he bit out.

Panic crawled up my throat, nearly choking me. "Let me out," I demanded calmly.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, kid."

No, he did not get to call me that anymore. "God dammit, Creed, my name is Nova! I'm not a kid, so stop pretending you're protecting me from myself and explain what the hell is happening!"

When he didn't answer, focusing stoically on the road in front of me, I tried the door handle. Of course, it was locked. Searching futilely for the lock, I felt tears threatening to fall.

"You're scaring me." He ignored me. "Stop the car and let me out! I'll walk home."

Finally, he met my gaze in the rearview mirror. "I can't let you do that."

My breathing felt labored, my heart pumping painfully now. "Please."

Now I sounded like a child. I sounded like a scared kid, unsure of what the hell was happening to her. If there wasn't an emergency with my parents, then there would be no reason to divert our plans.

Unless Creed had ulterior motives.

"What are you going to do to me?" I whispered.

"If you cooperate?" He glanced at me again before returning his attention to the road. "Nothing. But if you fight me?"

He left the threat hanging, and my vocal cords seized up. All I could do was sit in the back of the car, crying silently.

CHAPTER 2

Creed

This was *not* how I wanted my day to go. I knew this was coming sooner or later, and it'd been months since I signed on to guard Nova Arden. It should have been obvious, I suppose, that I would get the call soon.

All I had to do was remember my agenda. I wasn't her friend, or even technically her protector. Between what Jensen and Cassius were paying me every month, I could retire a happy man and never have to take another job if I didn't want to. With that in mind, I turned off the nice guy persona I'd adopted over the past six months.

Okay, I'd never been *that* nice. But I couldn't be soft on Nova just because I'd practically lived with her for half a year. Just because I knew her inside and out; the curve of her ass, the sound of her sigh . . . I couldn't dwell on any of that now.

She continued tugging on the handle in the back, apparently not realizing the child safety locks were engaged and she wasn't going anywhere.

"Knock it off," I snapped.

"Please, Creed, why are you doing this to me?"

The audible tears threatened to soften my resolve, and I knew I couldn't allow that to happen. She was a target like anyone else, and feelings had no place in this transaction.

"Because it's what I get paid to do." No use in keeping that part a secret anymore.

Sure enough, that created a barrage of sobs and screeches. The backseat became a fucking war zone as she kicked at the doors, pounded on the windows, and otherwise tried to escape the confines of the car.

“Nova, I swear to God, I’ll tie you up if you don’t knock it off.”

In the rearview mirror, I saw her freeze in place. Slowly, she dropped her legs and clasped her hands in her lap. Bringing her head up, she met my gaze in the mirror. Mascara ran down her face, her cheeks were blotchy and wet, and I found hate in her eyes.

“You’re disgusting. I loathe you.”

“Welcome to the club, kitten.”

I returned my gaze to the road, following the preplanned route I’d memorized. First, I’d studied the map, and then I’d driven it a handful of times. There was a car waiting for me so I could trade the one with the GPS tracker in it, and then we’d head into the Angeles National Forest to disappear for a while.

Nova would pose a problem for me, I was certain. As soon as I opened my door, she’d be on me like a fly on shit, so I had to prepare myself. I had duct tape under the seat, which I planned to strap around her stubborn ass until it ran out. I’d probably slap a big piece over her mouth, too, so I didn’t have to listen to her whining.

Taking my foot off the accelerator, I kept her head in my sight as I maneuvered off the road. Her eyes grew large, her lashes wet, and she craned her neck to see where we were.

“It’s a dead-end road in the middle of nowhere, kitten. If you follow my instructions, I’ll leave you alone. If you can’t, then I’ll use this”—I held up the tape—“to ensure you can’t move or speak.”

Counting down from five, I kept her gaze locked in mine. She didn’t budge or speak, but I didn’t let my guard down.

Predictably, the second I opened my door, she tried to launch herself over the seat. Roughly, I shoved her back where she belonged and slammed my door, instantly engaging the locks. The tint was dark, but I could hear her beating on the back window as I strolled around to the dented car sitting there waiting.

I checked it over, looking for bugs, trackers, and explosives. The trunk was stocked with a few ropes, more tape, and bottled water. I spotted a briefcase tucked into the back corner and hauled it up, opening it and checking the contents.

Firearms. Lots of them.

Hopefully, I wouldn’t need to use them, but it was nice to have them.

I ripped off a piece of duct tape and stuck it on my jeans. Taking a length of rope, I unwound it and walked back to the Arden’s Mercedes, slowly rewinding it from wrist to elbow. There was no telling how a spoiled rich girl would act when confronted with danger, but Nova had continuously surprised me.

Standing in front of her door, I unlocked the car and yanked the handle, finding her holding the other side in an attempt to block me from entering. Futile attempt as it was, it also sealed her fate. Tearing the tape from my pant leg, I slapped it over her mouth as she clawed at me. Her muffled screams sent pleasure through me, knowing she was terrified of me. The same girl who unashamedly tried to flirt with me every chance she got now saw me for the monster I truly am.

Binding her hands was job number one, mostly so she'd stop trying to pry my eyes from their sockets. Then, I wound the rope around her waist and let it drop down to her feet, hoisting her up and carrying her to the other car. Once I'd dumped her in the backseat, I finished hogtying her and excessively knotted the rope.

“Good luck getting out of that, kitten.”

I slammed the door on her pitiful face, jogging back to the fancy sedan and leaning inside to put it in gear. All it took was setting it in neutral and giving it a good shove from the back to have it sliding down the embankment. I wasn't trying to fool anyone into believing something had happened that didn't; Daddy Arden would receive the ransom call soon. No one would confuse the smashed car with an accident once the demands were outlined.

Once inside the rusty Toyota, I turned the key in the ignition to the sounds of Nova screaming and sobbing in the back.

“Keep that shit up, kitten. I love the sound of it.”

After one brief, loud scream, she shut up.

The drive was long, on winding back roads that often had nothing but a sheer drop on one side. Focusing on the track I'd memorized, I drove us to the cabin Jensen had rented using a shell corporation. Untraceable and isolated, it was the perfect location for this endeavor.

By the time we arrived, it was dark. Parking as far under the cover of pine trees as possible, I sat back and stretched for a second. Next came the fun part.

Nova was asleep when I opened the back door, but she came awake with a start when I grabbed her around the middle and threw her over my shoulder. She tried to pummel me with her bound fists, but I'd tied them pretty tightly to her waist.

So she screamed. Begged. Cried.

At least, I think that's what she was doing beneath the tape on her mouth.

Unceremoniously, I dropped my shoulder so she rolled off and landed on the musty couch, then set about checking the cabin. I knew she couldn't run tied up the way she was, but she could probably crawl or scoot around if she really wanted to. The doors were secured, the pantry stocked, and the basement ready to receive my guest.

When I returned to the living room, I found precisely what I'd expected. Nova was on the ground, trying to wiggle her way to the door. Crouching behind her, I looped one finger around the closest rope and tugged.

“Good luck escaping the cabin. Between the bears, rattlesnakes, and coyotes, I'm sure you could make the trek to

the nearest forestry station hundreds of miles from here.”

In apparent defeat, she rolled to her back, staring up at me. The grief in her eyes was evident, but I hardened myself further against her delicate femininity. If I was going to be successful, I had to revert to the man who killed without hesitation. No questions, no remorse.

Spending months in a mansion with overly friendly targets had softened me, and I needed to reverse that immediately if I wanted Jensen’s final payout. Added to the money I’d been saving, that million dollars would set me up for life if I was careful.

“Up you go.” Standing, I bent enough to pick her up, carrying her down the creaky stairs to the basement.

Jensen’s men had set it up so she could remain down there for a very long time if need be. Food, electricity, a bed, and even a toilet were all there. It had no windows and only one door at the top of the stairs. If I closed her in, no one from outside—i.e., helicopters searching for her—could tell this place was in use. From what I’d seen, I would have to share the space with her after dark or never turn on a light.

I let her drop to the mattress, then took a step back. “Screaming will do you no good. The forest is seven hundred thousand acres big, and nobody will hear you.”

She nodded.

“If I remove the duct tape, I don’t want to hear your mouth. Understood?”

She nodded again.

Against my better judgment, I snatched the tape off her face. It left a red mark, and she whimpered but otherwise remained silent and unmoving.

“Toilet?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Cautiously, I pulled my pocket knife out and cut the ropes at her feet. It took longer than necessary, but I was reluctant to carry a bigger knife around her. If she stole this one somehow, she’d have to try real fucking hard to kill me with it.

Once she was no longer hobbled, I pointed to the toilet in the corner. There was a shelf above it with toilet paper, feminine products, and even an air freshener. The sink beside it had soap and paper towels, so we didn’t have to live like heathens in the forest.

But she only stared at me.

“What?”

“Privacy?”

Her voice was meek, her eyes downcast. Perfect.

“You get what you get.”

Refusing to turn my back on her, I waited with my arms crossed as she hesitated. Finally, she shuffled to the toilet and did her best to leave her shirt hanging in the front so I couldn’t see anything interesting.

“Don’t worry, kitten, I’ve seen plenty of cunts in my lifetime. I’m not interested in what yours looks like.”

She pinched her lips together and finished without speaking. There was nothing much she could do to cover herself while she pulled her panties up and fixed her clothing with bound wrists, so I did, in fact, get a flash of her pussy. Once she'd washed her hands and returned to the bed, the ropes were wet.

“Why?” she whispered.

For a long time, I watched her instead of answering. She sat still, her legs curled beneath her and her hands in her lap. Her hair was tangled, her face smudged with makeup. The tape had left little red blood bruises around her lips, and her clothing was askew.

Finally, I sat in the single wooden chair, wishing for a fucking cigarette. I'd have to check if they'd given me any. “Simple, really. Money.”

“My father paid you so much to guard me.”

I laughed. “*So much*, kitten? You have no idea what *so much* even is.”

Her cheeks reddened. “Who, then? Who's paying you?”

“I have a boss, and he ain't your daddy.” Settling into the seat, I crossed my arms over my leather jacket. “It was a setup.”

“I can see that now.”

For some reason, the way her facial expressions changed as we spoke fascinated me. Something along the lines of hurt, followed by anger, and back to hurt. I suppose if someone I trusted had betrayed me, I'd feel the same.

Difference between me and her was that I trusted no one.

“How long will we be here?”

“That completely depends on dear old dad.”

“My mother will be devastated.”

I raised a brow. “And?”

“You don’t care at all, do you?” She huffed, growing louder. “All this time, I thought you were becoming a member of the family, and this is what I get for giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

I leaned forward, and she scrambled back on the bed seconds before I could grab her arm. “You saw what I wanted you to see. What you think you know about me is all I lie I concocted to make you and your parents trust me.”

“So who are you, then? Is your name even Creed?” she snarled.

“Yes, kitten, my name is Creed Cruz. And I’m a paid assassin.”

CHAPTER 3

Nova

Creed's words stopped me cold. Months ago, when he first showed up at our house, his penetrating gaze sent shivers racing along my spine. At the time, I wrote it off as a foolish reaction to his attractiveness. All my life, I'd been surrounded by well-dressed prep school boys, and men within my parents' circle who rarely wore anything more casual than a suit and tie. None of them had prepared me for coming face to face with such a coarse man as Creed Cruz.

But as he spoke the truth to me now, I understood completely why I'd had that visceral reaction to meeting him. My intuition had tried to warn me, and I'd ignored it. I'd dismissed my feelings as silly, the way my parents always had, and look at what it had cost me.

"You're going to kill me?" I asked. My voice trembled, as did my hands.

"Not if daddy dearest pays up."

Everything about this situation made me ill. We'd all let our guard down and welcomed this man—this monster—to live in our house with us. To prey upon us, to plan and prepare to do God knew what.

"Why?" I whispered. If I were to survive this, I'd have to grow a spine quickly and stop whispering to him.

"Don't know." He propped his booted feet up on the end of the bed. "Don't care."

“So, what? We sit here and have a staring contest until the call comes in that you’re supposed to bring me back home?”

“That’s your naïveté talking, kitten.”

My mouth opened and closed, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Finally, I spluttered, “So it *is* death, then?”

He only shrugged, pulling his pocketknife from his jacket and messing with his fingernails.

If my father paid the ransom, then Creed would have to let me go.

Right?

“What do you plan to do with me in the meantime?”

A stupid part of my brain urged me to beg him to join me in the bed. The smarter part of me, the part my mother and twelve years of private school ingrained in me, told the other part to shut the hell up.

“All I’m required to do is keep you from running off.”

“Will you—” I broke off, swallowing thickly. My wrists hurt from the bindings, and I tried to reposition myself more comfortably. “Will you . . . have your way with me?”

I couldn’t bring myself to phrase it any other way. Making love, sex, and other gentler words couldn’t begin to describe this man and his actions. On the other hand, my throat locked up at the effort to say the word rape.

Creed snorted. “Don’t you wish?”

My face flamed. Our conversation was possibly more embarrassing than having him watch me pee. It wouldn’t be

rape if I was willing, and I'd bet my parents' fortune that he knew how to convince me to acquiesce without a fight.

"I've seen the way you look at me, kitten. Since the day I set foot in your fancy-ass house, you've tried so pitifully to flirt with me."

Oh, God, just go ahead and kill me now. "I have not!"

Dropping his feet, he leaned closer and grabbed my ankle. Though I tried to fight him off, he dragged me until I plopped onto his lap. My sandals had fallen off ages ago, and my shorts rode up high on my thighs as they snagged against the rough sheets. Bracing my hands on Creed's chest to avoid headbutting him, I jerked back to avoid any further touch, nearly falling to the floor.

"You're telling me that each time you sat beside me close enough to touch thighs, you weren't burning inside?"

His voice was liquid gold, its warmth pouring over me. As he spoke, he curled his callused palms around my legs, stroking slowly upwards. My body heated in reaction, needing him and hating him in equal measure. The indignity of being trapped on his lap with my legs spread wide made me more irate than almost anything else he'd done to me so far.

"Gazing up at me with sleepy kitten eyes wasn't a ploy to convince me to carry you to bed every night?"

Dammit. I thought I was better at hiding my childish desire for him. Stupid, idiotic—

"Should I kiss you, Nova, and show you what it's meant to be like?"

My muscles froze, every molecule in my body locking down in a block of ice.

I wanted it. I wanted it more than I'd ever wanted anything.

Except to escape this cabin and go back to my parents. They would be worried sick by now. And it was his fault; I couldn't forget that.

“Not in a million years, asshole.”

Struggling to stand without losing my balance, I turned my back on him with my head held high. If he could hear my heartbeat betraying my lie, he didn't say so. If my flushed cheeks gave me away, he didn't comment. But he did track my movements as I stalked to the shelves in the corner and perused the food choices.

“This is miserable,” I mumbled. Nothing but a few cans of beans and tuna, some shelf-stable milk, and bottled water. And dust. Lots and lots of dust ringed the cans.

“It's not the Ritz, kitten, but we'll make do.”

Creed's breath washed over my nape, causing the fine hairs to stand up on the back of my neck. I hadn't heard him coming. Clearly, he was more dangerous than I'd anticipated if he could sneak up on me so easily.

“I like you like this.”

My skin wanted to crawl as I felt the tip of his knife run across it, but I was afraid to move and help him nick me.

“At my mercy.” The blade scraped across the base of my skull. “So scared of me you’ll do anything I want.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I lied, trying not to flinch as the knife threaded into my hair.

No, I wasn’t scared. I was terrified. He wasn’t the same man I’d pined over, acting like a fool in front of for six months. He was different; menacing. Mean. Like he’d cut me just to watch me bleed.

Creed Cruz was a heartless monster.

He chuckled. “Liar.”

Disgusted with myself for ever having feelings for him, I stepped forward just so he’d stop touching me and tried to grab a can from the shelf. Before I could get both hands on it, Creed yanked me back by my hair.

“Sure hope you plan on being cooperative, Nova.” There it was again; his breath on my throat. He nearly nuzzled me, if the way he buried his nose behind my ear could be called anything as tender as that.

“In what way do you expect my cooperation?”

My heart pounded in my throat, which was bowed backward to keep my hair from pulling so tightly. He had me at his mercy in more ways than one.

“Such a fragile, spoiled brat.”

The words infuriated me, but the tone melted me. Disoriented, I closed my eyes to keep the ceiling from

spinning in my vision. Swallowing, I gripped my fingers tightly together and waited for his next move.

“Do you have any idea how effortless it would be to break you?”

My lips trembled open, a tiny sound of distress leaving my mouth unbidden.

I felt his warmth against my flesh as he drew his tongue along the length of my throat. My pulse racketed in my eardrums, nearly drowning out any other sound.

God help me, if allowing him to play with me in that manner was the answer to escaping, I'd go through with it. I could pretend it was a hardship, but I had to admit to myself—deep, deep down—that I wanted him still.

The dangerous edge to him scared me, but it sent a thrill through me too. The deadly strength he carried with him like a cape should have sent horror racing through me, but it warred with the desire to have a taste of something so savage.

Just as I thought he'd do something reckless, he released me. My body sagged, and I stumbled forward, unable to catch myself on the shelves before I hit my chin. Pain speared along the split skin, and I cried out.

The ropes bit the raw places along my wrists as I brought my hands up to catch the blood dripping from my wound. Creed stood motionless, watching me hurry to staunch the bleeding. With a paper towel pressed firmly against the cut, I turned on him with fury in my eyes.

Advancing on him, I used both hands to strike him across the face. Instead of stopping me or dodging me, Creed slapped me back. Shocked, I gasped and stared at him in agonized uncertainty.

No one had ever raised their hand to me. In all my life, I'd never been spanked or even grabbed roughly until Creed kidnapped me. To my shock, he lunged at me, clutching my jaws in both hands with a snarl.

In the seconds that followed, I was positive he'd kiss me. His face was inches away, his gaze hard and determined. With no experience, I thought that meant he would do the expected: touch his lips to mine, setting me free from this dichotomy of wanting and despising. Giving me no choices anymore, only taking. Then I could give without guilt, blaming him for whatever transpired next.

But I should have known better. This man was anything but predictable; instead of kissing me, he latched his open mouth onto my chin. Tongue, lips, warmth, and fire all collided as he licked the spot where I bled. I couldn't decide if I felt revolted or turned on. In my mind, it was one more reason on a long list of why I hated him.

Finally finding my voice, I said, "What the hell are you doing?"

He didn't answer, but he did angle his head to bite along my jaw until his mouth reached my temple, and my nipples scraped across my bra as they hardened. I knew I wanted him to touch them, to touch me, in all the right places. He would know what to do, of that I was certain.

It wasn't meant to be. With a harsh breath, he pulled away, stomping up the stairs and slamming the door behind him. Alone, I thought hard about what the hell had just happened, but nothing came to me. Nothing sensible, at any rate.

When my wits returned, I raced up the stairs after him, finding the door locked. No matter how much I rattled the knob and screamed his name, he didn't come back for me. Dejected, I trudged back down one slow step at a time.

As a bonus, I could eat in peace. I could use the bathroom in peace. Maybe I could even figure out how to untie my wrists, considering how much they hurt. Picking up the bloody paper towel, I threw it in the trash can under the sink and perused the shelves once more.

The only thing I could get into without a can opener was the beans. They had a pop top, but the tuna didn't. Surely, someone had thought this through. Whoever had paid Creed to bring me here had to be smart enough to want me alive.

A dead prize was worthless.

By the time I'd pried the can open, I didn't even give a crap about a spoon. There was no way to heat the beans anyway, so I simply tilted the can until I could essentially drink from it.

Disgusted with myself in more ways than one, I tossed the empty can in the trash and opened a bottle of water. Once that was drained, I did my best to clean up. My stomach grumbled, still hungry, but I couldn't force down another can of cold beans without vomiting.

The bed beckoned to me, despite its grubby sheets, and I crawled onto it. As exhausted as I was, I should have slept. Curled up in the fetal position, I looped my arms around my knees. Unfortunately, the flesh beneath the ropes protested, and I had to try a different position to find comfort.

Idly, I yanked on the ropes and the knot. They weren't budging, but I had an idea. Climbing back out of bed, I padded to the trash can and took out the tin can. Wrapping one edge of the lid carefully in a washcloth, I used the other end to saw at the ropes.

By the time I freed myself, tears and snot rolled down my face. The pain was almost too much for me to withstand, but I managed to rinse the open wounds under cold running water and dry them off. Lacking bandages of any type, I ripped off the hem of my shirt in two sections and tied them around my bloody wrists. The effort that took was enough to drive me back to bed, where I laid face down and screamed into the pillow.

I was in an unknown world now. My location was isolated, my companion wanted to hurt me, and I was a sheltered little princess, a description Creed had accurately pinned on me.

And yet, with all that, I had to find a way to survive what he had in store for me. I had to plan, and I had to figure out how to escape.

Because I would not die down here like a rat in a dungeon.

CHAPTER 4

Creed

The sun had barely begun its ascent into the sky when I got up. All through the night, I'd tossed and turned on the squeaky bed set smack in the middle of the only bedroom on the main floor. Lacking decent curtains, the sunrise had made a valiant effort to piss me the fuck off and prevent me from sleeping in. Thankfully, I'd found cigarettes and better food in the kitchen cupboards, so I had a nice smoke out on the porch and drank coffee while watching the sun come up over the San Gabriel mountains.

All I could think about was the way Nova felt when I had my hands on her. For many months, I'd been under strict orders to leave her pristine and untouched. At first, I saw her as a teenager unworthy of my attention. But after a while, after I'd spent so much of my personal time by her side, my outlook had changed.

Though her efforts to flirt were inept, that could easily be attributed to her age. It was understandable that she'd had few people in her world to practice her skills on, and certainly with no one who would go further than holding her hand or kissing her cheek. Not if they wanted Daddy Arden to leave their balls intact. There were some girls in that preppy world who went to great lengths to remain a technical virgin while engaging in acts depraved enough to make a porn star blush. Not Nova Arden.

She remained demure, immaculate, and all I wanted was to mess her up. To smudge her makeup, tangle her hair, rip her

clothing . . . to mix pleasure and pain until she only knew my name. My face. Now, as I walked down the stairs with a cup of coffee in my hand, I was keenly aware that my restrictions had been pulled the moment Jensen called and said to take her.

What my precious little kitten had yet to understand was exactly how enticing she was to me now that she'd been roughed up. I was the one to do that to her; tie her hands together, make her cry, and give her a reason to bleed. To make her helpless. To make her hate me.

I fed on it; the pain, the humiliation. Apparently she didn't truly fathom my lack of morals—after all, I earned my paycheck by murdering people in a cold, calculated fashion.

Sitting in the folding chair, I propped my boots on the foot of the bed and studied her. She was lying prone, her reddish blonde hair spread all over the pillow and obscuring her face. The threadbare sheet barely covered her legs, snagged as it was beneath her hips.

And I wanted to take. I wanted to climb on the bed and throw off the covers, digging my fingers into her flesh and burying my cock inside her heat. To hear her cry out in shock, and then to change her tune when she felt what I could do to her.

Almost as if she heard my thoughts, she mumbled in her sleep, and I kicked the bed.

“Hmm?”

I watched the moment she became aware of her surroundings. She sat up so fast she clutched her head and

closed her eyes in retaliation. That was when I noticed her restraints were missing from her arms.

Narrowing my eyes, I snapped, “How did you untie the knot?”

Blinking at me, Nova flushed and dropped her gaze to her lap. Her wrists were covered with ripped fabric, which I quickly realized was from the bottom of her shirt. Her midriff was now exposed, showing me pale skin untouched by the sun or a man’s hands.

“I didn’t,” she said in a voice just above a whisper. “I cut through the rope.”

Rising fast enough to knock over the chair, I scanned the room for evidence of a knife. Seeing nothing, I strode to the bed and began pushing the sheets and blanket aside, searching for where she’d hidden the weapon.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked when I shoved at her.

“Where did you find the knife, Nova?” I demanded, not looking directly at her.

“There’s no knife, Creed.”

I stopped moving, gripping her face in between my hands. The stark contrast of my rough skin against her perfection brought me up short, but only momentarily.

“What did you do with it?” Picking up the pillow, I dropped it on the floor and pushed at the mattress until I could see between it and the box spring.

By then, Nova stood beside the bed, watching me ransack the basement. “As I said, there was no knife. I used the top from the can of beans I ate for dinner.”

Her words brought me up short, and I stopped long enough to watch her face. Nova was a terrible liar, mostly because her thoughts tended to appear on her face. At the moment, she appeared unsure and upset, but also confused.

“Show me.”

She walked to the trash can tucked under the sink and dug under the bloody paper towels to show me the sharp edges on the circle of metal. Then she showed me the rope she’d left on the floor next to the trash.

“You’re lucky that worked,” I said, a muscle in my jaw clenching at the thought of her accidentally slitting her wrists.

“I know. It wasn’t easy.”

We stared at each other, and I had no idea what my next move would be. For once in my adult life, I didn’t have a plan for every moment. My path wasn’t mapped out in advance with Jensen, having nothing more than the directive of keeping her alive and not letting her run away. Those broad strokes would get me and her in trouble, I could sense it.

Me because I was going to take what I wanted, and her . . . well, because she would be on the receiving end of what I wanted.

“For six fucking months,” I stated, moving toward her, “I had to abide by the rules. Your dad’s, my boss’s, you name it.”

Stopping in front of her, I cupped her throat for the sole purpose of feeling her pulse beat wildly under my palm.

“And now?” she whispered, meeting my gaze.

“Now, it’s game on.”

“Feels more like game over for me.”

“You’re just now figuring that out?” I asked.

Her breath came out in a whoosh, and her tentative movements were nearly my undoing. When my patience snapped, she would pay dearly for it. I wanted to crush her beneath me, knowing I should hold back, and remembering there was no real reason to anymore.

Damaged merchandise went for the same price, as long as her daddy didn’t know before he paid. Frankly, I should fuck her up and send proof so he’d hurry to pay more. Taking her virginity rather than cutting off a finger would light a fire under her father.

I felt her shiver as much as I saw it. Swallowing the saliva pooling in my mouth, I rested my forehead against hers. Dragging my palm lower, I rested it over her heart, feeling her hard nipple and her thick heartbeat. Despite her protests, it was clear she wanted me.

Why did that make it less fun?

Why did I want her to hate me before I gave in to my desire for her?

Ah, yes. Circling back to my utter depravity.

Sucking in a deep lungful of her scent, I tried to focus. I should feed her, feed us, but I wanted a taste of her first. Needed it more than my next meal.

Succumbing to my desire, I fisted the front of her shirt and lowered my head enough to press my mouth to hers. There was no gentle caressing of lips, but biting and sucking instead. Nipping her upper lip before drawing it into my mouth and sinking my teeth into it, I only reveled in the distressed sound she made.

But she opened for me, inviting my tongue inside her mouth and moving against me. She moaned, her fingers gripping my waistband and tugging me closer. When she did that, my cock begged me to let him out of my pants. The fire her eagerness created in my gut stole my senses long enough that I ground against her, dying to have everything her inexperienced body begged me to take.

So I had no choice but to step back, to leave her panting and confused. A frown shadowed her face, her eyes guarded.

“We need to eat.”

Turning my back on her, I went upstairs and left the door open. I knew she would follow, and I knew she wouldn't run.

Not yet, at least. I had no doubt she formed some ill-advised plan in her mind, but it was too soon for that. She had to be hungry, and the forest was unwelcoming outside our little cabin.

As I opened the refrigerator, I spotted her standing at the top of the basement stairs, gazing longingly at the front door.

“There’s egg substitute and a carton of orange juice.” Picking it up, I checked the expiration date. “Or there was.”

I tossed the carton in the trash, longing for bacon and waffles. The Arden’s housekeeper had spoiled me with freshly cooked breakfast every morning, and now my stomach expected it. Here, we had saltine crackers and fake eggs.

At least there was coffee, even if it wasn’t top quality. I wouldn’t last three days without hot caffeine before I’d be willing to wrestle a grizzly bear for a cup of coffee.

“Better than canned beans,” Nova mumbled, opening cupboards until she found the rest of the food. “There’s canned fruit, cereal, and Parmalat milk.”

We wouldn’t starve, but I’d be cranky enough to kill someone for fresh food before too long.

Nova pulled the items from the shelves and set them on the counter. I found the can opener and opened the fruit, dumping the contents into two bowls. She poured cereal and milk, searching for and finding spoons.

We sat at the little table in the corner to eat, and I noticed she refused to look at me. “Thinking of the best way to escape?” I asked.

Her head came up fast enough that I knew I was right. “There is no escape.”

“That’s right, so just remember that. Out there”—I gestured to the window—“there’s nothing but endless trees and mountains, too many creatures determined to eat you, and a deadly man tracking you if you try to run.”

Her shoulders hunched, so I knew she'd already considered that. "I don't want to be bear food."

"Wise choice."

Still, I knew she'd try to find the car keys and escape if I wasn't vigilant. I'd hidden them, but if she was as canny as I suspected, she'd find a way to get to them while I slept. Or she'd seduce me and incapacitate me while my pants were down.

Literally.

"Listen, Nova. I have my instructions, which are to keep you here until your father pays my boss the ransom. Simple as that. If you make it more difficult than it needs to be, you will get hurt."

When she brought her head up to look directly into my eyes, I saw the hatred in them once again. *Good*. "You can't seriously expect me to sit here and rot while you and whoever pays you plot ways to ruin my family."

"I can and do expect that," I said calmly.

Finally, the princess exploded. "Fuck you and your expectations!"

"Aw, the kitten has claws." My mocking was meant to humiliate her back into submission, but it failed.

"Believe it or not, asshole, I'm not some weak little debutante with no knowledge of the real world! I can think for myself, and I will. One way or another, I *will* make you pay for this."

Faster than she could blink, I shoved my chair back and stood, leaning down inches from her face. “Don’t think for one goddamn second I’m taking my eyes off you. I know what tricks you think will work, but they won’t. Don’t bother getting your hopes up, kitten. You’ll never get around me.”

When I anticipated a meek and apologetic Nova, I got the claws I’d mocked her for. She stood, too, pushing me back and screaming in my face. “I hate you!”

I grabbed her hand seconds before she could strike me, tightening my grip until she whimpered. Between the raw tracks encircling her wrists and the delicate bones beneath, I had the advantage. “Good, at least you’ve learned one thing in your privileged little world.”

“Fuck. You!” she spat.

I dropped my voice to ensure she truly heard my words. “You’d better pray to God I hold back on you, kitten. Because if I don’t, you’re going to need all your strength to survive me.”

“You’re nothing more than a vile monster.” She struggled, but couldn’t free herself from my grasp without causing more pain. “You disgust me.”

“So you’ve said. Problem is, that doesn’t bother me at all.”

I sat back down, scooping up food and eating without giving her a second glance.

Nova stormed out the front door, and I remained seated. Listening closely, I heard her soft footfalls making the wood on the front porch groan and creak. Bare feet wouldn’t get her

very far. Her cell phone was still in the Mercedes I'd pushed off a cliff, if there was even cell reception out here. So far, I'd yet to get a signal on my own phone, having to rely on the landline hidden in the back of the bedroom closet. As a matter of fact, I was supposed to plug it in tonight and give Jensen an update.

After a few minutes, Nova came back inside, retreating to the basement.

Where she belonged.

CHAPTER 5

Nova

Now I understood entirely how far Creed was willing to go to hurt me. If I didn't do what he said, or if I challenged him in any way, he would resort to causing me pain. He had so many options with which to accomplish it, too. He could deny me food, he could become my audience every time I used the bathroom, or he could set me loose alone in the forest. Or, the one thing I couldn't make up my mind about.

He could take my virginity.

I would hate him for it, but I would also be relieved. Better him than some fumbling, sweaty-palmed teenage boy who would pretend he loved me so he could get what he wanted and then throw me in the trash when he was done using me. One thing Creed would never do was pretend he had feelings. Not for me or anyone, I could see that now. It would be more like a transaction, one I could come to terms with.

But maybe I could make an escape before he had that chance. All I needed to do was find the car keys, and then I could just drive. Either direction I chose would eventually lead me to a forestry station or civilization. This cabin was obviously made for vacationers, after all, not kidnappers.

But getting to the keys when he was surely smart enough to hide them thoroughly was another challenge altogether. If he locked me in the basement while he slept, I couldn't slip past him. If I seduced him, I had a feeling he'd see right through my intentions. Then again, he knew I'd had a crush on

him, so it wasn't completely out of the frame of reality for me to want to be intimate with him.

Of course, if I hadn't spent the morning ensuring he knew how much I loathed him, then perhaps my chances of seduction would be greater.

Lesson having been learned, I tried to convince myself I needed to be nicer to Creed in general. Though it grated on me to fake pleasantries with my abductor, I repeated to myself that he was the same man I'd known for months. Nothing had changed except my perception of him.

"If you're eating lunch, kitten, now's the time to come upstairs."

His voice startled me out of my thoughts. Standing, I headed up the stairs to where he stood holding the door open. On the table was more canned food, but it was better than starving. Tuna salad with crackers and fruit cocktail. At least he was making an effort, I suppose, although that could simply be to keep himself from starving. I was no longer ignorant enough to assume he cared about saving my life as he'd been hired to do by my father.

"I was a means to an end all along, wasn't I?"

I don't know why I asked when the answer was more than obvious. Perhaps I wanted him to admit he'd grown to care for me in the time he'd guarded me.

"Yep."

Yeah, that's what I got for asking stupid questions. "And yet, I'm still alive."

“Can’t ransom a dead woman.”

Creed sat, picking up a cracker and putting the whole thing in his mouth. I watched him chew it, thinking his mouth was rather seductive. Full pink lips with a bit of scruff beneath them where he hadn’t bothered to shave—assuming razors were hidden in the house somewhere, which maybe they weren’t. But his mouth was beautiful, and that thought upset me.

I didn’t want to find him attractive. Sitting across from him as I had that morning, I thought about the way I’d stormed out. The porch creaked, and the wind screamed through the canyon. The trees swayed violently with it, beckoning me to join them in their dance. Surely I could find my way down the path if I had the car keys.

“Why are you staring at me?” Creed demanded.

“I was lost in thought, and you’re directly in front of me.”

“Well, stop it. I’m not your ticket to paradise, kitten.”

Flushing, I wondered if any of my thoughts had shown on my face. “I know that.”

“Good. Eat.”

“After all the hours you slaved away making this gourmet meal, I’d better enjoy it before it grows cold.” The snark was second nature to me at this point, and not meant as an actual insult.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Sheesh. Someone was cranky. It should be me, considering what he'd done. "Why, afraid I might hurt your feelings?"

I shoved a cracker in my mouth, deciding manners had no place here. Not in the deepest parts of the forest with all the wild creatures surrounding me.

Including Creed Cruz.

"I don't have feelings, except the aggravation you're determined to give me."

Sticking my tongue out at him, I plucked the only cherry from my bowl of fruit cocktail and dropped it in my mouth. The cut on my chin ached the barest amount, enough to remind me of last night.

"What's the plan here? You planning on popping my cherry, Creed? Sending me broken and used back to Daddy so you can say you had the final revenge?"

His eyes met mine, dark and heated. "You don't hold any interest for me."

God, even I knew that was a lie. I'd felt it when he kissed me. "You sure you're not a bald-faced liar?"

"Keep antagonizing the wolf, and you'll get eaten alive."

I shivered. "Maybe that's what I want."

"Just this morning, you said you loathe me. Which one is it?"

He had me there, and we both knew it. "I may hate you for bringing me here against my will and upsetting my parents, but that doesn't negate how much you make me want you."

There, I'd said it. Would he take the bait?

Creed laughed so loudly that it grated on my nerves. "You think you're so slick, kitten, but you're just like the rest."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"Women who overestimate their charm." He ate some of his tuna salad, washing it down with milk. When I didn't reply, he continued. "You think I'll give you whatever you want simply because you have a cunt?"

His harsh language only added fuel to my fire. "That's what all men boil down to, yeah. Flash a pussy in their face and they forget their own name."

He laughed again, and I scowled.

"Some men, I'm sure. Men who are trained from birth that nothing in this world is handed to them know better."

Since I didn't know what he meant by that, I looked down at the table. The edge of the fake wood had chipped, leaving behind a scratchy section that kept catching my shirt every time I moved. The tuna wasn't terrible, even without much spice or anything interesting in it. Clearly, there was mayo in the fridge, which I hoped didn't spoil easily. Considering how long we might be here and the amount of tuna in the cabinets and the downstairs shelves, we would be eating a lot of this exact meal.

"I'm positive you're not a virgin," I said, picking up on the paused conversation. "So you're telling me you've never fallen for a woman, regardless of her intentions?"

The expression on his face was unreadable. “Fallen for? As in, fall in love?”

“That’s what I mean, yes.” I found it hard to hold his gaze when he looked so intense. “Have you ever loved a single person other than yourself?”

“Let’s see; my mother was a crack whore who died giving birth to me in a dirty alley. My father is unknown, but most likely her dealer.”

My heart fractured, letting emotions leak back inside it. I’d tried to harden myself against him, but it appeared I couldn’t.

“I grew up with my incubator’s sister, who preferred to smack me around when she wanted to get her point across. After all, I was to blame for her dear innocent sister’s demise, not the drugs she continued to take even while pregnant with me.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I was born an addict.” His gaze hardened. “The hospital did their best, but I was one of many similar cases of babies without mothers.”

He fell silent, and I said nothing. Since he never talked about himself, I had no idea he’d had it so bad. I finished eating without a word and took my dishes to the sink to wash and dry.

Stealthily, he came up behind me, a solid wall of muscle and sinew. His body heat surrounded me, and I had to swallow hard. Rather than stop my movements, I simply reached for his plate and washed it too. All the while, he pressed his chest to

my back. There was an unusual connection between us, whether or not I wanted it to be so.

“Suddenly thinking of me differently, huh?”

His voice was gruff, as were his hands when he clamped them on my upper arms. Turning me in his embrace, Creed stood towering over me while his gaze lingered intently on my face. My bare belly scraped roughly against the waistband of his jeans, but I didn't hate it.

I wanted to hate him, but I wanted him to kiss me more. I wanted to forget what he'd told me, to forget he was a cold-blooded killer sent to kidnap me. And that he'd succeeded, not giving a damn about all the time he'd spent in my house with me. He hadn't let that deter him when the time came.

“We're not here to make friends,” I whispered, staring at his shirt. It was wrinkled and smelled musty, as though it had been in this cabin for centuries.

“No, we're not.”

Lifting my head, I kept eye contact while saying, “And yet, we're stuck here with nothing to do.”

A muscle in his throat ticced. “I can think of plenty of things to pass the time.”

“You said you weren't interested.” Why did I have to remind him of that now?

“I did say that.”

But his head lowered more and more, inching closer to mine. My heart thudded heavily in my ribcage, galloping into

my throat to make the anticipation thrum even higher. His breath washed over me, and I knew he was about to do what I wanted, needed, him to do. Press his mouth to mine, making my blood rise beneath my skin. Heating me from the inside out, creating a deluge of confusing feelings in my gut. Tangling his tongue with mine the way I'd read about in so many books—where the man was there to rescue the maiden, not take her against her will—and then he'd sigh into my mouth, pick me up, and carry me to the bed.

An alarm went off on his phone, startling us both. Creed was so close, and yet so far from me.

Backing up abruptly, he yanked the phone from his pocket and swiped his thumb over the screen to silence the sound. “I have to check in with my boss.”

“You—you get cell service out here?” Maybe, if I tried—

“No,” he said curtly, cutting off all hope I had left. “But there is a phone hiding somewhere, and I have to plug it in and use it to call him.”

Biting my lip, I imagined Creed throwing his responsibilities out the window and shoving me against the wall to have his way with me. Being with me was more important than a phone call, and he wouldn't be able to resist me.

It wasn't meant to be.

I staggered when he stepped away, realizing too late how hard I'd been leaning against him. He walked to the closet by the front door, pulling out a length of rope.

At the sight of it, I panicked. “No, please, you don’t have to tie me up again.”

He strode back to me, determination on his face.

“Please, Creed, I’ll go downstairs and you can lock the door. I won’t do anything foolish.”

Ignoring me, he wrapped the middle of the rope around my waist and tied it off, taking one long end and winding it around my legs until he could tie my ankles together. Tears sprung to my eyes, and I tried to blink them away.

When he tied me up like a Christmas ham, I felt like a trapped animal. Scared. Useless.

Prey.

The other end went around my chest, squeezing my breasts until the rope slipped below them. Without meeting my eyes, Creed tied the end around my wrists and led me to the couch. It sagged under my weight, and then he disappeared down the hallway.

A few minutes later, he brought a very old boxy phone to the couch, sitting beside me and reaching over to plug it into the jack on the wall. Punching in numbers, he stared silently at me.

“It’s Cruz,” he barked into the receiver.

I waited patiently, hoping the conversation wouldn’t last long.

“No.” He paused, glancing over at me. “No.”

I could just make out the other man's voice, though I had no idea what he was saying.

“No—I *said*, no.”

What were they arguing about? Me?

“That's not my job. I'm not a goddamn babysitter, and here I've been doing it for months. But that was as a favor. This—”
He fell silent. Then, “Are you sure?” followed by a long glance at me.

I felt myself flush.

“How much longer will you give him?”

My father must have balked at the idea of ransom. Had to admit, that stung.

“And does he know those are the consequences? Interesting.”

Licking my lips, I watched his every move. He swiped a hand through his hair, watching me in return. Whatever the other guy was saying, it had his rapt attention.

“Wanna talk to her? Proof of life or some shit?”

What good was I to any of them if I was dead?

Creed grunted but didn't hand the phone over. Apparently, they didn't want to talk to me.

Finally, he hung up, staring at me still.

“What?” I asked.

“Daddy Warbucks has twenty-four hours to bring the cash, or you're my next victim.”

My blood ran cold as ice. “What? No!”

Though I struggled, I couldn't stand. Instead, I tripped over my feet and the bindings, sending myself sprawling across the wood floor. Trying to roll over didn't work, and soon I found myself pinned by Creed's weight.

“Wanna know what my boss said, kitten?” He licked my earlobe, then bit down as I whimpered. “He said your father refuses to pay, so he doesn't expect the cash to come in at the last hour. That means you're all mine.”

Bucking my hips, I attempted to dislodge him.

I failed.

“You're as good as dead, girl.” Biting my shoulder, Creed continued. “I have permission to take my fill of your tight little body as payment for babysitting you.”

CHAPTER 6

Creed

All the blood in my body rushed in one direction. There was no denying how badly I wanted Nova, despite my claims to the contrary. The more she struggled beneath me, the harder my cock grew. In fact, her tiny whimpers of distress heightened my desire to the point of pain.

I had permission, and yet I paused.

There was no turning back now. We were on a path of destruction, one I hadn't orchestrated for once, but I had fully participated in it without remorse. When all I really wanted was to wrap myself around Nova's lithe body, holding back had become a sharp kind of bittersweet torture.

"Creed, please," she sobbed breathlessly.

I froze, waiting to see what she'd say.

"D-don't kill me, I'm begging you."

"And why shouldn't I?" I growled into her ear.

Honestly, I could think of a thousand reasons to keep her alive. Making her my sex kitten starred in all my wet dreams about the foreseeable future.

Her struggles ceased, and I briefly mourned the loss. Her sweet little ass was so tight against my crotch.

"Because . . . because I can be—or do—whatever you want!"

“What could you possibly have to offer me in exchange for your pitiful life?” My plan had been to ensure she surrendered to me by any means necessary. But if she offered herself to me, then there were so many new avenues to explore.

“I’ll—” She broke off, swallowing and stuttering. “I’ll s-suck you off.”

I let my forehead drop to the middle of her back. The very idea made it difficult to concentrate. High society princess Nova Arden down on her knees for me—supplicating herself to *me*—in exchange for her life.

I stood, dragging her up to her knees in front of me. The ropes bit into her skin as I gripped her chin, and her eyes were wide and wet.

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to calm down enough that I didn’t embarrass myself by blowing my load in my pants. She looked so enticing, so young and innocent. Dark circles had formed beneath her eyes, the lack of proper sleep afflicting us both showing quite evidently in her features. Her pale skin had become even more delicate, her blue veins running prominently beneath her cheekbones.

Tightening my grip, I forced her mouth open. “Let’s see you try.”

With my free hand, I unfastened my jeans and tugged my cock from its confines. It throbbed in my hand, extraordinarily eager to explore the depths of Nova’s mouth. She stared up at me, tears wavering on her lashes. I did not fail to notice she never looked down, never let her gaze lower to the cock she’d volunteered to suck.

My hips surged forward, giving her no time to adjust. Her pupils dilated, giving her a striking resemblance to a porcelain doll.

One I fully intended to break.

Spluttering around me, Nova choked and tried to bring her hands up. The ropes prevented her action, but she drew her head back sharply as if to escape the all-out assault she'd foolishly asked for.

Shoving my hands in her tangled hair, I yanked her forward again. "You're not done until I say you're done."

Dark delight filled me at the way her body went slack. Resting on her heels, she loosened her muscles as she admitted defeat.

So I took full advantage.

Her mouth was warm, wet, soft, and perfect. Groaning, I pulled her onto me repeatedly, listening to the sounds of her gagging and struggling to breathe.

I loved it. Somehow, I'd known that when Nova and I finally came together, she'd make the perfect fuck doll. Not the uptight duchess without a hair out of place who pretended not to cuddle up next to me on her pink floral couch, but the beautiful mess kneeling before me. The further my cock slid down her throat, the grubbier she became. Knotted hair, tear-streaked face, ripped clothing, red marks from the ropes . . . she was my dirty fantasy come true.

But I couldn't let her know that, or she'd have the upper hand. Leaning down, I tightened my fingers on her jaw. "Can't

even get the simplest thing right.”

The hurt flashing across her face didn't faze me. Her feelings didn't factor into this transaction. What I cared about was her saliva coating my cock and dripping down her chin to stain her shorts. What I craved was the way her throat bulged as she struggled to accept the length of my shaft. Her nails curled into her palms, her muscles straining against her bindings. If she were free, she might fight back.

Some deep, dark part of me was desperate for that.

Finally, I pulled out of her mouth as I felt the tightening that signaled I was about to come. Letting every ounce of my hot cum cover her face, I triumphed in her abject subjugation.

Regulating my breathing, I watched her struggle to adjust to the abundance of air filling her lungs. My heart raced, my mind already picturing the various ways I could take her. We'd crossed a line now, and there was no going back.

I strode briskly down the hall to the bathroom and cleaned up quickly, fixing my pants and returning to the living room. Nova tracked my every movement with her big doe eyes, wariness emanating from them.

Yanking out my pocket knife, I saw her flinch before I sawed through the ropes twisted around her middle. Once freed, she sat back on her feet and waited.

“Go clean yourself up, you look disgusting.”

In truth, she looked delectable. Sweet and filthy. Covered in the evidence of what we'd done—what *I'd* done to *her*—

and days' worth of grime, Nova had never been more attractive.

Her gait was stiff as she disappeared down the hall. I listened to her movements, but there was nothing down there for her to get into. The phone was in the living room still, the weapons were in the car, and I'd tucked my knife down into my boot.

The sound of the bathroom window screeching open only made me chuckle. If she wanted to run, she was more than welcome. Casually, I meandered down the hall. Stopping just shy of the door, I stared at her reflection in the mirror. She washed her face with an ancient washcloth, then stuck her head out the window and inhaled the breeze. An ounce of remorse struck me; she'd never spent much time indoors at home, preferring to be outside until after dinner. In the pool, in the garden, she tried to entertain herself in the sunshine.

But I had to quash those thoughts. This wasn't my doing, and I had to remember my objective.

And then she hoisted herself up, shimmying her shoulders out the window. Stifling a sigh, I watched her get halfway out before falling to the dirt below. Spinning on my heel, I stalked out the front door and around to the place where she'd dropped.

“Going somewhere, kitten?”

Gasping, her spine stiffened as she straightened herself up. At her full height, she was probably a foot shorter than me. “I can't do this.”

Crossing my arms, I asked, “Do what?”

She wouldn't meet my gaze. “If that's really what you want from me, I can't offer you anything in exchange for my freedom.”

“Then go.”

Her head came up sharply. “What?”

I shrugged and then gestured around us. “Go, Nova. *Run.*”

“You're not serious.” Her eyes had widened again, and the pulse in her neck thrummed heavily.

Moving forward, I pressed my thumb over her carotid as it jumped erratically. “Run, kitten. Run for your life, which is apparently less significant than you estimated.”

With an enraged scream, she turned away, stumbling forward. Barefoot, she tripped over a tree root and just managed to catch herself before pitching over onto her face. I stood still, letting her decide what she wanted to do.

Running was it, I guess, because she took off. She only hesitated the barest amount before her short legs ate up the ground, leaping over little rocks and pine cones. Sighing loudly, I followed at a normal pace, my boots crunching over the detritus that cut into her soles. The further she got, the more my temper rose.

She was actually willing to risk her neck in the woods instead of staying with me. Of course, I'd made it clear she was dead either way, so maybe she'd chosen to be bear food instead of taking two to the back of the head.

“Nova,” I called, and she screamed.

Maybe she didn’t realize I was that close?

“You’re not doing yourself any favors.”

But her legs pumped, and she clambered over a fallen log. It was darker under the cover of the dense tree branches, and the sun was descending behind the mountains. Soon, she’d be blind to her surroundings, and I’d be even more pissed at having to chase her stubborn ass.

“Run, Nova, run!” I taunted, closing the distance between us.

I heard her labored breathing, heard the anxiety in the wheezes and grunts. The long-dormant predator inside me grew more excited as we continued our game of cat and mouse. She darted behind a tree, and I lost sight of her.

“Your efforts are useless.” Reaching the tree she’d moved behind, I found that she wasn’t there. Gathering my thoughts, I focused on my surroundings. I heard something in the brush to my right, small and inconsequential. Up in the branches, a bird contemplated taking flight to escape the humans invading its space.

And there, a few yards to my left, was the sound of Nova trying to regulate her breathing down to silence. Something slightly larger moved behind her, and I briefly wondered if we were both insane for being out here.

“Either that cougar will get you or I will.”

She gasped, and I grinned.

“Who do you think has the bigger claws, kitten?”

The way she began to hyperventilate answered my question clearly. Rising from her crouched position, she looked over her shoulder. “Is there really a cougar out there?” she whispered.

“Hard to tell, but it sure sounds like it. Maybe it’s hungry.”

That was all it took for her to hurry to my side, constantly glancing behind her. “I hate you.”

“Good.”

I grabbed her upper arm more harshly than necessary, dragging her behind me. She stumbled and tripped along, never once focusing her gaze in front of us. I truly didn’t know what was there; it could be anything from a rabbit to a wolf. Maybe it really was a mountain lion, or maybe it was a bear cub. Neither of us should have to find out by coming face to face with it.

Only once the cabin came back into view did she jerk her arm from my hold. Stopping in my tracks, I glared down at her. “This is what happens when you think you know better.”

“Being mauled by a wild animal would be preferable to whatever the hell you did to me in there.”

Leaning very close, I made sure she was paying attention. “Your false bravado isn’t fooling anyone. The second you thought some wild creature was lurking, you ran to my side.”

“Trading one deadly predator for another,” she mumbled.

Flashing my teeth, I said, “Exactly.”

Pushing and shoving her back inside the cabin, I closed and secured the door, then went to the bathroom to close and lock the window. When I returned to the living room, she stood there with her hands clasped together and her head down.

“How much money do you want? I have access to my own accounts.”

Snorting, I scraped a chair back to sit down. “I have plenty of money, kitten. More than you seem to think.”

“I can give you all of what I have.”

“How much do you think an assassin gets paid? I probably have more than you do.”

“Then what, dammit!” she shouted, bringing her head up as she charged toward me. Stopping in front of my chair, she said, “I won’t let you abuse me and then kill me, Creed.”

Standing quickly, I snatched a fistful of her hair. “What choice do you have?”

“How much is your boss paying you? I swear, I’ll double it or triple it.” Her chest heaved, her cheeks red and her eyes wet. She was sincere, but her pleas were pointless.

“I got a hundred thousand dollars just for showing up at your door, and fifty thousand every fucking month I was forced to put up with you. The second I brought you here, I got a million.”

She whimpered, likely realizing the amount was more than she’d anticipated.

“And upon proof of your death, I’ll get five million fucking dollars, Nova. How much money do you have in your little allowance account that you think you can compete with that?” That didn’t even include the salary her father had paid me or the money I had saved up over the years. I didn’t need the pennies she offered.

The fire in her expression didn’t dim, but I sensed her capitulation. “I have enough.”

“Liar.” I laughed loudly. “Fucking *liar*,” I spat, flexing my fists to tilt her head back.

With her neck stretched, her veins beckoned to me. Latching onto one, I bit down on her smooth skin, sucking it into my mouth hard enough to leave a mark. *My* mark. She protested, moving her hands up to my chest as if to push me away.

Instead, she let them rest there as I licked my way up her delicate skin to the spot behind her ear. Her only view would be the ceiling, so she had no idea what I was going to do next. I liked her off-guard, off-balance, and unprepared. It made her reactions all the more real.

A moan rumbled up from my gut when I tasted her skin. Despite the fact I’d recently come, I felt the way my cock hardened against her belly. She must have felt it too, based on the way she shifted closer. Involuntarily? I couldn’t tell, but I knew she wanted me still.

“No, no, I can’t. You’re so rough, Creed. So cruel.”

Her words were muttered into the void, falling on deaf ears. Palming her tits, I rolled her nipples between my fingers until she cried out. With my mouth on her jaw and her hands on my chest, we moved in synchronicity. Closer and closer, grinding my erection into her as I hitched one leg around my waist, I brought Nova to the point of no return. Cupping one hand over her thin shorts, I felt the wet heat of her pussy and grinned in triumph.

Like it or not, she would learn how badly she needed me. I'd see to it before the sun went down, and then we'd go from there.

CHAPTER 7

Nova

My emotions had tangled with my desires because Creed was more than I'd expected him to be. His words and his actions were just shy of vicious. Then again, the way he constantly taunted me with my imminent death was fully barbaric. If he'd ever had a soft side, his early life had beaten it out of him. Anything I'd felt toward him while he was my bodyguard had been nothing more than my fairy-tale imagination.

However, I couldn't deny wanting his touch. He knew what he was doing; how to create flames in my bloodstream. My mouth dropped open when he curled his finger against me, dragging my panties against my crotch. Nothing about my sheltered upbringing had prepared me for the heat that would race up my spine when a man finally had access to the most private parts about me. Even though I'd tried masturbating a handful of times, I'd never created anything nearly as delicious as this sensation with my own hands.

As he circled my clit just right, I let out a high-pitched moan. Pleasure was not the black and white romance I'd pictured, but a multitude of nuanced colors. I knew where we were headed, and I'd vacillated between acceptance and denial over the past few days. The keen edge of an orgasm threatened to spill over, sending tiny convulsions shuddering along my limbs. My knees weakened, and I clung tightly to Creed's shoulders, needing something from him I couldn't explain.

The landline rang, and I groaned at the interruption. Creed hesitated, bringing my head up and looking into my eyes.

Surprisingly, his breathing was as harsh as mine, his cheeks just as flushed. I'd managed to mess up something as simple as a blow job earlier, so I couldn't understand why he'd be turned on by me now.

Moments from the biggest orgasm I'd ever had the chance to experience, Creed walked away to answer the damn phone.

"Cruz," he barked.

Steadying myself on his vacated chair, I tried to smooth my hair down as I listened to his end of the conversation.

"Are you serious?"

It was said with more irritation than incredulity. Since my hair was hopelessly snarled, I dropped my hands and twisted my fingers together while my anxiety rose to a fever pitch.

"That's not what you told me earlier today." Creed glanced at me and then turned around to face the front window. "Of course, if that's what you want."

My heart thumped painfully. Was it going to be now? Would he point his gun at me and pull the trigger without remorse? Once again, tears built up in the corners of my eyes. I'd tried to push aside the thought that my father refused to pay my ransom and all the crushing feelings it evoked. Surely, he had a strategy and wasn't just heartlessly letting me die.

"Fine, then."

My attention snapped back to Creed. He dropped the receiver onto the cradle, shoving his hands through his hair and then facing me.

I couldn't read his expression. No doubt, that was by design. Maybe it was even second nature to him to hide his thoughts. Still, my body trembled at his intense stare, my clit throbbing at the remembrance of what he'd nearly accomplished before we were interrupted.

"Celeste has volunteered to pay the ransom."

"My mom?" I asked dumbly.

"Do you know anyone else named Celeste?"

Shaking my head, I tried to think. "But why won't Daddy pay?"

I knew what I sounded like; a young child lost at the mall, wondering when her parents would come to rescue her.

"He thinks he's calling our bluff." The use of the word *our* was not lost on me. "But your mother doesn't want to sit back and wait for the news that you're dead."

Sinking onto the chair, I opened and closed my mouth several times. "So I could be free soon?"

He snorted. "She said she needs 72 hours to liquidate some assets. My boss has agreed to this timeline."

Lifting my gaze, I watched him carefully. "We have three more days together?"

A muscle in his jaw tightened, and his expression changed briefly before he settled back to the impassive mask. "Looks like it."

What the hell were we going to do for three more days? If I quit trying to thwart him, then I only had to wait it out. He'd

bring me back to town, back to civilization, and everything would return to normal.

But was that what I wanted?

Hedging my bets, I said, “That means you have to keep your hands off me.”

Moving quickly, Creed crossed the room. I stood, backing away from him until I bumped into the refrigerator. His nostrils flared as he closed in on me.

“Is that what you want, kitten?” Linking our fingers together, he pushed my hands above my head and nuzzled my throat. “For me to stop touching you now that Mommy Dearest has intervened?”

Swallowing thickly, I tried to arrange my thoughts into some sense of coherence, but with his tongue swirling over my skin, I couldn’t come up with anything.

“The only thing I want is to shower and get some sleep,” I murmured finally.

For some reason, Creed stepped back right away. Frowning, I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

“You already know where the bathroom is.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets, and I felt more confused than ever. There hadn’t been a time where he’d taken my needs into consideration until now. Part of me wanted to go back to fooling around, to see how explosively I would come when it was Creed’s fingers instead of mine touching me.

On the other hand, I vividly recalled the blow job he'd orchestrated—or whatever that could possibly be called. And then I wanted to hide under the blankets and remain a virgin, at least in the technical sense. I sure as hell was no longer innocent by any stretch of the imagination.

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I turned and went down the hall. The bathroom light was nothing more than a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, and the linens were threadbare. The washcloth I'd used earlier was stiff, so I pulled out a new one, along with a towel that was definitely older than me. There were a few options for soap, between a green bar and a bottle of cheap body wash.

At that point, all I prayed for was hot water. The rest was only gravy.

Stepping into the tub, I stripped and threw my ruined clothing over the pale blue plastic curtain. The faucet squeaked and the pipes protested, but I waited impatiently for the water to heat up. Once it did, I nearly wept with gratitude. Having no idea how long it would last, I hurried through washing myself, only briefly mourning the lack of a decent hairbrush as I lathered crappy shampoo through the tangles.

And only after I rinsed and turned off the water did I realize my dilemma. I had a small towel to wrap around my body, but no clean clothes. Rolling my eyes, I wondered if that was Creed's plan all along.

Cracking the door open, I glanced up and down the hallway. Creed was nowhere to be seen, so I tiptoed along the shag carpeting until I stood in the bedroom. There was a closet

on the far wall, so I began to paw through it in the hopes of finding something to put on. I didn't even really care what it was by then.

I snagged a flannel shirt but found nothing else of use. Turning, I spotted a dresser and rifled through the drawers. Cut-off sweatpants would work, since I could cinch the drawstring tight. There wasn't any female clothing, which I had expected, but that meant no underwear unless I wanted to layer boxers under the sweatpants. That seemed unnecessary, but then again, maybe I needed all the barriers I could get between me and my captor.

Dropping the towel, I slid on the shorts and the flannel, buttoning it high and shoving the sleeves up to my elbows. I also lacked a bra, but I barely had anything there to worry about anyway. Satisfied that I was at least comfortable and clean, I wrapped the towel around my hair and left the bedroom.

And ran smack into Creed in the hallway.

"Shit, you startled me!" I'd been too busy fussing with the makeshift turban on my head to notice he was right outside the door.

My heart raced at the hungry look in his gaze as it roamed over me from head to toe. He'd cupped my elbows to steady me, and I smelled the cigarette smoke I'd come to associate with him.

"My turn."

My brow furrowed as he released me to disappear into the bathroom.

I couldn't figure him out, and perhaps that was his goal. It left me off balance and at the mercy of his whims. With a shrug, I moved to the kitchen to figure out what we could eat for dinner that was hopefully not canned tuna.

The cupboards held beef stew and chili, so I recited eeny meeny miny moe in my head to decide. Digging out bowls, I popped open the cans and poured out the most foul-smelling dog-food-looking version of stew I'd ever seen. If that didn't make me lose my appetite, then maybe I could make it in life after all.

It was only as I stood there watching the bowls rotate in the microwave that I realized what I'd done. Instead of immediately searching for the keys to the car, I'd decided to play Domestic Barbie with a madman.

Keeping my footsteps light, I headed back to the bedroom, only pausing for a second outside the bathroom door to make sure the water was running. There was nothing as simple as yesterday's jeans to search through the pockets, so I went through the drawers more thoroughly, trying to be quick. Dropping to the floor, I hunted beneath the furniture, getting lightheaded when I stood up too fast.

Heart lodged in my throat, I shoved the hangers to one side in the closet and frantically patted the carpet. There were no loose spots, nowhere he could have tucked the key beneath the corners. I was too short to search the shelf above the hangers,

but it appeared to be empty when I hopped up on the bed to get a better view.

Crap. If the car key wasn't in the bedroom, where else could he hide it? I remembered there was a closet by the front door, so I went back out to the living room to take a look.

Creed was leaning up against the front door, his arms crossed against his bare chest and a towel secured around his waist. My stomach dropped to my toes at the knowing smirk on his face.

"Dinner smells interesting," he remarked, shoving off the door and coming to a stop in front of me.

"It's beef stew." My voice didn't waver, and I was proud of that. "Looked disgusting coming out of the can, though."

Water clung to his hair, and his chest was damp. I wanted to run my fingers through it, lick up the drops of moisture leftover from his shower, and beg him not to be angry.

Instead, I waited for his wrath, knowing I deserved it. But what could he expect, exactly? That I wouldn't make any attempts to escape if given the chance?

"Next time, I'll be sure to only shower while you're locked up."

Turning toward the kitchen, I spoke while putting the bowls on the table. "I'm hungry, how 'bout you?"

The cutlery drawer stuck when I tugged on it, probably due to the shaking of my hands. I picked up two spoons but dropped them with a yelp when Creed clamped down on my shoulders.

“Don’t fucking mistake me, Nova,” he said directly into my ear. “I *will* catch you if you try to leave, and I’ll drag you back by your hair.”

As if to prove his point, he jerked on my wet ponytail until my head rested on his chest. I wanted to speak, to defend myself, but the words stuck in my mouth.

“You haven’t the slightest idea how to be devious, kitten, but it’s all I’ve known.” Cupping my breasts, he growled, “I’ve spent years perfecting my craft.”

I shivered. His *craft* was murdering people.

Pinching my nipples harshly, he stepped back seconds after I felt his erection pressed against me. Without his jeans and my white denim shorts between us, it was much more prominent.

To my dismay—not that I’d admit it to him—he left me in the kitchen and came back dressed a few minutes later. His usual attire of jeans and a t-shirt looked good on him, but I wouldn’t have minded seeing him in something more casual.

I was already seated at the table, dipping my clean spoon in the stew and then letting it fall back into the bowl. Between the appearance of the food and the not-so-subtle warning he’d given me, my stomach was jittery.

“Accommodations not up to your standards, duchess?”

Even his taunting words couldn’t stir me from my reverie. I knew now that I couldn’t escape. I’d tried and failed, so what was the point? My mother was getting the money together to have me freed, so Creed was no longer expected to kill me. He

had more money than I did, apparently, so there weren't any bargaining chips left in my pathetically lacking arsenal.

“Don't think starving yourself will gain my sympathy.”

Bringing my head up, I blinked at him. “I'm not trying to pull a stunt, Creed. Just trying to decide if I can stomach this crap.”

He lowered his head, but not before I spotted his smirk. He was eating, and it wasn't poisoning him so far, so I decided to suck it up.

The flavor was better than the sight, that was for sure. And once I started, I realized I was starving. After a minute, Creed got up and retrieved a box of crackers from the cabinet, setting them in the middle of the table. His hair curled the slightest bit around his ears as it dried, and I was struck again with attraction.

Something must be hardwired wrong in my brain if I found this man attractive after everything he'd done. I should be repulsed at his job, disgusted over his methods of keeping me in line, and overall desperate to remain as far from him as possible.

And yet, I felt none of that when I looked at him.

We had a finite number of hours left together before he'd have to go his own way, and then I'd never see him again. My life was now altered, no matter how much I wished it to be otherwise. Gazing out the window over his shoulder, I watched the sky changing colors as the sun set. It would be dark sooner here than elsewhere, thanks to the mountain range

dominating the horizon. As the shadows in the cabin darkened in the twilight, I made a decision.

I would convince Creed Cruz to take my virginity before dawn broke the following morning, no matter how much begging it took.

CHAPTER 8

Creed

I studied Nova's slender figure as she washed the bowls in the sink. She was acting funny, but not in a humorous way. It was more an odd funny, as if something had shifted inside her. We'd only been here for slightly over twenty-four hours, but we were intertwined in a tangible web despite either of our wishes to the contrary. My goal for the evening had been to seduce her, and I simply couldn't wait any longer. Of all the lies I'd spewed at her, the one about not being attracted to her was probably the biggest.

Sometime in the middle of the summer, I'd begun fantasizing about Nova Arden. Against my better judgment, I longed for certain things with her after spending so much intimate time together. Experiences, entanglements, some ethereal hope without a label; that's what I hungered for. Despite my desire to forget she existed after this little venture came to its natural end, I knew I would miss her. For months, I'd fought my softer side, knowing I couldn't afford to be anything but heartless. In my line of work, men obeyed orders without question, or they found themselves meeting the other end of my rifle. I sure as shit didn't want to find out who they sent to kill the assassin.

So I'd resolved to not be that guy. I couldn't give Nova an inch when I knew she'd take more than a mile. Instead, I had to prove to her who I was, and that my intentions were serious.

Dead serious.

“Nova,” I murmured, standing behind her and running my finger over her ponytail.

She turned off the faucet and faced me. “Hm?”

Her lashes were long, pale, and obscured her big doe eyes. When she lifted her chin and met my gaze, I had to swallow past a dry throat. I didn’t know how to be gentle, and I didn’t want to be, anyway. I wanted to take, to seize and plunder, to devour each inch of soft, fragrant skin before finally plunging past the barrier marking her as untouched. Pristine and too trusting; that was Nova.

Reaching up, she slipped a shirt button out of its hole with trembling fingers, my gaze riveted to her movements. Slowly, she shifted to the next button, and then the next. Only once the shirt hung completely open did she change course, crossing her arms to cup her hands over her bare breasts. Hiding them from me, and in return showing her shyness. Her innocence.

Tracing her collarbone, I dipped down her sternum to drag my hand beneath her arms and force her to drop them. Pushing the flannel shirt until it hung from her elbows, I took my fill of the sight in front of me. Rosy nipples, blue-green veins crossing her small tits, and a ribcage I could span with my bare hands. To prove it, I rested my thumbs side by side, spreading my fingers until I reached her underarms.

All the while, her breathing hitched and jumped. Beneath my palms, her heart galloped like a racehorse after the starting pistol. Leaning forward, I tried to be gentle as I pressed my lips to hers. Her soft sigh echoed into my mouth, making my cock harder than ever. The more I kissed her, the more frantic

my movements became until we were rolling down the coaster rails at top speed without brakes. In no time, I'd gripped her jaw to angle her head, tilting it back so I could dominate her smaller frame.

She whimpered, fisting my t-shirt and bringing one leg around my waist. With her pelvis seeking contact with mine, I knew she could feel how hard I was. My choices were to either let her know it was all because of her or make her think my base desires were uncontrollable. Instead of deciding, I bit her lower lip before tangling my tongue with hers. The noises coming from her mouth only made my lust sing, rising higher and higher until I knew I had to hear her come.

From my hands; my mouth. And, finally, from my cock.

Lifting her other leg so they were locked around me, I carried her down the stairs to the basement. Some primitive instinct insisted I lock the door behind us, so I did, wondering why I needed that level of security when we were the only two people for miles. Always watching my back, always listening to my intuition, had so far saved my ass more times than I could count.

Lowering Nova to the bed, I ripped her shirt off the rest of the way and dropped it on her pillow. Her back arched, begging for my touch on her body. The ridiculous shorts had to go, too, but I noticed she curled into herself once she was naked.

Grasping her ankle, I warred with the two sides of my conscience. One said to give her time, to go slow and gentle. The other said to take her now, as roughly as I wanted. After

all, she was nothing more than my captive. She deserved no kind consideration from me.

Deciding to split it down the middle, I leaned over her so I wasn't staring directly at her pretty pink pussy, though I wanted to spend hours doing just that. My clothes began to grate on my nerves, but I wasn't ready to take them off yet. So I focused on Nova. Closing my eyes, I listened to the rustle of the sheets as she shifted, writhing beneath me when I took a nipple between my teeth. Her mewls and moans ricocheted inside my skull, urging me on.

Finally, she put her hands on me, stroking up and down my back. Inching beneath my shirt, touching my bare skin, her delicate hands explored my shoulder blades and my spine. I feasted on her tits, molding them to my liking and then biting, sucking, and rolling my tongue over them again and again. I felt the wet spot in my jeans grow and spread against the zipper with every high-pitched moan from Nova's mouth. Wanting to feel how wet she was for me, I lowered one hand until I cupped her hot cunt, spreading her slick juices with my thumb. She shuddered, reaching for me and crying out.

Then she cradled my face in her hands, and I turned my cheek to kiss the red mark on her wrist. Acting so tender made me feel like a complete fool. Never in my life had I been under someone's spell, but Nova did that to me. She drew me in and welcomed me, acting as though it was the most natural thing in the world to stand with the sun bathing our faces. I'd become too used to the dark, grimy underworld.

Fearing this girl's light would be my undoing, I shoved against her chin until I held her jaw in a firm grip, forcing her head back. With two fingers, I thrust inside her pussy to find the spongy spot I knew would make her lose her shit. Circling my thumb over her clit, I heard the expletives falling from her tongue and grinned in triumph.

I owned her body, and she would know that as a fact before we were done here.

I could make her come, or I could withhold her orgasms. I could fuck her breathless, or I could leave her wanting me and my cock. *My choice; my decision.*

Her belly quaked, wracking shivers coursed over her limbs, and she fell apart. Finally, she knew the truth of what I could do to her. Shouting God's name and several other words I'd never heard from her delicate lips—even when she was pissed at me—Nova clenched her teeth and resorted to grunting as I refused to relent. Over and over, I stroked her until she came again, begging me to let her catch her breath. Instead, I doubled down, lifting her hips and bringing her pussy up for a taste. Her essence exploded on my tongue the same way her orgasm exploded through her.

“Please, no! Oh, God, I can't take it.”

Drawing her clit into my mouth, I sucked and nibbled as she tugged on my hair hard enough that I was sure she ripped out several strands. Wishing I'd thought to bind her hands, I batted them away until she switched to gripping the sheets.

“Oh, Creed. Oh, fuck, Creed!”

I would have grinned again, but my mouth was too full of her. She tried to wrap her legs around my back, but I swatted her ass and lifted her higher. Head thrashing against the bed, Nova groaned loudly and then finally released what I was positive was her fourth orgasm.

Feeling entirely too triumphant for my own good, I kissed her thighs and latched onto the flesh until I left a mark. She squirmed, reaching for me, dragging me up her sated body until we were face to face.

“Here I thought I’d have to beg you to touch me.”

I remained silent for several minutes, contemplating that idea. I guess I’d given her that impression, so I shouldn’t be surprised at her feelings. Earlier, I’d made it clear she wasn’t worth my time, and then I’d fucked her skull as roughly as possible. Putting her in her place, as it were.

Now, there was one last obstacle to getting what I wanted. I would be the first man to fuck Nova, to take the last remnants of her virginity and toss them onto the jagged rocks. The monster inside me hoped it hurt, that it would be a life-long reminder of the humiliation I had inflicted. The other side, the one she had brought out in me recently, recoiled at the thought of causing her any pain.

“Creed?” she whispered.

“What?”

She rolled over, propping her head on her hand and staring down at me. I didn’t like having her above me like that, so I sat up.

“Will I have to beg you to go any further?”

Snorting, I realized what she meant. Here I was, stuck inside my head instead of taking what she offered.

Shoving her back, I leaned over her and said, “Maybe I want to know what that would sound like.”

Biting her lip, she gazed up at me for too long. She’d become too trusting of me when she really shouldn’t. At last, she said, “Please, Creed.”

Dipping my head, I spoke into her ear. “I like it when you say my name.”

Angling her head in a silent plea for me to kiss her throat, she repeated herself. “Please, Creed.”

My breathing picked up, and I obliged her request by biting the column of her delicate throat. She moaned, her legs moving restlessly with mine. Though my pants were painfully tight, I had yet to remove them. Lifting off her, I pushed her until she was on her stomach, then took my sweet time studying the curve of her ass. I could picture an upside-down heart without effort, and I traced that shape onto her skin. She wiggled her ass, and I smacked it, eliciting a gasp. Pleasure or shock, I didn’t know or care.

Finally giving in to my base desires, I stripped my shirt over my head and tossed it on the floor. Toeing off my boots, I kicked them to the side and worked on lowering my jeans past my leaking cock. Nova kept trying to look at me over her shoulder, so I reached for the flannel shirt and looped it around her neck. Pulling just enough that her head came up off the

mattress, I then ran my hand over her flank and spread her wide. Her cunt glistened, shiny from the gushing orgasms she'd had already. Spanking her again, I watched her skin pinken deliciously as she struggled with which noise was more suitable; moaning or a disturbed chirping.

Tightening the shirt around my fist, I forced Nova's head to lift further until her back arched, then spread her pussy open for me. Edging forward, I ran the head of my cock over her lips to the tune of her moaning. She lifted onto all fours, but I pushed her back down until she was nearly prone, then slammed home.

Her cry was startled, her face ashen before a flush came over her entire body. The color was so enticing, I couldn't resist it. Sliding out most of the way, I slammed back into her cunt, letting her inner muscles flutter and convulse around my cock.

"Jesus," I spat between gritted teeth.

She was so hot, tight, and just right. The sensations were everything I'd anticipated, but better. Nova's pussy made the perfect slippery sheath, coating me in her arousal as I set up a faster pace. Leaving her prone for a couple of thrusts, I made sure to slap her ass a few times as she cried out. Then, I used my grip on the flannel to bring her up to her knees. It was either that or strangle, and in my hyperfocus on the feelings she brought to my cock, I doubt I would have noticed the difference.

On her hands and knees, Nova was an exquisite slam piece. Her ass in the air, my grip on her hip, and the redness

from my handprints all came together until I was hard-pressed not to burst.

“Son of a bitch,” she cried when her pussy clenched, signaling that she was about to come.

“Problem?” I snarled, plunging relentlessly in and out of her body.

“It’s right there, oh, God, right there!”

Stopping, I pulled out and tapped my throbbing cock on her ass. “No.”

“What the fuck do you mean, no?”

Her frustration made me chuckle. “No, kitten, you don’t get to come before me.”

“It’s your fault,” she groaned, dropping her head. I released the shirt, letting her body slump in defeat.

Kneading her ass cheeks, I laid my mouth on her spine and worked my way up to her nape. She squirmed, and my cock protested the lack of warm, wet pussy. Flipping her over, I let her see me for the first time.

“What the . . .”

I had scars all over from the waist down, mostly on my upper thighs. That same demented beast I’d fought against hoped she found me terrifying to look at. He hoped she gagged on the idea of letting me inside her now that it was too late. This was the demon she’d begged to take her virginity.

Her gaze flew to mine, which had hardened considerably. “What happened?”

“A better question would be who happened.”

She bit her lip, then sputtered, “Why now?”

Why would I now give her the full sight of me when I’d held off before? Why would I allow her to see the part of me I never let out in the light? I preferred to fuck with my clothes on, with my pants fastened other than the zipper. I never let anyone touch my legs, take off my clothes, or get a look at the real me.

So why now?

“Do I repulse you, kitten?”

Swallowing, she darted a glance down and then back to my face. “Are you trying to prove some kind of point?”

“Maybe.”

“To me or to yourself?”

CHAPTER 9

Nova

Creed took a long time to respond, and when he did, it was flippant and clearly a cover for his awful reality. “Doesn’t matter, does it?”

I wasn’t sure if we’d go back to having sex after this impromptu interruption. Had I ruined it for him somehow? Though I hadn’t expected his scars, I thought I’d reacted pretty well. Knowing what he said about his upbringing, his aunt had clearly not been a nice person. Maybe she was the cause of the burn marks dotted up and down his thighs.

“You owe it to me to finish what you started,” I said boldly. Would he take the bait if I challenged him?

“Owe you, duchess?” Leaning down, Creed showed me the storm in his eyes. If it was meant to scare me, it failed.

Spectacularly.

All I saw was his lethal attractiveness. Jaw rigid, hands clenched, and hell etched into his features. I wanted him more than ever, especially since my poor pussy felt so empty now. In all the ways I’d pictured this moment, this first time with him I’d hoped for—yearned for—I had seen it in shades of dull gray. What he’d given me was explosive technicolor, exquisite and blindingly bright. My emotions had staggered me, clogging my throat and my heart. Gruff and crude, punishingly strong, the man had managed to tear my soul into pieces along with my innocence.

“Yes, Creed. You can’t stop now, not when I can see how hard you are.”

To prove my statement, I reached down to close my palm around his shaft. His ocean eyes slipped closed, and he breathed out a heavy sigh while his taut stomach contracted. Feeling empowered by that reaction, I stroked him up and down, marveling that he’d ever fit inside my petite body. But he had, and in those amazing few minutes, he’d already trained me to crave him and his rough touch.

If I was going to accept a career criminal into my bed, the least he could offer me was good dick.

“Careful, kitten, or you’ll be wearing it.”

I much preferred to hear him call me by my name, but it was as if the spell between us had been broken. He’d been a different man for a little while, but something had changed. I didn’t know what, and I couldn’t make it go back, either. Only Creed could do that.

“Then come here and fuck me properly.”

His eyes blazed. “Feeling emboldened, are we?”

I smirked. “Maybe.”

Of course, perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut. Creed pushed my legs up to my damn ears and cupped my throat, pushing back inside me so swiftly my teeth snapped together. With my oxygen limited, my vision wavered and the pleasure between my legs heightened. All my senses narrowed down to him, to his movements, as he impaled me. He moved so fast the bed frame began to protest, squeaking beneath me

with each relentless thrust. He had more leverage since he was standing, and all I could do was hold on for the ride. Gripping his forearm as his fingers tightened under my jaw, I silently begged him to use me as he wished, to fill me with his cock until he came inside me. If I'd tried to spit the words out, they might have stuck in my mouth, but maybe one day I could better articulate something so lurid.

I pushed aside the thought that we weren't going to make it to 'one day' and let him fuck me out of his system. His experience showed in his actions each time he snapped his hips against me. Each time he tightened his grip on my windpipe or slapped my ass, I thanked my lucky stars Creed was the first man to be inside me. He had unusual desires, mainly because I had only ever read about missionary and a few other rather boring positions.

Creed Cruz was anything but boring.

Biting my lip, I watched him close his eyes and piston faster. If I'd learned a thing from him at all, it would be the expression on his face before he finished. I'd noticed it earlier when he was trying so hard to humiliate me, and I saw it now. Pinched, straining, and oh-so-glorious, Creed's face above me was fascinating. When he groaned and stilled against me, I found my heart crumbling in my chest.

Such a harsh man with such a horrible life was vulnerable in that one second. He wasn't chasing an agenda or belittling me. Instead, he was finding ultimate pleasure in my body, and though I knew I wasn't technically special, I felt that way. As though I could bring him to his knees with little effort.

Seconds after he pressed hard against me, I realized I'd forgotten all about coming again. Oh, well. It wasn't like I hadn't had enough orgasms. But, now that I knew how they felt, I was addicted to them. If I had the option, I knew how I would spend my remaining time with Creed.

With trembling fingers, I reached out and brushed his hair from his forehead. He opened his eyes, blinking several times as though surprised to see me before stepping back. My legs dropped, tingling from the position they'd been in, and I sat up carefully. Gentleness was far from ingrained in him, and I sensed he didn't like it when I was tender.

Finally, after staring down at me for a long time, Creed walked over to the sink. His butt was enticingly bare, the length of his stride long as he searched for something. There were marks along the backs of his thighs and a few encroaching on his buttocks. Deep inside me, I cried for the little boy who'd been mistreated his whole life. His upbringing had turned him into some kind of hardened beast, whether he would agree with me or not. Perhaps I understood him better now, realizing he'd had no choice but to take the job he had.

He returned to the bed with a towel, holding it out to me. "If you want to shower again, I won't stop you."

"Should I?" Lifting my brows, I studied the tight set of his jaw. He was angry, but I didn't know why. Was it simply smart to shower now, or was he trying to rush me out of his sight?

"Up to you." Reaching for his jeans, Creed yanked them over his feet with jerky movements.

"Creed?"

“What, kitten?” His tone was exasperated, and my heart throbbed just that much more. Even after our lovemaking, he wasn’t happy.

“Why are you mad at me?”

That stopped him in his tracks, and he turned his head toward me briefly before looking away. “I’m not mad at you.”

I felt immature for the first time in a long time. Clearly, there was some underlying problem I was too naïve to understand. “Then why are you acting as though you are?”

Throwing his hands up in the air, he stood before tugging his jeans up over his hips. Leaving them unfastened, he leaned over me on the bed, caging me between his brawny arms.

“Are you poking the bear, Nova?”

“Perhaps he needs poking,” I returned in a haughty tone. Maybe if I provoked him, he would tell me what was bothering him.

“Why’s that? Because you’re so world-traveled that you know everything? So fucking smart you think you can analyze my every move?”

Instead of responding, I grabbed two fistfuls of his hair and jerked his mouth to mine. With a startled grunt, Creed fought me for an instant, right before he sank his teeth into my lower lip. It was equal parts pain and pleasure, like much of our time together had been so far. Even when he lowered his full weight on top of me, grinding scratchy denim against my sensitive skin, I craved more. The scruff on his jaw left a blazing trail of

heat across my throat, and then he returned to my mouth to invade my senses further.

Refusing to give him the advantage, I kissed him as hard as I could. Tangling my hands in his hair, mashing my lips to his, I let him sweep his tongue into my mouth and leave me breathless. Always, he had the upper hand.

“You’re supposed to be disgusted by me,” he mumbled against my mouth. His hands had begun to wander, and my muscles quaked with need.

“Why?”

Blinking, he pulled away enough to look at me. “Because any sane person would be.”

“I guess I’m insane, then, because all I can think of is fucking you again.” My face flamed at my blunt language, but I hoped I could get through to him if I spoke the same way he did.

It worked.

Rolling to his back, Creed yanked me on top of him. Face flaming, I pictured the way my tiny breasts would look as they hung in his face, the bare skin of my torso pinkened by his touch, and my lap pressed firmly to his pants. Gripping my hips, he guided me over him, rolling my pelvis forward and back again. His pants gave me a strange kind of friction, and I gasped.

“So you’re a sex addict after one time, huh?” he taunted.

The inferno in his eyes melted my bones on the spot, turning me into a pile of mush. Carefully watching my face,

Creed reached up to pinch my nipples. My lids slipped closed, and with my sight taken from me, I found my courage. Rocking over him, I let the odd sensation build in my core. Covering his hands with mine, I moaned when he squeezed and molded my breasts in his large palms.

I felt him shift beneath me but kept my eyes closed. If he wanted a show, I'd better pretend we were in the dark. Moments after he lowered his jeans, I felt him at my entrance, hard and insistent. Feeling more confident when he moaned, I reached down and enclosed my hand over him, moving us so I sank fully over his shaft. Welcoming his size into my body took me a minute, and my mouth dropped open as I accepted the intrusion.

“Fuck me, kitten.” Creed’s raspy voice washed over me, and I lifted my hair off my neck to let it trail behind me. “Fucking ride me.”

Testing myself, I lifted and lowered, soon discovering I needed to brace my hands on his stomach to steady my movements. Biting my lip, I moved in a way that felt good to me, hoping he enjoyed it too.

If the noises he made were any indication, he did.

I moved faster, and he felt so good as he hit one spot over and over. Crying out at the building sensations, I tried to figure out where to put my hands. Eventually, I moved them back to my breasts, pinching my own nipples as Creed grabbed my waist. He pounded up into me, forcing me to move faster.

“Oh, God, oh, God!” The overwhelming feeling was right there, the one only he could give me so good.

“Fuck! Fuck, Nova. You have no idea.”

He was right; I had no idea.

What he did, what I did, it was all new to me, but also so familiar it was ancient. Instinct took over as I fell apart, as my muscles clamped down and I couldn't make myself move anymore. There was nothing but explosive heat racing up my spine, zinging out to my toes as they curled and I lost my breath, my heart beating out of control.

Creed shoved his blunt fingers in my mouth, and I didn't even care when I gagged on them. The orgasm was so strong it stole my will, and I fucked him like an animal to chase the aftershocks. Finally, I understood where he'd been coming from all along.

“Jesus,” he ground out, holding my hips in a bruising grasp. He stilled finally, and I felt the wetness he left me with as it seeped back out around him.

I collapsed on top of him, my body blanketing his and my hair strewn everywhere. His arms came around me, and I felt safe for the first time since this mess began.

Stupid of me, I know. The last emotion I should experience in the hands of my captor was safety, especially knowing his mission was to assassinate me.

But for these brief minutes, we were neither hunter nor prey. We weren't kidnapper and victim, or assassin and target. We were something unnamable, undefined. Twin flames igniting into one fireball.

Managing to catch my breath, I swallowed around a dry throat. Between high school health class, my mother's relentless lectures about purity, and the internet, I knew there were several myths surrounding the hymen. Creed hadn't actually burst through some virginity banner that the entire world could now see printed on my face. But, Jesus, I was sore now.

I didn't care.

My time with Creed would be embedded in my memory for all time, a piece of my history to remember when I was old. A story I would keep in my heart, never telling to anyone.

I jumped when he slapped my ass. "I could get used to this."

His admission surprised me, but I supposed he enjoyed sex. That was all he meant, obviously.

Curling my hand around his shoulder, I nuzzled my mouth against the pulse in his throat. "We still have a few days left. What else can you teach me?"

CHAPTER 10

Creed

Fuck fuck fuck.

I was utterly fucked.

It hadn't occurred to me how much things would change once I got inside Nova. All I pictured was fucking her tight virgin cunt in every position I could ever dream up, not finding some twisted salvation at the bottom of her fathomless eyes.

Somehow, I no longer scared her. Where I'd had the advantage over her at all times before, she now held my future in her hands. And her future, such as it was, could change at a madman's whim. I couldn't afford to be nice to her or to let my burgeoning feelings grow into anything more. She was my captive, and I would fuck her as much as I wanted without regard to her feelings; end of story.

"There's plenty I can teach you, kitten, but for now we need to clean up and get some sleep."

Lifting onto her elbows, she stared down at me for a second before pressing her lips to mine in a brief kiss. "Okay."

Avoiding her gaze, I untangled my limbs from hers and stood. I didn't dare stay with her, though, God, I wanted to. I wanted to sleep skin-on-skin, to wake her often in the night to sate my needs. To let my cock reign over my body and hers for the next seventy-something hours.

So logic told me I should do the exact opposite; lock her in the basement and go upstairs alone.

“Where are you going?” she asked as I rose, a tentative tone to her voice.

She was going to ruin me, that was all there was to it. Her sweet innocence would get us both killed. “Upstairs.”

“Creed, I—”

Spinning, I tried to scowl, hoping I succeeded. “You what, duchess? You thought we were lovers now? That I’d whisper tender nothings in your ear and we’d hold hands and shit?”

Her tears . . . good God, they were doing me in. “No, but —” She stopped, bringing her chin up defiantly.

Good girl.

“You know what? Go fuck yourself, Creed Cruz.”

The venom in her voice actually made me chuckle. “No need, duchess. I’ve already had my needs satisfied.”

Her outraged screech followed me at my back as I climbed the stairs, locking the door behind me. Something thumped against it as she threw an object at me.

Digging out the pack of smokes, I lit one up and stepped out onto the porch completely naked. The night sky was filled with infinite stars, enough to make me wish I could bring Nova up to see their beauty. The temperature was balmy and nearly perfect, and I sighed wistfully.

Leaning against the rail, I let my thoughts shut down and listened to the nightlife around me. Animals moved around;

the wind blew gently. From somewhere in the distance, I heard running water, but I wasn't sure how far away it was. The mountain range dominated my vision, but even it wasn't enough to hide the amazing nebulas shining above me.

Sighing once more at my stupidity, I ground out my cigarette and went back inside. After getting a quick shower, I plopped down on the only bed up here without any clothes on. My jeans were still downstairs, anyway, and I wasn't keen to put on anything from the dresser. Stretching my arms above my head, I closed my eyes and tried to shut off my brain.

All I could think about was that damned woman.

Blanking out my thoughts the way I did on an assignment, I breathed slowly and deeply. Holding in for ten, releasing for ten—and being possessed by her face in my head. Frustration bubbled as I rolled over and punched my pillow. It was just good sex. Just good sex. Nothing else. Nothing more.

Motherfucker.

Celeste Arden would pay her daughter's ransom and take her back home. I would have to figure out my next steps, especially since my plan had been to retire from this life. I'd been saving for a while now, and making it clear to Jensen that I wouldn't be his do-boy forever. It was nearly impossible to get out of the life, though, and if Jensen wanted me to continue as his hitman, I'd be hard-pressed to figure out another plan. Hiding under a false identity wasn't ideal, but it was entirely likely that would turn out to be the map of my future.

An owl hooted outside the window, and I snarled at it. Goddammit, I just wanted to sleep. Nothing in my life had

ever kept my brain running nonstop before, and the last thing I needed was to have that change over a girl. There were plenty of reasons I'd never had a relationship, and only one of them was my occupation. The rest included my fucked-up psyche, my upbringing, my tendency to be heartless, and the unmitigated horror I felt at the mere hint of commitment. There had been zero commitments in my life other than the one I was coerced into with my boss. Certainly nothing sweet or romantic, nothing familial and pure.

My aunt had made it her life's mission to abuse me. Physically, emotionally, and mentally; if anything went wrong in her day, it was absolutely my fault. What I had never admitted to anyone, not even my boss, was that she was my first kill.

I was twelve.

For years, I'd contemplated all the ways I could murder my flesh and blood. If that didn't fuck me up, then following through with such depravity before puberty hit certainly had.

As an orphan, I'd wandered the streets, remaining hidden in dumpsters and under overpasses with other homeless people. Grown men could be fucking terrifying when they wanted something from a young boy, so I learned real damn quick that the stunts I'd pulled to avoid my aunt's tantrums wouldn't be enough to save me from the brutal reality of the streets. I had no choice but to be slippery and fast as fuck if I wanted to remain untouched.

Ruthless by thirteen, with a body count higher than most men on their deathbeds, I only became hardened as the years

passed. When Jensen Marsh caught me stealing from one of his men at fourteen, I figured my life was over.

Finally, was all I could think. Finally, I was done with the starvation, the bruises, and avoiding advances from strangers. Dodging the police and CPS would all fade into the void when he pulled the trigger.

Instead, he offered me a job. At first, I was a scout, which was harmless enough. After a little while, he had me picking pockets and passing on the information I gleaned from notes inside wallets and cell phones. Eventually, he tasked me with my first official hit.

I was sixteen.

Nothing fazed me by then; not the blood, not the brain matter, not the screams of the collateral damage because I was messy and not in control the way I am now. Each action was a means to an end, a way to survive. And when the money came rolling in, I felt vindicated. I'd made the right choice, and no one would ever lay their hands on me again. I would never be hungry again. At eighteen, I bought my condo with cash. Then a car. Then any fucking thing I wanted after that.

I never looked back, never regretted my choice. It was that or nothing, honestly, and I'd break all ten commandments before I'd ever go back to living in filthy alleys having to beg for food. Unfortunately, now that more than a decade had passed, I was irrevocably tethered to Jensen Marsh and his mafia syndicate.

Rolling back over, I stared at the ceiling as moments of my life flashed unbidden through my consciousness. It was years

too late to give a shit, but my tired brain wanted to rehash it all. With a frustrated groan, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, rubbing my face.

The cabin was quiet and dark as I walked carefully through it. Snagging the basement key off the hook by the refrigerator, I unlocked the door and made my way silently down the stairs. In the dim light from the digital clock on the shelf, I could barely make out the shape of the woman on the bed. Curled into herself, her fist up in her face, Nova called to me in more ways than one.

Tomorrow, and the day after that, and then next week or next month, I would know what heavy regret felt like. But now; right now, this minute, I couldn't make myself care.

As I moved closer to the bed, I realized Nova wasn't asleep. Instead, her soft sobs met my ears and crushed my heart. Sliding in beside her, I discovered a primal possession flowing through me when I spotted my discarded shirt covering her thin frame. Shushing her as gently as I could, I tugged on her until she perched in my lap, stroking her hair as we reclined against the headboard.

Where I might have expected her to shy away from me, she instead clung desperately, her crying becoming louder with each breath.

I kissed her forehead, then her cheek, brushing my fingers along her jaw. "Your tears are gorgeous, little kitten, but you should never cry over me."

Bringing her mouth up, Nova kissed me fiercely, and something tore loose inside my chest while I cradled her body

close to mine.

God, I was so fucked.

How could I remain cold and detached when an emotion as simple as stern failed me?

How could I have my cake and eat her too?

Though I hadn't been the one to set us on this course, my next actions defined the future. It wasn't about the money; that no longer motivated me one way or the other. If I didn't get the final payout, I'd be okay with that. In the past few hours, I had come to realize there was no possibility of treating Nova as my next target. She was so much more than my next hit.

I was fucked.

“Why did you leave me down here alone?” Her question was interrupted by soft hiccups, and that fucking sensation wrenched through my chest again.

“Because I'm a cruel man, duchess.”

“Only sometimes.” Raising her eyes to look into mine, she searched my face for something I doubted she'd find. “You were sweet to me earlier.”

“I don't know how to be a nice guy, Nova. It's not in my nature.”

“You might surprise yourself.” Shifting so she straddled me, Nova clasped my cheeks in her hands. Speaking earnestly, she said, “You've been kinder than you needed to be throughout this whole ordeal.”

The t-shirt had ridden up to her waist, and her warm core rubbed against my hardening cock. Finding her hips in the dark, I held her still. “You must be sore.”

“See?” she murmured, and I had to admit she’d caught me.

I would have given her my right arm to take me inside her, as wet and slippery and enticing as her pussy was. Gliding over me . . . teasing me . . . torturing me.

“Shit,” she breathed, her voice catching when the head of my cock bumped her clit.

I was completely hard now, dying to throw her under me and lose my mind inside her body. Clutching my shoulders, Nova moved in a slow rhythm, absolutely killing me every time she came close to enveloping my cock in her tight little hole.

“Our time is so limited, Creed,” she whispered in my ear. Flexing my grip on her hips, I hissed when she bit my earlobe. “Let me fuck you.”

Her language had become dirtier the more we’d interacted. Admittedly, it turned me on to hear the coarse words from her pretty mouth.

For once in my life, I didn’t want to worry about tomorrow. It didn’t matter what came next, anyway. I’d lived on the edge for my entire twenty-seven years and was used to things changing rapidly. So what if this time the end result proved deadly? Facing death never bothered me before.

Except now I had this precious girl to protect. Where I was accustomed to taking lives, now I felt compelled to save hers.

With her mouth open, she sighed and finally sank down over me, a silent scream leaving her lips. My abs tightened at the sensation of her slick inner walls taking me in, and my cock wept at the need for release, but she took her time.

“Motherfucker, Nova.” Banding my arms around her, I held her as close as possible as I kissed her over and over. I needed the moment to go on and on and on.

I needed her breath to live, exchanged between us as she grew more restless in her movements. Holding her too tightly for her to adjust herself, I managed to guide her as she took her fill. Though I didn't pump into her as I wanted, I kept her arms locked at her sides and her legs around my waist. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes to gaze directly into mine, and I saw what I'd been missing my whole life.

Tomorrow, I'd have to set a precedent. I'd have to remind her that she was in danger from me and that I wasn't a nice guy. She couldn't see me as an ally, as a friend and lover, or it would only ruin her.

But I could pretend for tonight.

“Creed!” she called out, and my chest clenched.

“Feel me, baby girl, so deep inside you.”

She moaned, arching her back the best she could. It was difficult for me to let her run the show when I wanted to dominate her body, taking what I needed and leaving her exhausted. But I loosened my hold, letting her body bow back. Her muscles were fluid, beautifully curved, and she gripped my legs for support.

Riding me, undulating her hips, Nova was simply breathtaking. I'd never seen anything like her. Rising once more, she folded her arms around my head, crushing our chests together. Faster now, she raced toward her orgasm, and I joined her. Together, we pushed each other to find the sweet agony of release.

“Fuck,” I swore in her ear. My balls should have been empty, but they tingled still.

“Yes, yes, I'm coming.”

Goddamn, she was sexy. Her mouth opened against my neck, and I thrived on the sting when she bit me.

As we climaxed together, I felt lethargy take over, sweeping me under. I would sleep easy now that I was curled up with Nova.

CHAPTER 11

Nova

Waking with a start the following morning, it took me a minute to remember where I was. Sitting up and taking stock of the situation, I found my body tender and my bed empty.

One of those things disturbed me more than the other.

Glancing around, I found the basement lacking in both sunlight and humanity. Rain pelted the walls and could have lulled me back to sleep if Creed were with me. Jumping out of bed, I used the toilet and ran water in the sink to wash quickly. God, even my face felt different. Positive I hadn't miraculously matured overnight, I felt changed in every aspect, nonetheless.

I wanted to put on Creed's shirt, but it was gone. My heart thumping in my chest, I tugged on the flannel button up from yesterday, struggling to push the buttons through the holes as I climbed the stairs on wobbly legs.

If the door was locked, I wasn't sure I could handle it. Not after what we'd shared last night and the way we fell asleep together.

The knob turned easily in my hand, and I let out a shaky breath. Creed turned from the stove as I stepped into the kitchen, and my mouth watered at the sight of him in nothing but a pair of shorts he must have found in the dresser.

"Kitten," he greeted me, turning back to the stove.

So I was kitten today, not Nova. As long as he wasn't about to be weird, I could deal with the somewhat insulting nickname. Anything was better than *kid*. "Good morning."

I felt like he deserved a nickname, too, but what the hell could I call him? Daddy? Sir? Uh, beast?

Mr. Hyde might be more fitting.

"What are you making?"

"Grits."

Coming up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his waist.

And felt the stiffening of his muscles.

The one-word communication, the rigid set of his shoulders; those things could add up if we weren't careful.

Kissing his back, I tried to ignore the way he shrugged me away.

"It's ready."

Creed turned off the burner, carrying the pot to the waiting bowls. I watched him scoop creamy grits into them and add a spoonful of margarine that was hopefully younger than me.

Dropping the bowls on the table with a clatter, Creed yanked one chair out rather roughly. In desperation, I laid my hand on his arm and waited for him to look at me.

I was unprepared for the derision in his eyes when he did.

"Creed, what—" I broke off, swallowing past a dry throat. "What's wrong?"

He sat, spooning food into his mouth. Blinking back tears, I joined him on the other side of the table, knowing I was nothing but a stupid, naïve teenager. How could I have expected to keep someone like him? He was an assassin, for God's sake!

I burned my tongue eating too fast, but I wasn't about to let him see me cry. When I finished, he still had a few bites left, so I washed my bowl quickly and headed to the bathroom to get a shower.

It felt good to wash my hair and simply stand under the hot spray, no matter how weak the flow of water. Normalcy was scarce here, and this was about as close as I could get. My eyes stung with unshed tears, but I held my face under the water until they went away. Then I shut off the faucet and shoved back the curtain, grabbing the towel I'd left on the counter and winding it around my body.

Wanting clean clothes, I went to the bedroom to rummage through the drawers again. There was so little for me to choose from, and as I was picking up a pair of boxer shorts, I felt his presence behind me. Lifting my head, I gazed at his reflection in the grimy mirror.

Hard; that was what I thought when I looked at him. He was a hard man living a hard life. Perhaps it was foolish of me to think I could soften him. Everyone knows you don't fall for a man with the idea of changing him, but the idea remained there in my head. He didn't have to change entirely, just enough to give a shit about another human being. Enough to care for me the way I cared for him.

Watching us both in the mirror, he lifted his palm until he cupped my throat and pulled my head back against his chest. The towel slipped, exposing the tops of my breasts. Where I expected him to rip it off and pinch my nipples until I cried out, he stood there with his thumb over the pulse in my neck instead.

Silent. Staring. His grip tightening ever so slightly until I had to work harder to breathe. My chest rose and fell more rapidly, my lungs struggling just a bit. He wasn't hurting me, and he wasn't stealing my breath entirely. Was the point to remind me he was in charge? That no matter what else occurred, he had the upper hand? The strength to end my life without a witness to protest?

My mouth opened, but I didn't know what I wanted to say.

"What is it, kitten?" His voice rasped in my ear. "What do you think you want?"

"I don't think it, I know it." My tone was timid, and I hated it. After all the effort I'd put into not being scared, here I was nearly cowering in front of him.

"You know nothing, kitten."

Honestly, he was right. I knew nothing of his life, of what he liked or what made him tick. I had no idea what he did when he wasn't working, or how many women he'd made promises to before breaking them.

Both the promises and the women.

"Then tell me." Sounding stronger, I repeated myself. "Tell me, Creed, what you think I'm too dumb to know."

Nuzzling his way behind my ear, he began to whisper to me. “You think after all is said and done that you and I will ride off into the sunset together. You think you’re not my victim because you spread your legs willingly.”

Each word disappeared into my skin, ashes piling up in their place. With his hand closed over my windpipe, he only touched me enough to drag his nose over the shell of my ear. Delivering blow after blow without once hitting me.

“You think I’ll fall for you because your cunt is tight and tastes sweet. As though I’ve never had anyone else as good as you.”

Those fucking tears gave up the fight, streaming down my cheeks to collect in Creed’s hand. He used them to his advantage, crushing any hope I had left.

“You’re such an uptight duchess. All I wanted to do was sully your family name, mess up your perfectly bland life, and never look back.”

And even after the awful words, my body reacted to his breath in my ear. My nipples had tightly peaked, my pussy growing wetter by the second. Something was obviously wrong with me.

Why did I want him even as he told me how much he loathed me?

“Make no mistake.” With those words, he lifted his head and captured my gaze. “I will have whatever I want.” Flicking open the towel, he allowed it to drop to the floor in a swirl of white. “And now I know you’ll give it to me.”

Holding my head back, Creed opened his mouth along the side of my throat. The pressure at that angle made my lungs truly struggle to fill properly, which clearly didn't bother him at all. His other hand dipped, skimming over my abdomen until my muscles quivered.

And I wanted him. I wanted more; all that he could give me and then some.

Heat built between his chest and my bare back. Fire grew in my core, wetness gathering and tingles spreading along my limbs. Even if I'd wanted to resist him, my body would betray me.

"We both know, don't we?" Dipping further, his fingertips played with the curls between my legs. "We know how wet you are, despite hating me."

He was wrong about one thing.

Yes, as he swirled his fingers over my clit and plunged two fingers inside me, I cried out at how good it felt. Gripping the dresser for balance, I rose on my toes and closed my eyes. There was no resistance as he fingered me, as he kept me on the edge each time he backed off and then went back in. The way he skillfully manipulated my body until my skin flushed and my inner muscles clamped down on him, proving he could do what he wanted and I would enjoy it.

But I couldn't hate him.

Such a cruel emotion refused to fill my body the way I wanted his cock to fill me. The only thing I needed at that moment was him, in whatever way he'd give himself to me.

My eyes popped open as he shoved his fingers in my mouth. Tasting myself, watching his eyelids grow heavy as he stared at my reflection, I moaned. His erection pressed against me, proving that he, too, couldn't resist. Creed shifted me, widening my stance until he could impale me, and I gasped at the intrusion.

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “So full.”

My toes curled into the carpet, my knuckles white as I gripped the edge of the dresser harder. Creed's body dominated mine in so many ways; height, breadth, and the way his cock fit so tight in my pussy. As close as I'd been before he stopped me from coming, I knew I wouldn't last very long once he started moving.

Jerking my arms behind my back, he held them in place while he rammed his cock deep inside me and then withdrew in rapid movements. My breasts bounced at the speed he used, and my vision blurred.

So I closed my eyes and let myself go. He could have me; he could lead me. Use me, fuck me, whatever he wanted. I wanted him to have that power, to use it to his advantage.

Palm on my forehead, Creed forced my head back and devoured my mouth. Biting my lips, sucking on my tongue, groaning into my mouth as he filled me over and over. My cries grew louder, nonsensical, and my legs wanted to give out.

He pulled out abruptly, shockingly, and kneeled behind me. Before I could ask what he was doing, he pushed one of

my legs up until my foot rested on the dresser and flattened his tongue along my pussy.

“Fuck,” I cried, trying to gain some semblance of balance.

But he flicked the tip of his tongue over me, gripping my hips to bring me back to where he wanted me, and I had no way to center myself. He used his entire mouth to fuck me, dipping in and out and sucking on my clit while I screamed gibberish.

Pressing his fingertip to my ass, Creed nibbled on my pussy while probing gently back there. I’d never so much as considered someone wanting to—

“Oh, my God!”

My thoughts scattered as the orgasm exploded through me. I felt that finger slip inside me, and my knees locked in place even as my thighs trembled from the impact of it all. Creed never stopped, just forced me higher and higher until the second orgasm joined the first, crushing me under its weight.

“Can’t breathe!” I gasped, and he bit my ass cheek.

“Damn right,” he muttered, hoisting me up and pressing my face into the bed.

When he entered me without hesitation, every nerve ending sparked again. Where I’d thought I couldn’t possibly come another time, he stroked that spot inside me with each pounding thrust. Gathering my hair into his fists, he used it as leverage to go harder, deeper.

“This is the only thing I want from you.”

God damn, I was so close to going up in flames.

“I demand it. Do you hear me?”

Creed slapped my ass, and I yelped in surprise. His groans became louder and more intense, and I knew he would come soon.

He spanked me once more. “Do you fucking hear me?”

“Yes! Fuck!”

By the time the third orgasm crushed me with its intensity, Creed had lost any pretense of control. Pounding into me erratically, he pulsed inside me as he came and finally stopped moving.

“You’re here to milk my cock every day, as often as I want it.”

He pulled out, and my head dropped listlessly to the bed. I felt him dripping onto my ass, and the way he’d made me gush all over the bedspread.

As he walked to the door, I finally spoke up. “I don’t care how heartless you sound, Creed, or how vile your words. I won’t let you break me.”

He left me there alone, as I expected he would. I would need to rinse off in the shower again, and then I’d get dressed and see what I could do to pass the time.

Apparently, I wouldn’t spend the day talking to Creed as I’d originally assumed.

CHAPTER 12

Creed

“I won’t let you break me.”

Nova’s words reverberated through my head, reminding me of all she had endured because of me. The shittiest part was that I was trying to protect her now, but she couldn’t see it yet. I needed to make her understand I was no good for her, that I was the monster she’d rightly accused me of being the minute I took us off course. There was zero chance for us to make a life outside these four walls, and I sensed she wanted that more every time I gave in to my desire for her.

The problem was, I couldn’t keep my hands to myself or my cock in my pants. Not when she offered me such sensual responses every time I touched her. Every moan, every breathless plea, went straight to my gut and prevented me from walking away. The consequences of my attraction to her were still unknown, but I knew they’d be dire.

Maybe if I continued to be cruel, she’d figure it out. Or I could just ignore her, which was probably best for the both of us.

I’d somehow known all along that this plan was fucked up, but I hadn’t quite grasped how true that was until recently. Originally, I thought Marsh wanted me to find information from within the Arden household, but that hadn’t been the goal. Of all the targets I’d taken out in my lifetime, I’d never killed a woman. Especially not one who was poised between child and adult, growing into her grace despite my colossal

ego creating roadblocks. For some foolish reason, I had let myself believe this charade was never intended to end in Nova's death.

Though the likely truth had been in the back of my mind, I'd shied away from admitting it could happen. Jensen Marsh and Cassius Arden had been friends for decades, and they had a lucrative quid pro quo relationship. If Jensen needed something swept under the rug, Cassius orchestrated it. If Cassius had an enemy, guess who was on tap to take them out?

So, why Nova, and why now? How could holding a cooperative senator's daughter hostage gain anything for a mafia don? He had power, money, prestige, and the city at his fingertips. The Arden name had helped him gain all of that.

Stepping out onto the front porch, I wished desperately for a bottle of scotch. What I needed was to drown out the world and all the mistakes I'd made. Settling for a cigarette, I again pictured the stubborn expression on Nova's face as I'd left the bedroom.

"I won't let you break me."

What she didn't realize was that I *had* to break her of her appeal with me. If not, she'd go on pretending we were destined for greater things. She probably thought she could save me from a life of crime, turning me into a glowing altar boy while she looked on proudly at her accomplishment. It wasn't even the money that kept me doing what I did; it was the difficulty getting out.

Blood in, blood out.

Mine and hers, it seemed.

When the door opened behind me, I tensed but didn't turn. Hearing her moving behind me, I braced for the moment she did something stupid.

Leaning against the rail beside me, close enough to hear her soft sigh but not close enough to touch, Nova draped her arms over the railing and stared out at the forest.

“What would you do if I ran right now?”

Christ, this woman.

I blew out smoke. “Chase you.”

“And then what?”

Lifting my brows, I contemplated what she was getting at. “Catch you, bring you back—kicking and screaming, I hope—and tie you up in the basement.”

After several beats of silence, I stole a glance at her profile. She appeared serene, gazing out into the distance and apparently ignoring me.

“Is that what you want?” I couldn't help asking. “For me to leave you down there alone without freedom to move around these five-star accommodations?”

“Maybe anything is better than this fucking farce.”

Nova had rarely cussed around me; at first, she never said a single bad word. Then, occasionally, she'd say hell or damn at home, but only when something went wrong or she hurt herself. But as we spent more time here, she'd slipped into a vernacular more similar to mine.

“What farce would that be, duchess? That you’re my captive and don’t get to decide what happens next? Are you sick of not having access to social media to alert the other basic bitches that you’ve stopped off to get a fancy coffee? Or do you miss your massive closet that’s twice the size of my first house?”

She grumbled something under her breath, her shoulders hunching forward.

“What was that?” I taunted, stubbing out my cigarette and staring hard at the side of her head.

“I never did that sort of thing, and you of all people should know that. I only wore half the things my mother bought for me, if even that. My parents have always treated me as a commodity instead of a human being.”

The stinging pain in her voice swayed me, and that pissed me off. “Poor little rich girl.”

Scoffing, she finally turned to glare directly at me. “That’s right, Creed, I’m loaded. So why don’t you let me pay you off so we can do anything other than this? My parents are clearly not interested in ransoming me, so let’s just go. We have a car and money; we could leave now and no one would ever know the difference.”

Stunned, I could only gape at her for several seconds. “You’ve lost your goddamn mind if you think it’s that simple.”

“And so what if I have?” Throwing her hands up, she paced to the other end of the porch and back, stopping in front of me. “You think I’ll be sad at never seeing my mother and

father again? You think I'll ever be the same once I go home, if I even get the chance?"

No, I didn't think any of those things. I knew her life was irrevocably altered now. What I didn't know was that she had thought that far ahead and didn't like what she saw in her future.

"I'm not some daddy's girl who spent her youth on his lap learning about the business. All he does is drink, golf, and close himself in his study with his cronies."

Which included Jensen Marsh.

"My mother is too busy with luncheons and fucking gambling to give a shit what I'm doing with my life, as long as I don't stir up any scandals." I heard the catch in her voice and knew she was on the verge of tears. "Why me, Creed? Why the fuck did you kidnap me?"

Groaning, I ran my hands through my hair. "I don't know, kitten, and that's the truth. I don't ask why in my line of work. How much and when is about all I'm allowed to know."

"My father might be a crooked bastard, but I don't understand what he'd get tangled up in so badly that it would result in this."

"You know about . . ." I trailed off.

She smirked. "That he has no problems being a shill for the right price? How do you think he amassed his fortune?"

"Then I guess you know about as much as I do."

Spinning again, she paced to the porch steps and paused.
“If I run, will you catch me?”

If I leave, will you follow?

“Nova,” I warned. “Don’t do anything impetuous.”

“Why the fuck not, Creed? What difference does it make?”

Alarm began to fill my chest until it became hard to breathe. “Don’t make me do it.”

I’m begging you not to force my hand.

One foot lifted, hanging over the next step. “I’m sick of this game.”

And she took off, her feet bare and her hair flying. I hated to chase after her, knowing it was best if she stayed put but wanting her to have a normal life again. With a heavy sigh, I followed, thundering down the steps and past the dirt patch around the house. Nova had made it to the cover of dense trees by the time I hit grass, which quickly changed to pine needles and other crap.

“We’ve already done this once, remember? You came back willingly enough when you realized how dangerous it is out here.”

“I don’t care,” she called back, and I saw her lurch over a fallen log.

“You’ll cut your feet open, duchess.”

She didn’t respond, and I discovered with mild horror that she was making good gains on me. Picking up my speed, I had to jump over the stupid log, twisting my ankle in the process.

Swearing obscenely, I limped along after what I could see of her strawberry blonde head, wishing I could smack her in the face for being a brat.

“Goddammit, Nova, stop this stupidity!”

Without my jeans to protect my legs, branches reached out and scratched me as I passed. My ire piqued as sweat popped out on my forehead, and I closed the distance between us as swiftly as possible.

The view of the cabin came into focus, and I suddenly realized she’d led me in a circle. Frowning deeply, I tried to figure out why she’d bother.

Ice water spilled down my back at the sight of her running flat-out toward the car.

“Nova!” I shouted in a full panic. “I swear to God, you better fucking stop right the fuck now!”

Motherfucking cunt whore! She’d found the keys in my pants pocket after I’d left them on the floor of the bedroom.

“Nova!” I yelled.

She’d reached the car and gotten in the driver’s door. All I could make out through the windshield was her bent head as she tried to start the engine. Forcing my legs to pump faster to cover the distance between us, I just managed to launch myself at the hood of the car as the motor caught and sputtered to life.

I kept sliding, finding myself face down in the dirt as she hit the gas. The car lurched, the engine sounding as though it wanted to die.

I had no idea what I would do if she managed to leave.

Lunging for the door handle, I wrenched it open seconds before she hit the lock. Jogging alongside the car, I swore multiple times as she pressed the gas harder.

Tears ran down her cheeks, joining the snot and dirt already covering her face. “Please, just let me go!”

Since I was struggling to grab either her or the steering wheel, I gave up and reached through to unlock the back door. Climbing in—she was only going twenty—I yanked down the back seat to expose the car’s trunk to me. Wrestling with my conscience, I pulled the suitcase into my lap and clicked it open.

“What is that?” she cried, craning her neck to look back at me.

“Insurance.”

I had no choice. Those words filled my brain as she screamed at me to let her go. Choosing the biggest handgun from the lot, I racked the slide as roughly as possible.

She needed to understand the consequences of her actions.

“Don’t fucking make me do it, Nova.”

Steadily as I’d ever held a gun, I aimed the fucking thing right at the back of her head, pressing the barrel into her goddamn skull.

Sobbing and shaking, she screamed names at me.

As though that changed a thing.

“I fucking hate you! You’re a sick, twisted bastard!”

Instead of responding, I reached up and slammed the gearshift into park. We rocked back and forth for the length of time it took me to slow my heartbeat to normal.

She'd really planned to leave me.

"Get the fuck out of the car, Nova." When she hesitated, I added, "*Now.*"

Shaking like a leaf, she flung her door open and climbed out, and I followed her with the gun pointed directly at her. She wouldn't meet my gaze, instead staring down at her filthy feet. They were scratched up exactly as I'd told her they would be.

"Get back in that house."

Silently, she trudged toward the porch, her arms wrapped around her stomach. Her breathing was ragged, as was mine, but she obeyed me for once.

"Downstairs." I waved the gun at the basement door. "Now."

"All you had to do was get in the car," she said desperately. "We could have gone anywhere in the world."

"Shut up."

The second I closed the door behind us, I set the gun on the highest shelf above the canned tuna and turned toward her.

"Don't come near me," she said, bringing her chin up.

So of course I moved closer, grabbing that stubborn chin between my thumb and forefinger. "Or what, princess?"

"I'm done with you, Creed. I mean it."

“I don’t fucking care. You have no idea what kind of shit storm you nearly created.”

Her lip trembling, Nova opened her mouth to speak, but changed her mind.

“What’s the matter? Speechless for once?”

“Leave me alone.”

“I don’t fucking think so.”

Her brows drew together. “I’m not in the mood for your crap, so just go upstairs and leave me alone.”

“Or what?” Moving slowly, I watched her eyes as I groped her. First her breasts, pinching her nipples, and then lower to her tiny shorts. “Are you going to stop me?”

“If you fuck me now, it’ll be rape.” Her voice strangled on the last word as I slipped my hand past her waistband.

“I can make you beg me in less than five minutes.”

Clamping her mouth closed, Nova narrowed her eyes when I slipped one finger inside her. She was wet already, dying for me to make her come.

“Tell me you want me, kitten.”

Rather than admit the truth, she shook her head hard.

Stepping forward so she had no choice but to back up, I caused her to fall onto the mattress. Following her so I could cover her body with mine, I resorted to sucking on her nipples through the thin undershirt she wore. Her back arched, her hips rising and falling against my constant onslaught. Her hands fisted in the sheets, refusing to touch me back.

“Say the words.”

“Go to hell!” she snapped.

“I’m already in hell, Nova. Can’t you tell?”

Torn between needing her and needing to teach her a lesson, I pulled her shorts down far enough to expose her to me. My cock throbbed at the idea of not getting what it wanted, so I shifted the pair of cut-off sweatpants I’d foolishly put on this morning and set it free.

With her teeth locked together, Nova moaned and shuddered as her orgasm neared. Finding her clit and flicking it with my thumb, I leaned down to kiss her. My mouth moved over hers, and she opened for me, letting me slip my tongue between her lips. Her body had warmed with my touch, and she clutched my shoulders as she neared her release.

“Tell me you want me,” I demanded.

Her body shook with the need to come, and her mouth opened on a gasp. “Fuck, I want you!”

The moment she capitulated, I drove into her, bringing her to a screaming orgasm within seconds. With spasms still racking her body, I withdrew, despite my cock berating me for tricking her.

“Three minutes was all it took for you to beg me.”

Turning my back on her, I snagged the gun and climbed the stairs, letting my heart break fully.

As promised, I’d finally shown her how savage I could be.

CHAPTER 13

Nova

The bastard had made me want him, *need him*, to the point I would beg even when he'd treated me so horribly. My body still sang with the orgasm he'd given me, and I wanted to hate him for making it clear how far I'd go to have him inside me, but I could only hate myself. Once and for all, Creed had proven that he didn't care for me in the slightest; certainly not to the extent I cared for him.

After all the time we'd spent together, both in my house and in this one, I should have known I would lose if I tested him. For once, I had been seconds from getting away from this hellhole. The only thing that slowed me down was the desire for Creed to come with me; otherwise, I could have just put the accelerator on the floor and left him behind. My weakness had caused me to hesitate, leaving me stuck here.

Curled up on the bed alone, I stared dry-eyed at the wall. My brain refused to process the fact that he pointed a gun at me. It—*he*—pressed hard enough into my skull to leave an imprint, for God's sake. I didn't understand why we couldn't leave, why his boss scared him so thoroughly he didn't want to take the chance on escaping with me. We could go anywhere, become anyone, and live our lives out from under the thumb of our oppressors.

Then again, I guess he thought I deserved to go back to my high society life and pretend to be someone I'm not for the rest of time. Faking my way through an arranged marriage, knowing my parents would never allow me to choose for

myself, and then popping out kids to keep up appearances from the outside.

And from within, I would die a little at a time beside a mannequin of a husband.

Creed Cruz was the first person in my life I thought gave a shit. Turns out, he was hiding an agenda, just like everyone else. The idea stung more than I expected.

Rolling out of bed, I moved slowly to the sink and sat on the floor to look at the bottom of my feet. As he'd predicted, I'd scratched them up stepping on all kinds of pine bark and other shit on the forest floor. My sandals were somewhere back in the Mercedes ditched at the bottom of a culvert, and I hadn't seen anything here but old men's sneakers. I searched the shelves by the toilet for any kind of peroxide or bandages, but only found pads and tampons.

My head came up, my eyes widening.

I wasn't on birth control, considering that I didn't have a boyfriend and had never gone further than second base with a prep school loser.

Assuming that second base still consisted of kissing only, which I couldn't say for sure anymore. Everyone in my private high school had treated sex as a sport, including practicing in the afternoons instead of doing homework. William Lexington—the III—had taken me to the movies once, and in the back of his chauffeured car had leaned in to kiss me and try to grope me. I'd slapped him, warning that I would tell both our sets of parents he'd molested me if he tried anything else.

God, I'd been so uptight and hopelessly *naïve*. Now, here I was, stuck in the basement of a run-down cabin in the middle of nowhere . . . having given my virginity and my dignity to a career criminal. If he'd gotten me pregnant, what would I do then?

Shivers ran over my arms and down my spine, so I went back to bed and wrapped myself up in the blanket. Staring into space, I tried to shut out the thoughts plaguing me.

Two days ago, I would have sworn I knew Creed's character. I would have said there's no way he'd walk away from his own flesh and blood, not after the childhood he'd endured. After the events of the past few hours, though, all I knew for certain was his cruelty. He'd proven how vile he could be, and how determined he was to put me in my place.

The tears I'd fought off finally dripped off my nose. Trying to focus on what little I'd learned in school about conception only made my heart hurt. We were taught the lightest version of sex ed ever developed because we were all too precious to do the deed. Reality didn't mesh with that mentality, but it was too late now.

My stomach churned, and I thought I might heave from the stress of it all.

I was talking to myself, now, determined to find enough entertainment to keep from going crazy. Considering his promise to lock me in here, I didn't bother to check the door. Then again, he also said he'd tie me up and hadn't.

With shaky legs, I stood and climbed the stairs. When the knob turned freely in my palm, I sobbed in disbelief. Glancing

around carefully, I didn't see Creed anywhere in the common areas. Out the living room window, the car was plainly visible beneath the trees he'd used to hide its existence from overhead. Ignoring that, I moved to the pantry cabinets to find something to soothe my aching stomach.

Finding chamomile tea, I set the pot on the stove with water in it and searched for a mug. I'd seen Creed drink coffee out of one, so I knew they existed in theory. By the time the water boiled, I'd found a mug and a plastic bear filled with honey. Fixing my hot tea, I stirred it and cautiously stepped to the front door. Peering out the dusty windows, I saw the porch was empty and took my solace there.

The soles of my feet protested against the wooden planks of the porch, but I sat on the creaky old metal chair and tucked them up under me. Wishing I'd brought the blanket along, I blew across the top of my tea and watched the trees sway in the wind. Any other time, I would find the view peaceful, but now it only served to remind me of my captivity. The vast wilderness of the Angeles National Forest stretched before me, taunting me with what I couldn't have.

Freedom.

From within the cabin, the landline rang, and my shoulders tensed automatically. Footsteps thudded, then I heard Creed's deep voice answer the call.

"Cruz."

Breathing slowly, I did my best to listen in to the conversation.

“With what?” At the apparent response, he grunted. “I don’t think that’s a good plan.”

What now? I thought. Hadn’t I already been through enough?

“Seriously, this is getting out of hand, Marsh.”

My heart pounded painfully against my ribs. *Jensen Marsh?* But he was Daddy’s best friend.

“You said her mother was—I don’t care!”

Surely my mother would come through for me, wouldn’t she? How could my parents just let me die at the hands of a madman?

“She’s seen my face, knows my identity. You want me to—Goddammit!”

My mouth had gone so dry that I sipped on more tea, wondering what the argument was about now.

“Absolutely not. I don’t fucking care! You have some nerve—”

The sound of the phone crashing against the wall made me jump. Creed let out several choice phrases before jerking the front door open and stalking outside, lighting a cigarette as he rounded the doorway.

And coming up short at the sight of me.

“How long have you been out here?”

Suppressing a shudder at both his tone and the thunderous expression on his face, I gripped the mug harder to steady my hands. “Long enough, I guess.”

Blowing out smoke, he marched over and crouched in front of my chair. The death grip he had on the armrests effectively caged me in place. “You know who it is, then?”

Nodding, I tried to swallow down the lump forming in my throat.

“Do you know what he wants me to do to you?”

Dozens of ideas flashed through my head, and I didn’t like any of them. So I stared into his eyes, trying to read his thoughts.

Pushing off my chair, he spun and leaned on the railing. “It’s not good.”

Yeah, I could have guessed that for myself. I was too absorbed with hating him and myself for what had transpired earlier to worry about what came next.

“How could you do that to me, Creed?”

Obviously misunderstanding me, he replied, “I told him no.”

Looking down into my mug, I watched a curl of steam rise up and disappear into the air. “No, before.”

My voice was a mere whisper, but it didn’t break. Not like my heart. Nothing could break like that.

“He knows I don’t have a fucking conscience, so he figures I’ll do anything he asks without question.”

“You’re not even listening to me.” Setting the drink down with a snap, I unfolded my legs and stood stiffly beside him.

“Why would you treat me like that after everything we’ve shared? How could you?”

Finally meeting my gaze, he answered impatiently. “I’ve told you before, duchess, I’m a cold-hearted monster. I have no morals, no code of ethics, and you’re better off remembering exactly what I’ll do to you if you disobey me.”

Tentatively, I reached out and ran my fingers down his arm.

Before I could speak, he snapped, “Don’t touch me.”

“Oh, so it doesn’t go both ways, then?”

Dropping his eyes to my hand, he glared for a few seconds before dragging his gaze insolently along my breasts, somewhat exposed through the thin white t-shirt I wore. “No, it sure as fuck doesn’t. Want another example, kitten?”

“Sure, Creed. Show me how much of a ghoul you are. Do you think it changes anything?”

Stamping out his cigarette, he faced me, grabbing my wrists in a tight hold. “Jensen expects me to get a video of me raping you to show dear old dad.”

My jaw dropped open and my eyebrows went up to my hairline.

“Shall we get started?”

Instead of panicking, I said, “I’ll just have to put on a performance, then.”

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

In response, I moaned as though turned on. When a muscle in his jaw began to tic, I upped the ante with an admirable cry of unbridled passion.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What’s the matter, baby?” I crooned. “Don’t like the idea that I know how to fake it?”

“You weren’t faking it, kitten.” His grin was so smug I wanted to smack him. “Believe me, I can tell the difference.”

“Mm, really, Creed?” Biting my lip, I let my breasts bump up against his arms. “How sure are you?”

But he called my bluff, moving so close there was nothing but inches between our faces. “The way your pupils dilate when I fuck you. The flush that comes over your chest and cheeks when you’re so hot for me you’re willing to beg.”

Startling me, he licked along the spot under my chin where I’d split it—how many days had it been now? Time had become irrelevant here.

“Dammit, stop being an emotionless robot, Creed.”

“I have plenty of emotions; it’s just that they’re mostly centered on rage.”

“Then do what your boss wants so you don’t have to put your neck on the line. Follow his instructions to the T so only I suffer and not you.”

Moving from my chin, Creed licked the side of my neck. “Maybe I will.”

“And if you got me pregnant? What will you do then?”

Immediately freezing in place, Creed paused for several seconds before pulling back as slowly as I've ever seen someone move. "Why would you say that?"

Finding his enticing blue eyes so close to me, I focused on them as I said, "It's basic biology, Cruz."

"It's not been—you can't possibly—what in God's—"

"I sure hope the ends of these sentences are worth it."

Twisting away from me, Creed balled up his fists and breathed heavily. "Nova—"

But he didn't finish his thought. Part of me felt bad for him, but not bad enough to fix what I'd started.

I went inside with my mug, setting it in the sink and opening the cabinets to find food for lunch. Jeez, or was it dinnertime? I had no idea anymore.

"Nova, what—" Again, he broke off, taking a few deep breaths before continuing. "There's no way to know so soon."

"No, there's not." Deciding on a box of mac and cheese, I took it and the pot I'd previously used to the stove. "But logically, there's no reason to think you haven't already planted that seed."

He groaned loudly at my choice of words.

"So to speak." Greatly enjoying his discomfort, I turned on the burner to heat the water and found the Parmalat milk and the tub of margarine.

"Goddammit, woman, how do you sound so nonchalant?"

“Seriously?” Spinning to face him, my voice raised as I said, “After everything I’ve been through, you think having an assassin’s baby doesn’t terrify me?”

Grinding his fists over his eyes, he leaned against the wall. “But you’re not right now, and we have to keep it that way.”

“You’re the one who can’t seem to keep your hands to yourself.”

“For God’s sake, shut your mouth before I fuck it, Nova.”

“Now, there’s one way to ensure you don’t impregnate me.”

“So help me.” Coming up behind me faster than I could blink, Creed aligned his chest to my back. “Stop fucking running your mouth.”

“Or what?”

His breath caressed the back of my neck. “How ‘bout I force my fat cock into your tight little asshole?”

My face heated at his words.

“Can’t get pregnant that way, either, princess.”

“Or,” I countered, my hands and voice shaking, “you could leave me the hell alone since it’s clear you don’t have feelings for me.”

“I have feelings for you.” The low timbre of his speech threatened to excite me, but I knew better. He pressed his erection into my ass, grinding against me for effect. “They’re right here in my pants.”

“Ugh.” Wrenching away from him, I fled to the relative safety of the stove. Dumping the noodles into the boiling water, I did my damndest to ignore his presence.

It was impossible to do, but I had to try—my sanity relied on it.

CHAPTER 14

Creed

My inability to leave Nova untouched had indeed been my undoing. By this point, I didn't honestly care if this mission had turned out to be the beginning of my ruination, but I couldn't accept the horrifying idea of creating a child inside her. She deserved more, and by God, so did any baby. Being a parent had never crossed my mind even once, knowing how fucked up my life is. Obviously, tab A into slot B is how conception happens, but I just didn't take that into consideration with this particular young virgin in my bed.

Even now, as she cooked for us, I wanted to bury myself inside her and fuck away our problems. Didn't matter how many times we'd already done it, either; she was so tempting, somehow calling me to her. Like a mermaid, a siren, drawing me to my ultimate death.

Apparently, I'd go gladly with a smile on my face.

But now, I was supposed to do what should have come easily to me. I was supposed to violate Nova for real, all to appease a boss who had more of a vicious streak than I'd expected. I had no idea how many times I could turn him down before he'd decide he'd had enough of me. The most information Marsh would give me was that Cassius had to pay one way or the other, and I quickly realized he didn't even care about the money when he sped up Celeste's previously agreed-on timeline.

"It's ready," Nova said.

Looking up at her as she set bowls on the table, I tried to picture her parents receiving word that I'd killed her. Would they grieve? They seemed so preoccupied with their own lives, but surely they'd mourn their only child's death.

"Thanks," I told her, feeling the need to be nice—for now.

It grated in my gut to think they didn't love her the way she deserved. Someone as full of spirit and dreams as Nova Arden should have the chance to live her life out loud, not shut off from reality to ensure she preserved her parents' picture-perfect status.

"You're welcome." Nova sounded surprised by my manners, and I couldn't exactly blame her.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but you're as involved as I am by now." Waiting for a second to figure out how to phrase my thoughts, I saw her brows go up as she sat across from me and blew on her forkful of food. "Jensen Marsh hired me to infiltrate your house until your parents trusted me."

She nodded. "Right."

"And I had no explicit instructions on how or where this abduction would take place until months had passed. Then he gave me directions to this cabin, and I did a few dry runs so I'd know how to get here when the time came." Pausing, I took a bite and chewed, taking the coward's way for a second. Christ, this shouldn't be so hard to spit out. "For some reason, I never allowed myself to believe this whole thing would end in your death. Maybe because you're young, maybe because I'm going soft, or simply because this is so far out of the norm for what I do."

All Nova did was watch me intently as I squirmed in my seat.

“This phone call today . . . he told me he wants to ruin your father. In my opinion, it was never about the money. I guess Cassius did something unforgivable back in the day, and Jensen sat on it for all these years. If your father doesn’t kill himself, the punishment is . . . destroying you.”

“That’s one hell of a vendetta.” With jerky movements, Nova got up to fill a glass from the kitchen faucet. “Raping me on video, killing me, and all for what?”

I couldn’t help but notice the way her hand shook as she drained the glass. “Well, you already know I disagreed with him.”

“And broke the phone,” she pointed out.

“Let’s both hope it’s not broken. I don’t know what he’ll do if he can’t get in touch with me to dispatch his orders.”

Setting the glass down, Nova stared over my shoulder. The sun had begun its descent behind the tree-covered mountain top, bathing the both of us in an orange glow. The color suited her, setting her already golden hair on fire.

“Why does it matter?”

Frowning at her question, I answered with one of my own. “Why does what matter?”

“What happens to me; why does it matter to you?” Lowering her gaze, she found my face and studied my features. “You’ve proven who you answer to at all costs.”

“Look, I can’t—” Breaking off, I licked my lips. “I can’t risk pissing off a mafia boss, duchess. That’s bad for my health.”

“You’ve defied him already by keeping me alive. By not agreeing to perform on camera for my father.”

“He told me to hold off on killing you until he’d decided if he would accept Celeste’s payoff.” Shrugging, I tried to make her understand why I had to be what I couldn’t deny I was. “I’m a killer through and through. It’s in my bones; in my veins. Everything I’ve done was by necessity. On the other hand, everything he’s done is by design.”

“So, if you don’t kill me, he’ll kill you.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Tell me again why we didn’t run.”

It felt like one of those moments where there should have been a ticking clock filling the silence. I had no logical explanation.

“Tell me again, Creed, why you didn’t get in that fucking car with me and just drive.”

Because I’m a coward deep down.

A coward and a bastard.

A monster without a conscience.

And she was the opposite of that: she was beauty and grace, intelligence and spirit and courage.

“What would we do, duchess? Where would we go? How would we afford our survival?”

All of those were perfectly valid points, but none of them mattered if I didn't have the nerve to do what she described.

Just drive.

“Jensen Marsh would hunt me down for the rest of eternity if I skipped out on him. His children, and their children, and all his ancestors in perpetuity would view me as a target.” My gutless heart squeezed at the thought of getting Nova caught up in that. “And you would be the same in his eyes if you came along. Forever hunted, forever the devil's prey.”

Too many emotions to identify flitted across her face as her eyes filled with tears. In all the months I'd known her, Nova had only cried a handful of times, and most of them had been because of what I'd done to her.

“Whatever my parents did in the past, specifically my father, will get me killed anyway.” Shaking her head, she dashed away the tears. “I have money, as I've said, Creed. We can empty out my account and get the hell out of the country. I'm dead if I do and dead if I don't, so why don't we make our own destiny?”

“You can't just walk into your bank and demand all that money in cash. For one thing, they won't have it sitting around in their vault. For another, there are limits for a reason.”

“What are your great ideas, then?” she exploded. “Follow along with this insane plan? Fake my rape on camera to get Jensen off your back, only for him to order my death next? Are you willing to go through with that?”

The answer should have been yes. Without hesitation, I should have replied *yes, Nova, I plan to do all of that if those are my instructions.*

But I couldn't.

And the longer we spent here, the more the reasons I couldn't do that became obvious. Her tears as she asked if I would go ahead and kill her were absolutely my undoing.

"I don't have any great ideas. All I can do is take it one day at a time."

"Until Jensen Marsh sends a hitman to take out his recalcitrant assassin. Oh, and then they kill me too."

Fuck, why was she so right?

About this and everything else.

"That's not his current plan."

"But you want to sit here waiting for the phone to ring until that is his official plan."

Not me, the man with all the answers, sitting here lost over her tearful face. Not me, the ruthlessly murderous bastard without a conscience fighting with myself over what to do next.

"I killed my aunt, duchess."

Her eyes widened, but I didn't give her time to process that statement before plowing forward.

"God, she enjoyed beating me. I swear that's how she got off, and since she pretended to be a pious church-going bitch, she didn't go out with men unless they were certified hands-

off. Couldn't have any gossip going around about her, no ma'am."

In my head, I heard her high-pitched screams as she belittled me; as she struck me again and again while spewing insults at a child.

"She'd yell until spittle flew from her mouth and landed on my face. At first, I cried every time, considering that I was a baby when she took me in. Eventually, I grew hardened from it all, knowing I had to protect my damn self because no one else was gonna do it for me." My breathing had become shallow, and I struggled to regulate it. This was no time to have a panic attack. "By the time I hit double digits, I begged her god to kill me. I couldn't abide living one more day in her version of reality."

I saw her throat work as Nova swallowed. "Creed—"

But I wouldn't give her the chance to show any sympathy. I had a point to make, and she'd damn well hear it. "So, I fucking killed her instead. The opportunity presented itself one morning after she'd dragged me to church so we could hear the fire-and-brimstone-style sermon she so loved." I swigged some of my water, wishing for the thousandth time I had something stronger. "I'd cracked open an eye during prayers, and she'd caught me. In the middle of her beating the shit out of me with an old leather belt, it wrapped around my wrist unexpectedly. I yanked it from her hands, stronger than her by half. She never thought I'd fight back, but I did. I put that belt around her neck and tightened it as far as I could."

By then, Nova's pupils had dilated as they fixed on me.

“I tightened that thing around that bitch’s throat as much as my twelve-year-old strength would allow, and I gloated at her flailing legs. I grinned down into her face, asking her how she liked it.”

Part of me was trapped back there, seeing the scene as it had played out. Hovered over her on the threadbare carpet, hoping the belt buckle didn’t break off under the stress. At that point, she was dead one way or another. If strangling her hadn’t worked, I was desperate enough to try other options.

“What did you do after that?” she whispered.

Rubbing my palms together, I sat back in my seat. “Walked away. I lived on the streets, dodging older men’s advances. Eventually, I learned how to pick pockets to earn cash and survived that way.”

“And then Marsh offered you a real job, is that it? Is that why you think you owe him?”

“I don’t *think* I owe him, duchess, I *do* owe him. Not even because he was the first adult to give me options in life and I felt some type of way about that, but because of the life he leads. I agreed to become part of his crew, his mafia, his *Cosa Nostra*. There is no getting out other than death.”

Blood in, blood out. That’s how it works. From the first kill to the last, I belonged to Jensen Marsh. It was too late to regret agreeing to live under someone’s thumb the same as I’d always done. Too late to wish I’d made different choices when he offered me the seemingly innocuous job of errand boy.

“That’s why we flee the country, Creed. Get lost somewhere on a beach or in a jungle.”

“I think you’ve watched Blue Lagoon a few too many times.”

Her cheeks tinged pink, and she bent her head to take another bite of noodles.

She’d made me watch that movie with her at least a thousand times. I could admit it was tempting to consider living off the land, watching Nova frolic naked in the surf daily. But in reality, regardless of where we went, Marsh could find us. He simply had the manpower—and the tenacity—to make that work.

“For now, duchess, you need to eat. I’ll figure out what to do about my boss and his wildly changing instructions.”

The look she sent me would have withered a lesser man’s balls into shriveled up mushrooms. “Don’t tell me I need to keep my strength up and then tell me you’re going to kill me any day now. It’s pointless to prevaricate about the basic facts.”

Damn, she had a point. As usual.

I didn’t want to let her know, but I took her suggestion seriously, and I would figure out how to make it work. One way or another, Nova Arden would not die by my hands.

No matter who I had to rip apart to keep her safe.

CHAPTER 15

Nova

As though I didn't already suspect how badly Creed's aunt had treated him, now I had the truth from his own lips. But to think he'd killed her at the young age of twelve was entirely different. He really was born to be a killer, as he'd said. Ruthless or not, he'd had to find a way to survive without any options.

Looking back on my own childhood, I felt a bigger sense of remorse. Rather than anyone beating me, I'd simply been neglected. But in the grand scheme of things, that was absolutely nothing compared to what he'd had to endure every day of his life. Creed hadn't asked to be brought into the world, and he certainly hadn't asked for his crackhead mother to die during childbirth and abandon him with an even worse relative.

So much of his life was shaped by those past experiences, and I wondered if he knew it. Didn't he realize Jensen Marsh had done the same as his aunt, only the mafia boss had done a better job of hiding his true intentions? He controlled Creed's every move, only throwing cash at him to buy his silence and loyalty.

Trying to leave meant death. No matter what avenue he pursued, Creed would always have to look over his shoulder.

We were both in trouble now, though, unless we could figure out a way to escape this damn path we'd found ourselves on.

After dinner, I'd gone downstairs to give him space. I wasn't sure if he'd leave me alone, but he had. Spending another night alone on that lumpy mattress had sucked, but I understood he was scared now. Scared of me getting—or being—pregnant, and scared that the more we talked, the more I could convince him to leave his job and risk his neck for a brat.

With the sun rising on the other side of the walls, I wanted to go outside and breathe deeply of what freedom I could. Picking up my shorts from the side of the sink, I felt them to see how damp they were after I'd washed them by hand. They were stiff now, but not as dirt-streaked. I'd done the same with my underwear and bra, which were dry enough to put on. Feeling somewhat human again, I tied the plaid shirt I'd taken around my midriff and headed upstairs.

Creed stood in front of the sink, drinking coffee and staring out the window.

“Good morning,” I murmured, walking past him to the front door.

He didn't respond, and he didn't move.

I guess I'd expected him to demand to know where I was headed. Since he didn't, I turned the knob and opened the door, scaring off a squirrel from the porch rail.

Inhaling deeply, I let the scent of pine and forest bracken fill my lungs. It was peaceful here if one discounted the fact that they were trapped in a one-bedroom cabin with a murderous madman.

Who felt the need to join me as I tried to enjoy my solitude.

I heard him strike his lighter, and the faint sound of the flame catching on the tip of his cigarette. He inhaled before moving closer to me, leaning against the railing in essentially the same place the squirrel had been.

“Contemplating running again?” he asked.

His casual tone didn’t fool me.

“No, Creed, because I’ve witnessed firsthand what you’ll do to hold on to your tenuous control.”

“I tried to warn you.”

Yeah, I suppose he had. Funny, though, how much you think you know someone you’ve spent every waking hour with just to be proven wrong. I had begun to suspect he had feelings for me, but I was obviously mistaken.

“I’m not running out there on my own.”

“Well, we’re not running together, duchess. You have more life to live than I do.”

“You’re just a coward, that’s all.”

His fingers tensed on the rail, his shoulders hunching. Where I expected him to lay into me for a comment like that, he remained silent.

“Now that you’ve ruined my solitude, I think I’ll go back inside.”

Before I even managed to turn around, he blurted, “I’m going to the store today.”

Frozen in place, I stared at his scruffy cheek. “Pardon me?”

“I have to get some things, and no one around here should be looking for me. You’re too recognizable, though, so I need you to stay here.”

My heart clanged inside my ribcage. “I have to stay here?” I reiterated in disbelief.

Now he looked at me, facing me fully and taking one last drag of his cigarette. “Please, Nova, for the love of God, stay put.”

My brows pulled into a frown, and I tried to piece together what he meant.

Because him leaving while I stayed did not make any goddamn sense.

“I won’t be long, but if you think we’re going to get rescued or something stupid, you’re wrong.” Crushing his cigarette on the post, he flicked it away and grabbed my shoulders. “Please listen to me.”

Dumbfounded, I stared silently into his eyes.

“I’m going to get you some shoes and maybe normal clothes. But also, if I can get a small photo printer, then I can make fake IDs.”

The words rattled through my brain but didn’t want to form coherent sentences.

“If you call your bank ahead of time and tell them you’re closing out your account, they can have a check ready to go. In

and out, right?”

“In and out,” I repeated dumbly.

“Then I’ll make some fake IDs to get you out of the country and somewhere where you can open a new account.”

“Creed.” Realizing I’d been staring at the zipper on his leather jacket—which he hadn’t worn in days—my gaze snapped up to his. “Creed, that’s insane. Why would you do that?”

Yanking me to his chest, he kissed the top of my head. I let my arms wind around him, feeling safe and comfortable in his strong embrace.

“Because I fucked around and got attached to you, baby girl.”

Oh, God. His words hurt, stabbing me deep in the chest when I should revel in their meaning. “Why?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

Pulling back, he cupped my face in his large, warm hands. “You haven’t told me in days what a horrible monster I am, but I know this is a mistake. I know I should shut down the feelings I see in your eyes every time you look at me, but I fail every time I try.”

“That’s not an answer.” Why? Why would I push him when he’s offering to do what I want? He wanted to let me go, as I’d begged him to repeatedly.

“You don’t deserve to die, and I can’t be the one who kills you.”

His words were the sweetest he knew how to say, but this wasn’t a fairytale where the prince professed his love for the poor servant girl. At best, this was the darkest fairytale in the dead of night, where the beast eats the girl and she comes crawling back on her knees to beg for more.

Why did I have to fall for the villain?

I shouldn’t sacrifice safe and secure for dangerous and deranged, and yet here I was, falling for my assassin. Desire coated my traumatized soul, trickling into my heart until it bled out at our feet. If I was going to fall for the wrong person, then I needed to do so full-out.

“You’ll let me go?”

His beautiful blue eyes appeared haunted as he kept his gaze locked on me. He’d experienced more shit in his existence than most people saw in a lifetime of nightmares.

And he was telling me it was okay for me to go, to fuck up his chances of leaving alive. While I couldn’t bear the thought of him staying here and trying to renew his career options, I had to take what I could get.

“Yes. I didn’t want to at first, but the more we talked about it last night, the more I realized I don’t have a choice.”

I tried to regulate my breathing as I came too close to hyperventilating.

“I can’t follow through on Jensen’s orders, and that means he’ll send someone to kill me. There’s no way in hell I’m

gonna let you get caught up in that shit.”

“I’ll stay here today, Creed. I promise you won’t have to worry about me obeying this time.”

After all, behaving meant I’d secure my freedom.

“Good girl.” Pulling me close again, Creed kissed my forehead and tugged me back inside. “Is there anything specific you want me to get?”

The sound of the refrigerator running was suddenly the loudest thing in the room. Swallowing, I tried to form coherent thoughts. “Is it stupid to want a duffel bag or backpack for whatever you’re buying me?”

“No.” He sat on the coffee table, guiding me to stand between his legs. “But I’m not getting more than one or two outfits. Anything else can be bought once you’re on the other side. We have to stay under the radar.”

“Okay.” What did I want? Nothing but clean clothes and a pair of shoes. Real shampoo, not just a bar of soap? Chocolate, or food that didn’t come from a can? All of it could wait, though. “I just want you to be careful.”

“Of course.”

He spent several minutes running around the cabin, gathering a few things to take along. Tucking his knife into his boot, he checked his handgun and put it back in his waistband. Opening his wallet, he counted out his cash and tucked it back inside the worn leather.

“Creed.”

Glancing up at me, he said, “Yeah?”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Yeah, baby. Just don’t go outside.”

“I meant for you.”

Pausing finally, he stepped over to me and hugged me close. “I can’t be certain. For all I know, Jensen is waiting for me to make a move so he can use that as an excuse to take me out.”

The very thought had tears clogging my throat until I couldn’t breathe. “Fuck.”

“I don’t mean to scare you, but I have to be honest at this point. There’s no telling what’ll happen.”

My gaze darted to the old phone on the side table. He’d plugged it back in, but it had not rung.

“Don’t use that, no matter what,” he said, misinterpreting my intentions. “It’s been bugged and probably traced by someone, and God knows what else.”

“I won’t. That wasn’t why I looked at it.”

“What is it, Nova?”

“What if it rings while you’re out?”

He ran his thumb over my cheekbone. “Then I guess you’d better hide your pretty ass in the basement and lock the door.”

Fear pulsed through me, slicking its way up my spine. “And then hope you get back here in time to be caught up in a fire?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Yeah, I didn’t necessarily believe that. “You have to promise.”

“I promise to do my best, but that’s all I’ve got.”

It would have to do.

“Here.” Creed handed me his cell phone. “There’s no signal, but I can’t take the risk that he’s tracking it and will realize I’ve left.”

Taking the phone from him, I watched him leave the cabin, climbing into the rusted-out car and starting it. Though it coughed, the engine caught and idled noisily. My throat constricted, but I swallowed and gave him a tiny wave as he looked over at me.

Despite the terror holding me in its clutches, I went to the bathroom to shower. Once I was clean, I ate a bowl of fruit cocktail and tried not to panic.

The landline phone never rang, and I didn’t do anything with the cell phone in my pocket. Without cell service, it was merely a useless brick. Hours passed, and the knot in my stomach only grew. I tried to eat lunch, but I couldn’t force anything down, so I gave up. Now that the bedroom was no longer off-limits, I searched every nook and cranny to pass the time.

I came up with several more guns, another knife, and ropes. Duct tape, emergency flares, and a first aid kit hid in the front coat closet. Torture devices for the captive, but nothing I could use anymore.

Darkness fell, and I knew in my gut something had happened to Creed. There was simply no other reason for him to be gone so long. If I was recalling it correctly, there was a Walmart just outside the gates of the Angeles National Forest. Even if we were several hours' drive inside the entrance, he should have had time to go and come back.

I just had to accept the fact that he'd failed. Being here alone without transportation meant my only option was to use the phone and hope someone got to me before Marsh's men did.

I didn't like those odds.

Instead, he'd probably come and kill me first, or send someone to do it for him. He'd either want to ensure it got done and he'd pull the trigger himself, or he had another hitman on tap to clean up the other guy's botched hit.

Exhausted from worry and stress, I paced the kitchen with the lights off as time passed. Dinner should have been an hour ago, but I couldn't stomach another can of tuna. The sun had disappeared behind the mountain, though it was possible it shined on the other side of the city.

All I could picture was Creed dead somewhere because he'd tried to do the right thing.

Chewing on my fingernails, I tried to decide if I should barricade myself in the basement or not.

The phone rang, making me jump and let out a scream.

Simultaneously, headlights cut through the darkness and illuminated the front windows.

In a flash, I ran out to meet the car, hoping to God I wasn't walking into the arms of another assassin. Behind me, I heard the phone ring again.

Fuck, I was about to die, wasn't I?

CHAPTER 16

Creed

Walmart was the closest store to the national park other than a touristy souvenir shop I'd seen on the way in. The entire drive out of the park and especially out on the main road, I kept my eyes on the mirrors to an excessive degree. I had no idea who might be watching me, who might have been tipped off that I made a move, or anything else. Jensen wouldn't hesitate to take me out if he got a whiff of me betraying him, which was why this was all a stupid idea.

The stupidest motherfucking idea I'd ever had in my entire miserable fucking existence.

But it was necessary. I simply couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't sit idly by while Nova's life was ripped away from her, nor could I be the one to do the job. Somehow, she'd shown me how much life mattered, both hers and mine.

And didn't that fucking suck for a career hitman?

What would I do with myself if not this? Sell used cars? Go door-to-door dragging around vacuum cleaners? My only useful skills involved high-power weapons. I had nothing to offer Nova but a life on the run, and that was not what she deserved.

However . . .

I was also past the point of pretending I could let her walk away. There was no scenario in my imagination where I didn't envision her there by my side. Whether we hid in the middle

of nowhere or in plain sight, we had to be together. My brain—and yes, dammit, my heart—had laid out the facts.

Nova Arden belonged to me, and nothing and no one else would touch her now.

Roaming around the store in the hopes of finding what I needed quickly, I did my best to think of her when I chose a fresh pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Knowing everything about my charge from the months of sitting on her house made it easier to pick her size and style, at least the best I was able to without hitting up the fancy stores her mother shopped in. Dropping everything indiscriminately in a cart, I hurried to the shoe section and found some flip-flops. They weren't perfect, but they were faster than digging for her size in sneakers. I found the photo printer I needed and added a pack of photo-quality paper, then steered to the personal hygiene section.

Shampoo that smelled like strawberries, fancy-ish body wash, and deodorant were thrown in together. The very next aisle held condoms, and I didn't even hesitate to scoop some off the shelf and let them mix in with the rest of my bounty.

Finally, I nearly sprinted through the fresh produce, picking out some peaches just because I thought Nova would like them. Moving even faster than before, I grabbed some actual meat—instead of the canned variety—and a bottle of wine, then picked up some harder stuff while I was there. I was probably in overkill territory, but oh well.

If nothing else, I would pack all of it into bags and we'd take it with us when we ran.

But for one fucking night, just one if that was all we got, I'd make her a nice meal and pretend we weren't both hostages stuck in a cabin in the woods.

Checking the time, I cursed under my breath. It had taken forever to get out of the forest, and now it was past lunchtime. I didn't want to panic, but the thought of Nova alone back there was killing me. If Jensen called and I didn't answer, God only knew what he'd do next. I didn't want to find out.

Other than the things to create fake IDs, scotch, condoms, and cigarettes were all I'd needed in reality—and not even in that order. But if I didn't get one more chance to sink myself balls deep in Nova's beautiful little cunt before shit went south, I might as well give myself up to the entire mafia and let them riddle my body with bullet holes.

Stripping off the hoodie I'd been hiding in, I slung it in the backseat and pressed the gas pedal harder. I needed to get back and see for myself that my baby girl was safe. I probably burned through half a pack of smokes before I pulled up the winding drive to the cabin. The entire place seemed washed in darkness, not even a sliver of moonlight visible to break up the void, and I frowned when an uneasiness crept over me.

Did she have to hide in the basement? Was someone here, or had they already been and gone? My heart shoved its way into my throat, and I reached for the revolver in the glove box. Forcing the car into park before I rolled to a complete stop, I put my hand on the door handle as I pulled up close to the porch.

With the window rolled down, I heard the sharp peal of the phone. At the same time, the front door burst open and Nova came flying down the steps, her golden sunset hair a tangled cape behind her.

“Jesus, Creed!” She practically sobbed my name, collapsing against the hood nearest the driver’s door. “Hurry, the phone’s ringing.”

Wrenching open the car door, I sprinted up the few steps to enter the open front door and snatch up the receiver. “Cruz.”

“What the fuck took you so long,” Marsh barked.

“I was a little tied up with the project you gave me,” I replied tersely. “What is it now?”

“Oh, really?” God, I hated his smarmy tone of voice. “Thought you said there was no way in hell you were following through on that one.”

“Yeah, well, my options are limited, aren’t they?”

“Damn fucking right, Cruz. You know very fucking well that when I give orders, I expect them to be followed without question.”

“Yes, sir,” I managed to bite out.

“Now, listen, Cash is close to giving in, but he needs that final push.”

“What, exactly, is he giving in to, Marsh?”

“The ultimatum I gave him. Take himself out or I ruin his daughter. Surprisingly, though, he’s dragged his heels. Makes

me wonder if there's something about those two I don't know.”

And he'd just figured that out? I wondered early on why Cassius hadn't jumped at the opportunity to pay the ransom and get his child back. Instead, he appeared so nonchalant about his flesh and blood.

Breathing through my nose to tamp down on my anger, I said, “Unless you want me to ask the girl, I don't have any answers for you.”

“It's tempting, since she won't live to know the difference.”

My hand clenched so hard on the plastic receiver that I heard it creak in protest. “Right.”

“But for now,” he continued, “just hold out for another day or two.”

“Sure.”

When he hung up, I stood there staring at the wall so long I didn't even know Nova stood beside me.

“Baby?”

Snapping my head around, I demanded, “What did you call me?”

Her eyes widened, and she took a step back, stammering, “N-nothing. Is everything okay?”

But it was too late. Advancing on her, I caught her before she could run off. Threading my fingers into the hair at her

nape, I tilted her head back. “No one has ever used an endearment for me.”

Her eyes were like warm whiskey as she stared up at my face. Slowly, she rose on her toes until we were closer in height, touching her lips to mine as gently as a butterfly’s wings.

But I wasn’t a gentle person by nature, and I crushed her body close to mine. Her breasts pressed against my chest, and I took her mouth in a hungry kiss. Nova opened her mouth, inviting me inside, and I accepted the advantage she gave me. Tasting her was everything now; I’d never go back to not having her in my arms.

“I was so fucking scared to be here alone,” she whispered into the balmy night air.

Lowering my mouth, I kissed down the side of her neck. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“When the phone rang, I was mostly terrified you’d miss his call and he’d send someone after you.”

“That was always a possibility.” Reluctantly, I pulled back. “There are groceries that need to be put in the freezer.”

Her face lit up. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, duchess. Real food.”

Grinning, she spun away from me and dashed to the car. Joining her more slowly, I watched her lean into the back, her perky round ass on full display beneath the ratty cut-off sweatpants.

Unable to help myself, I molded my palms over each ass cheek. She squeaked when I slapped them both, jolting up and bumping her head.

“Can’t put that thing in my face like that, sweet girl.”

Shooting me a look over her shoulder that fucking killed me, she smirked. “Let’s get this stuff inside, please.”

“If you insist.”

Of course, I didn’t want the trip to have been a waste, so I helped her carry everything inside and put away the cold stuff. She nearly screamed when I presented her with a pint of ice cream, and then she did scream when I hauled her over my shoulder and swatted her delicious ass again.

“First things first.” I carried her down the hallway, depositing her on the bed. “I missed this right here.”

To show her what I meant, I tucked my fingers beneath the waistband of her shorts and yanked. Seeing her bare and glistening for me, I wanted to fucking weep. My cock certainly did.

He’d have to wait.

Knowing I needed to feed her dinner, I set my mind to bringing her to orgasm as fast as I knew how. She gripped my head when I lowered it between her legs, arching her back and bringing me in closer. Her scent washed over me, and I nearly drooled at the idea of getting to eat her as an appetizer.

Flicking my tongue over her clit, I listened to her moaning and mewling, then I pushed two fingers inside her. Her hips bucked, and she clamped her thighs around my ears. Pushing

her legs back open, I gave her a long, slow lick before going back to sucking her pretty little clit into my mouth.

“Creed!” she choked.

“Yeah, kitten?”

“God!”

“Almost there, I feel it.” I sucked on her harder, moving my fingers faster as she writhed under me. “Gonna come for me, baby?”

“Please, yes!”

Chuckling at her incoherence, I stopped talking to focus on her. On her pussy, her clit, and giving her as much pleasure as I could.

She screamed loudly, shuddering around me as she fell apart. I slowed my licks but didn’t stop entirely, letting her come all the way back down to earth.

“Holy Christ.” Lifting enough to look up at me, Nova reached for me.

I let her cuddle up against me, but I stopped her when she reached for my cock. “All I wanted was to taste you, Nova.”

“But—”

“After dinner. I promise.”

She bit her lip, and I nearly changed my mind.

Nearly.

“I’m going to cook for you, and then we’ll come back here if that’s what you want.”

“You’re all I want.”

My heart flipped over in my chest. Kissing her temple, I said, “Thank God, cuz I’m all you’ve got.”

“I’m serious,” she said, climbing off the bed and fixing her shorts.

“I know you are.” When she moved toward the door, I remained on the bed.

Stopping, she looked back at me. “Creed?”

“I’m trying to figure out how to tell you I feel the same way.”

Her face softened, and she returned to the bed. I widened my legs so she could stand between them, and then she leaned in and hugged me.

A gesture as simple as a hug, and it made my eyes water.

“You just did, baby.”

I held her close, inhaling her scent. Her soft curves were familiar to me now, as were her tells. She hiccupped, her shoulders shaking, and I just about freaked out.

“What did I do wrong?” I asked, frowning heavily. Fuck, just when I thought I had this shit down.

“Nothing, Creed. You’ve given me so much more than you know, and now we have to separate.”

Wait.

What?

“We don’t . . . I’m not leaving you here.”

“But—” She jerked away from me, standing in front of me with her tear-streaked face, tugging self-consciously at the hem of her shirt. “But you said we’re not running together.”

“I guess I did.” Scrubbing a hand over my face, I then held it out palm up. She took it, and I led her back to the kitchen.

Pointing at a chair, I made her sit while I washed up and began preparing dinner.

“Look, I didn’t expect to find anything out here.” Throwing food on the counter from the fridge, I glanced over my shoulder as I continued. “It was always about me doing my job and going back to real life. But now . . .”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. What the hell did I know about feelings? Emotions? I knew cold hard facts, wind speed and direction, and which caliber bullet did the most damage. What I didn’t know was how to unclench or be anything but a bastard.

“You changed it all, Nova.”

“So, now what?”

Wasn’t that the million-dollar question?

“Fuck if I know, baby girl. Fuck if I know.”

CHAPTER 17

Nova

Creed made me dinner. It was a small act, but it meant he wanted to take care of me. He wanted us to leave together. I'd finally gotten through to him, to the point where he thought of more than just himself and his next assignment.

He thought of me, and that was enough.

We ate by the light of a few candles, which I'd found in the basement during my earlier search of the cabin. They were only utilitarian emergency votives, but they let off the same glow as anything from the Jo Malone collection my mother favored. When we'd each drained a glass of wine and finished eating, I took the dirty dishes to the sink to wash. Behind me, Creed pulled the ice cream out of the freezer and dug into it with a big spoon. By the time I'd set the clean plates in the dish drain, he'd set bowls of fresh sliced peaches and vanilla ice cream on the table, drizzled with a touch of honey.

"I don't know anything about making fancy desserts like your chef back home, but—"

"Creed," I interrupted. "It's perfect."

He smiled boyishly. "Really?"

"I promise." Not only because he'd thought of me when he bought the peaches, but because I was so sick of canned food.

Creed scooped up a spoonful of ice cream and held it up to my mouth. I accepted the bite, my mouth tingling at the iciness

covered in rich honey. I moaned a little, and his pupils grew bigger in the dim light.

“Better watch it, or dessert will end up melting.”

He had a good point. Too much watching him lick the back of his spoon and I’d abandon all pretense of wanting to finish eating before going to the bedroom.

“What else did you get from the store?” I asked as we ate.

“Let’s see.” He cut the side of his spoon through a peach slice. “Scotch. More cigarettes.” Scooping up the fruit, he held it out to me. “Condoms.”

I nearly choked on my food. “Seriously?”

“You didn’t honestly think I’d suddenly want to stop fucking you ten times a day, did you?”

The amusement on his face made me grin. “No, but I didn’t realize you’d thought that far ahead in your getaway planning.”

“I, um, also got something else for you. Just in case. If you don’t want it, I’ll understand.”

Since he avoided my gaze, I began to feel uneasy. “What is it?”

“It’s, uh, fuck.” Dropping his spoon, he scrubbed his hand over his face. “It’s a pregnancy test.”

I felt my face drain of color. “What?”

“It says early detection or some shit, and I just thought you’d rather know one way or another, that’s all.” Red-faced,

Creed stood and put his empty bowl in the sink. “Obviously, it’s up to you.”

Over the sound of the running water, I heard my heart pounding in my eardrums. “I think it’s way too early to know.”

“Okay.” He took my bowl, too, rinsing it out and not looking at me. “Yeah, okay.”

Though my throat was dry, I forced out the words. “Is that something you need to talk about? Whether I am or not?”

“No.”

The bowls clattered against the plates when he set them in the drain. “Creed—”

“I’m going to shower, okay? I won’t be long.”

“Okay.”

Confused, I sat back in my chair and watched him walk off. Getting me the test was thoughtful, I suppose, but also odd. I was pretty sure I wasn’t pregnant, if only because I felt signs of my impending period creeping in. If I was late, though, I had the test available.

So it was thoughtful.

But the odd sadness in his gaze right before he stopped looking me in the eye made me wonder. Did he actually hope I was? Or was he simply terrified of one more responsibility, one more thing tying us together?

Moving to the bedroom, I slowly removed my clothes and left them on the dresser. Regardless of what he was thinking, it was too soon to find out. However, it probably was the smart

decision to ensure we didn't mess up and change the outcome, so I picked up the grocery bag he'd dropped on the floor in the corner. Somehow, the small cardboard box was terrifyingly foreign to me. My fingers tried to tremble as I opened it, revealing a handful of foil wrappers.

“Starting without me?”

Jumping at his sudden presence, I dropped the box, and the condoms spilled out across the bed. “Just looking.”

Creed, too, was naked, and he strode slowly toward me. “It won't be the same as feeling you without one, but we need to be smart.”

All I could do was nod.

His chest was broad, his shoulders wide. His upper arms were probably the same circumference as my thighs, and his hands were twice the size of mine, maybe more. Every aspect of him made me feel delicate. Easily breakable.

Feeling less bold than I sounded, I said, “Shatter me, Creed.”

Only he understood me. Only he knew what I wanted when I didn't—when words failed me. Picking me up, he held me steady as I wrapped my legs around his waist. Proof that he was more than ready for me pushed against my backside, and I wriggled. I needed him inside me; needed it badly, ever since he'd had a taste of me earlier.

Something flared in his eyes. “You're mine, now.”

Nodding, I flexed my fingers on his shoulders.

Moving forward, he sandwiched me against the wall. His sheer size overpowered me, his presence commanding simply by existing. “Mine, Nova.”

“Yours,” I agreed.

My lust only climbed higher as he let his gaze bear down on me. Kneading my flesh, he shifted us until he could reach back and pick up a condom.

He was right when he said it wouldn't feel the same. When he got it on and slid easily inside me, I could tell the difference.

But it didn't matter.

I needed him to take me, to fill me, to do what he wanted with my body. One of us needed to remember to be safe, that was all. Running would be more difficult if I happened to be pregnant, and I didn't want that. We had to get out soon or we wouldn't get out alive.

So, for now, I pushed aside any thoughts of the difference and let him impale me with his cock. When it came to sex, Creed knew everything I didn't, and I'd begun to appreciate it. Using his mass to brace me against the wall, he cupped my throat with one large hand and squeezed just enough to make my vision narrow down to only him. The rough paneling scratched against my back, Creed's body meshed with mine so perfectly, and sweat built up from the heat between us.

His movements were fierce, taking me in the manner I'd asked for and more. Breaking me, shattering me; splitting me in two. At the same time, only he could put me back together

again, and I clung to him as my cries became louder. When I felt the sharp curl of an orgasm bearing down on me, I sunk my nails into his shoulders, and he grunted.

His turquoise eyes blazed at me. “Let it go, Nova. Let go and come for me.”

Tightening his thumb and middle finger against the sides of my throat, he sent me gasping into a spiral of exquisite pleasure, and I let out a low moan.

“Stunning, baby. Fucking stunning.”

I felt a flush cover my face and neck, then he released my throat to kiss me. Nipping my lips, sucking my tongue into his mouth, and pounding me into the wall, Creed found what he’d been looking for inside me. He nearly flattened me when he pressed against me, slapping his palms on either side of my head.

Shifting just a bit, he nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck and kissed my throat. Words of all the wrong emotions bubbled up inside me—love and devotion were the last things Creed would want from me. So I sucked them back in and held him close instead.

“Still better than anyone else I’ve ever been with.”

That wasn’t quite the compliment I would have preferred, but it was enough for now.

Carefully, he pulled out of me and sat me on the bed so he could disappear down the hall to the bathroom. I found myself staring at the dresser mirror, wondering who the hell the girl in the reflection was. Certainly not me; mousy, timid, virginal

Nova Arden, daughter of Senator and Mrs. Arden, who'd never done a single thing out of the ordinary in her whole life.

“Baby?”

Turning my head, I smiled at Creed standing in the doorway. “Yeah?”

“I called your name a few times.” Fully entering the room, he sat beside me, his massive thigh lined up alongside mine. “Are you okay?”

“Just wondering what happened to the girl I used to be.”

“What does that mean?”

Recognizing the sharp tone, I picked up his hand and held it tightly. “Used to be, I didn't step one toe out of line. Now look at me.”

“If you're having second thoughts—”

“Please don't think that.” Climbing onto his lap, I pushed Creed—rather, he allowed me to push him—until he was flat on the bed and I could drape myself over him. “I've never felt more sure about anything in my life, even if it's out of my norm.”

His eyes searched mine, apparently finding what he sought. “You have to tell me if you want to run alone, or if you want me to get you out and then go our separate ways. It would kill me to think you're only going along with my stupid plans so you can slip away from me at the last minute. That's dangerous.”

“I don’t want that, I promise.” To prove it, I slid over him until I could kiss his throat, letting my hands wander over his abs. “I lo—” Swallowing harshly, I tried again. “I want to be with you.”

“Nova, please be honest.”

Frowning, I looked down at him. His expression was uncertain. Scared, even. “Listen to me.”

Not thinking about what I was doing, I let my fingertips trail over his pecs and back down to his stomach. The muscles bunched and flexed beneath my touch, and I became momentarily distracted by the sight. Amazingly, his cock began to rise as I watched it, and I lost my train of thought.

“Creed,” I murmured.

“What is it, duchess? Not used to staring directly at it?”

The amusement in his voice didn’t deter me. Reaching out, I circled him in my palm, mesmerized at the way it grew longer and harder in my hand.

“Does it always have to be that way?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Shooting him a glance, I discovered his face was drawn into rigid planes, his hands fisted into the sheets at his sides.

“Are you in pain?” I asked curiously.

“To an extent.” Letting out a long breath, he said, “It’s nearly painful when it’s so hard and I have no release.”

“Am I—should I stop?” Biting my lip, I risked looking over at his cock before meeting his gaze again.

“Fuck, no.”

His hips rose in time with my strokes, and I realized how delighted I was to watch him enjoying my touch.

“What were you asking me a minute ago?” he asked, his voice somehow both tight and breathless.

“Hm?” Finding him watching me, I bit my lip again as I considered how best to ask my question. “That first blow job—is it always like that?”

His hooded eyes shuttered for a second as I circled my thumb over the head of his twitching cock, and then he opened them, letting them blaze directly at me. “No, princess, it can happen in many different ways.”

“Then . . . why?”

“Jesus, baby, you’re making it incredibly difficult to answer you coherently.”

I guess it hadn’t yet occurred to him that was by design.

“I wanted to humiliate you.”

Dropping my hand, I studied the worn sheets tangled beneath him. “Oh.”

Sitting up, Creed gripped my chin and tilted it to face him. “There are two reasons. One, I was an asshole looking to terrify you. I needed you to see me as dangerous, and you weren’t.”

“And two?” I whispered, fighting off tears. Things had changed since then, and I shouldn’t be mad at him for it now.

“I’m a sick bastard, angel. I enjoy weird shit. The more you fought me, the more I wanted you. As soon as they told me you were off-limits, it made you irresistible.”

“What about now? Are you only with me because you want to do the opposite of what they’ve demanded?”

Gently, his thumb moved over my pulse, and I wondered if he was even cognizant of his action. “Now, I feel the irresistible urge to protect you. The thought of leaving you, or killing you . . .”

His hold on me tensed, and I knew he was telling the truth. Reaching back down, I found him as hard as before, and I pushed on his chest so he’d lay down. Tentatively, I parted my lips, first licking the tip and then bringing the head into my mouth.

Creed hissed out a breath, and I decided I could be a little daring. Cupping his balls in one hand, I used the other to envelop his cock. By the way his legs shifted and he moaned, I knew I was doing the right thing. I saw the various scars on his thighs and leaned down to kiss one, then another, and another, until he squirmed beneath me. Finally, I lowered my mouth over his shaft and tried not to gag around him.

Then again, he’d enjoyed that before. But I didn’t want my dinner to make a reappearance, so I attempted to take him as deep as I could without ruining it. Pulling off, I stroked him a few times and tried again, listening to the moans and groans coming from deep in Creed’s chest. He didn’t touch me or

force me, and I wondered if he struggled to let me have control.

“Fuck, baby. Unless you want to swallow, you need to be careful.”

Intrigued, I took him to the back of my mouth one more time, then licked around the sides before bending down to put my mouth on his balls. He’d obviously cleaned up after taking off the condom, because he smelled like the soap from the bathroom. I felt his body tense, and just as I thought he needed more encouragement, cum spurted from the tip of his cock, dripping all over his stomach.

Carefully, he reached for me, bringing me up beside him. Fusing his mouth to mine, he threaded his hands through my hair and held me hostage to his kiss. It was warm and slow, and I enjoyed the tangling of our tongues.

“Thank you.”

My brows shot up. “You’re welcome?”

Grinning, he said, “You did amazing.”

“Oh.” Blushing, I tried to scramble off the bed, but he only clutched me closer.

“Let me clean up, and I’ll be right back.”

I watched him walk out the door again, feeling sated and content. When he returned to the bedroom, he loomed over me on the bed, kissing my nose and plopping down to spoon me against his chest.

“Sleep, my little Nova.”

My eyelids felt heavy, and they slipped closed of their own accord. As I drifted off, I felt his arms draw around me, tethering us together. I know I mumbled something, but by then, it was in my subconscious as sleep took me.

CHAPTER 18

Creed

That feeling only Nova could create in my chest twisted and expanded until I couldn't catch my breath. Glancing down at her, I watched her as she slept. Void of mascara, her lashes were so pale they seemed to be nonexistent, and blue veins snaked along beneath the thin skin of her eyelids. Delicate was the word I would use to describe her, but in many ways, she was stronger than me. Lying vulnerable in my arms, she stirred feelings of possessiveness and loyalty I'd never experienced before.

"*Love you,*" she'd murmured while on the brink of sleep. Everyone was their most vulnerable in sleep, with no way to protect themselves. No instincts raged under the surface when the brain finally shut down. For me, that made it even more real. No one in my entire life had ever said those words to me, so I didn't know what it meant to love; not to accept it or to give it. But I thought maybe I could learn by her example.

How the hell had someone so guileless taught me so much?

I gave her a few more minutes to fall into a deeper sleep before sliding out from behind her. My protective instincts grew stronger every day, so much that I wouldn't have been disappointed if she'd told me she was certain she was pregnant. One day, in the future, I wanted to hear her say she was carrying my child inside her. Created out of the two of us, completely innocent from day one.

A chance to start over from the beginning. A clean slate, washed in purity.

But for now, we were better off not worrying about a pregnancy and baby while we were running for our lives. Marsh wouldn't hesitate to kill her—and me—if he even got a whiff of disobedience. It wouldn't matter if she was carrying my child at the time, which was the best reason to get moving right away.

Leaving her curled up in the bed, I pulled on a pair of sweatpants and made my way blindly down the dark hall to the living room. I'd left the photo printer on the coffee table, and I grabbed it and the rest of the things I needed on my way to the basement. Not that I felt safe anywhere anymore, but the basement was the best choice for hiding lights at night. Without a desk, I had to improvise with the folding chair and the old mattress, but I set up my gear and got to work.

I wished I'd thought to take her picture before we ate dinner, but I hadn't. For the time being, I would work on faking the IDs for my chosen non-extradition country. Using the mobile internet cube I'd bought, I researched what typical identification looked like for residents of Fiji. The least I could do was take Nova to her favorite idea of a fantasy location—the setting of the Blue Lagoon movies. In reality, it didn't matter if we went somewhere that didn't share extradition with the US since Marsh didn't consider himself bound by any laws, but it only helped to not have to watch for authorities hunting us down too. Hiding among the tourists would hopefully give us a slight edge.

By the time I'd created passports and licenses for the both of us, my eyes burned. Blinking rapidly, I tried to read the clock on the shelf, but I couldn't focus. Instead, I left everything where it was and climbed the steps wearily. Automatically checking the lock on the front door and the location of my sidearm, I set a timer on my phone and crawled into bed beside Nova, blissfully allowing sleep to take over for a short while.

Not the alarm, but Nova's lips on my throat woke me some time later. She'd wrapped herself around me until there wasn't a whisper of space between us, and her mouth ignited fires on my skin. All things considered, it wasn't the worst way to wake up.

Soon, her little moans sent all my blood rushing to my cock. Exhaustion dropped off to the wayside as she rose over me, pushing her hair behind her shoulders, and sank that sweet pussy over my throbbing cock.

"I love it when you take control," I told her.

There was that word again. *Love*. I'd never thought of it so much before, but now that it was out there, the meanings were at the forefront of my mind. Emotional, physical, and metaphorical love all meant something different. Instead of being a devilish monster to her, I was her lover. Soft, sweet, and completely out of my element. Another first was needing to be what she saw in me instead of the hardened bastard I'd been raised into.

Tossing those thoughts aside, I reached up to pinch her nipples, listening to her pleasure roll off her tongue. She was

so damn sexy, finding what she needed, searching for the right pace and angle to get her there. From someone who didn't even know what sex felt like last month to the woman riding me now, Nova had grown exponentially.

Her warm brown eyes opened, and she looked down at me, a sly smile on her lips. Heart banging against my ribs, I let my hand trail up the side of her neck to dip my fingers into her mouth. Kissing and licking my thumb, Nova moaned around me and shifted to take me deeper.

As I slid further into her pliant body, I jerked my hips up and fucked her hard. She gasped, her eyes widening as she moved faster to meet my demands. Her loud cry vibrated through me, and she bit the pad of my thumb.

Desperate to throw her beneath me, I tried so hard to hold back. But when her strength flagged in the path of her impending orgasm, I sat up, banding my arms around her so I could flip us. She let out a startled shout and arched her back, her legs falling open to welcome me back inside her. Pinning her to the bed, I used all my strength to fuck her hard and fast.

Almost as if I needed to prove something to myself, I shoved her hands above her head and prevented her from touching me. Then, I pulled back enough that our only contact was my hands on her wrists and my cock sliding in and out of her wet cunt.

“Fuck me, Creed,” she ground out. “Fuck me harder.”

“Trying to, baby.”

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I adjusted again, raising up on my knees to pull her onto my cock repeatedly. Using her as a fuck doll, slamming into her without mercy, and in general fucking her as though her well-being meant nothing to me.

Just the way she craved it.

“Yes!” she cried. “I’m so close.”

“Goddamn, my little angel is turning into a demon.”

And when she brought her fingers down to play with her clit, I nearly lost what control I’d managed to keep a stranglehold on. She became wetter as I moved faster, and the slippery coating on my cock spurred me faster toward climax.

“Fucking make yourself come, baby. I’m not gonna last much longer.”

Neck strained, Nova moved her fingers faster, and I watched in pure fascination as a red flush crept up her chest to her throat. She cried out repeatedly, to the point where I wouldn’t be surprised if a park ranger knocked on the window to ask who was getting murdered in here.

And then she let out a blood-curdling scream, her inner walls clamping down on my cock and her legs locking in place. She clutched the sheets, her head thrashing as she screamed and screamed. I couldn’t help the swell of pride that came over me as I watched her lose her mind because of me, and it only took a few more seconds for me to fill her with every ounce of cum I had left in my body.

“You’ve fucking drained my balls, baby.”

I tried not to drop my weight on top of her, but she pulled me in close, kissing me with a tenderness that stole my breath. With my head cradled between her palms, I felt every ounce of her pure salvation seep into my veins.

“Nova.” Resting my forehead to hers, I clenched my eyes shut and tried not to be a wuss. Inexplicably, tears formed behind my eyelids. I wished I could say the words, but they wouldn’t come out of my mouth.

Tracing a fingertip under one eye, Nova said, “Didn’t you sleep?”

Since she unknowingly gave me an out, I grabbed it with both hands and used it to my advantage. “No, I started making the fake IDs. All I need now is our pictures against a plain white background.”

“I’m sorry, baby, I wouldn’t have woken you if I’d known you didn’t get any sleep,” she said.

“Don’t worry, princess. It was worth it.” The alarm on my phone went off, and I reached over to silence it. “I have internet if you think you want to use it.”

I wanted to be honest with her, ensuring it didn’t appear I was keeping anything from her.

“I can’t think of any reason I’d want it.” Sitting up, she pushed her hair off her face and smiled down at me.

“What?”

“You’re awfully handsome.”

Flushing, I smiled in return, unused to praise. “Don’t get me warmed up again, gorgeous, or we’ll never accomplish anything today.”

The little giggle that escaped her made my heart happy. “I’ll make something for breakfast.”

“First, brush your hair so you don’t look like a wild captive, and then let me take your picture.”

And then Nova full-out laughed, and I couldn’t exactly remember the last time I felt so satisfied. We were getting out, and we were going to have a life together. A real life, the kind I’d never expected to have.

After positioning her against the only blank white wall in the basement and snapping the utilitarian photos required for identification purposes, I set up the timer to take my own pictures while she went upstairs to make breakfast. It was strikingly domestic, if not for the fake passports and subterfuge I was planning.

“Creed, come eat.”

Yeah, I could get used to this.

“Real eggs,” she said in awe as I topped the stairs.

“I know, gorgeous, I picked them out.”

Smacking my ass as I passed, Nova handed me a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast.

“I forgot I bought bacon.” So simple, and yet so amazing.

“I hope you didn’t pay with a card of any kind.” Picking up a piece of toast, Nova nibbled on one corner. “I’d hate for

Jensen to think anything was astray and come to check on us.”

“It’s kind of cute that you think I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I’ve never done this before! It just occurred to me.”

“Don’t worry, I used cash.” That was a big rule when hoping not to be traced: only pay in cash. I’d had plenty of practice with pretending I didn’t exist.

“Did you get the IDs done?”

Nodding, I sipped on coffee and grinned at her. “We’re married, and our last name is Cavanaugh.”

“Interesting.”

“Do you not want to go the fake marriage route?” The thought hurt more than I cared to admit. “I can change them.”

“No, that’s not it. I’ll just have to get used to the new name, that’s all. What are our first names?”

“Beaufort and Beatrice.”

Her fork fell out of her hand to land in a clatter on her plate. “What?”

“You don’t like the sound of Beau and Bea?”

“You’re not serious.”

“No, I’m not serious.”

Her exhale was audible.

“Sue and Bob?”

Nova narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m glad you think this is funny. It’s only the name everyone will address me by for the rest of my life.”

Rising slowly, I crossed over to her chair. Leaning down, I kissed along the side of her face until I reached her ear. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll still call you Nova when I fuck you.” Or kitten, or duchess, or princess. Or any other pet name I decided I liked.

Her hands had found their way inside my shirt, and she stroked them up my chest. “Then it’s only fair I call you Creed every time you make me come.”

“Good.” I bit her earlobe. “I love to hear you scream my name.”

She gasped when I palmed her bare tit beneath her purple tank top. “We’re getting distracted again.”

“Dammit.” But I didn’t let go of her. It was too tempting to stand over her, imagining her sucking my cock until I exploded on her face.

“What else do we have to do before we leave?”

“Call your bank,” I answered, stepping away at last.

“And I tell them I’m closing my account and want the total in a cashier’s check, right?”

I glanced at her as I sat back down to eat before our food got cold. “Yes.”

“And then what?” she asked, frowning.

“And then we pray our planning works and we make it out alive.”

CHAPTER 19

Nova

I was nervous to make the call to my bank, but it went smoothly. The teller was too professional to sound shocked at my request, though it was an astonishing amount of money. At least, to me, it was. Considering they required several hours to complete the withdrawal before they'd be ready for me, maybe it was a big sum.

Creed turned on the portable internet cube so he could use his phone to move his money into different offshore accounts he swore were untraceable, but we couldn't open new ones without in-person proof of our fake identities. We'd wait until we were in Fiji to accomplish that.

Then, he scheduled plane tickets in our real names going to Germany, leaving the final purchase for later, once we'd left town. After he'd secured another set of tickets in our fake names for Fiji, it was time to go.

"Remember, kitten, at the first sign of trouble, you leave my ass behind and get out of the country."

He said the words offhandedly while packing a duffel bag, and they made my heart seize in my chest. "No."

Stopping in the middle of his task, Creed glared at me. "Listen, I can't focus on doing this right when I have to worry about you, too. They don't want to hurt you—for now—so use that to your advantage."

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I wiped it away angrily. "I said, no. I'm not leaving you behind to die, Cruz."

Storming over to me, Creed seized my face in his hands, bringing his head down to my height. “Goddamn it, Nova, be sensible. You have to make it out of this alive.”

“So do you.” More tears joined the first until I sobbed from the weight of them, and he held me tightly to his chest. Where I wanted to find strength and comfort in his embrace, instead I clung for dear life while I feared for his safety. This could easily go wrong, and we could both die.

“I—” He broke off, swearing instead. “Why are you so stubborn?”

“As though you aren’t,” I muttered into his shirt.

“Fine, then we stick together.”

Something told me that despite those words, he’d gladly throw himself on his sword if the need arose, leaving me to live out our plans alone.

I double-checked the cabin to make sure I wasn’t leaving anything behind, but this wasn’t some fancy hotel where I might have left my hair straightener in the bathroom. If I never saw this place again, it would be too soon, and I was more than happy to leave it as it was when we arrived. All the important things had been packed into two bags, one for him and one for me. Disregarding my protests, Creed tucked his cell phone into my bag, reminding me how to find the barcode for the tickets in case we got separated. Then he checked his gun, and I shivered at the memory of that damn thing pressed into my head.

But we were leaving all of that behind. All our mistakes stayed here in the woods, and I wouldn't allow them to follow us into our new life.

When he dumped the duffels in the trunk, he also checked through an enormous case of guns. I frowned. Christ, was it possible we'd need those?

"We'll switch cars on the way," he told me, slamming the trunk closed.

I swallowed thickly. "Okay."

The winding road out of the national forest was long enough that my head began to feel heavy, but I didn't want to succumb to sleep. Worst-case scenario, something went wrong on the way to the bank and I was unconscious for it. Best case; we got the money and made it onto the plane without incident.

Even I wasn't naïve enough to believe that would happen.

Neither of us spoke on the drive until Creed pulled into a parking lot of a used car dealership. Though he'd warned me of the exchange, I absolutely assumed he meant to steal a car rather than buying one.

"Stay in the car," he ordered.

I didn't argue because, for all I knew, my face was plastered everywhere as the senator's missing daughter. While Creed was inside, I sat low in my seat and counted slowly backward from five hundred.

I'd nearly reached zero when he opened my door, and I was so zoned out I nearly fell out of the car. With a raised

brow, Creed reached in to unbuckle my seatbelt and tug me out of the car.

“It’s the silver Ford over there. Get in the driver’s seat and crank the air, okay?”

I took the keys he held out, trying with everything in me to ignore my instinct to turn around and watch him. Rather than scan my surroundings suspiciously, I did as told. The muggy interior smelled faintly of cleaning products, and the paper mat with the dealership’s logo crinkled under my feet. The car started smoothly, and the AC kicked on, blowing my hair off my damp neck.

Checking the rearview mirror, I saw Creed backing up the other car behind me, and then he quickly transferred our things from trunk to trunk. When I expected him to kick me out of the driver’s seat, he instead slid into the passenger side.

“Ready?”

“What about the other car?” I asked, checking the mirrors and pulling out of the lot.

“I don’t have the title, so I told him I would find it and sell the car to him later today or tomorrow. He bought that story, at least long enough for us to get the hell out of here.”

I checked the street signs around me and realized I knew where we were, so I made my way toward my bank. “What do I say if they ask why I’m closing out the account?”

“You aren’t required to tell them shit.”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I shot him a glance. “But if they ask and I don’t have an answer ready, won’t they get

suspicious?”

He sighed. “Fine, then tell them you found a bank offering a higher return on your investments.”

“Um, yeah, okay.”

Turning one more time, I saw the sign in front of my bank down the road. Creed sat forward, looking out the windows and mirrors. The more he checked, the more nervous I became.

“What are you looking for?”

“Anyone I recognize.”

My stomach sank, held in place by a lead balloon. We’d switched cars just in case Jensen had a tracker on the other one, but I hadn’t really expected anyone to find us here. My fear had been that we’d be ambushed at the airport.

Creed yanked a hoodie from the backseat. “Put this on and keep your head down.”

Trying to breathe slowly and not hyperventilate, I slipped the jacket on and covered my hair with the hood. My chest hurt, and I gripped his hand. “Creed, I need to tell you something.”

“No, you don’t, kitten.” Grabbing the back of my head, Creed drew me in for a kiss that lasted less time than I would have preferred. “I already know. Now be careful and don’t dawdle.”

The words were there again, ready to strangle me. He couldn’t actually know how I felt until I told him.

All I did was nod.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed out of the car and headed into the bank. The cool, quiet interior freaked me out more than it should have. Walking unsteadily up to the counter, I waited behind a woman about my age.

Someone who was living her life normally, not worried about having to run or die. Not a woman with her kidnapper waiting for her in the car while she closed out her account to live life under a pseudonym. Becoming nervous at the simple act of walking into public.

By the time they called for the next customer, I thought I would barf. “I’m Nova Arden. I called earlier about closing my account.”

The teller typed on her computer for a second. “Yes, I see that right here. I just need to see your identification.”

Since my real license was lost somewhere, Creed had made me a new one. I handed it over, waiting for the moment everyone in the bank realized I was a fraud. Bars would descend from the ceiling to encase me in a temporary prison right before they hauled me away for impersonation.

Of myself?

Shaking my head, I watched the lady type something else and heard her printer doing its thing. I was almost home free, if only she would hurry. Finally, she handed over the check in an envelope, thanked me with a smile, and I turned to go.

“Excuse me, Miss Arden?”

Fuck.

Lifting my head toward the unfamiliar voice, I tried to adopt a tone of teenage boredom. “Yeah?”

An industrious-looking guy with a buzz cut and thick glasses stood there, hands clasped in front of him. “I spoke to you when you called about the account closure.”

“And?” If I’d had gum, I would have smacked it loudly or blown a bubble. Poindexter was about to get me in trouble, and I doubt he knew it.

“Well, it was originally a trust set up by your parents—”

“I’m nineteen now, though, so it’s reverted to me.”

Heart pounding, palms becoming slick with sweat, I wondered if he’d called my parents. He pushed his glasses up higher on his nose and took a step closer.

“I felt it best to inform your guardians—”

“You did what?” Clutching the envelope in my fist, I barely refrained from yelling. “What is wrong with you?”

But I didn’t wait for his response. Maybe Gold Star in there expected kudos for going above and beyond, but I knew he’d squeezed my timeline down to dangerous proportions.

Shoving the check in my shorts pocket and pushing open the door, I scanned the parking lot for anyone preparing to jump out at me. Seeing no one, I made a beeline for the car and the safety of Creed’s presence.

“Some dumbass in there called my parents, so we need to —”

His lethal expression sent a thrill of raw fear racing through my body. “They’re here.”

“My parents? Don’t worry, I’m an adult—”

“Get down!” he shouted, shoving my head down to my lap.

I hadn’t believed my own words anyway, and so I complied, however uncomfortable it made me.

The other door slammed shut, and I chanced a look at the spot Creed had vacated. Through the window, I saw him heading to the back, and I felt the car shake as he removed something from the trunk.

The gun case.

The formidable black metal suitcase filled to the brim with firearms I couldn’t name. The one he’d shown me as an emergency precaution.

Tears clogged my throat for the millionth time, and I swallowed them back. My father wouldn’t kill me, I was certain of that fact.

And yet, the door handle felt too big in my hand as I yanked on it. My fingers trembled, feeling numb and tingly at the same time, as though they’d fallen asleep from lack of blood flow. I heard tires squealing and looked up in time to see a vehicle speeding my way.

Not my father.

My father’s best friend.

The mob boss; the man who'd held me at my christening and been there throughout all the years I grew from infant to woman.

The same man who employed Creed Cruz to kidnap me, ransom me, rape me, and kill me.

There was shouting over the ringing in my ears. Finally, my father's voice, sounding pissed at all of us. My mother screaming my name.

Gunfire.

My sobs as I dropped to the ground and crawled around to the opposite side of the car. To Creed.

To my salvation, however tainted it had become.

"Goddammit, I told you to keep your head down and stay in the car!" he shouted at me.

Terror, panic, *sorrow* clogged my throat. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I kept chanting it, though I didn't know what I was sorry for. None of this was my fault.

Throwing a long gun on top of the closed trunk, Creed lifted enough to look through the sight. "If Cash dies, will you hate me?"

How was I supposed to answer that question? "Just get us out of here," I whispered—words that sanctioned my father's death.

"Hands over your ears," he ordered, and I clamped them tight over the hood of the soft jacket.

The reverberation of the shell exploding from the rifle was still loud enough to make me scream. Something hit the back of the car, because it rocked again after it had settled.

“Marsh has been tracking your father, so the idiot in the bank unknowingly tipped them all off.” I stared up at Creed as he pulled on a lever that racked another round into the chamber, then fired.

Refusing to scream again, I clamped my lips between my teeth until it hurt. Return fire bounced off the pavement, and I heard sirens in the distance.

“We’re running out of time,” he grumbled.

Another bullet left the gun, and he smiled.

That alone was enough to fill me with horror. Here was the assassin in his element, a side of him I’d never seen.

And he was fucking good at it.

“Down.”

I didn’t ask who.

He fired again, and everything suddenly became silent.

When I discovered I’d squeezed my eyes shut, I blinked them a few times to clear my vision.

And found Creed bleeding on the ground by the tire.

I know I screamed, but I was too busy ripping the hoodie off and pressing it to the wound to care how I sounded. The sirens came closer, and I knew I had to get him out of the parking lot before emergency personnel arrived.

Or there would be no leaving.

“You have to help me, Creed,” I pleaded through my tears.
“Come on, get up.”

He wasn't unconscious, but he stumbled as I tried to force him into the back seat. Just as I thought we were in the clear, the door on the opposite side of the car opened, and I jerked my head up to look into the eyes of Senator Cassius Arden.

Holding a gun aimed at Creed's head.

CHAPTER 20

Creed

The entire time Nova was in that bank, I scoured the street for signs of Marsh or his men coming for us. My instincts told me nothing would go smoothly, and I had been right. Seconds after my girl got in the car, I spotted Jensen himself heading straight for us, along with a few of his goons. Right behind his car were Cassius and Celeste, who I feared were equally deadly as the mob boss in that instance.

I wished Nova had stayed put, but I should have known better. She felt more secure beside me, even as she watched me bring them all down. Celeste cowered in her fancy car, likely at the thought of how dangerous the situation was, but I left her alive at the end of it all. She was stupid—and certainly didn't deserve her daughter, who was never good enough in their eyes, despite striving to be all they expected of her—but I had no reason to kill her.

Not until the last man standing managed to aim true, did I find myself bleeding on the ground. I had to admit, Cassius was a better shot than I gave him credit for.

“You have to help me, Creed.” Nova's strangled voice cut through the din of gunfire still ringing in my ears. “Come on, get up.”

With her help, I was able to get into the car. My arm hurt like a bitch, but the bullet had gone straight through. All I needed was a goddamn second to catch my breath.

And somehow not get shot between the eyes by the father of the girl I'd taken.

"I knew you were just a little whore working with these guys to take my money," Cash sneered.

Moving as slow as I ever have, I used the cover of the hoodie to ease my handgun out of my waistband.

"Daddy—"

"Oh, no!" he interrupted. "It's not Daddy now that you've ruined my reputation completely. All you had to do was behave yourself and help me look good. I'll never poll favorably again, thanks to you."

Fuck, and I thought my family was heartless.

Another centimeter and I'd have a proper grip on the gun.

"You didn't even try to put up my ransom!" Nova cried.

"I'm not shelling out millions of dollars for a slut who isn't my daughter!" Cash hollered.

Nova gasped, and I felt so bad for her. "N-not your daughter?"

At that moment, she sounded as lost as a young child, and my heart broke for her. I knew the Ardens and the Marshes had spent more time together than most people thought was appropriate, but I'd never banked on Celeste having an affair.

"Your mother cheated on me in exchange for payment on some gambling debts. I'm sterile and have been since I was a teen."

While Nova cried and Cash rambled, I moved my hand farther out from behind me. We didn't have time to play Maury Povich; we needed to get the fuck out of there.

“Then who is my father?”

“Don't know, don't care. Ask the woman who spread her legs and ended up with you in her belly. She's tried to atone all these years, but I refuse to forgive her for such a betrayal.”

As he spoke, Cassius leaned closer until his gun pressed directly between my eyes. I swallowed, trying to convey my thoughts to Nova. Did he hate me for kidnapping her, or for my unintentional role in exposing his family secrets?

“I need both of you gone.”

“Jensen Marsh is dead, Senator,” I pointed out. “I killed him myself. Just move on with your life and let us leave.”

“Not happening.”

That was the moment I'd lost the fight, and I knew it. Nova began bawling, pleading with Cash not to shoot me.

“Baby, it'll be okay. You have to know by now I would gladly die for you. Just go; run into the bank where you'll be safe.”

Her fingers closed over mine, and I figured there was no use fighting her. Hell, maybe we'd both die in the backseat of an old Ford compact, with no one to witness what we'd meant to each other.

Fuck me sideways, the sound of the gun firing in such a small space left me deaf.

“That’s never coming out of the upholstery.”

It was meant to make her laugh, but it failed miserably.

The hoodie came in handy one more time as I wiped blood and other matter from my face and arm. Nova shook like a leaf about to fall from the tree, and I had to figure out how to escape with her going into shock.

Framing her face in my hands, I held her close enough that she had to look me in the eye. “We have to go right now.”

Slipping out of the back of the car with her in my arms, I rounded the hood and tucked her into the front passenger seat. I had to buckle her in, and then, without other options, I dragged the senator’s body out of the back seat and left it on the pavement. Getting in the driver’s seat as quickly as possible, I peeled out of the lot without a backward glance.

If the security cameras had caught any of our features, there’d be a BOLO out for us soon. If we made it to the airport without getting pulled over, it would be a miracle.

An even bigger miracle would be making our flight without getting recognized.

Using the interstate to my advantage, I pulled into a gas station at the next exit and had to carry Nova into the little outside restroom at the back of the building. No one would see us there, and we certainly needed to clean up rather than appear in public covered in brain matter.

Locking the door, I dropped the duffel bag on the floor and set Nova on the edge of the sink. She merely blinked up at me, so I began to talk as I turned on the faucet.

“You saved my life, baby. Do you have any idea how hot that is?”

Using the stingy paper towels and watered-down soap, I washed her face and down her neck. She didn't have it as bad as me, thankfully, because I was sure I didn't have time to wash her hair.

“You were brave, baby girl. So brave.”

I tugged her tank top off and slipped a clean one over her head while her eyes tracked my movements.

“That's much better.”

Moving quickly, I scrubbed my skin until it stung, ripping off my shirt and checking the bullet wound. It oozed slowly, so I tore a strip off the dirty shirt to tie around my biceps, taking the idea from Nova.

It felt as if eons had passed since she'd had to cut through the ropes around her wrists and tend to her wounds. Ages since I'd been a heartless monster searching for something beautiful, knowing I'd never find it.

Clean as I could get in a dingy gas station bathroom, I stood for a second in front of Nova and wrapped my arms around her.

“It's interesting,” she croaked.

“What is?”

“How intimacy and horror can come from the same place.”

Did she mean me, or the situation? Either way, her thoughts scared me.

“No time for philosophical discussions, baby. We have to get our asses on that plane before it’s too late.”

“You killed for me.”

“It’s my job.”

Her breath stuttered as she inhaled deeply. “This wasn’t a job you were hired to do, Creed. You killed them to save my life.”

“Yes, just like you killed Cassius to save my life.”

I felt her mouth rest over my pulse. “You’ve gotten under my skin until I’m helplessly addicted to you. No matter what I thought before, you’re everything to me now.” I struggled not to interrupt her as she swallowed. “I discovered today that I would do anything for you. Anything to keep you by my side.”

All-consuming passion, love, devotion—whatever words I chose, they all seemed paltry compared to my feelings. “I’ve given up all I had, all I am, for you. If I’d had to die for you today, I would have done it with a smile on my face if it meant you were safe.”

“All I need is you, Creed, for the rest of my life.”

Holding her tighter, I kissed the top of her head. “Then we’d better get going if we plan to have a life after this.”

Our bloody clothes, my cell phone, and the ID I created in her real name fit down at the bottom of the trash can, quickly covered with paper towels and toilet paper. The road to our terminal curved around the entire airport, and I kept an eye on my mirrors the same as I had on the drive down the interstate. So far, no one was following us.

I left the car in long-term parking with the title in the glove compartment. I'd used my real name, knowing I would no longer be Creed Cruz after today. Hopefully, the tickets to Berlin would throw everyone off for at least a hot minute so we could get to our destination free and clear. With a last long gaze at the case of weapons, I left my handgun on top and slung my arm over Nova's shoulders.

Let the authorities spin their wheels identifying the carnage in the backseat. Let them trace the weapons back to several unsolved murders. If they were intrepid, they could connect me to Marsh and Marsh to Arden. They might even find something to charge Celeste with, because I would bet all the money in my combined accounts she wasn't as clean as she portrayed on TV.

"Will you always wonder who your father is?" I asked as we walked to the shuttle stand.

"My gut tells me it's Jensen Marsh."

I stopped in my tracks. "Why?"

"Mother was awfully close with him, even when Dad—Cash wasn't around. They'd lock themselves in the study all the time."

"Do you think Celeste arranged this whole thing, then?"

Shrugging, Nova took my hand to urge me forward. "Could be. Or Jensen wanted Cassius out of the picture to have Celeste all to himself."

Huh. Pondering that, I slid the hood of her clean hoodie up over her burnished gold hair. That shit was like a beacon.

A beautiful beacon that suited her delicate bone structure perfectly.

After all the mess of today's showdown, I had yet to utter the words I knew she needed to hear. I knew she had tried to say them to me a few times, too.

They were true, but they were weak compared to reality. As I'd thought back in the bathroom, such an all-consuming passion for Nova's spirit ran deeper and truer than love. Her light, her goodness, was not inherited. She just was.

Perfect and flawed and forgiving. Sweet, good-hearted, and fierce.

She was mine, and I was hers.

As we settled on the shuttle seats, I held my breath for the possibility of our plans falling apart at the last minute. Maybe I should have made her dye her hair. Maybe we should have gotten colored contacts, or I should have grown a beard. Padded our clothing or some other way to obstruct our obvious identities.

I checked us in electronically, and we made it past security without hassle. With nothing but carry-ons, we only had to clear the gate check to board our flight to Fiji.

To forever.

Once we'd cleared that hurdle—the attendant had scarcely glanced at our identification—we sat as close to the gate as possible. My knee bounced as we waited in the hard plastic chairs. Nova kept her head down, and so did I, wishing I had

my phone or something else to keep my brain occupied, but it was better to be alert.

Perhaps I'd be on high alert for eternity.

Nova grabbed my hand and squeezed it, and I stilled my leg with great effort. It wouldn't help to bring attention to us. The minutes ticked by, and then a news bulletin appeared on the TV further down the terminal.

"Fuck," I hissed.

There we were, practically life-sized. Old pictures, but close enough. Christ, Nova looked like a high school cheerleader in her picture, while I looked . . .

True to life. I looked like a career criminal; like a man who'd lived a hard life and never once caught a break.

If anyone was really watching, our break was about to come to an end.

The voice over the loudspeaker called for first-class boarding of our flight, and I shot to my feet with Nova's hand clutched in mine. She gasped, and I knew she'd seen what I'd seen.

"Just walk normally, baby, and it'll be fine."

My feet hit the jetway, and my heart pounded hard enough to explode. We tucked our bags beneath our seats, and we both stared out the window at the baggage handlers.

"Only a few more minutes," she murmured.

Would we make it? Would this actually work?

“Is there such a thing as being pulled over mid-air?” Nova whispered.

Good God, was there? “I don’t think so.”

I’d heard of things like scrambling jets and forcing planes to land. That wouldn’t happen to us, would it?

“Do you like the names I picked, baby?” I asked to distract us both.

“Blake and Audrey Cavanaugh,” she recited. “We’re on our honeymoon. You surprised me with Fiji because it’s the one place I’ve always wanted to go but haven’t had the chance.”

“We met at photography class.” Picking up her hand, I kissed her knuckle next to the diamond ring I’d slid on her finger. It was real, but the marriage was not. “Turns out you’re better at it than me, and you can’t wait to use the fancy camera and photo printer I bought you.”

She grinned at me over her shoulder, then I saw her face freeze. Turning my head, I met the polite gaze of the flight attendant.

“Can I get you a drink?” she offered.

And I sighed in relief. “Nothing just now, thanks.”

“We’ll be taking off soon. If you need anything, just press the call button.”

I’d never been happier in my entire life to hear the noises of the plane as the jetway detached and we backed away from the terminal.

Had we done it?

The captain came over the loudspeaker, announcing our destination, the flight time, and the estimated time in Fiji at our arrival. By the time our twelve-plus hour flight was complete, it would be the following evening in the South Pacific.

“Oh, my God,” Nova whispered.

“What is it?” I whispered back.

Her eyes were huge and shiny when she leaned over to kiss my cheek. “We did it.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lara used to scribble her fictional characters down on legal pads in high school, and then not show them to anyone. She needs copious amounts of coffee and chocolate to survive. You'll find F.R.I.E.N.D.S. references sprinkled throughout her books because it's her favorite show. She enjoys eavesdropping on the character conversations in her head, which she has been assured doesn't make her crazy. Unfortunately, she always gets the best ideas while in the shower, driving, or about to fall asleep.

Though she's a Florida girl at heart, Lara currently resides in the Blue Ridge Mountains with her husband of twenty-plus years and their three children, where she is living out her own happily ever after with the boy she met at age fifteen.

Read More from Lara Norman

laranormanauthor.com

DARK LOVE
A DEADLY SINNER MC
NOVELLA
ASHLEY KAY

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DARK LOVE

She just wants to survive. He wants to own her.

Missy -

He's found me. After years of hiding in the shadows.
Staying under the radar goes to hell in one night.

I won't go back. I won't let my father put me under his
thumb. I'll die first.

Because the only man that can save me hates me. And I
hate him. Calix. But dear god I can't stop dreaming about him.

Calix -

She's the daughter of my enemy. I don't trust her. Can't
trust her.

But every time I see her, I want her. My body craves hers.
Needs to own her.

Will she let me in long enough to know the truth? And
have a taste of what I want.

I'm a bastard. Because I don't care. Circumstance have
thrown us together.

Let them try and take what's mine.

Dive into the kick-off of the Deadly Sinners MC by
Ashley Kay.

CHAPTER 1

Calix

Fucking Valentine's Day. Every year is the same dumb bullshit. Random women flood Sinner's Chamber, the local club our MC owns and frequents, thinking they're gonna land themselves a biker. Like this redhead pinned under me, against the wall.

"Yes, right there," she cries as I grind my dick deep into her wet cunt. Her walls squeeze around my cock, spurring me further. My left hand holds her ass and my index finger nudges her tight hole. The other hand slides up her stomach under her shirt to cup her breasts and flicks her nipple. "Oh God, right there. Calix."

Her use of my first name pisses me off. I introduced myself like I always do, Gage, my road name. No one calls me Calix, except family. And certainly not this bitch, who probably overheard it being thrown around at a club party. Damn Lucky, always screwing around. He knows fucking biker snatch-ons are just trying to lock one of us down.

I slip my cock out and turn her around, pressing her face against the plaster wall. "Ready for a real hard fuck?" I say, playing the part this woman clearly wants.

"Yes, please. Fuck me, Calix. I've always dreamed of being with a biker. Do whatever you want to me." She begs, saying my name again.

Who does this woman think she is? Coming into my fucking club, thinking she's seducing me? I'll give her the

experience she's craving. "Shut the fuck up, and bend over." I order, smashing her face against the wall. I spread her legs out, her wet lips glistening in the light. Perfect for lining up my cock with her slit. I slide in with one fast movement, not giving her any time to adjust to my size.

"Oh shit," she whimpers. I smirk, slamming into her cunt. Damn, that feels good, warm and tight. I pick up my pace, thrusting with all my force. Her ass bounces off my dick as her cries bleed into the loud music from the club outside.

After a few hard thrusts, the familiar sensation hits. I pop my thumb in my mouth, coating it in saliva, then bury it in her tight little hole. "God yes. I love anal," she screams. Fuck me. I let my thumb bottom out in her ass in time with my dick. Her wails go straight to my cock and I'm busting my load a moment later.

My dick jerks inside her twice before I slide out, remove the condom, and toss it in the trash can. I push my softening cock back into my jeans and do up my buckle. The redhead turns around, a look of bliss on her face.

"Wow, want to get a drink?"

"All good, doll. Thanks for the ride."

"Thanks," she sighs, her orgasm still clear on her face. "I'll see you next time."

Not likely. I turn out of the back room and make my way through the onslaught of bodies between me and the bar. The music thumps, any lyrics inaudible through the collection of noise and the scrape of a guitar. Vicious, the club's Sergeant at

Arms, sits alone at the far end. *Thank god.* I grab the empty seat beside him.

“Rough night?”

“The pussy in this place is a little clingy,” I spit.

“You always say that,” Vicious says, handing me a fresh bottle from the bucket in front of him. He doesn’t so much as glance my way. One glimpse down his line of sight tells me all I need: Onyx Grey. The only woman on the planet to get under Vicious’ skin, and he’s never even touched the girl.

No man from the club would dare. Dorian and Karis, the club’s Vice President and President, have rules about dating their daughters and I’m not risking my cut for any woman. Clearly Vicious doesn’t feel the same way.

“She’s gonna get you fucked, you know that, right?”

“Watch your mouth, I don’t need a gossipy prospect overhearing you and spreading bullshit,” he growls. His voice drops deeper than normal, taking on a deadly edge. Still, he stares at her while she grinds her ass against a man dumb enough to touch Dorian Grey’s daughter. Dead man walking right there.

“Then stop staring at her like you fucking own her.”

Vicious’ head snaps to me, death in his gaze. I blow him a kiss. He leans over, flipping a knife through his fingers — *where the fuck did that come from?*—and points it at my neck. The lights of the club flash over his face, making him look more menacing than normal. His eyes seem to lose their humanity, dissipating into black pits. Seeing him like this, I

could swear a demon lurks beneath his skin, just waiting for an opportunity to break out.

The corner of his mouth turns up. “I’ll give you that one cause we’re friends. But Nyx is my fucking concern. Let me worry about my repercussions.” He kicks back on the stool, leaning against the wall.

A few heads glance our way. Thank fuck, the humming bass swallows up most sound in this place. “That problem is all yours,” I spit at him. He nods his head and takes a swig of his beer. “Don’t risk your damn cut on her.” I swear he mumbles back, “too late” but I can’t be sure with the noise.

As if she senses our conversation, the little shadow painted in black and red comes strutting our way. Every male eye follows her, including the dude whose dick she was grinding on. She stops him with one twitch of her finger. He drops his head in defeat and walks off with his tail between his legs. Hot damn, she is something. Nothing but feistiness and spunk smashed into her five foot frame. She levels her gaze on Vicious, fire lighting in her violet eyes. Well, maybe V isn’t the only one fucked.

Poor bastards. Free pussy is way better than hoping the girl you find is cool with you murdering someone on occasion.
Yeah, piece of cake.

CHAPTER 2

Missy

The constant thumping of bass seeps into my blood until it melds into the same beat of my heart. Two years of long-ass nights, wandering hands and coworkers who look at me like scum are taking a toll. The music is the only thing that keeps me grounded. As long as the melody fills my veins, I can take everything else that life throws at me.

Sinner's Playroom isn't a terrible place. The people are nice enough, or at least they were, and the story I fed everyone about my background worked for a time. Until I slipped up. I should have known friends in a place like this was just a pipe dream. I'm lucky the slip didn't mean I needed to move.

After five years of constantly looking over my shoulder, I think I'm safe. He would come for me if he knew how to find me. He's already proven that much.

"Sugar, you're up next. Make sure you're ready," snarls Mercedes. God, what is it with that name? They're always meaner than shit. I ignore her bitchiness and finish up for my set. This costume isn't my favorite, the thin black straps barely thick enough to cover my nipples and pussy. At least my tiny skirt gives me some coverage. Tuesday's nights are always the worst; the clientele is always sleazier because our outfits are skimpier. Just the thought of the roaming hands tonight makes me heave.

The light behind the stage flashes, letting me know it's go-time. I strut onto the dark platform in time with the beat,

letting the music wash over me and dull the nerves that always seem to build before a set. The breaks on stage help me push through the rest of the stomach-turning night. I don't mind being stared at. It's the hovering scent of stale beer and decaying tobacco. Not to mention the constant inappropriate touching. Just because I'm a stripper doesn't mean I let all my boundaries go right out the window.

Stop. Focus. I have to force my brain to push my thoughts away. Doing anything on the pole requires concentration. Sure, it looks easy, but that's 'cause I've worked my ass off to make it look that way.

The music stops and a man in front hollers, sending my heart slamming into my chest. The bouncers are right there, making sure he doesn't get too rowdy, thank god. I blow a kiss to the crowd, earning me a roomful of cheers and praise. Even though I'm on the stage in a strip club, I can't help but imagine what it would be like if this was an actual concert hall and the men in the chairs were screaming fans instead of drunk patrons.

Sweat sticks to every inch of my body, droplets falling in between my breasts and forcing me to fight the urge to rub away the itch. No way I'm messing up the hour it took me to apply all of this glitter just right.

"Nice moves," calls a woman dressed in a black leather jacket, skintight jeans and black leather boots that go all the way up her thighs. Her brown hair frames her face, making her smoky gray eyes stand out against her makeup and golden skin.

“Thanks,” I say, not sure why she’s backstage. I’ve never seen her before, but the vibe radiating off her screams *I dare you to fuck with me*, and I will not be doing that, given that I like my ass where it is, thank you very much.

“Come here, girl,” she crooks her finger at me, flashing black pointy tips accented with a thin red line. They’re fierce and sexy, making me instantly hide my hands. I miss having nails like that but I have to budget for every penny I make now, I can’t splurge on more than a simple manicure once a month.

“Do you need something?”

“Do you like working here?” she asks, completely ignoring my question. I don’t answer. “This isn’t a trick, honey. Do you like working here or do you like dancing?”

“Dancing is the one thing in my life that isn’t eating my soul.” I wish I could snatch the admission back the second it’s out.

“A girl after my own heart. You may not believe this, but I’ve been exactly where you are right now.”

“And where is that?” I snip, bleeding more edge into my tone than I intend, but I can’t stand when people assume they know me or where I’m coming from.

“You hate working here but do it because you love to dance and the money keeps you surviving. Am I close?” A pit sinks to the bottom of my stomach, and I swallow, unsure how to respond so I just nod. “I thought so. Nothing to be ashamed of, you’re a talented dancer making a living.”

“What’s your point?” I ask, wanting her to move this along. Her observation of me is making my skin crawl. I didn’t realize I was that easy to read.

“I’m Jessie, I run Underground Inc. and we’re hosting an audition next week.”

Mercedes bumps into my shoulder from behind, knocking me forward a few steps. “Hi.” Her voice drips with honey and turns my stomach.

Jessie levels her eyes on her and pulls her lip up in a snarl. “Someone needs to learn some manners.”

Mercedes scoffs. “She’s a nobody. Just a rich bitch pretending to fit in ‘cause it’s cool.” My eyes go wide at her comment. Who the fuck does she think she is? She doesn’t know me. She just hates me after finding out my parents had money.

I’ll never understand why people think that just because parents are rich, their children are as well. Beyond room and board, I never enjoyed their money.

Jessie doesn’t waste a breath before her hand latches around my coworker’s wrist, wrenching it behind her back and forcing a whimper from her. “Funny, I heard a rumor you were causing issues here. Guess they were right. Pack your shit and get the fuck out. We’re all here to make a living, not deal with petty drama.” Jessie lets her go and Mercedes tumbles forward.

“But I need this job. You can’t do this. I did nothing wrong.” Jessie looks over at me and back at Mercedes with the

funniest look on her face; it's a mixture of "am I insane?" and "what is this woman smoking?"

"Did you not just ram your shoulder into a coworker hard enough for her to stumble? And then call her a rich bitch to top it off, or did I imagine that?"

"She's pretending to be one of us," she sneers.

"Enough. Prospect!" Jessie calls to a man walking by us in a leather cut. He stops, turning around slowly.

"Ma'am."

"Escort this one out and find Gage. We need to chat." He nods in response, escorting Mercedes away while she glares at me. "Back to why I'm here. The audition," she says, turning back to me and handing me a postcard. "You're good, and I think you'd be a decent fit. If you want to know more, show up." Confidence drips off of her and I find myself wanting to be more like her in some way, to have some of that assurance backing me up.

I turn the paper over in my hand to find an address listed on the back: Downtown Los Angeles. "Be there tomorrow at noon." I nod and head over to the employee bar area in the back. A man I don't recognize sits in one of the short black lounge chairs. I grab a bottle from the bar; Ace always leaves a few bottles out back here for us in case someone needs a little help before going on stage.

Liquid courage is exactly what I need right now. The paper in my hand calls for my attention, so I slip it into the only place I can think to keep it safe and out of sight: my breasts.

The man in the chair notices; his eyes never leave my hand. He's kinda hot, with blonde hair buzzed to the side of his head, but longer on top. He's wearing a black Deadly Sinners cut, so he's with the club. *Stay away from trouble!* Noted, I reassure myself, I have enough issues without inviting club life to my door. Just because I work in a strip club owned by a motorcycle gang, doesn't mean I want to be involved with the club.

What about the audition? I didn't think of that. Surely it's part of it because Jessie is a biker babe; that was pretty obvious. I reach for a bottle, but my hand won't stop shaking.

I'm stuck between excited and terrified. Excited by the reality of leaving this place is on the horizon and terrified about stepping a foot back into Downtown. What if...?

No. I refuse to speak that bad luck into reality.

"Need some help?" the man asks before grabbing the bottle I was reaching towards.

"Thanks. Two fingers."

The man twirls the bottle around his hand before uncapping it and pouring the perfect amount into two rocks glasses on the makeshift bar top. "Here you go. Are we celebrating anything?"

"The possibility of getting out of here," I say, and tip my glass back, letting all the amber liquid flow down my throat.

"Well, I do like a woman who knows what she wants."

"Huh?" Realization of what I just said hits, *oh god*. "Sorry, misspoke."

“Damn, and here I thought a beautiful woman wanted to take me home.” I pinch my lips together to keep from cackling. I hear lots of pickup lines daily, but this interaction takes the cake.

“You’re smooth.”

He leans into me, his indigo blue eyes stealing every bit of breath from my lungs. He smells like a mix of citrus and cinnamon spiced cider. The combination swirls in my nose, going from my brain to my clit. Fuck, I haven’t been this aroused being near a man in over a year. Working here will do that to you.

“You have no idea how smooth I can be,” he says. His hand grazes the exposed skin on my stomach. My nipples tighten at the touch.

Holy shit. “Maybe you should show me,” I taunt.

“Oh, you’re a brave little sprite.” His breath caresses my neck the closer he gets until his lips graze my ear. “Say the word and we can really take this celebration to the next level.”

The word “yes” is on the tip of my tongue.

“Gage, go-time,” calls Jessie from the doorway, sucking the tension right out of the room.

“Fuck. Maybe next time,” he says before leaving. And I’m left standing here, regretting not saying yes sooner.

I reach for another drink, but something pokes my boob. I pull out the card Jessie handed me earlier with the address to the audition on the back. Can I do this?

If you go back, he'll find you. I shake the thought away. I already know I'm doing it; if I don't, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

* * *

Sweat drips from every inch of my body. My muscles scream for me to give in but I refuse. I can do this. I follow the woman in front of me, raising my left foot slowly off the floor, hugging my ankle. *Brush your toes*, I say to myself, remembering to keep my foot as close to my knee for as long as possible before I extend from the back of my knee, stretching my toes to the sky.

God this feels glorious. Even if I don't make it any further today, I needed this. To dance like I used to, unabashed and for myself, without hungry eyes or wandering fingers, pressing in on places they don't belong.

I wasn't going to take Jessie up on her offer to audition for Underground Inc., but honestly, what do I have to lose? The club is a dead end. I'm miserable and looking for a way out, so why not take this one.?

The woman leading the audition calls out commands; I follow them without fail. Sweat continues to drip down my back and between my breasts. *Shit*, I'm gonna need a damn hose before I get in any car after this. I haven't sweat this much in ages, plus the strain in my muscles? It's glorious. The woman calls out the last command, instructing us to hold an arabesque for an eight count, balanced on relevé. Piece of cake.

Jessie breaks out into a clap. “Thank you, Morgan.” The blonde nods her head and turns to leave right as the back door screeches open. “Ah, perfect timing, as always. Ladies, this is Onyx, she leads our Elite group. Our headliners if you will. I asked her to stop by and assist with the last part of our audition today.”

The woman in question looks lethal. Dark hair, black as night and twisted into a sleek bun, which sits anchored from the top of her head, showing off her pointed jaw and long neck. She looks bored and ready to be anywhere but here. My eyes lock on the inky tattoos covering her arms and back in a veil of dark ink cascading beneath her clothes.

“Okay, this part is simple. I’m going to put on some music. All I want you to do is feel the beat move through you and dance it out. Ignore Onyx walking around, she’s here as another set of eyes,” Jessie announces. The other women don’t look convinced and some look downright uncomfortable. “Alright, let’s begin.”

The remaining eight of us move to the center of the floor. Slow, soft notes build into a rolling crescendo. The singer’s voice comes in like a melodic wave. My body instantly responds, blacking out the rest of the world. Heavy emotion cracks through me, bleeding with the pain the singer infuses into the song. Suddenly the music stops and the singer’s voice turns staccato in a frantic rhythm before turning back into the mournful melody.

I let my hips and chest roll with each change in melody, lifting my leg into a full extension before throwing my body

into a twist. My toes become one with the floor. The beat picks up again and I move into a series of turns, pushing my leg out in front of me before snapping it to whip beneath me.

On my third rotation, the sounds quiet and a round of clapping and howling picks up from Onyx and the group of men who arrived behind her. She puts her fingers between her teeth and whistles so loud the back of my neck pinches. *Shit.*

“Oh, fuck yes. That’s what I’m talking about. We’re done here. Thanks for coming, ladies. Jessie will be in touch with where she wants or needs you.”

A pit forms in my stomach. It’s over, just like that. *Crap.* I turn towards my bag but Onyx stops me. “Not you, sweetheart. You, I want on my fucking team.”

“Excuse me?” The question falls out. She can’t be serious, after only watching for one song? I look at the other women filing out of the room; some seem sad, a few look at me with anger filling their eyes. Great. “Don’t worry about the angry ones. There’s always a few who want to make Elite but never do.”

“They’re lucky. They won’t last a day under your tyranny,” says a dark-haired man. His round face is an odd contrast to the darkness swirling in his eyes.

“Quit it, Micah, you’ll scare her, and I need a second.”

“If she’s sane, she won’t last a day. Are you sane, girly?” the muscular man with dark eyes asks.

“Not a chance,” I smirk.

“My kind of people,” Onyx coos. “Alright, the hours are rough, but the pay is good, and it comes with room and board.”

“If it gets me out of Sinner’s Playroom, I’m all in.”

“Perfect, I can fucking do that, honey, and then some.”

“Where do I sign?” I hold out my hand and Onyx grabs it, pulling me into her.

“Hell yes, this is gonna be fun. First up, let’s get your stuff. Then we can talk contract and money back at my place. You’ll be staying with me.” She raises her eyebrow, a small smile splits her face.

“Um, okay. I took a cab here,” I say, running my fingers over the strap of my bag. “If you give me the address I can be there later today.” *Please say yes.* I really don’t want any of these people to see where I live.

Onyx laughs and the men behind her look confused. She slides her arm through mine. “Not a chance. You’re one of us now.” She leads us through the front door. Two men in black motorcycle cuts stand with their backs to the building in front of an SUV. I stop in my tracks. I’m not a stranger to men in cuts, the Sinner’s Playroom is owned by the Deadly Sinners MC after all, but, somehow, seeing them here surprises me.

“Don’t mind the prospects, they’re harmless.”

“Harmless?” I try not to let sarcasm seep into my tone.

Onyx giggles. “I should introduce myself, I’m Onyx Grey, but for the love of God, call me Nyx.” My heart stalls on her words. “I grew up with a lot of these guys; trust me, they

won't touch you. Ever." The way she says "ever" sends a shiver down my spine. Like she'd actually hurt someone for coming at me. Warmth settles in my stomach. I've never had people in my corner.

CHAPTER 3

Calix

“Someone has to have something on the prick,” Vicious grumbles. “He’s not a fucking ghost.”

“He’s as good as one. There is no dirt on him. He’s an entrepreneur out of Orange County, with several million spread among a few businesses. Been a lawyer since he turned twenty-two. Has a wife, a daughter no one ever sees or talks about. From the evidence I gathered, she’s either dead or in hiding.”

“Could he be hiding her away? If he cares that much, she might be useful if we can tie her to the club somehow.” Kraken, the club president, proposes.

Vicious gets a dark look in his eye that always scares the living shit outta me. The man has demons and I’m certain they’re afraid of him too. He’s been with the MC longer than I have, getting patched in at nineteen. He quickly became MCs enforcer and only recently moved up to Sergeant at arms, giving me the job as enforcer in his absence.

A gruesome job not fit for just anyone. Torture comes around every Tuesday like tacos. There’s always someone to interview and dissect, not that I’m complaining. The constant work helps keep the screams of my past to a whisper. Sometimes the voices get so loud I have to jump on my bike and just drive to drown them out. At least with work, the screams filling my head make sense.

“Someone needs to find something. He’s rising up too quick for someone not in the family. Either Fredo is losing his grip on reality or something is fucking amiss inside that house,” Kraken says. “My intel says he’s responsible for some of the missing shipments we’ve been dealing with. We’ve worked too fucking hard for peace with the others. I’m not letting it all go to shit because some asshole has a Don’s ear.”

“Maybe Fredo has an issue with one of his daughters taking over,” I offer.

“I’ll test the water next week at our meeting. But I think you’re right. It’s the only explanation that makes sense,” the Pres says. “I want one of his men here this week. We need more intel. But I got a bad feeling about Marcum. Gage, I want you on the run next week up North, with Texas and Doc. These prospects are too new.”

“Anything you need, Pres. And put feelers out for intel on Marcum, too. He’s definitely up to something.”

“Good thing Jessie already found the daughter. How’s that for intel?” our VP states with a shit-eating grin. Bastard. He’s always been great at hiding things. As if on cue, Jessie pushes through the back door of the clubhouse, heading our way.

She breezes right past me and Vicious, her stilettos clinking with each step. She comes to a stop, lodging herself against Dragon’s side. Jessie looks like a biker’s wet dream: thigh-high boots and clad in leather from head to toe. Her smoking eye makeup and the light sheen of sweat glistening off her skin only add to the badass energy dripping off of her.

“Boys,” she purrs. Dragon’s hand slides around her waist, resting on her hip.

“Well, did you find her?” Pres demands.

“We might have found her. I can’t confirm for sure because she doesn’t match the photo exactly, but my gut says it’s her. She’s a spitting image of Marcum’s first wife. The same dark hair, curvy body and sharp jaw.”

“You’re sure?” Kraken presses her.

“Don’t matter if it’s her. I hired her into Elite today.”

“You did what?” Dragon says, pulling away from her.

“Don’t push me, Dorian. The girl is talented as fuck. No way was I or Nyx gonna let her walk.” She crosses her arms over her chest and raises her eyebrow. “I thought you wanted her tied to the club. She is.”

“You put our daughter in the middle,” grumbles Dragon. Jessie looks at the club VP like he has two heads.

“Our daughter is a beast in her own right. She can take care of herself. She wouldn’t control Elite if I thought otherwise.” Jessie levels a look at Dragon that dares him to test her. A chill goes through the group. Jessie is one in a million—feisty, strong and the only woman on the planet who would dare challenge Dragon, the club VP, for fun. “Nyx likes her already. She’s having her stay with her and without any interference from the club.”

My gaze darts to Vicious. No surprise, his hand is in a fist at his side, the muscle in the side of his jaw strung taut. Dude has it bad.

“This is the best outcome we can hope for. Let them grow close naturally and if we need the girl to take her father down, ask her when the time comes. It won’t serve anyone if we scare her off.”

“Always thinking twenty steps ahead.”

“It’s why you love me, brother,” she quips, blowing the Pres a kiss.

“Watch it,” Dragon snips.

“Hush, you know I’m yours and only yours,” Jessie coos. The VP leans down and captures her mouth with his. I turn away, not wanting to stare at the intimate moment. Those two are the exception for sure. “Come on, you need to relax.” She pulls the VP back towards the clubhouse. “You’re good, right, Karis? I have plans.”

“See you later, brother. Enjoy your wife,” Pres says with a soft chuckle. “Lovesick fuck.”

DING! DING

My phone goes off in my pocket, stopping the conversation.

“Yeah.”

“Gage, we fucked up.”

“Will you stop being such a fucking pussy? The faster you move, the faster we can get out of here, duh!” Nyx shouts in the background. Fuck me, what now? I pull the phone from my ear and put it on speaker.

“Wanna explain to Pres how you fucked up, prospect?”

“We’re in Red Devil territory. Apparently, Missy lives here. We didn’t know until we got here.”

“You’re fucking where?” Vicious roars. Pres gives him a knowing look. Oh, so Pres knows about V’s obsession—interesting.

“We didn’t know. Didn’t follow protocol to ask permission because the address is right on the edge of their territory.”

“Don’t fucking move. I’ll call Dex. If any Red Devils show, just keep the girls alive or it’s your ass,” I order the prospect.

“You know you just blew your fucking load, right? Calling fucking Calix for this shit!” Nyx screams at the prospect in the background, using my real name to boot, before I hang up. Vicious licks his lips; fucker is clearly getting off on her attitude. She’s all his. I like them with a little less venom and bite. A woman like Nyx gets under your skin and bleeds into your soul. I want nothing like that in my life.

“Always something with that girl,” Pres says. “Call Dex, get it figured out, and make sure Nyx comes back without one hair out of place. You feel me, Gage?”

I pull my phone out and speed-dial Dex.

He may be the leader of the Red Devils, but we have a tentative truce with them. Hopefully, he won’t be a complete douchebag.

“Gage, I hear some Sinners are in my territory without permission.”

“Our prospects messed up. They’re moving one of our dancers on Onyx’s orders. No one realized she lived in Red Devil territory.”

“Wait. I just sent my guys alone to deal with Nyx head-on? Fuck me,” Dex replies with a chuckle. Pres grins from ear to ear, one proud uncle that a rival gang fears his niece like one of his own guys. “Alright, I’ll call ‘em off but you better get over there. I sent prospects to handle it.”

“Shit. Thanks Dex. We’ll be there in ten.” I hang up the phone.

“Bring back my fucking niece, you two,” Pres says before storming off back to the clubhouse.

“Fucking hell, Nyx’s new pet better not be a goddamn spy,” I mutter under my breath. She’s already a pain in my ass and I haven’t even met her yet.

CHAPTER 4

Missy

“You didn’t need to do that, do you even have a pair of balls?” Nyx snarls at the prospect holding his phone in his hand like a limp dick he doesn’t know what to do with. The idiot stares at us, frozen in place.

“We need to leave,” he orders, ignoring Nyx’s insults.

“I don’t care about the rest. We don’t need to take it,” I blurt. Saying that hurts because this place was the first thing that was mine. I paid for the rent, not my father. But I don’t want to be here when those bikers show up. I couldn’t follow most of the conversation, but being in a rival area is not good.

“You heard her, Onyx. Leave it and let’s go.”

“Fine,” she huffs out. We make our way down the flight of stairs, the two prospects each carrying two boxes to go with the four others waiting in the SUV. We only make it two steps outside when a rumble of motors surrounds us. “Shit.” Nyx whispers, “Don’t say anything, I got this.”

Four bikers close in around our vehicle, making it impossible to leave. Onyx steps forward. “Hey guys, this is a simple misunderstanding. I’m sure if you call Dex, he’ll clear it all up.”

The bikers dismount from their bikes and remove their helmets. One steps forward, eyeing Onyx up and down. “Funny you say that, Dex is the one who sent us.”

“Then he didn’t know who he was sending you to,” she quips back, confidence lacing her tone. “He would never be so cruel to his men.”

“You think you’re something special?” the man sneers. His face contorts into a scowl. “You’re nothing more than some dumb Deadly Sinner pass-around. Bet once you fuck a real man, you’ll never go back to the Sinners. How about we find out right now? Just say the word and I’ll let you ride a real dick, sweetheart.”

Nyx cackles low, creepy, and maniacal until a loud laugh bursts from her. “You are barking up the wrong fucking tree, honey. Plus, you couldn’t handle me if you tried.”

“Stupid bitch,” the biker growls, pulling out a knife. No one moves. “Not so big now, are you?” he taunts.

In what feels like the blink of an eye, Nyx pulls a small handgun from under her jacket. “You were saying?” The other bikers reach for their waistbands. The prospects next to me don’t move a muscle and neither do I. I don’t want to die here. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, boys.” They freeze. A roar builds from two different directions headed right for us. Within seconds, four more bikers join the gathering in front of me.

I feel like I’m in some sort of movie. It’s the middle of the day and I’m in a biker standoff. How the hell did I get here?

Two of the bikers are wearing Deadly Sinner cuts and the other two are wearing Red Devils colors. The four men remove their helmets and I suck in a breath; the shorter man in the Deadly Sinner cut is fucking beautiful.

Holy hell, it's the man from the other night. Same blonde hair cut tight to his scalp, that super tight jawline and those piercing eyes that only exist on social media filters. He's as wide as a house too, same as the other guy that arrived with him. They dismount from their bikes and take in the scene. The other Deadly Sinner, who's sporting a beard and dark twinkling eyes, smirks at Onyx like he's getting off on this. The hot one scowls, stopping my thoughts in their tracks. I swallow, he levels cold, angry eyes on me sending a chill through my body.

The Red Devils approach, and a man with a President patch steps forward. "What's going on here?"

"You sent us, boss. She got mouthy."

"I'd expect nothing less. You are aware you're holding a knife to Dragon's princess, right?"

"Fuck you, Dex. I'm no one's fucking princess," Nyx tosses back.

"Onyx Grey?" The biker says her name like a curse; his eyes grow huge and his lip quivers for half a second before his hard mask slips back in place. "I was just doing what I was told, Pres."

"I'll deal with you later. For now, get the fuck outta here. Aero and I can handle this."

The bigger man comes up behind Nyx; he slips his hand over her fingers and lowers her arm holding the gun. She slips it behind her back, and as she does I don't miss the lingering touch the man gives her. I turn away and the other Deadly

Sinner has his gaze narrowed on me. Great, pissed off someone already. Way to go, Missy.

The other bikers take off, leaving the Deadly Sinners and the two Red Devils that arrived last. “We can take it from here, Dex. We’re only gonna be a few minutes.”

The biker walks over to the SUV and leans against the hood. “Well it doesn’t look very secure if I just leave high-ranking Deadly Sinner officers in my territory to do what they please without some sort of escort. Nah, Vicious, I’m good. Plus, if I stay I can flirt with Nyx. If I’m lucky, she’ll help me bridge our clubs.”

Fire lights in Vicious’ eyes, the small amount of color evaporates, and blackness overtakes them. “Not likely,” Nyx answers.

“Challenge accepted, baby girl,” Dex purrs. Vicious looks ready to murder him. The other Deadly Sinner knocks him with his shoulder and that seems to snap him out of the brewing anger. Dear god, what have I gotten myself into?

The prospects take the rest of the boxes and load them in the car. It takes them only a few moments. Nyx struts over and hooks her arm in mine. “Oh look, they’re done. Say goodbye to this dump, honey. We’re going home.” She looks to the SUV then to the men on bikes.

“Don’t even think about it, girl,” the blonde biker says. I still haven’t gotten his name, but he’s the best looking. His eyes feel like they go right through me every time I catch his gaze.

“Gage, you ruin everything.”

“I’m not wearing a backpack today, Nyx. Get in the SUV.” His command leaves no word for argument. Nyx climbs inside, shutting us in the back with the prospects up front.

“What was that?” I whisper.

She looks around, then shakes her head. “Later.”

We don’t say anything else on the way back to her, no, *our* apartment. “I’m sorry for back there,” I mumble.

Nyx snaps her head to me. “Don’t apologize. You aren’t on the inside yet, but don’t worry. That’s gonna change, very soon. You’re one of us now.”

One of them, that sounds kind of nice.

* * *

How did I have so many boxes? I swear I only gave them three. We’ve unpacked at least fifteen but, thankfully, there are only a handful left. I’m tired, clammy and starving. As if on cue, my stomach makes the loudest rumble. The two bikers and my new roommate, Nyx, turn towards me. The two that drove are downstairs bringing up more offending cardboard. *Ugh.*

“Guess I’m hungry,” I shrug.

“We’ve been working for a bit. I’m gonna order a pizza,” says Killian—I’ve learned that’s the name of the biker with dark brown hair, but he goes by Vicious. And the other one is Calix; he is the sexy one, but he seems to have a perpetual stick rammed in his ass since we met at my apartment.

All he's done is scowl at me since they arrived. I'm left wondering where the sexy biker from the other night is.

"Surely you two have better things to do," Nyx snips.

"We really don't."

She whirls on him. "Don't be a dick, Gage."

"Just doing my job, princess," he says with a smirk. She scoffs.

"We don't need a babysitter. We won't get in trouble."

"Not fucking likely," Vicious says under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Prospects will be back with pizza and beer in a bit. No need to waste away or get hangry, Nyx." The way that Vicious says her name, it warms a fire in my belly. It's so full of want and need in those three little letters. "Go clean up, pizza and dust don't go well together." I chuckle. Nyx rolls her eyes.

A phone goes off. "Mine," Nyx answers, walking down the hall and I take the opportunity to slip into the restroom near the front door. Before the door can close behind me, Gage is there, pushing me further inside.

"What fucking game are you playing?" he growls. My heart slams into my chest. His breath fills my nostrils with that same citrus and spiced cider that's filled my dreams since we met, had me imagining what it would be like to run my tongue over his chest and down his front. *Is the man a Christmas creamsicle?* I feel my lips pull up.

“You think this is funny?” He presses me against the bathroom wall, a hand gripping my wrist and holding me in place.

“No. What’s your issue?”

“I don’t trust you,” he grinds out.

“Didn’t seem to have a problem the other night,” I reply. His eyes are glued to my mouth as my tongue darts over my bottom lip, and my teeth slide into the wet flesh.

“Are you trying to get under my skin?”

I smirk. “I think I’m already there.” His grip tightens.

“You’re playing with fire. Trust me, I’ll end you.”

“Maybe I want the end. Maybe I’m ready to take the fucking leap off the goddamn ledge.”

Before I can think, a loud growl rips from his chest and his lips are on mine. His hand that’s not holding my wrist goes between us, landing right on the apex of my thighs. I gasp into him, and his hand on my pussy grips harder. Moisture gathers at my center. A whimper slips from my lips, and he chuckles against my mouth. I press my chest into his front, scraping my nipples on the button of his cut.

“Fuuuck.” He stills. “Get out, before I make a mistake we can’t take back.”

“Gage,” I breathe. He doesn’t say anything, just slips out of the bathroom, leaving me a panting wet mess. *What the fuck was that?*

After a few moments to collect myself, I leave the safety of the bathroom.

“Missy, do you drink? I need some liquid therapy,” Onyx whines.

“I’ll take anything. I’m easy.” A choking sound comes from Gage. I narrow my eyes at him, but he just scowls back. *Bastard.*

“My kind of girl. Let’s see what I have,” Nyx says, regaining my attention. She opens the French door on her beautiful stainless steel refrigerator.

The entire kitchen is a dream, boasting a professional grade range and oven as well. I can’t wait to cook in here.

“Like the kitchen?” she asks.

“It’s beautiful. This entire place is amazing. I can’t believe this is where I’m living now.” She laughs at me, and I join in.

“We’ll be downstairs grabbing food,” Vicious interjects, smacking Gage on the arm. “Let’s go.”

The second the door shuts behind the guys, I let my question fly. “Onyx, are you really a biker princess, like that guy called you?”

“I fucking hate that term,” Onyx says over her shoulder. She looks feral with her lip curled up. “And it’s Nyx. But, I guess it’s true. My dad is Dragon, the Deadly Sinners Vice President, and my uncle is Kraken, the President. Not something I would go screaming from the rooftops, but yeah.”

“Wow.” I don’t say anything for a few moments. “Okay, so tell me what I’m getting myself into here. I should have asked before I agreed and moved all my stuff, but I’m here now. Lay it all out, no surprises.”

“It’s pretty simple. We work for Underground Inc.; it’s an entertainment company, of sorts. We get booked for parties, special events, and we perform at two of the clubs a couple times a month. The pay is good, and you’ll sign an NDA for each event. It makes the clients feel better for the price tag they pay to know that the entertainment isn’t listening or squeamish if things get out of hand.” She finishes and takes a gulp of seltzer.

Out of hand. The words spin in my head, but I keep nodding away to what Nyx is saying. She can’t be serious. Entertainment for the criminals in this town? I didn’t even realize something like that existed, but it makes sense.

“You’re looking kind of pale.” She grabs a water bottle from the fridge and places it on my neck. “Here.”

“I didn’t realize the club would be so involved.”

“It’s mostly for protection. You don’t have anything to worry about.” I nod at her and help myself to a beer. Water isn’t strong enough. Indecision wars inside me. I should tell her that I’m hiding out. *You should not.* My heart slams into my chest and sweat gathers on my skin.

The door opens with a bang and Vicious and Gage enter with two pizza boxes and drinks. My stomach rumbles; thank god, *food.*

“Eat up, girl,” Gage says. I have to swallow the urge to bark at him to leave me be. Asshole is such a fucking...well... he’s an asshole. I cringe at my own thoughts, why can’t I come up with something better? *A dick*. No, wrong word. I’m now picturing the bulge I caught sight of in the restroom.

Nyx’s phone beeps. She glances over at it and rolls her eyes.

“Why not just dump the asshole?” Vicious asks, then swallows, seeming to realize he said his comment out loud. Nyx’s face goes red, Gage smirks and Vicious stares her down. “I’m not gonna apologize, no matter how hard you stare.”

“How about you keep out of my shit?” she snarks back, spinning around to lock eyes on him. “I’m perfectly happy with my choices. Are you?” The temperature in the room drops. I look from Vicious to Nyx, waiting to see who moves next.

“Fuck it. I don’t fucking need this shit from you. Gage, let’s go,” Vicious calls before storming out of the apartment. Gage gives me one last lingering look, and I can’t help the shiver aching to roll through my body, but I refuse to let him see how he affects me. It’s just lust.

“Don’t hate me. I swear my life isn’t this insane all the time. Certainly not all in one day,” Nyx lets out the second the door shuts. She glances at the pizza. “We have food, let’s tackle these boxes and I’ll fill you in on anything you want to know. Including all the details about Gage.”

“What do you mean?” I say way too fast.

“Oh my god, you’re totally blushing. He is hot, though.”
Fire creeps up my neck.

“Are they all as hot as him?” I whisper.

“It’s just us, Missy. No need to whisper, and yeah, most of the Sinners are babes but they’re man-whores, so watch your heart if you hook up with any of ‘em.”

I grab another beer from the fridge and a slice of pizza.
“Not likely. I prefer being single.”

“Perfect, I might be single soon myself. We can get into loads of trouble.” She cackles and I fall in with her, talking about nothing and everything which helps make unpacking go faster.

Three hours later we’re done, it’s late and I’m beyond sore from all the lifting. “Use the jets in your tub tonight. They’ll help loosen your aching muscles.”

“Wait, the tubs have jets? Can this place get any better?”

“You’ll be cursing my name by the end of the week, just watch.”

“Doubt it. I like hard work.” Nyx sticks her tongue out at me, and shoos me off to my room. Once inside, I rush to the bath. She wasn’t joking, there are six jets lining the tub. Oh yes!

I fill the basin and take my time peeling the sticky clothes from my body and rummaging through my drawers for a pair of pajamas. It takes the tub a good five minutes to fill. The first bite of the scalding water is glorious. I slip beneath the

surface and for the first time in years, I'm not looking over my shoulder for the boogie man. It will last this time, it has to.

CHAPTER 5

Calix

Two Weeks Later

Fucking bullshit parties like this are the worst. The rich elite hire Underground Inc, occasionally. It's all for show, for their morally gray business partners, to appear edgy and dangerous. In reality, most of these men would piss themselves after an hour in my shoes.

“What’s eating you?” Vicious asks at my left. “You aren’t on duty tonight, go relax, you need it.”

“Fuck that. The girls are working. They’re my responsibility.”

“Missy and Nyx are fine. I got eyes on them. Don’t be so uptight.”

“When the night is over. When they’re on, I’m working, you get it. You were the same fucking way,” I shout over the roar of music surrounding us. I can’t explain how I feel anymore. In two weeks I’ve gone from never wanting a woman, ever, to obsessing over a woman who is probably my fucking enemy. God, I have fucking issues. I’d rather be anywhere than alone with my thoughts right now. Even this lame party.

Typical over-the-top bullshit. Black everything with drips and pops of gold. Even the tables are completely black with only gold-rimmed glasses and gold silverware. I’ll admit, the decorations are interesting, but for what? No one is paying attention. Most of the guests are on the dance floor, creating a

sea of swaying bodies to the music, eyes glued to the stage. They cheer for a faceless DJ, trying to chase their next high. Today that high is drooling over the dancers.

I don't blame them. Missy and Nyx are a sight, dressed in one-pieces with fishnets and thigh-high black leather boots. My mind conjures images of all the things it wants to do to Missy. No, that would be a bad fucking idea. Doesn't matter how hot the woman is. She's hiding something, I can feel it, and protecting the club from traitors is my job. Except the damn woman is haunting my fucking dreams.

The music stops, and the lights dim, sending the crowd into a fit of cheers.

"Finally, the set's over," Vicious says. "They'll be coming around the corner in a few. You're worse than a mother hen right now. What gives?"

I don't answer. He knocks me in the back of my shoulder with his arm. "Spit it the fuck out, yeah? I don't have all night and I'm not gonna ask about your feelings again."

"Aw, Killian, you care," I tease, using his legal name to annoy him.

"Fuck you, dick. Spit it out or shove it down because I don't have all night."

"I don't trust the new girl."

"Missy? Jessie brought her in. What's rubbing you?"

"She's hiding something." It's a weak reason with nothing backing it up and Vicious knows it. He rolls his eyes.

“She’s probably hiding from her dickhead dad. But beyond that, you gotta have proof. She worked at the Playroom before she auditioned, they vetted her.” Vicious’ eyes dart to something behind me. “God dammit.” I turn to follow his gaze. Derek Marcum walks into the main ballroom accompanied by his protege, Preston Waters. Beautiful women hang on each of their arms; funny that the one on Marcum’s doesn’t match the photos of his wife. “I’ll text everyone.”

I scan the room looking for the girls, but come up empty. Son of a bitch. My gaze moves over the room one more time, relieved when I spot them in the corner. Nyx is laughing, and having the time of her life as usual. Missy though, she’s twitchy and, even from across the room, I’m positive she’s holding her breath. Her head doesn’t move, those beautiful green eyes don’t leave what’s caught her attention. I follow her line of sight. Marcum.

Fucking knew she was hiding something. I nudge Vicious in the arm, who looks ready to kill something, or someone. “Check Missy, I told you something isn’t right.” He looks towards the girl. She’s good at hiding shit, but I can see the difference. She’s scared.

“Not the time. Ask her when we get back. They’re clients around,” he snarls back.

“She’s eyeing Marcum, otherwise I’d let it go. She can’t be around Nyx if she’s a liability.” Vicious’ face turns to stone. I knew he’d turn into an unfeeling jerk the second he thought Nyx was being threatened. At least his damn obsession is good for something.

“Let it go. If you’re wrong, Jessie will kill you.”

“If I’m right, we need to know, I’ll be discrete.” Just need to push this anger down and out of my bloodstream. I should have known my gut was right. It’s always right, even when I wish like hell it was wrong.

CHAPTER 6

Missy

10 minutes earlier

Blood drums in my ears, the only Elite number of the night. I've busted ass the last two weeks working through this routine with Nyx and Jessie. I've spent more hours in the practice rooms at Underground Inc than I've spent in a dance studio in the last decade. My body aches daily and I fucking love it.

Tonight is my shot to prove to Jessie and the club that I belong here. The music starts, techno voices pulsing with the beat. My head lulls and I fall into my routine alongside Nyx. The bass builds, and our duet begins to earn calls from the crowd. I nail every turn and body arch. My heart races in anticipation for what's coming. *You got this.* The beat hits, our hands lock and we do the entire beat drop in sync with each other. Moving across the floor in leaps and twirls. And finally the last turn sequence is next.

My body takes over and falls right into the planned series of turns. I nail each one: three regular turns, two fouettes, and a second. Then again and again. *Yes!* My adrenaline is flying, Nyx and I cross each other, moving into the last pose and hold. The music stops and the crowd erupts in cheers. The sounds fill my heart. Finally, a crowd is cheering me for my dance moves and not because they got to see my tits swinging around.

We take a bow then move off stage.

“Missy ,you fucking killed it!” Jessie hollers from the side. She’s dressed in a short black dress that hugs every inch of her like a second skin and boots that match ours. “Way to go you two. I can’t wait to see how many requests we get for our new Elite pair. Go enjoy the rest of the night because next week we start partner work.” Nyx groans. “Exactly, fill her in and come ready to work. Well done ladies. Great fucking job.” Jessie walks off speaking into the microphone hanging off her head.

“How do you feel? Did the costume sit okay?” Nyx asks.

“Yep, everything fits perfect. Nyx, that was amazing.” Tears burn the backs of my eyes. “Thank you.”

“Don’t, thank you. I picked you because you have fucking talent, babe.” Heat warms my face and I’m grateful that I have so much makeup on it’s covering up my rosy cheeks. “Now comes the fun. Let’s go find some trouble.” She hooks my arm and we make our way to the main party floor. The other dancers are on stage now, dancing a routine I haven’t seen yet. They look amazing.

I turn around to tell Nyx something when my eyes land on a familiar man in a dark suit with a blonde I don’t recognize hanging off his arm. Pain scrapes across my heart but I force that feeling away; now is not the time to get nostalgic for the man who never gave a shit about me.

“Missy, what’s wrong?” Nyx asks, snapping out of my head.

Shit, shit, shit. What do I say? What is he even doing here? This is a party for businessmen connected to a mafia family. My dad is a straight-laced small claims lawyer. He would

never do anything illegal in his life. Except be a shit father and abuser. *Nope, keep those memories dead.* Not tonight. *Not ever.*

I don't answer Nyx as my eyes bounce around the room, looking for a way out. There must be a way out of here without making a scene. I hate to run out on Nyx and the club but I have to get out of here. He can't know I'm here. I won't be able to get away a second time.

"Ladies. Killer show," Gage's gruff voice startles me. I almost jump out of my skin. "Whoa, what's up? You're jumpier than shit. You good?" His arm grips my elbow, I try to pull away but he squeezes it.

"It's nothing. I probably need a bit of fresh air. Care to let go?"

"I don't like being lied to, Missy. Just fucking come clean now and we might be able to save you," Gage whispers in my ear. He knows! I pull back from him.

"Let me go. Please, you don't understand. I need to leave."

"Tell me why?" he growls.

"Calix," Nyx spits. "Watch yourself."

"Not the time, Nyx," Vicious says, earning himself an evil glare.

Gage winds his arm around my waist and pulls me against him. My skin ignites with that one touch, shooting heat straight to my core even in my anger. His hand stills against

my stomach. Right as my father pushes through the crowd, headed straight for us.

“Excuse me, I just had to meet you both. You’re so talented,” gushes the gorgeous woman attached to Preston—my former boyfriend. I freeze, the air in my lungs evaporating. Angry eyes lock with mine and a knowing grin spreads across my father’s face. Nyx either doesn’t notice or ignores it.

“You’re so sweet. We were just headed out. Full schedules and all,” she lies, thank god, buying us an exit.

“Don’t rush out too fast, it seems I owe the club a favor for finding something I’ve been missing for a long time.” My father’s voice is the same deep bravado I remember, dripping in coldness.

Blackness swirls at the corner of my vision as memory after memory flashes through my head. Gage’s thumb rubs circles over my stomach, pulling me back to reality. “I got a tip she might be here, I’m glad I listened. To think I almost missed tonight.”

What? Someone told him about me? But no one knew. He’s not making sense. “Nice to see you, but like Nyx said, we need to get going.” I shrug out of Gage’s hold and get two steps before my father and Preston block my path.

“Melissa, I haven’t seen you in five years, you aren’t running out on me so soon, are you?” He says the words with a grin on his face, but I don’t miss the anger simmering beneath the surface. “We have so much to catch up on, daughter.”

Nyx eyes bulge but Gage and Vicious don't react and neither do I. He dropped that hoping for a reaction and I refuse to give him one.

"As much as I hate to break up the family reunion, Missy and Nyx have rounds to make before we leave," Vicious cuts in. He steps in front of me just slightly and angled off of Gage, creating a box around us.

"You know the rules. My daughter, my property," my father says in a deadly whisper.

"Missy's club property, her and my enforcer are getting hitched, making her his. You understand club rules."

"You took off on our engagement to marry this buffoon? Pathetic," snarls Preston. I ignore his tantrum; he's only mad at the time he wasted pretending to care.

"We'll send you an invite," Gage says, I still haven't said a word, still stuck in shock. I can't marry a biker. The man in question bumps into me, pushing me closer to the door and further from my father.

"Act happy, little sprite. This will all be over soon," he whispers in my ear, my nipples pebbling from the caress of his breath over my skin. I lean into his touch and his chest scrapes my hardened nipples. *Dear god.* The universe sent Calix to ruin me, and I'm going to let him.

CHAPTER 7

Calix

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I roar at Vicious the second we get back to Nyx’s apartment. The women jump. Missy looks like my words physically struck her. *Good job, asshole.* Let her hate me, it’s better that way.

“There was no other option. If she’s club property, he has no claim on her.”

“Umm, hello, I’m an adult. He has no claim on me anyway. I’m not a piece of paper. No one owns me. I don’t even understand what Derek was doing there,” Missy says.

“You don’t call him dad?” I snip, unable to help myself. Her nostrils flare—it’s hot as fuck and brings my dick to life. Perfect timing, dude.

“Derek Marcum may be my father, but he hasn’t done anything fatherly my entire life,” Missy retorts. She plops down on the couch. “I don’t understand what he was doing there tonight. He’s a lawyer for small business claims. Is he a controlling asshole? You bet, but he isn’t a criminal.”

I raise my eyebrow in question. She can’t be serious. “Your dad,” Missy huffs, but I ignore her, “has been moving his ass up the ranks in the Cervelli crime family for the last decade. He’s inches away from getting himself hitched to one of the Don’s daughters. You mean to tell me you didn’t know?”

Missy just shakes her head. “No and I don’t care. I’m not marrying you or anyone else. I ran off because Derek was

trying to force Preston on me. Why would I hitch myself to a biker who can't even look at me without scowling?" She folds her arms across her chest and tilts her chin up at me defiantly.

Fuck me, this woman is gonna kill me. She has no idea the things I want to do to her. But acting like I hate her is better than letting this animal need to bend her over the nearest surface and make her mine win out. Attracted to her or not, I still don't trust her, which is a fucking problem.

"You don't have a choice. And this isn't real," I answer, avoiding her question.

"You can't fake it all. She'll have to get branded. She's club, otherwise someone is going to see through the fucking lie," Vicious says.

Missy glares at me. "A tattoo? You are so paying to remove it when this is over."

"Deal. But I'm picking what you get." I stalk over to her. "Better wipe that nasty look off your face too. If you want this to work, then you have to play the part. Make it look convincing, and once we deal with Marcum, you can go back to your life and I'll go back to mine."

She swallows, and I'd bet money she's dripping right now. Her teeth catch her bottom lip and I want to suck it into my mouth so badly. Fuck.

"Fine. If this will free me from him, I'll do it. But I'm still gonna work."

"Whatever. You'll be staying with me until this is all sorted; my apartment is two floors down. Do what you want,

but you don't leave this building without an escort," I say firmly.

"Goes for you too, Nyx. Don't put yourselves at risk," Vicious adds.

"Deal," they say in unison.

"This doesn't explain my father though, or why he's coming after me like this."

"He's a fucking criminal, Missy. He works for the Cervelli crime family. That doesn't happen to straight-laced people. Feel me? Get a bag, and we'll get the rest later. I'm fucking tired."

She storms off down the hallway and appears a few moments later with a bag over her shoulder. "Ready?"

"I'll be here. If Calix is a dick, you call me," Nyx says, placing a phone in Missy's hand.

"What's this?"

"You need something not tied to you." Fucking Nyx. "I have plenty of them. You need one. My number is in there too. Use it."

"Thank you." Missy clings to Nyx.

"We'll only be downstairs. Come on."

I hear Nyx curse my name to Vicious through the door on the way out.

"What's up with them?" Missy whispers.

“Only they know, and I’m not asking. The last time I almost lost my head.” She chuckles at my answer. The sound is husky and lodges in my ribs. This is gonna be fucking trouble. I sense a bunch of cold showers in my future, *perfect*.

The ride down in the elevator is long and silent. I reach for Missy’s bag; her head whips around, but I just smile and slide it off her shoulder. She looks confused. Damn, I know I’ve been trying to keep her at bay but have I been that much of a dick? Probably, I’m not known for my good manners.

The elevator dings open and I lead us to the left where my apartment is. I have another one at the clubhouse, but that’s more of a room to fuck and sleep in, not really much else. This is my private space, where I keep my personal shit and exist without a title.

I love the fucking club, they raised me. Shit, I’ve been Gage since before puberty. But here I’m Calix, just plain Calix. I can exist without the club or any of the bullshit from working with Elite. People think bikers are tough, but try working around a bunch of strippers and professional dancers all day.

“Nice place,” Missy sighs, two steps in the door. It isn’t much, just some grayish walls and dark furniture. I don’t require much, and I never bring a woman back here for shit. That’s what my room at the club is for.

“Nothing fancy. You can take the first door on the right. That’s my guest bedroom,” I mumble.

“Don’t,” she snaps.

“Excuse me?” I growl. “The fuck is your problem?”

“My problem?” she huffs, throwing her hands down at her sides. “You can’t be accusing me of being a liar one second and the next being kind. I don’t want your fucking pity.” Oh, this woman. Fury roars through my blood.

“You don’t know shit.” *Keep it together.*

“I know you think I’m so sort of a fucking spy!” Her chest rises and falls in heavy pants. Redness coats her cheeks. She looks like a goddess of blood and fury whipped up in her anger. An image of Missy riding my cock, screaming my name with my hand wrapped around her throat, plays in my mind. My dick hardens beneath my jeans. Fuuck. I blink the image away and she’s in my face, finger raised.

“You think I would rat anyone out to Marcum? I don’t even call the bastard dad!” Her voice catches.

“I don’t know what game you could be playing.” It’s true, but I already suspect she isn’t working for her father. The look he gave her said it all. He considers her property to control and right now she’s the one calling the shots, which he isn’t okay with.

“Fuck you. Just leave me alone,” she spits, turning away from me. Not happening. I reach for her arm; she shrugs me off. My hand wraps around her wrist, spinning her towards me.

I cup her jaw, forcing her to look at me. “Get it through your head, girl. Questioning outsiders is my fucking job. And you’re an outsider.”

“Not anymore. I’m club and your woman.”

I chuckle, letting some of the darkness I’m holding back seep in. My hand slides around her neck, squeezing tight. Instead of the whine I expect to hear, she moans. It’s thick and sultry with a touch of her breath at the end. My dick turns to stone. Fuck me if it isn’t the hottest sound in the world. *Bad idea*, my brain tells me before I can even decide what I’m going to do next. “If you were my woman, you’d be naked, and on your knees with my cock shoved down your throat.”

“Didn’t you tell Marcum I’m yours? Make me yours then,” she challenges. Her brown eyes light with fire, passion swirling in their dark depths.

“I’m a bastard, Missy. If I fuck you and put my brand on you, this isn’t some bullshit you walk away from. I don’t give a fuck if you hate me. You’ll be mine, forever.”

“I’ll only hate you if you’re a shit lay. Now, are you going to fuck me before you brand me, cause I’d like to know what I’m buying before we seal the deal,” she says. I shake my head, stunned. No wonder she and Nyx fell in so fast.

My fingers tighten around her neck. Her breathing turns heavy as lust fills the space between us. She moans again. This time I swallow her moan with my mouth, forcing my tongue inside and sweeping from edge to edge. She meets my thrusts with her own. God damn, she tastes like sweat and sugar rolled into one.

I slide my hand under the edge of her shirt, palming her plump breasts and flicking her hard nipple with my finger. My dick twitches in my pants. Fucker has to wait, I’ve wanted to

taste Missy since that night at Sinner's Playroom. She whimpers in my mouth and I pinch down on her hard tip.

"Calix!" she screams, filling the entire apartment.

"God, yes, I never want to hear Gage from your lips again. You hear me?" She nods.

"Fucking say it. Say my name."

"Calix," she whispers. I pinch harder on her nipple. "God, Calix!"

"You want more?"

"Yes, I want it all. Make me yours." Her cries are music to my ears. I place slow, deliberate kisses down her neck. I hit the hem and tear. Fuck the shirt. Two plump breasts fall free of the fabric.

"No bra, dirty little slut." A pink tint flashes over her body. "Does my Missy like being called a slut and a whore?" Her thighs clinch and she nods. That sexy tongue darts out over her bottom lip. My balls pull up. I make my way down to her swaying breasts.

My mouth clasps over one. She hisses at the contact. Her arms grab my back and shoulders. I move back and forth, from breast to breast, lapping at her hard nipples and sucking on her sensitive flesh.

I work my hands lower, shoving her pants down her legs. "What are you doing?" Missy asks.

"I thought it was pretty obvious." Then I notice the fishnets covering her thighs. Fuck it, I pull at the thin squares

until the fabric gives way.

“Calix, you’re ruining my costume.”

“Nyx will have more fishnets. Now shut up and let me taste you.” I drop to my knees and shove my face between her thighs. She yelps, but moves her pussy to give me easier access with my tongue.

I find her opening and suck up every bit of juice on the outside, making sure to land several swipes across her clit. She screams with each one.

“Dear god, Calix, where did you learn that?”

“No learning, just like to eat pussy.” I dip my tongue back in her wetness and she screams. Her left leg goes over my right shoulder. I take full advantage of the angle and slam face deep in her dripping cunt.

“Fucking hell, Calix, eat me. Oh my god. I’m gonna come!”

“Do it baby, blast all over my face,” I order her and squeeze the underside of her thigh with my left hand. A scream tears from her and, a second later, wetness rushes into my mouth.

I swallow up every drop.

“You taste so fucking good.” A pink tint blooms over Missy’s skin. I stand, her legs move to wrap around my waist. I carry her to the master bedroom and toss her on the bed. She spreads her legs wide, showing me every inch of her dripping cunt.

Fuck, she's perfect. I grab her foot and slowly pull the zipper of her boot down her leg, slipping it off and doing the same to the other, revealing a pair of milky thighs. Her pussy lips glisten in the light, like a beacon calling me to my meal. I pull my jeans down my legs, letting my thick cock spring free. Missy's eyes go wide and right to the bead of moisture gathering on the tip.

"You want to taste it, little sprite?" A shiver rolls over her body when I call her "sprite". Noted. She nods, maneuvering so her head hangs off the bed. I grip my dick, give it a few good pumps before I line it up with Missy's wet mouth and let her pull me in with her tongue.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I roar the second her mouth swallows my dick. She sucks my entire length into the back of her throat. I caress her neck and play with her nipples while she sucks and licks. Her movements drive me wild and in no time I'm fucking her face with abandon. She gags, I pull back but she uses her arms to keep me in place.

"You like when you can't breathe?" I ask her. She nods around my throbbing cock stuffing her mouth. "You like a little sting?" She nods again. I instantly go for her nipple and squeeze it as hard as I can until she yelps. Her legs pinch together and her entire body flushes, telling me everything I need to know. I lean forward, sliding my palm down her body.

My fingers dip into her wet cunt. I glide my fingers in her wetness and press on the bundle of nerves. She howls around my dick. Wanting to test a theory, I slide two fingers into her wet core, and give her nipple a pinch with my free hand. She

moans. “Does my little sprite like pain with her pleasure?” Wetness leaks down my hand, coating me in her arousal. “Ahh, just like I thought, such a good little slut.” Her thighs clamp down on my hand at my words. “Full of surprises, aren’t you? Hang your ass off the bed,” I command. My dick slides free of her mouth, and she takes gulping breaths while she moves into position.

I don’t give her time to say anything. The second her ass is where I want, I thrust forward, seating myself deep in her tight, dripping pussy.

“Oh dear God! Calix. You’re fucking huge,” she screams, filling my entire apartment with moans of bliss. I don’t move for a second to let her get used to my length.

“Okay, I’m good. Move. I need to feel you move inside me.”

Her whines spark every muscle in my body into action. I slide my hips all the way back and surge forward, slamming deep into her cervix. Her walls squeeze and pulse around me. Her breathing picks up and I seal my mouth to hers as I rock into her. The pressure in my dick builds, spurring me to my pending orgasm. Fuck, I don’t want this to end.

My tongue fucks her mouth in time with my thrusts, and I swallow every moan and scream down with pride. “I’m fucking coming,” she yells, ripping her mouth off of mine. A second later she clamps down on my cock and my release shoots into her pussy.

We stay connected for a moment, breathing and just existing, connected to each other.

After a few seconds, I place a kiss on her lips and pull out.
“Damn, little sprite, full of surprises.”

“You have no idea,” she pants, rolling off the bed and heading for the attached bathroom. I toss one of my clean shirts to her on the way back.

“Here. Worry about your clothes tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” she says, climbing in the bed. “I have one stipulation to all of this.”

“Anything. Tell me what it is and I’ll do my best to honor it.”

“Don’t ever force me to marry you and I’ll stay until we kill each other.”

“Deal, little sprite. But you’re still getting my brand on this pretty little skin.”

“Deal.” She kisses my lips, sweeping her tongue lightly over mine. Fuck my dick is already hard again for this woman. It pokes her thigh.

“Umm, I’m ready for another round if you are,” she purrs. Damn, I’m going to drown in this woman and I don’t fucking care one bit.

CHAPTER 8

Missy

Two weeks later

“On my count,” Nyx shouts over the beat of the music. I wait for the cue in the beat before leaping into the air into a split, then roll on the floor into a tuck, and rise in an arabesque. I reach through the notes as it bleeds through my skin, becoming one with my heart and soul. Micah, one of the male dancers, steps behind me, wrapping his arms around my frame and raising me into the air.

The second I’m over his head, the usual rush I get flows through me. I will never take this feeling for granted again. His grip tightens on my thigh, signaling the drop. I tuck my arms in and let my body spin down his arm. Mica catches me just before I hit the floor.

The music cuts, only the sound of breathing fills the air. Jessie and Nyx clap first. “Now that’s what I’m talking about. Did the lift feel better this time?” Nyx asks.

“Yeah, more centered. I didn’t feel like I was having to adjust as much,” I admit.

“Good. We’ll keep working on core, it will only help,” she reassures me, handing me a water bottle.

“Alright, boys, you’re done for the day. Ladies on the floor, time for stretching,” Jessie orders. Micha, my male dance partner, gives me a hug before heading off with Nyx’s partner, Cole. Nyx and I fall into our normal stretching routine, going through all the moves while random music

tracks play in the background. It's soothing, and the burn in my muscles transports me away to another place in my mind.

Nyx wasn't joking. Between her workouts and the extracurricular fun I'm enjoying with Calix, I'm beat. Thank god the Pres sent him away for a few days, my poor pussy needed the rest. But I kind of miss his grumpy ass now. The apartment is way too quiet without his grunting and heavy sighing. Not to mention our occasional snipping that always turns into hot sex. Sore pussy or not, just the thought sends moisture to gather at my opening. Damn, I have it bad for that man.

"Are you thinking about Gage?" Nyx asks, snapping me back to reality.

"Is it that obvious?"

She smiles, grabs two water bottles, and sits across from me. "No, but I've been dying to really ask you about him."

"What do you want to know? You've known him longer than me."

"Yeah, but not like this. He likes you. Gage doesn't like anyone. Especially women, it's sweet."

"We're scratching an itch. I'm sure he has his fill of women wherever he is." *Then why do you feel so shitty?* Ugh, no. *Shut it*, I yell back at myself. I swear it's a constant battle inside my head most days, especially where Calix is concerned.

"They aren't doing anything," Nyx says quietly.

"Huh?"

“Gage and Lucky. They went on a club run.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I lean back, pulling my legs into my chest. Nyx comes over and sits on them, pushing them deeper into my breasts. The move is exactly what I need, stretching the backs of my thighs in perfect, painful agony.

“I wasn’t going to, but you seem tense today. I just didn’t want you thinking that you weren’t wanted here.” She shrugs, then gets up from my legs.

“Nyx, I’m not going anywhere.” Her head turns sideways. “I like it here. The bullshit with Marcum is just that—bullshit. My dad’s an asshole, but he’ll move on when he realizes he can’t get me back. I don’t even know why he cares. He didn’t care when I left.”

“Why did you leave?”

“That guy he was with, Preston.”

“The preppy dude from the party?” Nyx asks, scrunching up her nose. I nod and we both stand and walk to the mirror for squat sits.

“That’s the one. We dated for like six months, then on my eighteenth birthday my dad tells me we’re getting married. There wasn’t even a discussion, I’m just told. My future in school, college, all of my plans, were over. My parents simply expected me to marry him.”

“My worst fear,” Nyx whispers.

“What do you mean? Your dad would never.”

Her eyes turn hard. “I’m not stupid. If marrying me off meant keeping me safe, keeping the club safe, he’d do it. He wouldn’t think about my feelings in the matter. Not if it meant my safety.” We sit in silence for a few seconds before she speaks again. “Enough about me. I take it you didn’t want to marry Preston?”

“No, I couldn’t stand the thought of marriage. My father has always been cruel to my mother when he thinks no one is looking. I’m also not blind—I saw the bruises growing up.”

“Damn girl. So you hate marriage. Got it.”

“I don’t hate it. But I never want to be married. No man gets to have a claim like that over me,” I say with a shiver. Nyx snorts. “What?”

“Honey, that stamp on your ass is so much more than a marriage contract will ever be.” My hand goes to my hip and the tattoo that’s hiding beneath. My secret gift to Calix. I just stare at her.

“You don’t think he’ll like it?”

“He’s going to love it. I’ll make sure someone covers our shifts tonight at the club. After rehearsals, let’s grab dinner.”

“You’re bringing your boyfriend?” I ask, surprised. In two weeks, I’ve never met him. They seem to spend a lot of time arguing on the phone.

“Um, I like Josh alive, thanks. I’ll ask Killian to come.” *Which one is that one?* “Vicious,” she says flatly, reading the expression on my face.

“Is there more there?” I’m curious to know but don’t want to overstep. Nyx is my only friend here.

“Gage doesn’t like Josh. And Kill and I, well, we circle each other.”

“Isn’t he like ten years older than you?”

“Eight, but who’s counting?” She smiles. “It’s a long story. Best heard over drinks. And since we have to head to rehearsals soon, I’m gonna put a pause here.”

We push off the wall in unison and head to our bags. I reach for my phone, checking it for messages even though I know there aren’t any. Nyx is the only person who would text me, and we’ve been together all day. To my surprise, there’s one lone message.

CALIX: Tonight.

Butterflies swirl in my stomach. He’s coming home, yes! My gaze goes to my ass and the surprise I have waiting under my clothes.

This is the best unmarried life I could ask for.

CHAPTER 9

Calix

Tonight. I look at the message again before pressing “send” and sliding my phone back in my pocket.

“Wanna add to the conversation here, Gage?” Lucky asks. He cocks his head at our guest. I smirk, *how rude of me.*

“How’s our guest doing?” I kick the dude’s loafer, who groans in response. “Would you like some aspirin for the pain?”

“Damn, Gage, you don’t gotta be a complete dick,” Lucky grumbles. I roll my eyes. Two of the newly patched members look close to losing their lunch. Fucking pitiful. I check on the chains holding our honored guest in place. No one needs a moving target during torture. I’ve seen more people hurt themselves because they don’t anchor their captive. Exactly how these dickheads have done up Mr. Suit here. God damn child’s play.

“Hey dummies, we aren’t butchers, and this isn’t a fucking meat hook. Any time someone asks you to dress a guest, you anchor their ass to the fucking floor, or I’ll have you swinging from my hooks next. Understand?” One guy sprouts beads of sweat on his forehead. The fuck is that shit? It isn’t even hot in here. I toss Lucky a look and the one he shares back says he’s as confused by the newbie’s reaction as I am.

Fucking great. I shake my head and get back to work. I’ll deal with him later. Mr. Suit wakes with a bleary look on his face.

“Oh look, our guest is up,” I announce and continue emptying my bag on the table. I don’t need to store them in a bag, but removing them one by one always gives my guests an added dose of terror that guarantees to loosen their lips faster. Mr. Suit must catch me removing the Santoku knife given his muffled scream from behind his gag. “Isn’t she a beauty?” I say to no one. “This one is a favorite blade of mine. I like to keep it so sharp it can open your flesh with one touch. Wanna see?”

I turn towards Mr. Suit. He attempts to flee, but his hands are tied behind his back, resting on a meat hook. For extra support, the hook anchors to two chains coming off the floor. Leaves enough room for flaying without worry of some idiot attempting to swing their body trying to escape. Fucking dumb either way. There’s no way out of this building if you don’t know the codes.

I turn the overhead light on, adding a cinematic effect. Okay, I’m a dick, but torture is an effective means to an end and the mind games help speed things along. I don’t get off on this like Vicious does.

“Didn’t start without me, did ya boys?” Vicious says, coming from seemingly out of thin air.

“Not our fault you’re late,” Lucky calls out.

“He has a point,” I say, raising my brow. He just laughs.

“Get on with it,” he says with a wave of his hand. “I want to know what our guest has to say.”

“Yes, what do you have to tell us, Mr. Suit?” His eyes bulge at my question and go even wider when his gaze drops to the knife in my hand. Vicious pulls his gag down.

“You got the wrong guy. I’m just a business ma-an,” he stutters.

“We know you work for Marcum.” I spit, already done with this conversation.

“Marcum who?” he says, playing dumb. Rage ignites my blood. My knife flips in my hand before I set to work, slicing the blade across his chest hard enough to go through his dress shirt. Red droplets race out, chasing the sharp edge as I drag it down his skin. Screams fill the empty space. This fuck is gonna tell us something more than his damn vocal range.

“*Stop!* Please don’t. I’m not a criminal like you.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” Vicious asks. “You work for a goddamn criminal, and you do his bidding.”

“Seems the math makes you one too,” Lucky finishes. The man gulps.

“Tell us about Derek Marcum.”

“N–no. He’ll kill me,” he whines.

“Look around, Mr. Suit. You’re already dead. Your heart and brain just don’t know it yet.” The guy stills at my words. “Tell us what we want to know, and I’ll make it quick.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Pity,” I say, before digging my knife into his chest, carving a nice little “M” in his pink flesh. He squeals like a

little pig. Funny, since he's about to be bacon in a second. I'm over this and his high-pitched squeals. I go back to the table and grab the pliers, shove them under his nail and pull until they give way with a tearing motion.

My stomach roils with the sound of flesh ripping away from flesh. It always gets me, but again, it's effective.

"I'll tell you whatever you want! Just don't take another fingernail," he pleads, tears stream down his face. "I'll do anything." His breath catches, Vicious and I step back just in time. Fucker projectile vomits a second later. The smell of acid and stomach bile permeate the room. I have to force my own organs from churning at the stench. Fuck, dead bodies smell better than this dude.

"Fucking hell. Tell us how Marcum is rising through the ranks so fast?" I snarl, asking the only question that matters. The only question none of us seem able to figure out. The man says nothing, but he visibly gulps. Mr. Suit looks like he's about to piss himself to match the vomit, apparently. Screw it, he's taking too long. I reach for the pliers.

"Fredo's broke."

"Come again?"

"The idiot can't keep shit out of his nose. He's blowing through profits faster than they can come in."

"Fucking hell." Lucky growls and Vicious lets go a few curses under his breath that I can't make out. Just what we need, the goddam head of the local mafia families addicted to his own supply.

“This is a fucking problem,” Vicious says between his teeth. “How does Marcum fit in all of it?”

“Marcum has deep pockets,” the man coughs. Bits of vomit hang from his mouth and chin. “They made a pact years ago.”

My blood goes cold at his words.

“A pact for what?” Lucky asks.

“Daughter for daughter.” My stomach drops out. “It’s why he wants his little bitch back so bad.” My hand flies across his face.

“Watch your fucking mouth. Missy’s club.” I say, and it takes everything in me not to put a bullet in his head right now.

“Sorry. Missy is costing him power. Fredo’s wife passed a few years ago. Originally Preston, Fredo’s nephew, was arranged to marry the bitch. But now Fredo wants his prize or he won’t give up Gianna without Missy firmly in his grasp.”

“Why now? She’s been living under his nose the entire time. He really had no clue where she was?” I ask.

“He didn’t care. Fredo was happy sleeping around. Now that Gianna is close to eighteen, he wants a son. Can’t have a son without a new wife to put one in.” My hand moves before I realize what I’m doing, lodging the tips of the pliers through his ear and deep in his brain.

Mr. Suit makes a gasping sound, and his body shakes several times before the light drains from his eyes.

“Smart fuck,” Vicious says.

“Why is that?” Lucky asks.

“He taunted Gage to guarantee himself a quick end. Better be careful or we’ll think you and Missy are more than for show.” I roll my eyes at his comment, hating that the fucker always sees so much.

Our newest patched member braces himself on the wall and empties the contents of his stomach, interrupting our conversation. “Fucking hell. Zander, help him clean that shit up. Goddamn rookies. Asshole better be battling a hangover or he has some explaining to do. That wasn’t even that bad,” Vicious grumbles, shaking his head.

“We’ll look into him again. Those three probably got too drunk last night,” Lucky offers.

“Probably.” I walk to the dead suit and pull my pliers from his head. They release with a crunching gurgle. I drop the tools into a bucket of bleach I keep at the end of my table.

This room isn’t much. Just an empty meat locker with one table and my hanging apparatus in the center. The less in here, the less trace I have to worry about, anyway.

“We need to clean this up and get to the girls. I got a bad feeling,” Vicious says, I feel it too. Mr. Suit’s revelation changes everything.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, we’re downtown, pulling into Sinner’s Chamber. It’s closed for rehearsals. Some mogul’s big birthday is this weekend, and he specifically requested the new duo.

We walk through the doors, passing three patched members on guard. Good, they already added extra security out here. “Boys,” I greet them, tipping my head. The music flows out of the open door, thumping to a familiar beat.

Like a beacon, my eyes go right to her. My woman. Fuck, that feels good and strange. I never thought I’d find a woman like Missy. She didn’t bat an eye when I told her I had to leave town for a few days. The woman seems to just get it.

She understands I can’t talk about work and won’t. She doesn’t need my burdens. Something about that and her attitude is addicting like a sweet candy I can’t get enough of.

Club business may be the reason we’re together, but if I’m honest with myself I wanted her from the second she walked into that back room at the Playroom. All ruby lips and bright smile. Anyone who can light up that place has to be someone special.

The club lighting is different tonight, the red bulbs replaced with blue to give the place a more icy feel. Usually, with all the metal and red flickering light, this place reminds me of a pocket in hell.

Tonight, it looks more like the Hell Hades rules instead of Lucifer. The blue glow licks the iron railings lining the stage. My gaze goes right to the half-dressed women performing under the lights.

I’m mesmerized, watching Missy on stage with Nyx. No wonder they’re so highly requested. *Fuucck*. The way Nyx trails her hand down Missy’s body as they sway to the music is sexy as fuck.

Missy twirls and Nyx's hand slides under her breast as she moves. My dick goes hard in my jeans. Son of a bitch, I can't get hard thinking about Missy and the VP's daughter. He'll kill me, and he's probably here somewhere. *Don't forget Vicious.* That deflates my thoughts like a popped balloon. He'd skin me for thinking about Nyx.

Missy does some sort of turn, and her leg extends in time with the music. Her dress rides up her thigh, exposing tanned flesh, making my mouth water. The things I'm gonna do to her body tonight, including fucking her from behind with that gorgeous leg in the air, just like she has it now.

"You're fucked, bro," Vicious taunts, pulling me out of my dirty thoughts.

"The fuck does that mean?"

"You got it bad for Missy. Thought she was a means to an end?"

"Watch it V, you're getting mighty close to disrespect. She's my woman, end of story." The fucker smirks at my remark. "Do you always have to be a dick?"

"If I wasn't, you'd get bored." He cocks his head to the bartender, who sends two drinks sliding down the bar. "Don't mess with her though, Nyx has practically adopted the girl while you've been gone. They're legit best friends already, so don't fucking hurt her."

"Mind your business old man." No fucking way I'm admitting to Vicious that Missy is likely to hurt me first. She's the one with that god damn rule. *Marriage is a piece of paper.*

Fuck, I shake the thought. I know marriage isn't anything more than a contract with the state. It doesn't mean shit, and I don't think either of us wants kids, but I can't deny that I want her to have my last name. Want to make sure Marcum can never get his hands on her. I need to claim her as *mine*. Damn, I need to get my hands on my woman.

"I'll be back," I tell Vicious and head off to the back room. Thankfully, the dressing rooms here are on the smaller side, so everyone gets their own. The music stops, and a cheer rises, letting me know the girls should be back here any second.

I wait in the darkened room, each second pushing my need higher and higher. The door finally pushes open, revealing Missy in her short red dress. My cock thickens behind my zipper, watching her bend over and undo the straps on her leather heels. She hasn't noticed me yet and I kind of enjoy watching without her knowing.

Her boot slips free with a groan that sends blood rushing to my cock. I wrap my hands around Missy's hips and pull her flush against my erection.

"Goddamn, I've missed you," I breathe in her ear. She wiggles out of my hold to face me.

"Calix. I thought I saw you in the crowd."

"You were hot as fuck out there. Talented too," I say, brushing her hair aside to give me access to her neck. Her breasts push out, tempting my hands to cup them.

I slide my palm underneath her breast, letting my thumb brush her nipple. She moans. I capture it with my mouth,

swallowing down her sounds of pleasure. Our tongues clash in a chaotic dance for dominance.

Missy pulls away first. “Calix, we can’t.”

“We can. Your room locks. Who cares if someone hears? I want the entire place to know you belong to me.” I grip the back of her thighs, lifting her off the ground.

“Umm.” Fucking glorious sound. I love every fucking sound this woman makes. “Yes, fuck me, Calix. But make it quick, slow is for later.”

“Don’t worry about that little sprite. This is gonna be quick and dirty. When we get back, I’m taking you on every surface in my fucking apartment. We clear?”

“Always. Now shut up and shove that dick in me. You talk too much.” God damn, always feisty. Makes my blood boil for all the right reasons. I use one hand to hold her up and the other to tear away at the shorts she has on under her dress. Then I finally reach my prize. Pure, uncovered, and unshaved pussy. I slip my finger past her opening. She sucks me in deeper while I flick her clit.

My cock is strains against my fucking zipper. Fuck this. I rip the fabric away from her body and let the scraps fall away.

“Calix!”

“Can’t wait,” I tell her and plant her ass on the small table in the room, and step between her spread legs.

“That’s part of my costume,” she barks.

“I’ll get you a new one. It’s just shorts,” I tell her before sliding three fingers into her core this time.

“Dear god, don’t stop.” Her moans make my dick ache to be inside her, but I need to make sure she’s wet enough first. I don’t plan on going gentle. My fingers pump into her tight cunt a few times and come away dripping in her delicious nectar.

I press my fingers to Missy’s lips. She opens for me and wraps her tongue around them, sucking off every drop. I pull my fingers out and replace them with my mouth. We snip and bite at each other, her hands working at my belt and zipper to undo them in record time.

Her fingers slip under the fabric of my pants, grabbing my cock instantly. I hiss at her touch. “God damn, woman.”

“This is *mine*.”

“All fucking yours, my little sprite,” I purr next to her ear.

She visibly shivers. “Umm, fuck me, Calix.”

“Hold on,” I order her, lining up my cock and slamming home in one go. She screams at the harsh contact as her walls grip on my length, sucking me in deep.

“Oh fuck, this is amazing. Don’t stop. Calix, I missed you so much. Missed your cock so much. I need it deeper. Dear God.”

“Fuck God. You only scream my name, little sprite.” I pound us into the desk, smashing Missy more and more against the small mirror. Her walls pulse around my dick as I piston in and out of her as hard as I can.

Missy is a drug for my cock. One hit and I've been hooked, constantly needing a taste, a touch. Anything to keep her in my system and her sweet vanilla scent in my nose. She grinds her hips against mine and I press down on her clit, rubbing in circles while I pump in and out of her tight pussy.

My balls ache as my orgasm rains down on me, rope after rope of my release shoots into her dripping cunt. I still in her as my release drips out around us.

"Calix," she pants, resting her forehead on mine. "Did you forget something?" I sigh, realizing what she means.

"Fuck, are you?" I ask her.

"I'm on birth control and I'm clean. You?" Her voice is so soft. For the first time since I've met her, I think Missy is being truly vulnerable with me. No facade.

"Clean as a whistle. I get checked often and I never forget a condom." She smiles at my words, but it doesn't reach her eyes. I hook her chin with my finger and place a kiss on her lips.

"Don't do that. I want your fire, your bite. If you have something to tell me, fucking tell me, woman. For Christ's sake, my cock is still filling your cunt." My hand cups her throat, dragging her closer. "You're *mine*, Missy. I won't force you to marry me, ever, but make no mistake. I fucking own you and I'm never letting go."

I seal my declaration with a kiss, searing my lips to hers. She kisses me back. My cock pulse inside her walls. We both chuckle.

“Calix, if you don’t slip out of me, we’ll never get out of here, and I’m starving,” she says.

“Fine,” I sigh, letting my cock fall out of her pussy. She slides off the desk and turns toward her locker. A flash of black ink catches my gaze. “The fuck is that?”

She turns around, moving her ass out of my sight. “I don’t want to get married, but I wanted you to know that I’m yours and you’re mine. So I asked Joker for a little ink.” She shrugs and turns around, giving me a full view of her naked ass. And right there, sitting just above her hip bone, is a heart with my name and a pair of ballet shoes.

“Fucking goddess.” I drop to my knees, wrap my arms around her naked legs and place a kiss right on the tattoo. “When we get home, I’m gonna worship this ass all night.”

“You like it? Joker said usually you do road names but...” I stand and stop her with a kiss.

“It’s fucking perfect. I’m glad you did it with my real name.”

She beams. “Good. But, please tell me you’re home for a month at least?” she pleads, but it’s pouty and breathy. Not whiny and annoyed like other women. “I missed you.”

“All yours,” I confirm. She sighs against my hip. I really want to bury my dick in her naked body again, but she needs food.

We get dressed and head back out to the bar on the main floor. Nyx is leaning against the cool metal top, speaking with Vicious and Jessie.

“Hey, you’re back. Nice,” Nyx says as we approach. “Missy was going kind of insane.” I smirk at that and Missy punches Nyx in the arm.

“Dude, thanks for keeping my secrets,” she tells Nyx.

“Fantastic job tonight. You really make us shine. Now go eat, I know you both haven’t eaten shit today,” Jessie says, coming over and wrapping her arms around both women.

“Let’s go out. There’s a new restaurant over by the coast. Give me thirty minutes and I’ll find us seats,” Nyx says, pulling out her phone.

“We’ll get take out,” I blurt.

“Fine by me. Dinner back at our place sounds way better than a crowded restaurant,” Missy says. Nyx looks from Missy to the door.

“Whatever, buzzkill. You just want to get laid,” Nyx whines.

“Like there’s something wrong with wanting my man to fuck me,” Missy says. She blows me a kiss over her shoulder.

The look sends blood rushing straight to my dick. Fuck, I’m in trouble.

CHAPTER 10

Missy

“Spill,” Nyx blurts the second she and I are in our apartment.

“About what?”

“The dressing room.” Her brow goes up. Damn, I didn’t think she noticed that.

“What?” I play it off and grab a soda from the fridge. Nyx grabs a can of spiked seltzer.

“Girl, I could hear you. Hell, I almost double-clicked listening to the two of you. Fucking hot.”

“Oh my god, you didn’t?” I’m half-mortified that she heard. Who else could hear? *Who cares?* True. Nyx doesn’t seem bothered.

“Almost. Did you show him the tattoo?” Glee swirls in Nyx’s face. Almost like a kid opening a new toy—it’s priceless.

“He loves it.”

“Loves it.” She wiggles her brows.

I stop. “I don’t know if it’s love,” I admit, plopping myself down on our black, plush couch. The pillows are so wide and soft they can swallow you whole. “Can it be love if I’m not willing to marry him?” Tears sting the backs of my eyes. “I can’t do it Nyx. Something about the label of marriage sends my stomach into a jumbled mess.”

“Then don’t. He won’t force something on you. He’s a grump, not an asshole.”

“I don’t know what my problem is. Since we ran into Marcum I’ve been so jumpy. Like someone is gonna pop out from around the corner. Plus, so much is up in the air, the ‘hitched but not hitched’ shit. All the uncertainty. It feels like a giant weight is squeezing my chest and I can’t breathe.”

“Tell me about it,” she sighs. “Growing up in the club a lot of life is uncertain. You learn to roll with the punches. Just never back down and keep going and you’ll be okay. Never surrender.” The corner of her mouth pulls up in a half smile.

My heart aches for her. I’ve been where she is, except I didn’t see it coming. I fucking envy her for that so much. Nyx is a force of nature, moving ahead no matter the obstacle put in her path. At work, she’s the same. If an idea isn’t fusing, she just keeps going until it all falls in place. I wish I had that kind of faith.

“Never surrender,” I repeat. Maybe I should make that my mantra. *Isn’t it already?* Huh, maybe it is. I’ve hidden from my past for this long.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Our heads go to the front door. “Why are the guys knocking tonight?” I ask Nyx.

“Right, how much pizza did they order that they don’t have hands?” I scoff, walking to the door. I check the peephole. It’s Mercedes. What the hell?

I pull the door open and yep, the woman who hated me the entire time I worked at Sinner's Playroom is standing in the hallway. With some dude I don't recognize.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, trying to hold in my snarl.

"I'm so sorry." Her words take a second to register, but by then it's too late. The man with her throws Mercedes at me, knocking me back into the apartment. I trip over the edge of the couch and fall back on to the coffee table, barely missing the edge, but it sends a ring through my head. Shit. Everything feels like it moves in slow motion.

Two men rush in behind Mercedes with the fucker that just threw her at me. A ringing goes off in my head, the room sways, *shit*. The men advance; one goes after Nyx, and one comes right at me. I kick my feet and let an angered scream tear from my lungs. "Stay away from me, motherfucker!"

A blur of motion stops me in my tracks. Nyx is fending off the six foot dude coming at her with a damn bar stool. Pain shoots through my scalp. The fucker coming at me grips my hair with one hand and my arm in the other. "Move and I'll snap your arm." I stop at his threat. "Good to see you can listen. Boss will be pleased." His hot breath hits my face. The stench of alcohol mixed with sour tobacco swirls up my nose, sending my stomach roiling and heaving. *Don't vomit.*

"Don't hurt us. I'll do what you want," I plead.

"Gregor, fucking finish that bitch, but don't kill her." The beast of a man smiles and pulls out a stick baton from his back. In one quick movement, he brings it down on Nyx's

wrist. She cries out, and the man grabs her by the back of her neck. Still, she doesn't stop fighting.

“Nyx!” I roar.

She locks eyes with me. “I won't let them take you!”

“Knock the bitch out and let's go. We only need this one,” the man holding me says. He squeezes my bone until it feels like it's gonna pop but I swallow my cry. Gregor slams his stick into the side of Nyx's arm and stomach, but she keeps pushing, refusing to give up. He hits her again, this time with his fist to her face. She falls to the floor unconscious.

“God damn, that one is strong. Are you sure we can't take her back with us?”

“We aren't starting a war so you can get your dick wet. This one belongs to Fredo. Marcum sold her fair and square. The bikers can fuck off,” the man holding me huffs. Sold me! My heart races. I need to get out of here. I can't let them take me. Oh god, why didn't I fight back harder?

They drag me down the back stairwell that's always empty. Shit, I was hoping they didn't know about this section of the building. We make it down the three flights of stairs quicker than I would have thought. I keep hoping someone is going to pop out from around the corner or something. But no one comes.

We push through the door at the ground floor, darkness swallowing the light from the stairwell. There's an SUV waiting. *Oh no.* I dig my heels in; I can't get in that. They'll never find me. My kidnappers pull me but I force all my body

weight to the floor. If they want me in that SUV, they can drag my ass; I'm not willingly climbing to my death. And just maybe I can stall long enough that Calix and Vicious will come back. *Long shot.*

“Goddamn bitch.” The attacker holding me swoops me up in his arms. “Open the fucking hatch.” Someone does, and he tosses me in the back like I'm an overloaded suitcase. “Give me a problem and that pretty little face is gonna meet my hand. Got it?” I nod my head. He shuts the door, then climbs in and tears away from the building. The familiar rumble of Calix's bike hits my ears.

Fuck it, I risk popping up from the back. And there they are: Vicious and Calix on their bikes, driving the opposite direction. No. My heart slams in my chest as my mind whirls with how to get his attention in the next second. Fuck. My eyes land on my shoe. Yes. I peel it off and throw it at the driver, he swerves, and the tires make a screech on the road. I turn back to the window and slam on it with all my might, screaming Calix's name.

“You fucking bitch!” Roars one of the kidnappers. I refuse to peel my eyes away from the two men on bikes getting farther away. At the last second Calix glances over his shoulder and I slam on the back window with the last bit of energy I can muster. Dear God, let him see me. Please let him see me.

A fist grabs the back of my hair. I scream. My head slams against the glass. Pain blooms in my temple and darkness rushes up on me.

My last thought is of regret. *Why didn't I tell him that I love him?*

CHAPTER 11

Calix

“Did you fucking see that?” I scream at Vicious. We both look over our shoulders at the SUV that almost missed us both. Damn thing came around the corner like something was chasing it. “Fucking pricks.” I go to flip them off and my heart stops. Plastered to the back window of the speeding vehicle is Missy.

“Fuck no!” I roar and plant my foot on the floor, guiding my bike in a quick circle and take off after them.

Tires screech behind me and I know Vicious is following. This can’t be happening. *Missy is mine*, they can’t fucking have her. I twist my hand harder on the throttle, flying down the street, dodging cars.

The SUV comes into sight, a mass of black speeding down the road. I push my bike further, knowing full well it can take it.

Vicious blows past me. I lock eyes with Missy. *I’m coming little sprite, just hang on*. Someone pops out the front passenger window, brandishing a gun. Fuck. A second later, three pops ring out.

POP.POP.POP.

One of the bullets hits a parked car. The shooter leans out again, this time he hits the floor right in front of me. Fuck. I can’t stop. I’ll die trying to save her but I won’t let them take her from me. My heart thumps in my chest, screaming to be made whole.

Missy appears in the back window again, the vehicle pulls around the corner and a cop car comes into view on my left. Fuck.

“Pull back,” Vicious shouts.

“No fucking way. They have my woman,” I roar at the top of my lungs.

“Pull the fuck back, cops. You can’t help her locked up.” He flips up the visor on his helmet and holds my gaze. *Shit.* I slow down and pull off the road. “Did you see Nyx?”

“What?” I ask. Vicious’ eyes are black pits. “They have Missy.”

“In the car did you see Nyx?” He ignores what I say and asks again.

“No.” Fuck. It hits Vicious at the same time, he pales. He doesn’t say anything, just takes off toward the apartments. I send an SOS to the VP and Pres, this is a Goddamn clusterfuck.

Blood pounds in my ears as the darkness that lurks in my soul fights everything in me to get out. It claws its way out of the box I keep it in, demanding its pound of flesh on those who dare to cross me. Those who thought they could take what belongs to me. *You’ll get her back.*

I pull up to the apartment building, Vicious is already parked and up the damn staircase inside before I can say “boo”. I catch him at Nyx’s door. It’s hanging off its hinges. *Holy shit.*

We take two steps inside, where there's a turned-over table and broken glass is scattered around the room. Nyx sits there on the floor with a shirt pressed against her lip. Her eyes lock on Vicious. He stops moving.

"You're alive," he breathes.

She gives him a weak smile. Then her eyes land on me. "They took her," she sobs. "Gage, I'm so sorry. I tried so hard." Tears flow from her eyes. "I'm so fucking sorry, Calix. You have to get her back."

I drop to Nyx's side. Vicious grabs some ice from her freezer. "Come on, let's get you on the couch." I lift her slowly. "I'll make Mr. Grumpy sit with you." I whisper to her, just for us. She tries to smile but winces instead. I force my anger to stay in check, it isn't going to do anyone any good. I can only be mad at myself. I failed them. I shouldn't have stopped.

Vicious slides his phone in his pocket and sits down next to Nyx. She curls into him. His face softens and he places the ice pack on her cheek. She winces and Vicious looks ready to murder. "VP is on his way. Jessie is out for blood," he says. They can get in line. I want these fuckers dead now.

"How the hell are we gonna find her now though? They could go anywhere," I grind out, running my hand through my scalp.

"I got a tracker on that damn car," Vicious says.

I blink. "You did what?"

"Put a tracker on the car," he responds.

“No fucking way.”

“Never leave home without the essentials,” he winks. Crazy bastard. For once I’m glad for the mini arsenal he carries.

“Guys, I remembered something one of them said. Oh my god.” Nyx’s breathing picks up, I watch as her chest rise and falls in quick short pants. Vicious covers her field of vision.

“Hey, look at me. Keep your eyes on me.” He locks his fingers with hers. “Feel my skin, my warmth. Focus on it and breathe.” Nyx takes a few big breaths then seems to even out.

She lays her head on Vicious’ chest and starts to drift off. “They said something,” Nyx blurts, coming awake.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The kidnapers, whatever. They said Missy was Fredo’s. I think Marcum sold her to the Italians. Gage, you have to get her back. Fredo will ruin her.”

“He isn’t gonna touch her. You have my word.”

I know we’ll find her because she belongs at my side. Marriage or not, she’s got my brand, and no one is taking her from me.

I’ll rip them apart first. Just hold on little sprite. I’m coming for you.

CHAPTER 12

Missy

Cold metal bites my skin. Nothing but darkness fills the space in front of me.

God, how much time has passed? It feels like hours since they locked me in this box and left me alone. Handcuffed to this ridiculous metal chair, with nothing but my thoughts and past conversation with Calix to run through my mind. Why didn't I tell him?

Metal shrieks behind me, sending my soul leaping through my chest. *Be like Nyx. Show no fear.* I repeat the words over and over in my head.

My heart rises in my throat with each impending step. But after what feels like ages, three men appear in my vision.

"Hello Melissa," says a familiar voice. My father, Derek Marcum, comes into view. He's backed by two other men, a few inches taller than his six-foot frame. The men give me a hard stare, and what looks like glee lights my father's eyes. Vomit churns in my stomach, threatening to come up, but I swallow it down. *Don't show weakness.*

I roll my shoulders back and do my best to channel my inner Nyx. Calix will come for me, I just need to stay alive long enough. I hold on to that thought and say nothing.

"Good to see nothing changes. Still an ill-mannered brat," my father snarls. His henchmen chuckle. I continue to sit without responding to him in any way. I owe him nothing. "At least you won't be my problem for much longer," he finishes

with a smirk. Asshole knows I'm probably dying to know what he means.

His phone goes off in his pocket and his smile broadens. "Oh good, company should be here soon." He answers the phone and walks away from me.

"This is Marcum," he says firmly into the phone. A few moments pass, my eyes staying glued to my father.

Is he going to kill me?

As much as I want to look away and drift off to some place where it's just Calix and I, I can't do that. I need to stay sharp and in the moment. What if my chance comes and I miss it cause I'm not paying attention? No, I can't hide in the corner of my mind. Anger spreads over my father's face. "You can't be serious. We had a deal, Fredo. You'll regret this old man."

Marcum pulls the phone from his ear like he's been bitten and breaks the thing in two. "You stupid bitch," he whispers. The hairs on the back of my neck go up. I don't know what he's pissed about but the lowness of his tone puts me on edge instantly. "Do you realize what you've done?" he snarls, coming for me this time. His hand grips the hair from the back of my neck, pulling so hard that white pain flashes across my vision. I can't help the cry I let out.

"Oh, am I hurting you?" He continues without waiting for an answer. "Good. You're pathetic. The only thing you were ever good for and you've gone and fucked it up."

Huh? I try to make sense of his rambling, but I can't piece any of it together. He pulls harder on my hair, ripping my head

backwards in the chair. “Such a dumb brat, I should have locked you up in that room and hand delivered you to the man myself.”

Hand delivered? My head is spinning trying to piece everything together. “I don’t know what you mean,” I croak out. He lets go of my hair, giving me instant relief.

“Don’t be daft. You had to go ruin your cunt, and sleep with the fucking bikers like some damn club pass-around. You disgust me,” he scoffs. His words lash into me like a whip and I hate that, even after so much, he still holds some control over my emotions. “Since you’re useless now, you have two options. You can tell me everything you know about the club and I’ll kill you quickly. Or attempt to be brave and I’ll let my men have you.”

My head snaps to the body guards behind my father. Both are looking at me like I’m a piece of meat they can’t wait to enjoy. Bile fills my mouth. He can’t mean...? Two more giant dudes walk into the room.

“Oh good, the rest are here. Make your choice. You spill everything you know right now or I’ll let my men wring every answer from you piece by piece. Trust me, these men aren’t gentle and they won’t be kind.”

Blood rushes through my ears so loud it feels like it’s roaring in my head. Sweat breaks out down my back and on the part of my skin between my breasts. Fear slams in my gut but I hold strong. I’m not an idiot. There’s nothing to stop my father from torturing me after I hand over whatever information he thinks I know.

I take a steadying breath, preparing for what I'm about to do. I can't give in to my father's demands; it's going to have to be the hard way, as he's putting it. But I won't betray the club, they're my family. I'll die for each one of them.

"What's it gonna be, Melissa? You gonna tell me everything you know about the club?"

"No." It comes out with almost no sound.

"What?" he asks, and genuine shock is thick in his voice. Did he really think I would just tell him anything because he asked me? He's more delusional than I thought. His dark eyes lock on mine. "What did you say?"

"I said no. Do your worst old man. I won't tell you shit about the club. I'll die first."

One of the men behind my father chuckles and says something under his breath. I hear the slap before pain explodes across my face and blood fills my mouth. It takes a lot of effort to hold in my cry of pain, but I do. I refuse to give up anything to him. Men like my father get off on the terror they cause others. He can't get off on hurting me if I show him nothing. Another strike lands across my face on the other side this time. Black spots pop in my vision. Darkness threatens to swallow me but I refuse to give in.

"She thinks she's tough. Well then, someone get her on the hooks. Let her hang from her shoulders and let's see how tough she really is. Take her down to her bra and underwear too. Might as well let the boys get a good view of what they're gonna get."

I swallow, hoping no one noticed. But he did, my father saw the hint of fear pass over my face. I know because of the look in his eye, the pure glee glinting there. It twists in my gut, trying to force what little is in my stomach up.

“Yes, Melissa. When I’m done with you, I’m gonna let my men fuck all your holes until you’re nothing but a lifeless corpse.” My heart drops into my stomach at his threat and I scan the faces of the men behind my father. Each man’s gaze is full of lust.

No. He’s just trying to scare me, I tell myself, but I know he’s telling the truth. If Calix doesn’t get here soon, my father will leave me to them once he’s done hurting me.

You’ve got fire, little sprite. Calix’s voice fills my mind and it’s like he’s there. His cinnamon orange scent fills my nose, reaffirming my resolve. He’ll come for me. I know he will.

Another palm lands across my face, and this time darkness takes me under.

* * *

Ice cold pellets hit my body, bringing me out of the darkness that swallowed me earlier, and I gasp awake. My eyes fly open, taking in that my father and his four men are still in the warehouse with me. But now, instead of being tied to a chair, I’m hanging from some sort of hook with my feet swinging in the air.

And I’m down to my underwear. A cold pit settles in the bottom of my stomach, zapping my nerves. I need to get out of

here. *Don't panic, think it through, bide your time.* I wiggle in my restraints; my hands move slightly. A small plan forms in the back of my mind.

“Nice to see you’re awake. Now tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know anything,” I plead, hoping he’ll hear the truth in my voice, but knowing he won’t care. He doesn’t want to save me and once he gets whatever he’s after, he’ll leave me to his men. I have no doubt of that fact.

My father nods at his men; one of them steps forward and lands a punch to my gut. *Fuuuckk.* The air tears from my lungs, pain blooming in my stomach and back. Holy shit. I try to suck in air and breathe through the pain while trying not to get sick from spinning in place.

My toes barely touch the floor and each spin stretches my shoulders further. His men hit me three more times, each one sending shooting pain through every part of my body. The last blow breaks the skin open on my stomach.

“Fuck!” I scream through the agony. The bastard hitting me just smirks and sends one final blow across my face. Blood fills my mouth, and my vision blurs for half a second.

Fuck, fuck. I need to move or I’m gonna be out of strength to do anything soon.

“Have you had enough?” My father asks, even-toned and not like he’s watching his daughter get beaten in front of him. I shouldn’t be surprised; I’ve never been anything other than a possession to my father. “If you just tell me what I want to know, this can all end right now.” He looks from me to his

men. “Trust me, Melissa, they aren’t gentle and will take pleasure in slowly using you until you die.”

“Missy,” I whisper, shoving the bile back down.

“What?”

“Melissa died a long time ago. My name is Missy, I belong to Calix Gage and the Deadly Sinners.” I spit at him as hard as I can, sending bright red blood flying through the air. Droplets land on his face and over his shirt. Redness flares up his neck and over his face. His lip lifts in a feral growl.

“The fuck did you say, you ungrateful little bitch?” He charges. *NOW!* My mind screams. I use all of the strength I have left to pull my knees up and land a foot in the center of Marcum’s chest. The force helps me kick my weight forward and lock my legs around his neck and throw the entire force of my body upward in a fucked-up pull-up, getting just enough lift to slide my wrists off the hook. I come crashing down onto my father in a heap.

Thankfully, his men freeze instead of descending upon us instantly, and I’m able to untangle myself and bolt down the closest aisle of the warehouse. I didn’t realize earlier in my panic that there are actual rows beyond the darkness. A gap opens to my left and I take it, slipping between the rows and going three aisles over.

There’s a small space, and I hear footsteps moving away from me so I risk it and stop to breathe. Bad idea—the second I stop, my ribs scream in torment. *Shit.* I take in a breath but it catches, sending more pain through my stomach and chest. This isn’t good.

Keep moving, Calix's voice says in my head, like he's right here. I hold on to that, he'll make it in time. He'll find me. God, Calix, please find me. *Stop wallowing*.

Get up, I order myself. I take three short breaths then bolt to my left, away from the noise of shuffling feet.

My heart slams against my chest. They're gonna fucking find me from my heartbeat alone. My hand shakes and I grab it in my other, willing the tremor to leave. I can do this. Fuck them. My foot catches on an empty pallet laying on the floor. I grab the middle plank and wiggle as hard as I can but it doesn't budge. Shit, I need a weapon and to get out of this rope around my hands. Blood pounds in my head, the scuffling of shoes on concrete getting closer.

Screw it, this is gonna hurt. I angle myself over the pallet and slam my bare foot down as hard as I possibly can. Pain shoots up my heel but I ignore it—no way I'll survive without a weapon. I slam my foot down again and again on the wood, knowing that, with each hit, I'm drawing my captors closer. My heel is a throbbing mess but on the fourth slam, a crunch sounds in the air.

"Yes," I breathe out, releasing the breath I've been holding for the last five minutes. With the piece broken, I wrench each side off the stapled end, then quickly use the sharp edge to break free of the rope around my hands.

The shuffling of feet gets closer. I take off down the aisle, away from the sounds of people, hoping I'm going the right direction. Each step is a new kind of torture in my heel. Note to self, don't break pallets with bare feet. I chuckle at my own

joke—can't be too serious with myself, even at a time like this.

A hand shoots out in the darkness, I almost miss it but barely have time to swing my makeshift stake down on it. The goon hollers in pain. "Little shit," he snarls, lunging for me. I swipe at him, getting lucky and dragging the sharp end straight across his neck. I force the stake deep once I feel it connect with flesh. He lets out a gurgled moan and falls to the floor, grabbing the gaping wound.

I don't stop, I can't. If he came out of nowhere, someone else will. The next second, I'm swept off my feet with a large hand gripping my throat. "Got her," the bastard calls out. I grab at his hand but it's the biggest of the four henchmen that has me in his grip and I can barely pull enough air to send oxygen to my lungs. "You aren't getting away this time."

He pulls me against him, letting me feel his hardness as his breath assaults my senses. *No!* My mind rages. I'll die fighting for my body. I fight against his hold, sending anything I can after the fucker. My foot connects with his dick and he drops me. "Stupid whore."

I take off, leaving my weapons at his feet, not thinking about anything but getting far away from the brute. There's another opening in the aisle next to me so I go left and move three aisles over, hoping it creates extra room to sneak out without another encounter. About ten steps ahead there's a gap. Good, I can rest.

Just as I get to the gap, a hand comes around my mouth, pulling me into a hard body. I scream through the hand until

the familiar scent of cinnamon and orange hits my nose.
Calix.

CHAPTER 13

Calix

Missy stills in my grasp. Fuck, just thinking that feels good. I got her. We may not be out of this place but she's in my fucking arms and no one is touching her again. I slide my hand off her mouth, hoping to God she doesn't scream.

She whips her body around, locking eyes with me but not saying a word. Her dark brown eyes burn into my soul. *Home*, Missy is my home, and I almost lost her. Before I can say anything, she pulls my mouth down to hers, sliding her tongue over mine.

My hand instantly cups her ass, pulling a soft moan from her lips. She pulls away too soon. "You found me."

"I'll always come for you. You got my brand woman, you're *mine*," I whisper. Something close to shuffling sounds from the right. "We need to move." Missy nods her head in reply.

I pull a gun from my waistband, a small twenty-two caliber pistol, and hand it to her. "Can you handle this?"

"Point, shoot, and don't shoot you. Sound about right?"

I smirk. She's fucking sexy with a weapon in her hand and a pissed off attitude flowing off her.

"Perfect." I grab my other handgun from behind my jacket. "Ready?" She nods. I shouldn't, but I need her. My mouth slams down on hers. She opens, letting me in. Our tongues clash, and even in this fucked up situation, Missy still fights

for dominance. She's fucking perfect. "I love you," The admission falls out, needing to be said in case shit goes sideways.

"I love you too. I—" she starts, but I cut her off with my finger.

"Later. We need to move."

As if on cue, something creaks an aisle over. I raise my gun as a bullet zips by my head way too fucking close. I pull us back behind a pallet of shit in the row. Two more shots ring out from our left. Damn, they're coming at us from two sides. I raise my gun, shooting at the men approaching from the right.

A spray of bullets comes from our left. *Fuckers*. One man steps into the aisle. A loud bang rattles through the air, and he drops to the floor. Vicious appears behind him, a smirk plastered on his face.

"Thought you might need a hand," the cocky fucker says.

"There's two more down that way."

"Negative. There's one prick left," he argues. I turn to call bullshit and notice the spray of blood over Vicious' face. He smiles, blowing me a kiss.

"Prick."

"You stupid whore, you ruin everything," screams a man I barely recognize. Preston, the man with Marcum at the party. He charges, metal flashing in his hand.

BANG! BANG!

He stops, a hole appearing in the center of his chest, and another in his neck. He gasps, and a shocked expression mars his face.

“I may be a whore, but you’re dead,” Missy says, with her gun still leveled on him. Preston drops the gun in his hand at the same time that his legs give out. He falls in a gurgling heap to the floor. I wrap my arm around her body and my other around her outstretched hand.

“Let go, little sprite,” I whisper in her ear. She leans against my hold and releases her firearm.

“I killed him.” She chokes on her breath. “I killed two people today, but I don’t feel anything.” A look of pure panic crosses her face.

“Whoa, whoa, you’re in shock.” I pass the piece to Vicious so he can dispose of it, then pull Missy tighter against me. “Breathe, baby, it was you or them. You did nothing wrong.”

“But they’re dead,” she stutters. “And I’m not sorry.”

“Neither am I, little sprite.”

Vicious mumbles something into his phone.

“Where’s my father? He was here,” Missy huffs out. I squeeze her hip between two fingers.

“The slick fuck slipped out right before we got here,” the leader of the Red Devils says.

“Thanks for the help Dex.” I knock him on the shoulder, and we pat each other on the back. Vicious curls his lip in a

snarl. I just roll my eyes at him. They can have a cock-measuring contest on a different day.

“Is Nyx okay?” Missy blurts.

“She’s a little banged up but threatened us with death if we didn’t bring you back, so I’d say she’s feeling just fine,” Vicious answers with a little too much pride showing. Dex huffs under his breath. Goddamn pissing match.

“Where are we?” Missy asks and any thoughts but of her disappear.

Dex holds up his hand. “No place you need to know,” he answers. He then turns to me, ignoring Vicious completely, “Look, you got your woman. Now get the fuck out of my territory.”

“Done.” I grab Missy’s hand and pull her out of the warehouse.

“Gage,” Dex roars. I turn back, waving my hand in the air. “Let Dragon know. I always collect my debts.”

Vicious growls, knowing exactly what Dex is alluding to. I just toss him my middle finger and he laughs.

I tuck Missy under my arm, “Come on, let’s get you home.”

* * *

The ride back drags on in silence. I lace my fingers through Missy’s, hoping that reassures her.

“Thank you,” Missy says, so low I almost miss it.

“Why are you thanking us, girl?” Vicious asks her in his usual gruff tone. I send him daggers over her head, and he shrugs. Prick.

“You saved me. I’m the reason Nyx got hurt, but you saved me anyway.”

He chuckles. “Not sure what that has to do with anything.” He brushes her off about Nyx. “You’re club, Missy. That patch on your ass is for life.” Warmth fills my heart at the reminder that she wears my brand. Missy is mine.

The entire way back to the towers, I stare at her. I came so fucking close to losing her today. All I want to do is get her back to our apartment, strip her down and make sure she knows how much I love her, how much I need her in order to breathe.

Five hours, that’s how long she was gone for. Five of the worst hours of my life. I’m not naïve; Marcum didn’t kill her because he hoped to gain information from her. From her busted lip and slight limp, I bet she put up a hell of a fight.

We arrive back in silence. Missy can barely keep her eyes open. “Come on,” I nudge. She lets out a soft moan. My dick goes instantly hard. Not now.

“Calix, I hurt,” she whines. Anger rises in me again. If only I could resurrect the men who hurt her just to kill them slowly. She winces, so I drag her to the edge of the seat then hoist her in my arms.

“Tell Nyx I’ll text her in the morning. Just give Missy tonight,” I order.

Vicious nods. “I’ll make sure she gives you two space.”

“Thanks,” I say, with Missy tossed over my shoulder, her ass in the air. She’d probably kill me if she wasn’t half asleep, but I don’t have hands to carry her the other way.

“Go take care of your woman.”

“Same,” I taunt. He waves me off, cursing something about Nyx under his breath. Bastard has it bad.

I make it up to our floor and through the apartment to my bed, then place Missy on the black sheets. She burrows into the fabric. “Calix,” she whimpers.

“Yeah, little sprite.”

“Hold me, please.”

Her plea twists my heart. Damn, this woman owns me already, and I don’t fucking care.

I climb in next to her and wrap her in my arms. “Sleep now,” I order. She sighs, leaving me to wonder if this is what heaven feels like. Because laying here with Missy feels pretty fucking close.

CHAPTER 14

Missy

“You stupid bitch.” Preston snarls before the loud bang fills my ears. Red liquid drips from the hole in his neck.

My eyes fly open on a gasp. “God no.”

Calix is there in an instant. “You’re safe now,” he rumbles, his soothing voice slips itself around me, calming my heart and mind.

Two days of nightmares and sleep. I’ve only eaten the few times Calix has forced me to.

Nyx stopped by yesterday. I didn’t want to talk to her though, and made Calix get rid of her. Being alone is easier. I need time to decipher what I’m feeling.

Guilt? No. Could that be my problem? I don’t feel guilty, so my mind forces me to relive Preston’s death on repeat.

“You okay?” he asks. His hard length brushes my ass cheek.

“I am now.”

He chuckles at my reply. His hand snakes down my front, dancing between my legs and over my pussy, while his other hand cups my breast and flicks my nipple.

“Calix,” I whisper, my voice airy and dripping with need. “Fuck me until the dreams disappear.”

He says nothing, just forces my chin up to swallow my soul through my mouth. My tongue clashes with his in a fight

for dominance. His hands roam all over my body, each squeeze of my skin sending a spark to my pussy.

“Yes, I want more,” I hiss. “Touch me, Calix. Fuck me senseless.”

“Be careful what you ask for, little sprite.”

The next second, he flips me on my back and is between my legs. His hard dick looks angry, a bead of liquid sitting on the tip. I watch, transfixed, as he pumps himself from base to tip three times.

“So fucking beautiful, Missy.” He bends down and places a kiss on one breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth, then moves to the other. I cry out from the pressure building inside my body. Each pull feels like a lightning strike to my clit.

“Yes, baby, scream for me.” The tip of Calix’s dick nudges at my opening. My walls contract, trying to pull him in. He pulls his hips back, then surges forward, seating himself deep inside me in one thrust. I gasp, my vision blurs and my nipples turn rock solid. Pleasure zaps up and down my spine with each thrust from Calix.

“God, yes, give it to me. Fuck me, Calix. Give me everything,” I yell as he grips my thighs and slams my pussy down on his hard dick. My head tips back in pure bliss, my orgasm crashing down over me.

“I’m coming.”

“Yes, come for me,” Calix orders. He fills me with his release at the same time my next orgasm rams into me, stretching on for eternity.

Once the tremors finally subside, Calix wastes no time. He flips me over and buries his fingers into my dripping cunt.

I yelp, but relax against his touch. “Yeah, baby. I’m not done with you yet.” He slides his fingers back in, spreading them out inside me. I can’t help the moan that fills the room. He keeps stroking me like that, whipping me into a frenzy of nerves and I come without warning all over his cock.

“Fuck yeah, that was hot, Missy. Come on me again, little sprite,” Calix orders. He flicks my clit over and over, making the muscles in my pussy contract and scream for release.

“You ready for more dick?”

“God yes, I need you,” I whine, pleading for him.

“Stay still.” I feel him move behind me. He brushes the tip over the back of my thighs and pussy lips. My teeth slide into my bottom lip to stop from screaming out.

I can feel his cock glide up and down my opening. It sends a shiver over me. My hips push backwards and he meets them, filling me and pulling a scream from deep in my chest. “Dear God, fuck me harder.”

“Fuck that, this is all me, little sprite. You’re so fucking beautiful, taking my cock. I could pump in and out of you like this all night long. Would you like that? You want to take my cock all night long?”

His words end me. My pussy erupts around his dick, sending liquid squirting out around his length. “I want your cock forever,” I say between thrusts.

Calix stills. “Forever?”

“Marry me, Calix,” I scream as I come on his dick again. He slams his hips flush to my ass and fills me with another release.

Neither of us says anything for a moment, we just breathe. It’s like a game of chicken, but with words.

“You’re fucking serious?” he finally asks, with his cock still buried in my pussy.

I raise myself up on my elbows and nod. “Yes. Marry me.”

“Fuck yes, I’ll marry you.” He slides out of me. I turn over and he hovers above me. Neither of us care that our release is dripping out of me onto the bed.

“I love you,” I say.

Calix places kisses all over my breasts and stomach. “I love you too. Now open up, I’m not done with this pussy yet.”

I willingly open my legs and let Calix slide back inside me. Everything else will sort itself out. We have the club, and we have each other.

EPILOGUE

The club vibrates, the thump of the bass not doing a damn thing to help the headache that creeps up my neck. Half-naked women dance and grind against well-dressed men in tailored suits in time with the bass and constant beat of the ridiculously loud music. Normally I don't mind the loud music, but tonight it's pounding in my skull. Maybe this was a bad idea.

I'm sitting at a high top table at Club Nuvo, the newest, hottest club in Los Angeles or so I'm told.

With work and all the drama around my father I don't get to spend much time checking out club trends. But Nyx wanted to see this place. Our first real night out since the kidnapping.

I'm still a bit on edge. No one knows how those men knew about the stairwell or even got in the building without help. Until we find out who is responsible, I don't know if I'll be truly at ease. But the nightmares are finally gone after a month and the guilt I have about ending two lives eases with each day.

"Will you enjoy yourself? This is your bachelorette party after all," Nyx calls over the loud music. I just roll my eyes. Nyx is wild and ever since my kidnapping she never leaves my side. I love her but it can get annoying. Calix says to give her a few months and she'll relax. I fucking hope so.

"I am enjoying myself," I snip, sticking out my tongue and giving a shimmy in my skintight black dress. It hugs all my curves and I'm just small enough on top that it holds my tits at the perfect angle. Nyx is in a similar outfit, but the color is

bloodred with straps that wrap around her chest and up her throat.

She snakes her hand around my waist. “You are?” Her voice barely carries to me.

“Yes. This is the first real night out. Since, you know. I can’t believe the guys agreed to let us come out escort free.”

Nyx’s face falls. “About that.”

A waitress approaches with a tray carrying a new set of drinks.

“Your drinks,” she says, placing them on our table.

“We didn’t order these,” I tell her.

“The gentleman over there sent them.” She points to the VIP section. I follow her finger to find a devilishly handsome man dressed in dark jeans and a button-down black dress shirt raising his glass to us.

“God, is that Dex? Are we in Devil’s territory?” My heartbeat picks up. My father has eyes in their territory. Their leader may not be tied with him, but someone in the organization is. The club hasn’t found out who yet.

“No. This club is neutral territory. Owned by the Irish, we’re good.”

I reach for my glass of single malt scotch and take a sip, letting the liquid coat my tongue and enjoying the warm burn as it slides down my throat. *Umm*. I groan so low I’m certain no one heard over the loud music. This scotch is good and after a long-ass day, it is the perfect drink. Too bad I’m not

enjoying it at home; that would be so much better. A nice hot bubble bath, a glass of scotch with the bottle not far away and a good book. I groan again at the thought.

“If that isn’t the sexiest fucking sound I’ve ever heard,” says Dex. His voice is low and husky. “Too bad you’re claimed.”

“Can I help you?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. His gaze is only on Nyx as she takes a sip of her glass, leaving a drop of amber liquid on her bottom lip then swipes her tongue over her lip.

“Watching you lick that bottom lip is just as sexy as that sound your friend there made.” I eye him and glance to my left; Nyx is doing the same. “Enjoying what you see Nyx?” His gravelly voice is deep enough to melt panties but it only makes me miss Calix.

“Maybe,” she purrs.

“So, do you come here often?”

Nyx and I bark out a laugh. Who is this guy?

“Does that line normally work for you?” Nyx chuckles, twirling a piece of her hair between her fingers.

“Usually,” he answers, a cocky grin spreading over his face. “What brings the princess here without an escort?”

“I can go...” My answer is cut off by a rough growl.

“Onyx, what the fuck are you doing here?” Vicious roars. I know it’s him before I can see him because no other person would dare speak to Nyx like that.

“You were saying?” Dex says. We turn our heads and, sure enough, Vicious and Calix are storming over. Calix’s eyes are dark and hooded, his mouth set in a hard line. Fuck, well there goes my night.

“Fuck that, what are you doing without an escort?” Calix says. His arm instantly goes around my waist, pulling me against him. His lips brush my ear.

“I’m gonna beat your pussy with my cock to punish you for this,” he growls, sending heat straight to my core. Damn him.

“We’re blowing off steam. Do you got a problem with that?” Nyx challenges him. Vicious’ nostrils flare. Fuck, I do not want to be Nyx right now. Dude looks like he is ready to murder someone.

“Do you really think this is a good idea? Coming here without protection?”

“I never do anything without perfection,” Nyx blurts with a hiccup. She rubs her ass against Dex. Shit, the alcohol must be finally hitting her.

“That’s it. You’re done!” Vicious roars. Dex throws his hands up, giving Vicious room to throw her over his shoulder. She screams profanities at him but it doesn’t faze him.

“You!” Calix growls at my ear.

“Yes?” I jump, expecting to be read the riot act right here in public.

“Let’s fucking go! I’m not losing my balls because Nyx wants to blow off steam. You’re Gage’s problem, Nyx’s safety

is mine,” Vicious yells, already walking away.

“Not for long if I have my way.” Dex calls out. Vicious eyes go red. He flinches but something stops him. He just shakes his head and leaves the club with Nyx screaming over his back.

“Come on, little sprite.” Calix leads me out of the club, leaving Dex in his spot without saying anything.

We get to his bike. Vicious loads Nyx on the back of his. “Is she okay with him?” I whisper.

“They aren’t our concern. Nyx is a big girl, she knows the beast she’s poking in Vicious.”

“Yeah.” My eyes stay fixed on my friend as she clings to Vicious’ back still yelling at him while he speeds away.

“Let’s go home, little sprite. I got a treat for you.”

Calix practically races home. We don’t live on the same floor anymore. After what happened, Jessie and the entire club wanted Nyx and I to feel safe, so we now split an entire floor and only a select few have access to our floor.

We park and slide in the elevator. Calix presses me against the wall, sweeping his tongue inside my mouth. His hands roam my sides while he uses his hip to pin my back to the cold metal.

The doors beep. “Fuck,” Calix says before pulling away to enter the code that lets us on our floor. The ride up goes by in a blink, and we spill out to the common area.

Loud noises sound from behind Nyx's door. *Shit*. Calix pulls my head towards our place with a shake of his head. "Not our problem."

I nod, he's right, so I let Calix lead me to our bedroom. There's a bucket of ice with a plate of strawberries, bananas, and berries next to our bed. There are also small bowls of cherries, and whipped cream, plus one of what looks like chocolate syrup. Just looking at all of this is making me hungry.

"What is all this?" I ask, turning around to see Calix entering the bedroom with a container of vanilla ice cream.

"I thought we'd have sundaes."

"Human sundaes?"

"Yeah, you first. I want to lather you in ice cream and then suck it all up," he purrs. His words twist deep in my pussy. God damn, this man. He always finds a way to burn me from the inside.

"Take off your clothes and climb on the bed. I want those legs spread. Looks like your punishment for earlier is gonna be fun."

A pit settles in my stomach. The look of glee on his face mildly concerns me. I do as I'm told and strip, then climb on the bed, showing off my exposed pussy.

"Fuck baby, you're perfect." He runs a finger through my lips. The cool air mixes with the warmth in my core. I shiver and my nipples tighten. "Ready?"

I nod.

“Don’t move. I’m gonna do up my sundae then eat it,” he chuckles. “Eat you, that is.” The dark edge in his tone twists deliciously in my stomach, making my pussy drip.

Calix takes a large spoonful of vanilla ice cream and drops globs of the cold liquid over my stomach and breasts. He grabs the spoon, scoops a piece of ice cream and drips it over my clit.

“Fucking hell, Calix!”

“I know, but I couldn’t resist, you look so beautiful dripping with ice cream down your body.” He descends on my core, sucking and licking the ice cream off the spoon and my pussy.

He presses the cold metal against my opening. The contrast makes me jump.

“Holy fuck.”

“Yeah baby, I’ll clean you up really good after, but we’re gonna have a lot of fun with this. You ready?”

“Ready for what?” I don’t get any other time to think. Calix drops his head to my clit while sliding three fingers in my pussy. I grind against his hand. “Dear god, don’t you stop,” I scream.

“That’s it baby. Swallow my fingers,” he growls against my lips. Each pump of his hand sends sparks flying through my body. “You want a fourth?”

He rocks his hand against my opening, waiting for my reply. “Stretch me,” I plead.

“Yes, little sprite. Swallow as much as you can, you’re in control.”

I grind my hips down on his hand, willing my body to spread to take more. The feeling of him splitting me open is a delicious burn, and I love it.

My head falls back on a scream and my entire body vibrates with ecstasy. I open my eyes to Calix dropping chocolate syrup across my stomach. He drags his mouth back over my clit.

“Dear god.” He pushes his hand deeper with each cry.

My fingers reach out, finding his free hand. I pull it to my lips and suck on two of his fingers just like I would his cock.

“Fuck, you sexy bitch.” I suck deeper at his name-calling. “That’s it, take all of it. Stretch those lips for me.” His tongue lashes out, hitting the center of my clit. My pussy explodes around his tongue and fist.

Liquid slips free, coating me and the sheet. My eyes water and my vision blurs. Calix just smiles. “Ride me, baby. I want to watch those breasts in my mouth.”

I slowly move to straddle him, letting his cock inch into my pussy. Fuck yes, this, I need this. His cock fills me and I moan as the stretch of his dick sends a hum through my body. I grind my hips down on Calix’s length, forcing myself to take all of him. His mouth latches onto one of my nipples; I cry out, filling the apartment with my moans.

“Yes, suck on my nipples. Harder,” I plead, grinding harder and harder into his cock. He meets my pussy on each

thrust, seating himself deep inside me.

A new orgasm crashes over my body, sending shivers through my arms and legs. My head flies back and his mouth latches down hard on my other nipple.

“Fuck yes. Come in me.” The words fly off my tongue.

Calix shoots his release deep in my core. We stay connected, kissing for several moments after.

“Fuck, I don’t want to move but I need to.”

“Go shower and clean up, I’ll be here when you get back,” he promises. I chuckle as I dismount and head to the restroom.

For a second, I pause and recognize how happy I am, truly happy. We’re getting married in a week and I’m not scared. It doesn’t feel like a sentence, it feels like freedom and the start of something amazing.

How could it not be? We love each other. I love my job. What more could I ask for?

“Why’re you smiling?” Calix asks on my way back to the room.

“No reason,” I answer before climbing into bed and burrowing into him. Funny, I always thought family would be the death of me. I never once thought they’d be the reason for my happiness.

Guess I just needed to find the right family. And I did, the Deadly Sinners and Calix are home.

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley is a romance author who grew up reading romance from any genre she could find. Now she spins her creative web writing spicy adult romance books about broken people finding their other halves and happily ever afters with lots of steam squeezed in, of course.

As a work from home wife and mom to one amazing little girl, she lives just outside the bright lights of Las Vegas. You can usually find her running around her neighborhood with her crazy little, laughing and joking with her hot bearded husband, or sipping coffee with her headphones on plotting new characters and steamy scenes to bring to life in her world.

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DEADLY SIGHTS
MELVERNA MCFARLANE

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DEADLY SIGHTS

First he stole her kill. Now he'll steal her heart.

She's his match in every way, and he won't let her escape him. The problem: They work for rival organizations, and she has a grudge against him. Her rival companies will kill them once their cover is blown, but before that happens he has to convince her they belong together.

Hard to do when she tries to kill him every time she sees him.

CHAPTER 1

Joyful laughter and running children scattered across the Creative Gifts playground. Among the ruckus, one solitary white boy stood off to the side. Crouched close to the ground, only he knew what held his fascination. For the two girls playing together, his unique knowledge could not stand.

It was mid-March, but the weather was unpredictable. Frost continued to visit the area and harden the ground. On this day, however, the weather was warm and the sun shone brightly.

The girls crouched down on either side of the boy, staring as he poked the ground with a stick.

“What’re you doing?” asked the little Black girl wearing bright-colored hair beads at the ends of her cornrows.

“I’m digging a hole,” the boy said.

The other Black girl who had her hair in afro puffs lowered her head to the ground. “Why?”

“None of your business.” He stood, tightening his hold on the stick.

Both girls rose and stared him down despite his towering height, fearless in the face of his darkening glower and reddening face.

“Ooh, you’ve got a secret. Is it treasure?” Hair beads girl reached for his pockets.

“I said it’s none of your business!” He shoved her and walked away to crouch in a new spot.

The two girls looked at each other, shrugged, then flanked him. This time, they were quiet as they observed the boy with a temper.

He started a new hole, ignoring the two girls. Or he tried to. He stole glimpses of the girls who watched intently instead of joining the other children.

The dirt was like clay, thick and difficult to dig. After what seemed like ages, he made a quarter-sized hole in the ground.

The silence from the two girls prompted him to blurt, "I'm making a trap!"

"It can't be a good one." Hair Beads folded her arms.

"I bet it's better than any you can build."

"But if it's a trap, shouldn't it be secret?" Afro Puffs pointed to all the surrounding people.

"No one ever sees me, so no one'll know."

"But we saw you."

He glared at Afro Puffs for identifying the hole in his logic.

"And we know where your trap will be." Hair Beads' taunting caused him to throw away his stick.

"What do you know?" He stomped off.

The girls didn't see him anywhere until dinnertime. Similar to when they were on the playground, he sat alone among the kids lining up for their meals or sitting down and horsing around over their plates. And like that morning, the girls shared a look. They got their trays with dinner and set

them on either side of him. When he remained silent, the girls began to eat.

Afro Puffs noticed he only ate the chocolate cake and swiftly placed her portion on his plate.

“What’d you do that for?” He reached for his fork but stopped before touching it.

“It’s what friends do.” Hair Beads shrugged and forked a noodle into her mouth.

“We aren’t friends.”

“We are now.” Hair Beads slurped the wiggly noodle.

“Why would I be friends with a bunch of babies?”

“I don’t know, but it’s been decided.” Afro Puffs’ quiet finality halted the boy from protesting further.

He retrieved his fork and gobbled the chocolate cake before offering his pasta to the girls while eyeing Hair Beads’ cake.

“We’re friends, but I don’t give nobody nothing with chocolate.”

The news that he wouldn’t achieve the holy grail of miracles, getting three slices of his favorite dessert caused him to shrink in his seat.

Hair Beads plucked a piece of chicken from his plate, oblivious to his reaction. “I wouldn’t give chocolate to my mama if she rose from the dead and took me away from here.”

This new insight into these insistent little girls sparked his interest. “Your mom died?”

“From I was born. I been here my whole life. The other kids,” Hair Beads glared at the other children in the cafeteria who were oblivious to the trio, “said it was my fault. Just because they knew their parents before they died don’t mean they better than me.” She returned her attention to her plate. In a tiny voice, she whispered, “Why would anyone kill their mama? Mamas hug their kids and kiss their boo-boos. Mamas make everything feel warm and soft.”

“Until they stop. Mine left me here and said she would be back. That was when I was six. I’m ten now.”

“She’ll come back for you.” Afro Puffs glared into his eyes.

“You’re wrong. Today, the director, Mrs. Granger, told me she died. Worst birthday ever.”

“Today’s your birthday?” When he nodded, Hair Beads frowned at her dessert. “You better not be lying to me.” She shoved the cake at him. Before he put his fork in the rich dessert, she stole a mouthful, leaving only half of the cake. “What? I feel for you, but I got to get mine, too.”

Afro Puffs disappeared from the table. After a few minutes, she returned with a cardboard box and set it in front of the boy. “Happy Birthday and I’m sorry about your mommy.”

Curious, the boy pulled the flaps open. “Holy—”

She covered his mouth and looked around the room. When no one paid attention to them, she released him. “Not one word,” she whispered while pressing her finger to her lips.

Hair Beads leaned over to take part in the secret. A wide grin broke out on her face. Inside the box was a quarter of a chocolate sheet cake. When she grabbed her fork to take back the half she'd given the boy, Afro Puffs slammed the lid closed and shook her head. Hair Beads pouted, but took her seat next to the boy without further protest.

The boy sat in amazed silence. "Since I've been here, no one's ever been this nice to me," he said, choking out the words.

"I'm nice to my people."

"You say that like you own me."

"I do."

Hair Beads nodded. "She told me the same thing when she arrived two days ago. And when that fuzzy-haired Trishelle tried to mess with me, she made sure Trishelle knew it, too." Hair Beads snickered. "Trishelle walked out of the bathroom like she saw Jesus."

"Isn't Trishelle thirteen and taller than some adults here?" the boy asked while staring at Afro Puffs.

She stared stonily back at him without saying a word.

"That didn't stop her from getting stomped." Hair Beads mimicked wailing on the table. "So, I don't mind being owned by someone who looks out for me without me asking. Cause everybody here is out for themselves. You should know that by now. I bet you won't mind her looking out for you, either. Not after she puts whoever bothers you in their place."

"B-b-but how old are you?"

“Five.” Afro Puffs goes back to eating her pasta as if she hadn’t dropped a bomb on the older boy.

“Me, too. Are you sure I can’t have one bite? Nobody’s watching.” Hair Beads inched her fork closer to the box, but a side-eye from Afro Puffs sent her back to her pasta.

Since the girls found nothing odd about adopting him, and with so much cake available, the boy decided he didn’t need to belabor the point. Instead, he turned to eating the birthday cake Afro Puffs gave him. Instead of shoveling the dessert into his mouth as fast as a speed eater at an eating competition would, he took small bites, smiling after swallowing each.

When he caught Afro Puffs staring, she jolted. “When my mom comes to get me, I’ll make sure she takes my people with us.” Her eyes widened in surprise as if she hadn’t meant to reveal her thoughts.

“She’s not coming back,” Hair Beads said. “She’s probably dead like the rest of our parents.”

“She’ll come for me, along with my daddy. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“How come you’re so sure? My mom never came back for me, and she promised,” the boy said.

Afro Puffs stared the two down. “Because these people stole me out of my daddy’s car when he and Mommy went into the store. And if they don’t come for *me*, I’m going to leave here and get *them*. And I’m taking you with me.”

CHAPTER 2

Nadira

A drilling sensation pierces through my brain, awakening me in agony. I clutch my head, curl into a ball, and try to breathe through the pain with gritted teeth. No matter how many years have passed, I'll never get used to the crushing agony that visits me at random.

Nor do I understand the dreams preceding the intense suffering. The faces remain a blur and none of the visions are from my memories. Although I wouldn't know if they were.

After my accident, my memory was foggy for a couple years. Through rigorous training at the orphanage that took me in, I improved my recall. If I hadn't shown progress, they would have stopped training me. Thankfully, my long-term memory wasn't affected, but I had to live without remembering the first ten years of my life.

With tears trailing from my tightly closed lids, I count to ten, then thirty, then fifty. When I get to one hundred, the pain becomes a dulling throb, one I can manage. I sit up and reach for the glass of water and pain pills I keep beside the bed.

Leaper, my chestnut Sokoke cat, jumps onto the bed, rubs her head against my arm, and meows her concern. I hate that my headaches upset her this way. Besides her vocal distress, she drools when she's anxious. I pick her up to cuddle until she begins to purr and her slobbering ceases.

The clock at my bedside reads seven, which means my alarm has yet to go off. I cancel it and get out of bed to ready myself for my monthly night out with the ladies. By the time we meet up, the pain will have disappeared or be manageable enough.

I stroll naked into my walk-in closet to select my outfit. A knitted cowl-neck cream dress, and a pair of suede, over-the-knee slouch boots fit my mood and the cool weather. To match my outfit, I select a wig with a side braid that falls below my hips. For jewelry, I go for the understated drop-thread dangling earrings. Once I put everything together and do my makeup, I stand in front of the full-length mirror to see the full effect.

Satisfied with the way the cream highlights the deep dark brown of my skin, I focus on the scar that starts under my wig and ends mid-cheek. My makeup does a good job of blending the scar tissue, but I'll never be able to hide it. As glaring as it is, I'm grateful for it. I'm a tall, fat, Black woman with a facial deformity, so no one sees me. It's a trait I've used to master my profession; the one people don't know about.

I head out to the Say Yes lounge where my friends, Chelsea, Tamara, Moni, and Danae will meet me. For a Wednesday, the place is popping. Men and women fill the dance floor while dancing to popular R&B hits. A constant stream of people fill their orders at the bar. As I look around for my girls, a sensation causes the hair at my nape to stand up.

Discreetly, I glance to my left then right, seeking the eyes that have landed on me too long. I don't sense aggression, but

I don't like standing out. Standing out when I don't intend to means I'm slipping. With my attention on finding my mysterious audience, I almost miss Chelsea rushing to me. With her in my peripheral, I continue seeking the person putting my senses on Spider-Man mode.

“There you are,” Chelsea says, taking my elbow and steering me away.

Chelsea works as an interpreter. She speaks twelve languages from across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Like me, she travels a lot. It's how we bonded. We sat next to each other on a flight to Dubai and I enjoyed talking to her so much I made sure to stay in touch.

“Danae and Moni arrived early and found the private booth you reserved.” She nudges me in the side. “And they've already started on the signature cocktails made by our dedicated bartender. Girl, you always do the most for us. Got us here thinking if only you had a dick, we'd be begging you for that ring every time we see you. Except Tamara, but that's because she knows she isn't your type.”

“And Tamara needs variety,” I respond.

Unlike Chelsea, I met Moni, Danae, and Tamara at a small Black-woman-owned business conference. There we shared the stresses and rewards of being professional Black women who own our companies. Moni owns a medical practice, Tamara runs a law firm, and Danae owns a group of accounting firms across the region.

“There's that. Tonight might be different, though. That last girl had her making plans,” she whispers the last.

Chelsea and I arrive at a curtained doorway. Currently, the closed drapes cut off the antics in the room from the rest of the lounge. I draw back the hanging to see Tamara twerking for the bartender and the rest of the ladies throwing dollars at her.

“Now, y’all know this is a classy joint. Why’re you acting the fools in front of this innocent man?” As I walk inside, Chelsea’s snicker follows me.

“Look, it’s Mother Ter-please-a. Come and get your ass in here before we tell you ‘bout yourself.” Moni drags me toward her side of the booth.

“Nah, she deserves the full read. Acting like she gives a fuck how we act when she the one handing out admission tickets.” Tamara stops twerking to flank my other side.

I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips. Indulging my friends feeds a part of my soul, and I make sure my soul is as well-fed as the rest of me. Chelsea drops a club soda in front of me, my drink of choice when hanging with my ladies. I rarely drink alcohol. When I do, it’s for work functions where my not drinking would cause comments.

Tamara leans in and whispers, “Seriously, thanks for tonight. I need to be surrounded by women who aren’t going to fuck me over.”

“Chile, please.” Moni rolls her eyes. “We know we got you on loan for two hours, max. You ‘bout to go out them curtains and find your comfort kitty for the night.”

Tamara glares across from me to Moni.

“Who you glaring at? You know Moni’s right.” Danae sips her cocktail. “You’ll get all the platonic love you need from us, then go searching for some pussy.”

“Not this time. I’m all pussied out.” Tamara peeks at the bartender.

“Now you better stop. That man don’t need to be caught up in whatever identity crisis you’re in because you got a bruised heart. Stay loving on the girlies and you’ll eventually find the right one.” Chelsea raises her drink to emphasize her point.

When the ladies move on to a different topic, I lean and whisper to Tamara, “Let’s do retail therapy. Wherever you want.”

“This weekend?”

I review my schedule in my head. I fly out tomorrow and the job is an easy in-and-out. “I should be back in town in time for Saturday. I’ll call if I need to reschedule my flight.”

“Thanks.” She squeezes my arm.

Although the lounge doubles as a club, they serve food fit for a gourmand. Soon after my arrival, the staff opens the curtains and serves the dishes Chelsea ordered before I arrived. We get to eat, watch the crowd, and cut up at the same time. This is why I love hanging with my girls.

I eat a little of everything but leave room for what I’m looking forward to, knowing I’ll be back on my regular diet and exercise regimen tomorrow. My size comes from my build and my body’s natural weight distribution, but I can outrun,

out-pull-up, out-cross-fit most people. My stamina is another surprising fact for people in my second profession.

“Okay, before we do the regular and try to get Nadira to cut up out there,” Danae points toward the dance floor, “Y’all know our hostess needs that sugar first.”

As if they heard Danae, the waitstaff enters with dessert, and Tamara intercedes. With a glare directed at Chelsea, she takes control of the cart.

“Why must we do this every time? I’m not here for the dancing. I chose the lounge because that’s what I wanted to do while listening to the music,” I protest, but know that they will wear me down as I eye the two slices of chocolate cake heading my way.

“But you will get your ass on that floor if you want a piece of this. Otherwise, Chelsea will be on cloud nine with two slices.”

I glare at Tamara for pitting me and Chelsea against each other. Our weakness for chocolate is not to be messed with. “Fine, one dance.” I reach for the dessert.

Moni pins my hands to the table. “You know that’s not how this works. Say it and do the thing.”

“Why did I ever become friends with you?”

“Excuse us, but your memory of events needs refreshing. You forced us to be friends with you. Picked us up like strays at the shelter.” Danae says and every one of them nods in agreement. “Now, do as Moni said so we can shake our asses while our asses are hot.”

I sigh before forming my fingers in the shape of a heart and placing my hands over my chest. “I promise that I’ll at least dance with one guy—”

“Hot guy,” Moni specifies.

“Dance with one *hot* guy and m—”

“—whose sexiness is independently assessed by one of the crew. Please read that oath back for me.” As the lawyer in the group, Tamara is worse than Moni with promises.

I glare at the women, but say, “I, Nadira Zane, promise that I’ll dance with at least one *hot* guy whose sexiness has undergone an independent assessment from my crew. And if he asks for a second dance, I’m obligated to accept until he bares a red flag or my crew permits me to exit the dance floor. There, I said it. Now, give me my goddamn cake.” I snatch the dessert off the tray and take the bite I’ve been waiting for all night. “Mmm.”

Chelsea, who also has her cake makes noises more lewd than mine. I’m not a third of the way through and she’s licking the tines of her fork to get every chocolatey morsel off the damn thing while eyeing what’s left of mine.

“Keep eyeing Nadira’s cake and you’re going to lose an eye. You know she’s worse than you with sharing.” Moni’s warning is not new.

“That’s not true. I share my friends.” I wink while slowly pushing another bite into my mouth.

The gesture is only half teasing because I savor my cake whenever I cheat on my diet, and I always cheat when I’m

with my girls. There's something about the decadent, velvety texture of chocolate icing, the lightness of chocolate mouse, and the dense richness of the cake that puts everything in my world to rights. It's a feeling I've had since waking from my car accident twenty-five years ago, and it hasn't left me in the intervening years.

"Can you be any slower?" The complaints start with Danae, then everyone echoes her.

I'm seventy percent finished but the ladies are done and their glasses are empty. I roll my eyes at their impatience. "Y'all know I only allow myself this treat when I'm with y'all. Settle yourselves and don't ruin it for me."

"The only reason you loving on that cake so much is because you need dick in your life," Tamara says.

"Ignore her," I mouth to the bartender whose ears perk up. To Tamara, I say, "What do you know about needing dick? You've been on Team P since puberty."

"Ain't that right? Remember that story about her almost seducing her high school teacher? That woman nearly caught a case because of Tamara's horny ass." Chelsea slams the table in her amusement as she bowls over with laughter.

"Yeah, then she stay trying to put people away, acting like she wasn't jailbait. Now that she's got her own firm, she keeping ho's out of jail." Moni bumps shoulders with Chelsea.

"You not right, hating on my natural game like this. If I was a straight-chaser, all of you would have found your baby

gay membership cards years ago.” She shrugs with a suggestive smile. “I’m just saying.”

“Alright ladies. Ms. Nadira has finished her cake. It’s time to go dick recruiting on the dance floor.” Danae pulls me from the table.

“I’m not a fan of this plan. I already promised I’d dance with one guy. Why are you making it sound like you’re going to have a whole line of men sent my way?”

“I’m not saying we not but I’m also not saying we aren’t,” Moni says, already swiveling her head to survey who’s in the club.

To defend myself, I curve my arms around Chelsea and Danae’s elbows. “I need at least five songs to loosen up before you sacrifice me to the dick altar.”

“That’s not what you need to loosen up.” Danae pulls me to the center of the floor.

One song transitions to Daft Punk’s *Get Lucky*. The irony makes me smile and wag my finger at my friends. Except for the occasional tingle of awareness, I lose myself to the music. I can’t pinpoint the source from the crowded dance floor. When the third song plays, Chelsea leaves to get a drink, leaving me with Moni and Danae. Tamara is off to the side with a woman who looks like her ex. I’ll ask her about the woman when we go shopping together.

The sensation along my nape intensifies. As I do a twirl, an arm wraps around my waist and pulls me into a hard chest. Danae and Moni stop mid-step, their eyes bulging and mouths

hanging open. Then Moni forms the shape of a D with her fingers and places it over her heart before letting her hands travel below her waist. Then she winks. Danae is more discreet but no less obvious with two thumbs up, giving me her approval.

They don't know about the heat flooding my veins or my body's signals going haywire. I calm my instinct to toss him over my shoulder and slam him to the ground. Instead, I home in on what's putting my senses on high alert. I don't detect any malice from him. His hold is firm but I can easily break it. The problem, if there is one, is the compulsion to get closer, to rub my ass against his dick until he gets hard.

Get a hold of yourself Nadira!

The man behind me doesn't tower over me, which would be hard to do as I'm 5'9", but he's tall enough that he needs to bend to whisper in my ear. "I've been waiting for you all night." His voice comes out deep, like velvet chains that are deceptively soft but will not break under any pressure. It sparks images of a large man wrapped around me.

Then his words sink in. Is he the person I felt watching me earlier? Or is he someone who shouldn't know about me at all? I keep my body loose, not betraying the instant I become alert to everything around me. His scent, pine and citrus, invade my senses, but I hold the distraction at bay. We dance until the song ends.

He pulls me closer. "Can I take you somewhere to talk?"

I nod as I inventory the weapons I'm wearing. There are the knives hidden in my heels, the gun strapped to my thigh,

and the wire hidden in my earrings. If he tries anything, I've come prepared.

He takes my hand and leads me to a less crowded area in the club. I survey my surroundings. If a fight breaks out between us, I can slip out from view in the hallway beside us. My dress may be a problem if things get messy. I should have worn black.

While I think of all the ways I can disable or end him, he swings us around until my back is to the wall and he blocks my view of the club. I'm right about him not towering over me. He's probably three inches taller than me, but I'm momentarily stunned by how wide his shoulders are. And his arms... he isn't flexing, but his biceps strain against the fitted material of his shirt.

As I trail my eyes up, I try not to shiver as he rubs his fingers in soft circles above my hips. When I get to his face, my brain blinks out before rebooting to come online again. How on earth did I grab his attention? Handsome men only approach me when I try to stand out, which I typically avoid doing. He surpasses handsome with his wavy brown hair, golden-brown eyes, and smile that'll con a nun out of her panties.

Mesmerized, I watch as his full lips form words over bright white teeth that contrast with a tan that speaks to either him loving tanning salons or living a life full of travel to warm climes. When he stops moving his mouth, I raise my eyes to his waiting gaze.

“Sorry, what did you say?” I ask, realizing that my knack for observing everything has disappeared under this instant attraction.

He’s put me in a vulnerable position and I have yet to react. Without explanation, I swing us so his back is to the wall. The man doesn’t seem to mind.

He grins at me. “Something in the air told me I’d meet my destiny tonight. I was thirty percent convinced the first time I glimpsed you and the quiet confidence you wear.”

“And now?” I can’t believe the breathy question comes from me. Or the way my heart rate doubles the longer his stare sears through me.

“Hmm.” He runs a finger down my scar.

The slight caress should bother me. It does bother me, but not in the way it should. I suppress a shiver instead of the need to pull away and hide my face.

“When I saw your eyes, I was seventy-five percent certain, but now I’m one hundred percent sure.”

“Considering we haven’t exchanged that many words, what sold it for you?”

He leans forward until his breath kisses my ear. “Your breath smells like my favorite dessert, and I’m fighting the battle of a lifetime by not kissing you and tasting how perfectly you complement the chocolate you ate.” He pulls back after his admission, his thumb still circling the spot above my hip as if he needs the reminder that I’m in his arms.

I swallow... Nope; I gulp at his admission as my eyes stray to his mouth again. Sinner's lips. Where are my defenses? Why do I find it hard to analyze his words and mine everything he does for red flags?

“Forgive me if I find that hard to believe. You don't even know my name.” I take a deep breath, inadvertently inhaling his piney scent and almost closing my eyes as it draws me in.

He shrugs. “That will come. What matters more to me is putting a face to the woman I belong to, and making sure she knows it, too.”

CHAPTER 3

Nadira

“I can’t believe I missed the hot guy that carried you away,” Chelsea says, repeating some iteration of the same thing since we left the club.

She’s staying over at my place, a tradition we started a year into our friendship. She has a room dedicated to her for her overnight visits. Before we turn in, we perform the ritual of decompressing and talking over the night’s events. Chelsea hands me a bottled water before spreading out on my sofa.

“I can’t believe after that doozy of a line, we didn’t exchange names.” I bang my head against the chair I’m sitting in.

Leaper jumps onto the headrest and stretches until half her body is on top of my head and her lower half rests on the chair. Her tail curls around to gently sway against my neck. It’s my cue not to leave until she’s good and ready to walk away first.

“Yeah, explain how that happened again?” Chelsea rises and digs through the drawer labeled ‘For Chelsea Only’ containing her favorite chocolate candies.

“One second he was talking about belonging to me, then he pointed out that you were looking for me. I turned my back on him for a second to tell you where I was. When I spun back, he’d disappeared.” I frown at the memory.

Usually, no one can move that stealthily without the kind of training drilled into me since I was eleven.

“Was he so sexy that you’ll overlook his disappearing act? I know you’ve had a long dry spell, but don’t settle for the first swinging dick that comes your way.”

“I mean he definitely made me reconsider my life’s choices for a hot second, but in the end, he was all talk.” I say this, yet the same tingling sensation I associate with him hasn’t left me, though it’s not as intense as it was in the club. “Anyway, I doubt I’ll see him again. He was nice eye candy while he lasted.”

“With your travel schedule, he probably wasn’t destined to last anyway. Speaking of which, I see your bags are packed. Where are you headed this time?”

“London. I have a client who insists on an in-person meeting to update him on the new administration’s trade positions and how it will impact the goods they export to my markets.” What I tell Chelsea isn’t a complete lie. While in London, I’ll multi-task by doing my day job and my second job.

For my cover, I stick as close to the truth as possible. I’ve seen too many in my secondary profession get caught and killed because they weren’t as circumspect about their covers.

“I guess we should turn in. It’s already four in the morning, and I’m guessing your flight is early.” Chelsea rises and stretches before heading to her room.

“Alright, squatter, it’s time to move.” I touch Leaper’s paw, and the cat springs off my head as if I scalded her with hot water.

I do a last check of my apartment before going to bed. Sleep comes easily but not restfully. The tingling sensation in my waking hours intensifies in my unconscious state. Golden eyes gleam at me from the darkness.

When I reach out, they disappear, replaced by a hauntingly youthful voice saying, “I’ll be your forever family.”

I spin in every direction, seeking the source of that determined promise. Everywhere I turn, nothing but darkness confronts me. Still, I persist. The impression that I need to find the owner of that voice drives me when everything else is a void.

The words repeat, though the cadence changes. Deepening. Full of finality. Layered with sensuality. My heart beats in anticipation of a vow on the verge of fulfillment. When next I see the twin golden spheres, I race toward them but never close the distance. As I close my hand, desperate to grab onto something, my alarm blares, shocking me out of my dream.

I inventory my body, relieved that yesterday’s headache hasn’t resurfaced. My relief doesn’t last long. My instincts tell me something is awry. Leaper is not in sight. She is a creature of habit, insisting on her breakfast the instant my alarm goes off. I search her favorite hiding places in my room, but she isn’t in any of them.

When I reach the kitchen, she’s already face-deep in her food bowl. My senses go on high alert. Chelsea and Leaper don’t fuck with each other. Chelsea would never feed my cat even as a favor. I rush to my walk-in closet to the panic room I built when I purchased the apartment.

Inside, I pull up the video surveillance from last night. My blood freezes at what's playing out in front of me. I stop the screen in shock. I'm supposed to be a light sleeper. How the hell did I not wake up when this motherfucker broke into my apartment? Better question, how the hell did he bypass all my security?

I hit play again, seething at the audacity this asshole has. What makes matters worse is when he stares directly into the hidden camera in my bedroom, he doesn't try to hide his face. Instead, he smirks and salutes the camera, acknowledging that I will see him. I see red at the clarity of his face, and that sinner's smile causes the same reaction in my body as it did last night.

I continue to watch as he goes from room to room, rifling through my things. When he disappears into my walk-in, I pause the video and search for what he could have been doing. I don't have long to look. A wig is missing from its mannequin head. It's the auburn one with a side part and luscious, cascading waist-length curls. If that isn't enough, he reorganized all my wigs. They now line the shelves by color, shade, length, and style. I admit, the new system has a pleasing aesthetic that puts my style grouping to shame.

Deeper into my closet, laid out on the island is a pair of four-inch leather ankle boots, a maroon turtle neck, plaid peacoat, cashmere slacks, my missing wig, necklaces, rings, earrings, and a note. I snatch it from the countertop and read it.

I don't want you to stress about what to wear for your upcoming trip. Here's everything you'll need.

I don't know what makes me more furious, that he was in my home, picked out an outfit for me that totally slays, or that I want to wear the damn clothes despite hating he selected them. Then I realize he chose everything except my underwear.

Should I spite him and myself by wearing something else, or look stylish as fuck? I finger the soft material of the pants that will hug my curves where I need it and hang loose where I don't. Like my wigs, he didn't leave my wardrobe unscathed from his discerning eye. My clothes now are in groupings by season, with each having its own color wheel. Dammit, I don't need him to style me! But thanks to his meddling, either decision I make, he will be the cause.

Fuck it.

I open my underwear drawer to find he's struck again, organizing the chaos I usually hide away. Another note rests on top of my neatly arranged panties.

These can never do justice to the beauty of your body, but if you must wear them, I'm fond of the pink and brown pair.

My skin heats at his compliment. It should be creepy. He's taken stock of my bras and panties. So, why am I turned on? I shake my head, hoping these rogue thoughts will fall out. The man disappeared on me to somehow stalk me?

He doesn't know who he's dealing with. I may not have a name, but I'll find him. I return to my surveillance room to see where else he spent time in my home. As I watch him feed Leaper, there is no sense of gratitude in me.

He's mocking me, and I won't let that stand. The mystery man from the club has become my new pet project. When I find him, I'm going to teach him a lesson he'll never forget.

* * *

After searching my apartment for bugs and bidding Chelsea goodbye, I pack Leaper into her carrier and ready myself to leave. In an outfit of *my* choosing and wearing the underwear I selected, I celebrate my petty victory; I look damn good in my chosen outfit.

My first destination isn't the airport but my bunker. Hidden under a section of storage units owned by my shell company, is my command post and artillery center. It's where I plan the hits my organization contracts out to me, and if necessary, where I design the weapons I'll use that will leave no trace of my presence.

Before I lead anyone there, especially the man who slipped through my defenses, I take a circuitous route. The tingling awareness I felt last night is noticeably missing, but I'm not taking chances. My identity depends on my caution. I switch cars in an underground garage halfway to my destination.

I breathe a cautious sigh of relief as I pull into the storage company where I keep my stash. For this trip, I'll leave the high-end artillery at home. I walk down the halls in the tunnel until I reach the miniature laboratory. Once I select the materials I need, I engage the extra security and head to the private airport.

On the chartered plane, Leaper spends her time seducing the flight staff with her energetic antics, tip-toeing while

investigating every nook and crevice on the plane, and requests to play fetch with the wool balls I brought to keep her busy.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, I fall into a fitful sleep. Unlike the last time, every noise, loud and faint, jars me awake. It happens again and I give up trying to rest in the air in time for the gourmet meal. Flying private with Leaper means she doesn't get the standard fare either.

The flight attendant sets a plate with a specially prepared meal for the cat. Beside the setting is a small vase with a flower. Leaper sits on her hind legs, watching me for what I do first.

Where was the waiting when the interloper broke into my apartment?

I shake off the thought. When I return will be soon enough to handle him. The moment I take up my silverware, Leaper digs into her food with gusto. The small resentment I bear towards the feline melts away. I can never stay mad at her.

Who else waits patiently at my door to greet me when I step through it? I have no one else. My friends, though they fill a gap inside me, can't give me the unwavering trust and loyalty Leaper does. She is my family, by my side to offer comfort when I'm in pain, companionship when I'm lonely, and entertainment when I'm down. No one, especially a man who breaks into my home and feeds her, will ever come between us.

I finish my meal of lamb chops with rosemary potatoes and honey-glazed carrots when the attendant offers me a slice

of chocolate cake. I close my eyes against the temptation and reminder of last night at the club. Another reason to add to the mountain piling up of why he deserves my wrath. I squeeze my hand into a fist. Instead of satisfying my curiosity about his taste, I will be forever in doubt regarding what I'm missing.

*I can't be missing... I'm **not** missing anything by not kissing that man.*

Ooh, I hate not having a name to go with the lips, and eyes, and nose, and those thick arms, and those big hands. *Dammit Nadira! Think about something, anything else.*

Right! At a time like this, Leaper proves why we'll always have an unbreakable bond. She bounds into my lap to curl in a ball. Soon, her purring calms my thoughts, and I turn on my tablet to plan for my legitimate meeting.

By the time the pilot announces our descent, everything is right in my world. We land and I visit the site of my operation. Although I have building layouts and security images that helped me plan my mission, I prefer to visit the site in person. I soak in the place's energy, get an idea of foot traffic, and the viability of the escape route I selected.

Satisfied with my discovery, I seek my mark and lay the groundwork for my assignment, while avoiding the mountain of security surrounding him, his wives, and his children. Before returning to my hotel, I make one last stop. My efforts are well worth the outcome when Leaper greets me as if I'd been gone all day and not a few hours. As I feed her the treats from my time on the road, I plan out my next day.

My schedule will be busy. First, satisfy my business client, then assassinate the sitting emir of the Arab nation of Ras Al Najib.

CHAPTER 4

Nadira

Make it look like an illness.

The chemical compound in the hotel's custom-shaped ice ball will have the desired effect. The Emir, a seventy-five-year-old gentleman, is attending a political summit. Dignitaries, royalty from numerous nations, aides, security, influence chasers, and more pack the ballroom. The combined body heat causes the staff to open the patio doors, permitting the brisk winter air to cool the room.

I spy my quarry. Dressed in the hotel's official uniform, I blend in with the wait staff and mill close to him. He wears the traditional white thawb and a patterned kaffiyeh. Although I don't research my marks' backgrounds, it's hard not to know about this one. His handsomeness makes people forget about his cruelty, but my job isn't to bring feelings into my work. Am I elated that after tonight he will no longer torture women and children? Almost as much as being the person to end him.

His bodyguard stops my roaming with a hand on my arm. "Fetch the emir a glass of nabidh."

I do as requested, making sure to use the specialized ice prepared just for the emir before returning to the bodyguard who gave me the initial order.

He takes the tray with the drink and approaches the emir's table. I don't envy the rapid symptoms the man will develop tonight, but it couldn't happen to a nicer guy. As I step back to find the unobtrusive hiding space I picked the day before, the

tingling along my nape returns. I search the floor, unwilling to discount my instincts this time. I shift to the left and a high-powered whizz passes by my ear. Then the screaming begins.

I spin to see the emir slumped over his table, a bright red spot making a mockery of the pristine white tunic he's wearing. The spot grows, making it obvious that someone shot and killed the man.

As the truth sinks in, fury replaces my calm assessment. Someone stole my kill! I recall the whizzing sound to figure out the trajectory of the bullet. When I identify the location where the shot must have come from, I search the ceiling for any movement. While chaos reigns behind me, my intense focus pays off. A deep shadow moves eastward.

After discarding a few options, I bank on where I would make my exit route if my job had been to make things look like an assassination. With haste driving me to catch the person who's marred my perfect record, I rush to the place in my mind: the office building three structures away.

No one notices me as I sprint to the other building. I check my watch and the surrounding area. Everyone walks about casually, but that means nothing. I take the risk that he hasn't left the property and I slip inside. Faint footsteps from above spur me into action. On the third-floor landing, I stumble to a halt.

“You!”

He stops and grins. *Grins!* “Fancy meeting you here, Keeper.”

A sharp pain slices through my head, but I try to shake it off.

“As much as I’d like to stay and chat, here and now’s not a good time.” He grabs my elbow and starts running down the stairs with me.

I need to fight him off, but I’m too disoriented to do anything other than follow him out of the building and to his waiting vehicle. Flashes of a room full of metal cabinets sear through my brain, causing me to clutch my head.

“Keeper?” His concern reaches me through the fog, but more images bombard me, places I’ve never seen and can’t identify.

“Stop the car,” I say while taking in gulps of air.

He pulls over and I run out to collapse on the sidewalk and heave. He appears beside me to rub circles on my back and lifts the hair from my neck. Nothing comes out but acid burns the back of my throat. Cool air hits my nape and the soothing action at my spine helps to center me in the present, forcing the pictures and sounds in my mind to fade.

“Here.” He hands me a bottled water.

I glare at him, then at the bottle.

“It’s not drugged.”

After a few seconds of internal debate, I snatch the bottle and chug it.

“We haven’t gone far enough to be safe.” He ushers me back to the car.

“Who are you?” I ask.

He glances at me from the corner of his eye, his lips downturned in disappointment.

What have I said to cause that reaction?

“Considering our professions, I doubt you’d believe me.”

“Tell me anyway.”

He nods. “I have a few names. Tell me when you recognize one. The first, someone I was very fond of gave me. She called me Trapper.”

Again, pain slices through my head. This time is more tolerable than the last. “That doesn’t suit you.”

He firms his lips and his nostrils flare while he gets whatever bug he’s got up his ass under control. “Then you might recognize Reaper.”

“You’re fucking lying.”

In our circle, the Reaper matches me for record kills. He’s pulled off some of the most daring assassinations with high-profile targets even more important than the head of a royal family.

Reaper pulls up to my hotel, and all the reasons that had me running to beat his ass come to mind again. The valet takes his car and he ushers me to a different floor. Curious, I remain quiet as he opens a suite door.

I follow him inside.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions—” He dodges the knife I send flying in his direction. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“You stole my target and you’re staying at the same hotel? Why are you stalking me? Did someone send you to kill me?”

He blocks my roundhouse kick with laughable ease and every punch I throw at him. “You’ve got me all wrong.”

I step back to reassess the situation. My anger is controlling my reactions and I’m betraying my intentions if he can predict my strikes.

“If I was sent to kill you, you’d be dead. I didn’t gain my reputation because I’m shitty at my job.”

“Okay, then explain yourself. And leave nothing out.” I stretch my neck and relax my pose.

“Where’s the fun in that?” His eyelids lower and smokey heat enters his golden irises. “Let’s take our time getting to know each other.”

When he is close enough, I grab his arm and toss him over my head, but he’s as agile as I am. He spins mid-air to land on his feet. Then he uses the momentum to trap my arms to my side in a hold that feels more intimate than it should, and he tumbles us to the ground. He absorbs the impact from the fall before wrapping his legs around mine and immobilizing me.

“As much as I love the feel of your arms and will gladly wrap myself around you if you ask, I’d prefer doing so with fewer clothes and more kissing.” His sinful voice is too close to my ear, causing my insides to run amok. His lips brush against my ear. “And sucking,” he says before drawing my lobe into his mouth and demonstrating the action he mentioned.

My body locks up while I try to understand what's happening to me. I haven't breathed a full breath since he caught me and my skin is so sensitive I feel the individual fibers in my clothes rubbing against me. My breasts swell and my nipples harden. When my eyes start to close, I jolt, pulling my ear away from his distracting mouth.

“And definitely more licking.” Undaunted by my evasive move, he proceeds to the skin under my chin that I exposed with my reaction. With a flick of his tongue, he flays me. Untamed desire that I don't know what to do with keeps me weak and at his mercy.

“I knew your taste would make me an addict.” The velvety softness in his voice winds around my will, imprisoning it, and my body loses resistance.

This man is an unknown. He could be my enemy, sent to seduce me before killing me. But all that begins to fade the longer I stay in his arms. He presses closer to me, and my head falls back further, as I unconsciously grant him more room to taste me.

With his arms and legs wrapped around me, my hips are the only body part I can move to get leverage. I need to get away from him and these unwanted desires. I brush against him and freeze when his hardening length presses against my ass.

He groans, and the sound travels to my clit, causing me to gasp at the sensation.

“Who are you?” I put together enough words for a competent question.

He pauses and drops his head on my shoulder. “I shouldn’t have started something I couldn’t finish.” He kisses my shoulder and his regret transmits to my heart. “When you wake up, come find me. My name is Julian Caddel.”

CHAPTER 5

Julian

“You’re late.” My handler, Jason, takes a leisurely sip from a snifter.

We’re meeting in a bar owned by one of our information gatherers. It caters to an elite clientele, and the owner grants our operatives exclusive access whenever we have high-class targets in play.

“I’m always on time,” I respond and walk behind the bar to pour myself a drink.

Most times, the dim lighting and quiet atmosphere would present as intimate; romantic even. Not today. There is a sinister quality, almost a sense of distrust. This is new. For close to thirty years, I haven’t given the organization I work for a reason to doubt me. The one time was when I lost Nadira after telling her to come find me and she never did.

Creative Gifts, the orphanage we were in together before they moved me to one for older teens, said she ran away. I never believed them because she wouldn’t have left without me. After losing the people in my life, she knew how much I needed her. No, she would never have run away on her own.

When the trainers at the new orphanage realized I didn’t eat up their excuses, their next tactic was to concede that someone might have abducted her. She was the prodigy they were most proud of, a MENSA genius. Already undetectable when stealing, she instantly grasped concepts that took most

people longer to learn. So, it was understandable that rival organizations heard and wanted her for themselves.

Although believable, I didn't buy it. For years, they tried to make me forget her, going so far as to "find" newspaper articles to corroborate her death. My connection to her, as farfetched as it was, made it impossible for me to believe them then. And although I've toed the line over the years, it's always been due to biding my time. All the covert snooping I've done, ended the night she showed up at Say Yes with a different name. As does my show of loyalty to an organization that did its best to make me believe the most important person in my life abandoned me.

I watch Jason while he observes me. After so many years of us working together, he should realize by now that I won't give shit away, especially anything that would compromise Nadira's new life.

"Did you have any problems with the hit?" Jason asks.

"Why don't you spit out what you want to know so I can answer and get on my way?" I have no time for his roundabout way of questioning me today. I need to return to Denver and the plans that have nothing to do with assassinations.

"Our client has access to the same news outlets we do as well as underground sources."

"And?"

"*And* someone else tried to make a move on the emir today. I need to know if you're compromised."

He has no idea to what extent. Or that I'll willingly do so again and again just to be in Nadira's orbit.

“I slipped in and out. No tail. Satisfied?”

Jason takes forever to respond. In the interminable seconds, we stare at each other to see who'll blink first. It's not me.

“I'll take your word for it.”

On the surface, his words should reassure me, but they don't.

“I have another assignment for you.” Jason pulls out a thick envelope from an attaché on the floor beside him.

I shake my head and down the rest of my drink. “Give it to someone else.”

He taps a finger on the envelope while contemplating me. “This is new. Since when do you give up an assignment without knowing the details?”

“Consider it me taking a mental health break. When I'm off hiatus, I'll check in with you. In the meantime, if I see one of your people spying, know I won't keep silent.” I walk toward the exit. With my hand extended toward the knob, I pause. “Oh, and I'll apologize in advance.”

“For what?”

“For killing whoever you send.”

After all these years, the phantom ache I've carried from being separated from Nadira is no longer a dull throb that exists to remind me who I'm missing. It hammers at me to get

to her, to watch and protect her, and to fulfill the promises we made to each other long ago.

From our two interactions, it's clear Nadira doesn't remember me or her past. The amount of willpower I have to harness to stop myself from unloading everything is something I've never had to do. On my flight to Denver, I spend the hours researching memory loss. I want her to remember me and everything we were to each other, but all the materials I read suggest the patient not force the process.

I pull up a recent photo of Nadira I took while she slept. Despite the risk of her waking, I covered her naked body to study her. As the seconds passed, I couldn't resist the lure of lying beside her, and I needed the memory to prove I hadn't succumbed to a hallucination. I've had them in the past after days of refusing to eat and drink in protest when the adults around me refused to give me information about her whereabouts. As an adult, the visions came occasionally. Always vibrant. Always leaving me screaming the name I knew while reaching for her ghostly image.

But now there's proof. I caress the scar on her cheek, wondering how she acquired it. Some people might find it unsightly, but the mark draws my eyes to her best features. Her dark eyes shine like onyx whether they glitter with her rage or sparkle with desire. Her cheek glows with health and softness despite the disfigurement. And her lips... The obsession to beat all obsessions. Plump, soft, juicy.

I close my eyes, wishing I tasted her when I had the chance, and knowing I won't until she trusts me the way she

used to. If that means waiting until her memory returns, I'll do it. I'll do anything for her.

CHAPTER 6

Nightfall meant lights out, and all kids had to be in bed. No exceptions. But Afro Puffs and Hair Beads weren't all kids. They had a mission. Preventing them from embarking on their quest were the security guards stationed in each wing of the orphanage.

Afro Puffs rolled her eyes as another guard made his rounds. "Let's go," she said when she deemed the way clear.

Hair Beads nodded and followed, crouched low and on socked feet to minimize the noise against the tiled floor. In their hands, they carried their sneakers.

This wasn't their first time disregarding the rules. What did the orphanage expect when they trained everyone to have stealthy skills? The same ability they taught the girls, they now demonstrated as they crept past the guards to enter the boy's wing.

When they got to the correct door, they slipped through to meet the boy waiting for them.

"Where are we going this time?" he asked.

"Shh." Hair Beads pushed her finger against his lips and nodded toward the exit.

With great care, the children traversed the halls, avoiding the guards and the cameras taking video. Their first stop upon exiting the dorms, was the maintenance building. At the door, Hair Beads and the boy stared at Afro Puffs who nodded at the other girl.

“Why me? You’re better at picking locks than I am.”

“You answered your question yourself.” Afro Puffs stepped away to give Hair Beads more room.

While Hair Beads bit her lip and fiddled with the lock, the boy asked Afro Puffs, “Are we going to the same place as last time?”

“No.”

“Then where are—”

“Why do the older kids call you Next?”

“Yeah, why do they?” Hair Beads paused her activity to pay attention to him.

Afro Puffs glanced at her, then the door, prompting Hair Beads to resume her attempt to break into the maintenance building.

The boy looked down at his shoes while answering, “Since I don’t pick up on the lessons as fast as everyone else, the instructors say I’ll get it next time.” He shrugged and refused to look at the two girls.

“Who needs them? Yes!” Hair Beads opened the door with a victorious smile.

They quickly entered and closed the door. Using the moonlight filtering through the small windows, they found the storage closet with the tools they needed and left as silently as they’d arrived.

In the woods bordering the orphanage, they trekked, stumbling over roots and fallen branches until Afro Puffs

raises her fist. “This is a good place. Let’s scrape the leaves first, then dig.”

“Why is this a good place?” Hair Beads asks.

Afro Puffs turns to the boy with a raised brow, prompting him to respond.

“Because the ground here looks level and a passerby will have a sense of security. Before they walk into the trap, they won’t be on their guard for things to trip them up.”

At Afro Puffs’ nod, he beamed.

“And why is building a trap so important to you?” Hair Beads rested the trowel beside her.

“Because I need a safe place for my treasure. When my mom left me here, she gave me my dad’s watch. She told me it was the most important thing to her after me, so I should keep it, but I don’t trust the kids in my dorm. If they find it or learn what it means, they’ll steal and destroy it. That’s what they did to the only picture I had of me and my mom. Now I barely remember what she looks like.”

“Doodoo heads, all of them,” Hair Beads said.

The three dug until Afro Puffs pointed out, “This is deep enough to do major damage. Remember, if you don’t want the person who falls in to walk away, dig deeper. Now for the spikes.”

They foraged for sturdy branches and shaved the tip until it formed a sharp spear. While Afro Puffs explained how to ensure the spikes wouldn’t fall over at the slightest weight but

pierce whoever fell into the hole, the other two stared at her in amazement.

Every night, they did this ritual until the boy and Hair Beads could build a successful trap. When they met on another night two weeks later, the boy brought his treasure.

As he placed the watch underground, he beamed up at the girls. “Today, Mr. Hough said my trap was the best out of everybody’s. I still have to work on my stamina, but it was the first time I didn’t see him frown when he reviewed my performance.”

Hair Beads, who sat idly weaving leaves, said, “I think this means you should get a new nickname.” Her mouth twisted in disgust. “I don’t like Next.”

“Me neither,” he said while placing the spikes to protect the tin box containing the watch.

“How about Tr—”

CHAPTER 7

Nadira

An all-too-familiar drilling sensation wakes me, disturbing the few tidbits of my dream I still remember. The faces remain a blur, but something about the girl in hair beads resonates with me. Maybe it's because after my accident, I felt the same anger at the older kids in the Fostering Futures orphanage.

I try to hold onto the blurry images, but the pain in my head whites everything out. Deep breaths get me through the worst. Drugs do the rest. Once I can move my head and open my eyes minus the agony, I rise from the bed.

Shit! I missed my check-in with headquarters. I stumble toward my burner phone, my equilibrium still off from the residual effects of my headache. Twenty missed calls.

I redial the last number and confirm my identity when the line engages.

“What about make it look like an illness didn't you understand?” My handler, Gary, bites out every word in his harsh Scandinavian accent.

“It wasn't me. Someone else took him out before I could execute my plan.”

The silence that greets my confession is not typical. Neither is having my target taken out by someone else. Someone I can't afford to think about right now when Gary expects me to be cold and unemotional. But I'm so far from being cold.

“Gary?”

“When does your flight land?”

“Ten.”

“Make sure you’re at HQ by ten-fifteen for debriefing.” He hangs up without the usual jokes that only he gets.

Leeper chooses that moment to launch herself from the top of the TV cabinet onto the bed to lather me with affection. While I greedily soak up everything she has to give and not harbor thoughts about a certain man, a knock at the door puts me on high alert.

“Room service,” a strange man says.

“Leave it and I’ll get it when I’m ready.”

I didn’t order anything. Like the movies, it’s always a good idea to suspect unsolicited room service orders. I creep to the door and lower myself to the ground. Barely visible are a pair of glossy black leather shoes that are part of the hotel uniform. Considering I’m still in the waitress uniform from earlier today, I don’t relax until five minutes after the feet and muted footsteps disappear.

I retrieve my gun before opening the door and wheeling the cart of food inside. I aim at the cloth draped to the floor, then fling a corner over the domed dishes. A sigh of relief escapes me when I find nothing there. With one danger addressed, I look at the top of the cart. A card lies beside the large dome.

I apologize for my hasty departure, but it couldn’t be helped. Trust me when I say I would rather spend the hours

with you than what I have to do instead. Since I expect you'll be hungry by the time you read this note, I've ordered you some things I think you'll like. And before you throw everything away because you suspect I've poisoned you, remember, I'm waiting for you.

Yours,

Julian Reaper Caddel

I growl, scaring Leaper into hiding under the cart. How is it this... Julian character is so confident about me and what I like when we're goddamn strangers? I raise the lid off the first dish, salmon, spinach, and a bean salad lie temptingly on the plate. Under a smaller lid, is chicken liver, a treat for Leaper. When my heart begins to melt, I stiffen my spine. The man is damn good at emotional manipulation.

There is a third dome. Since he's proven to know I eat a high-protein diet, I suspect the third dish is my weakness. Given that Julian's actions have never endangered me, I lure Leaper out of her hiding place with the liver.

As my cat and I enjoy the meal he provided, I turn on the TV for the news. A reporter details the emir's assassination, but a breaking news update interrupts her. Ras Al Najib's biggest trade competitor, Unlaak also has a representative who was brutally gunned down during a private party. I don't need to be told that Julian's quick exit had to do with Unlaak's prime minister dying today.

Two targets in one day. I stamp out the admiration kindling inside me. I have more than one bone to pick with Julian, and holding him in high esteem will ruin the ass kicking he needs.

With the main meal eaten, I eye the last dome on the cart. Curiosity gets the better of me and I peek at the contents. It's as I suspected, a four-layer chocolate gateau with chocolate shavings stares back at me.

To distract myself, I pack my belongings. But soon I return to the cart, unable to deny the draw of the dessert. With a deep breath, I succumb to the temptation and relish every dark, sinful forkful. I moan even as Julian's words about fighting the urge to taste how perfectly I complement his favorite dessert whisper in my ear. When I finish the last mouthful of the amazing confection, I wipe down the room, leaving no trace of my presence. I have to put as much distance between myself and the memories of being in Julian's arms, or I risk making a mistake. Though I have a cover for being in London, caution saves lives.

My first stop upon landing in Denver, is Bio Solutions, the name of the organization that sends me contract hits. Gary waits for me with a cup of steaming tea.

“So, London,” he says.

“Yeah, London.”

“Break it down for me.”

I relay my actions for the time, ending with when the emir took Julian's bullet.

“Then what happened?”

“Because of the chaos, I kept moving until I was sure about my surroundings. When I found a safe place to call, I did.” I don't know why I didn't mention Julian or why I don't

do so now. But neither my lips nor tongue form his name and my voice box joins the picket line to keep him unmentioned.

“The next time you’re in the field and I call you, pick up your fucking phone. We cool?”

I nod without remarking on his abrupt change from calm handler to concerned father figure.

On many occasions, Gary acted as more. As a ten-year-old orphan, he oversaw my recovery, created my training regimen, acted as my sounding board, my friend, advisor, and yes, sometimes, my father. Since I have no memory of my real father, I cling to his constant presence in my life.

“Dismissed,” he says, though he watches me with concern.

I leave, feeling frustration fill me because my mad dash here resulted in a meeting lasting five minutes. Without a reason to stay, I head home to plot my revenge against a man who’s beginning to take up too much of my thoughts.

CHAPTER 8

Nadira

Everything is quiet, but a sixth sense tells me Julian has been in my apartment again. I watch the tape of him carrying shopping bags into the kitchen where I don't have a camera set up. I'll correct the oversight. But first, I rush to the kitchen.

Nothing looks awry, but the Julian I've known less than two full days wouldn't leave without having done something. Despite the normalcy of everything being where I put it, I begin opening cabinets. My dishes are grouped by pattern and function. The canned goods and seasonings that I gave up on organizing a long time ago could give supermarket aisles competition. When I get to the fridge, I bypass the order and zero in on the folded paper in front of a quart bottle of milk.

Don't worry about grocery shopping.

How does he predict my reactions before I realize what I'm doing? This whole time I've been mentally adding to my shopping list. But now I don't have to. I return to his note.

You'll also find an oven-ready meal prepared for you on the second shelf so you don't have to spend too many hours in the kitchen. Take your time to relax. And when you're ready, come find me.

I'm starting to hate his insistence that I find him. He's the one who's fixated on me. Yes, I want to kick his ass, and yes, I'll probably kill him while I'm at it. But if this is his way of wooing, he needs lessons. And the fridge full of foods I eat isn't it.

My stomach growls. In a huff, I take out the meal he prepared for me. On it are simple reheating instructions. I bet he doesn't know nothing about seasoning. I throw the food in the oven and set the timer for the suggested minutes. As I take a wineglass from the cabinet and fill it with a pinot noir, I chuckle at the thought of roasting him for his subpar cooking skills the next time we meet.

When I realize that I'm looking forward to seeing him again, I hit my forehead with my palm. Something must have addled my thinking when I was unaware. What had he used to knock me out? Whatever it was must still be in my system, or maybe I'm anticipating is the ass whooping I'll rain down on his presumptuous stalker ass.

The timer on the oven dings and I plate the pork chops and root vegetables. I line up a slew of seasonings to doctor what I expect will be a bland meal. The scintillating scent of the pork and vegetables is *not* making my mouth water and is *not* an indication the food will taste good. I slice through the juicy pork chop and spear it and a carrot onto the fork. The first contact of the food with my tongue is a sinful pleasure. Spices play a symphony in my mouth, causing me to demolish my meal.

As I set down my silverware on the pristine plate, I glower toward the kitchen where the leftovers are. Julian doesn't deserve his culinary skills, but I'm not going to spite myself and not take a second helping. I pause and stare at the leftovers. Maybe seconds will be better after my workout. My regimen isn't out of some goal for an ideal body. My body is the ideal for me. I love my larger-than-life curves. I exercise to

maintain my flexibility and stamina for my job by going to the gym four times a week. I can keep pace and beat many of my trimmer counterparts, and that's all that matters.

After sweating out my frustration with a sparring bout at the gym, I return to my apartment. Prior to my departure to London, Julian breached my security, then did it again before I returned. How remains a mystery. Now, I go room by room and note where I need to upgrade while searching for new hidden devices I missed in my previous search. Again, nothing turns up, leaving me in a state of annoyed curiosity as I turn in for the night.

The next morning, I wake with the echo of a voice promising to be my forever family. No headache this time, which is a blessing, but I feel more exhausted than when I fell asleep, as if I went ten rounds with the World Boxing Council's heavyweight world champion. I haul myself out of bed and pull on a robe over my naked body. Dragging my feet along the floor, I go to feed Leaper.

I stumble to a halt. Where is Leaper? She would usually demand her breakfast before now, but she isn't leading me to her food bowl. On alert, I listen for the slightest noise. My body tenses when muted sounds emit from my kitchen along with the savory mouth-watering scent of grilling meat. I close my eyes, hating that I'm not surprised this man has invaded my home again and that I'm going to eat and enjoy what he's preparing. At least, the answer to Leaper's whereabouts is no longer in question.

After putting on another layer of clothes to act as a barrier between me and my intruder, I head to the kitchen. Leaper chomps away at her breakfast while Julian maneuvers through the space as if he owns it. He has familiarized himself enough; I suppose. From the loose sweatpants around his waist and his bare torso, today's appearance is a product of last night's breaking and entering. I quiet the voice in my head asking where in my apartment he slept. The answer may ruin what looks to be an amazing meal. A frittata loaded with vegetables and thinly sliced grilled steak sits beside an avocado salad.

Having lived alone after leaving the orphanage, I became accustomed to doing everything for myself. And as much as I appreciate good food, I don't take the care Julian does in preparing and plating the meals. A warmth suffuses my insides. The closest anyone has come is when Chelsea buys muffins from the bakery downstairs.

It's all a ploy! Don't fall for his pretty looks and culinary skills. Right. I have to remember he's shady as hell from his first appearance in my life.

Julian puts the finishing touches on the dishes and spins to confront me with his arms folded. "Do you want to eat or kick my ass first?"

"That's a tough choice, they're both so enticing."

He smirks and collects the plates. "Then I'll decide for you. Eat so you'll have the energy to come at me." He passes me to finish setting the table. He doesn't utter a complaint while I watch without volunteering to assist him. "Okay, Keeper, let's eat."

I shut my eyes and massage my forehead at the mild throbbing that begins. Something in my mind is fighting its way to the surface, but a dense fog surrounds a memory prompted by Julian calling me Keeper. This reaction isn't as painful as when we were in London, but I'm certain now that the name isn't casual. When the murkiness deepens, I give up trying to unveil what my mind is protecting me from.

As a child, before I gave up on remembering anything prior to my accident, the doctors advised me not to force myself to remember. To let it come naturally. At the time, I was young and scared and didn't listen. As a result, I blacked out and recalled nothing. Although frustrating, I plan to heed the advice now.

At the table, I devour my breakfast, barely able to contain my moans of pleasure. Last night's dinner wasn't a fluke. Julian knows his way around food. Maybe I can convince him to deliver without having to be around. But doing so requires me to leave him alive and physically able. Hmm.

I glance up to see him watching me with an expression I can't place. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Like what?"

I shrug, struggling to find the right words. "I don't know, but it makes me feel..."

He quirks up. "What do I make you feel?"

For countless seconds, I have no answer I'm willing to share or that makes sense. There's no explanation for the way

my body reacts to being close to him or the fullness in my heart at his stare.

I place my silverware beside my plate and say, “Why are you here?”

“Are we doing this now?” His face transforms, leaving the humor I’ve seen in his response too many times.

“Yes, I think we should.”

He nods and clears our plates from the table before leading me to the living room. He sits in front of me, holding my hands, and I don’t have the will to take them from him. The silence builds my anticipation. Is this when he drops a bombshell on me, exposing his manipulations to get me to soften up to him for an end goal I can’t think of right now?

“I’m here to keep a promise,” he says.

His response is so far from what I expect, that it takes me a while to follow up with a question of my own.

“Who did you make this promise to?”

Julian eyes me, his pause causing me to tense the longer he leaves my question unanswered. “I don’t think you’re ready for the answer to that yet. But know the person I’m beholden to wants you to achieve everything you desire. I’m here to eliminate obstacles and ensure your happiness.”

I pull my hands from his and stand to tower over him. “You don’t get to determine what I’m ready to hear.”

“I agree. It’s not my call.”

“Then it’s mine and I want to know who is pulling your strings.”

He tilts his head to the side while studying me. His eyes go to the scar on my face. “How’d you come by the scar?”

I touch the raised tissue on my cheek. Although judgment and disgust aren’t evident in his voice, the reminder that my face isn’t perfect throws me into a vulnerable place. Considering I’ve never known my face to not have the disfigurement, I shouldn’t have a reaction when someone points it out.

Julian gently pushes me onto the seat facing him and takes my hands again. “If you aren’t ready to tell me, that’s okay.”

“What does my scar have to do with the person behind you?”

“It’s not the scar per se, it’s what I suspect occurred from the incident. Do you have any memory of a time before you were wounded?”

“What if I don’t?”

“That’s why you’re not prepared for everything I want to tell you. And believe me, I have so many things to share, but I won’t. Not yet.”

I touch my cheek again. “The reason you won’t leave me alone is because you knew me before my accident? How?”

His eyes warm as he stares at my face. “Not one day has gone by that I don’t remember you. The truth is, I’ll forget my name, my face, every identity I’ve ever created, and my very essence before I fail to recognize you.”

CHAPTER 9

Nadira

“You’re not wearing the outfit I picked out for you.” Julian appears beside me as if manifested through a magical summons I didn’t initiate.

“It would have drawn too much attention.” I glance down at my off-the-shoulder lilac dress. The subtle color compliments my deep brown skin tone without being too flashy. Its understated elegance guarantees no one will remember me as I blend in the crowd.

“I wholeheartedly disagree. Although what I put together was a showstopper, everything you wear draws my attention to you.” He lowers his voice to a growl, “And you test the limits of my control every time.”

I almost stumble at his revelation so readily given but correct myself without revealing the slight shock his compliment delivers to my system. His merest praise causes my breasts to swell and areas to throb that shouldn’t.

There’s something wrong with me. I’ve started wearing pajamas because my attempts to keep him out have been for naught. On top of my change to accommodate his appearance in my life, a week has gone by and he’s still alive. Still breaking into my apartment despite the upgraded security. Still cooking amazing dishes—he even drops in on me during my legitimate business hours to bring me home-cooked lunches—and styling my outfits. The food is damn good and too

tempting to ignore. So far I've resisted wearing his recommendations, but it pains me every time.

His knack for style shouldn't surprise me. Everything he wears is designer-chic on steroids. As we walk up the path to the privately owned castle hosting today's event, I peek at him from the side of my eye. The tux he selected to crash the wedding I'm attending is foreplay in action. The material makes love to his broad shoulders, thick arms and thighs, and firm stomach.

I curl my fingers into my palm to stop myself from reaching for him. Ever since he said he knew me from before my accident, I've held my curiosity at bay. But I want to know everything he knows about me. To distract myself, when Gary called, I jumped at the chance to take this job that meant flying across the Atlantic and to the southern coast of Spain.

Because Julian sniped my last target right under my nose, I have to redeem myself. Speaking of which...

"Are you here to steal another assignment?" I stop to glare at him.

Amusement lights his golden eyes. "I'm your plus one."

"Funny how I don't recall asking you to be my date."

"And you'll never have to." He takes my hand, drawing me closer until he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into his chest. "I'm here for you. No other reason."

He leans forward and I focus on his distracting lips, my eyes nearly falling close. In London, he stopped himself from kissing me. Ever since, I've wondered what his lips would feel

like pressed against mine. Heat radiates from beneath my skin and my heart skips its regular beat. When he's a breath away from answering my unasked question, he raises my hand and kisses my knuckles.

How can I feel so turned on by a simple brush against my hand and disappointed that it isn't on my lips? I pull away, hiding my shortness of breath by pretending to fix my shoe. "Death and dating, how romantic."

He chuckles at my droll comment while he waits for me to stand. "Being near you is all the romance I need." He places his hand on my lower back and leads me into the Spanish castle. "So, who's the target and how are they meant to die?"

I glance at him from the side of my eye.

"Consider me your support staff, here to aid you in achieving your goals."

"Mmhmm."

"I swear, as a lifelong Nadira fan club member, president, and organizer." He crosses his heart, causing me to roll my eyes.

Yet I find myself saying, "The father of the groom. He pissed the wrong cartel off when he stole a shipment of weapons and drugs."

"And how is he supposed to die?"

"Publicly and painfully."

"I can't wait for the show. I imagine I'll be riveted to my seat as I watch you work. Maybe I'll pick up a few tips. You

were always generous with that.”

“With what?” I jump on his slip.

Ever since our conversation last week, he’s been careful not to mention anything about my past before the accident. And with the dreams I’ve been having about an unfamiliar place, his evasiveness only increases my curiosity.

“I’ll tell you one day.” He kisses my palm in apology. “I promise I’ll reveal everything.”

I snatch my hand away, hating that he knows more about me than I do, and I follow the crowd.

A set of arches depicting images in bas relief open to an Andalusian-style ballroom. The painted tiles lend an air of romance to the day. It’s a pity the bride will leave in tears and the wedding guests will remember this occasion for all the wrong reasons; mainly me.

I find an inconspicuous seat, but with Julian beside me I won’t attain the level of invisibility I usually do. Throughout the ceremony, a fight for possession of my hand ensues. Before it gets out of hand, he whispers in my ear, “If you keep this up, you’ll draw attention to yourself. Just give in and grant me this small pleasure.”

I glare at him, wishing it is because he’s right about my actions attracting unwanted attention and not due to the way my pulse races at his confession or the rightness in the way his hand closes over mine. In response to my quiet but hostile reaction, he kisses the tip of my nose.

“You’re very sexy when you contemplate ways to kill me.”

I give up.

“Good, because I’m prepared to lose a limb for this privilege.” He raises our joined hands to his mouth and kisses my fingers.

I bury my face in my free hand, unable to believe I said that out loud. I do too many uncharacteristic things around Julian without a satisfactory explanation. Refusing to prolong our argument, I turn my attention to my mark sitting in the front row.

He is an attractive older man with salt and pepper sprinkled through his hair and beard. He beams at his son who repeats his vows with a puffed chest to the supermodel beside him. Is he posturing because he convinced a gorgeous woman to be his wife or has he truly fallen for her? In families like these, it’s more than likely the love is superficial. Soon, they’ll face the first test of their devotion.

Once the newly wedded couple exit to take their photos, we head to the second ballroom that opens onto a garden in a similar style to the Alhambra. Columns of shrubs line the door of a courtyard, leading further into the garden and beckoning the guests outside. An explosion of green, pinks, purples, blues, and yellows feeds the eyes. A makeshift dance floor of plexiglass covers the long water feature in the center of the garden, giving guests the choice to dance in the cool building or outside surrounded by a piece of paradise.

Along the sides of the courtyard, elaborate, tiered centerpieces adorn tables sitting under silk canopies to protect guests from the sun. Julian has yet to free my hand. I glance at

our interlaced fingers and acknowledge, at least to myself, how good it feels to touch him.

When we get the table with the place cards, I select the one with my alias while Julian selects the name of a person designated to sit beside me. I eye him, wondering how he'll keep a low profile when the real person shows up to take his seat.

The bride and groom enter grinning and blushing with excitement. Throughout the toasts, Julian keeps an arm around my shoulders to share his take on the various tributes. To the lasting regret of the guests and groom, the best man delivers a toast full of cringe takes.

“I bet the best man will breathe easy once the father of the groom steals the show since he won't go down as the worst thing that happened.” Julian nuzzles beneath my ear.

It takes everything in me not to outwardly react, but my pulse thunders, and my body warms. The memory of being locked in his arms in London hasn't faded and with Julian so close to the places he sucked and licked, I struggle to maintain a cool facade.

While I battle myself for calm, the emcee announces the first dance

“Do you know how distractingly delicious you smell?” He destroys my hard work by sucking on my lobe.

My eyes nearly close and a moan almost slips out. I gasp and lurch from my seat. To hide my awkward reaction, I head

toward the crowd gathering at the open bar where the wedding guests stop to congratulate the groom's father.

I enter the crowd, my focus on my target. While they offer cover, congratulating him with many women adding a request for a dance, I discreetly don the lilac gloves matching my dress. I choose to put them on now to administer the deadly toxin because any earlier would put myself and others at risk.

When I arrive in front of the groom's father, I say, "You must be so proud to welcome your new daughter into the family." I grasp his bare hands and hold for three seconds, allowing the warmth from his body heat to aid in the toxin's absorption.

"Yes, she is a perfect match for my son. We've already gifted them a home close to ours."

"That sounds amazing. Especially if they plan to start their family immediately. You'll always be close to your grandchildren."

He winks with a knowing smile. "You sound like my wife. She suggested the purchase. I don't mind saying the previous owners put up a fight, but we eventually persuaded them. The property was too good and we didn't love the couple. Now, we'll have neighbors we approve."

I release his hands and walk away to dispose my gloves before touching anyone else. As I head toward my designated table, a familiar tingling on my neck precedes the arm wrapping around my waist.

"Try this." Julian pops a petit four into my mouth.

I moan as chocolate melts on my tongue.

He closes the distance to whisper in my ear. “How long before the fireworks start?”

“Thirty minutes. By then he will have forgotten me among the long line of well-wishers not to mention his slew of dance partners.”

As I finish speaking, the father of the groom enters the dance floor and steals a partner from a younger man, leaving him empty-handed and looking longingly at the woman in the older man’s arms.

“That gives me time, then.” Julian leads me to the dance floor and pulls me close for the slow song the emcee selects.

He leaves no distance between us. My breasts tingle as they rub against him, but fighting to separate will draw people’s focus on us.

“Support staff doesn’t dance,” I say with a forced smile.

“No, but people on dates do.” He expertly spins me before catching me in his arms.

“If this is a date, we should get to know each other, but you know everything about me already. That seems pretty uneven.”

“I know a past version of you. I’m interested to know who you’ve become and will soak up knowledge whichever way I get it.” He dips me, keeping me suspended in an infinite of seconds where I can make out the golden flecks in his eyes and the banked passion he has yet to release.

I clear my throat when he lets me up. “Then how about we trade? For every tidbit I share about myself today, you tell me about the version of me you know?”

Regret brackets his mouth and dims the light in eyes that have come to mean more to me than I want to admit.

I don’t even let him open his mouth to voice his disappointment. I look over his shoulder and blink away the sorrow dragging my spirit down.

“How about I make you a promise?” he offers. “If you suspect you’re remembering anything, I’ll provide context to the best of my ability.” He presses our foreheads together. “I don’t want to watch you suffer alone in silence.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now?”

He places my palm over his heart. “You are not alone, and I’m not okay with doing something that can do you more harm than good.”

Although the song transitions to a fast-paced number, he continues to slow-dance with me, swaying us in time to the rhythm in his head. The chatter from the guests fades, as do the couples sharing the floor with us. As much as I’ve fought him, nothing but acceptance shines through his eyes.

Julian could be the one man I won’t have to fear discovering my secrets. And that shit scares me more than the possibility of losing my closest friends for the same reason. But there’s no time to let fear take over when he wraps my arms around his neck and encloses me in his massive arms.

His scent of citrus and pine washes over me, replacing my fledgling alarm with a sense of peace.

Song after song plays with Julian keeping me close. I should object to the attention he draws toward us because he doesn't switch up the pace of our dancing to match the upbeat songs, but I have no will left to pull away from his embrace. When others attempt to dance with me, he pointedly glares at them until they make a beeline to someone else. For the boldest ones, he clutches me closer and says, "Find your own treasure, I don't share." Then he swings us away to another area of the dance floor.

Why does it make my heart race to glimpse his possessiveness? Maybe it's because I haven't been anyone's treasure before. No one's. Not even my friends are territorial over my time and affection, and this novel feeling is doing more to me than all the failed dates and relationships from my past.

No one can penetrate the bubble encapsulating us, except the screams coming from the ballroom.

"The show is starting without us," Julian says as people stampede around our bodies to discover the reason for the screaming.

"I suppose it would be in poor taste to continue dancing when there's a tragedy happening a few feet away."

His mouth wobbles as he tries to hide a grin. "The worst taste." He offers me his hand.

Surprisingly, I take it with no resistance and allow him to lead me off the floor.

“How long do you need to stay to confirm that your job is done?”

“Just long enough to assure myself no intervention will save him.”

We arrive at the mayhem in the ballroom. Because of my height, I’m able to view the action without needing to get too close.

“Where’s the ambulance?” The groom’s mother screams while pressing fresh napkins against her husband’s mouth. But nothing staunches the blood spewing from him. Blood drenches her ecru-colored dress, and a growing pool surrounds them.

Pain and hopelessness twist my target’s face. By now, he must realize that his death is imminent and no miracle can save him. When his eyes start to dull, I step away, granting my space to another curious onlooker.

Julian is by my side before I take too many steps, holding my hand in his. I’m getting used to having his strong fingers enclose mine. As we make our getaway under the sun setting in the sky, I peer at Julian and wonder what kind of person I must have been to inspire this depth of emotion from him. The kind that creates a need to be in contact with me from an innocent handhold to being on the end of my attacks.

To avoid him reading my new determination to discover the person I was before my accident, I keep my eyes glued to

the path ahead of me. Step by step, I plan to uncover what's missing from my memory.

CHAPTER 10

Julian

“The package was delivered as requested,” Nadira says into her phone while I take the exit toward our hotel.

Of course, she learned we were staying at the same place when I took her keys after walking out of the reception—not that I needed them to get into her car. I took her mild growl of annoyance as progress, that she was growing to accept my presence in her life. Otherwise, she would have shed her heels and attacked me with gusto.

Although I can’t hear the other end of her current conversation, I can guess she’s talking to her version of my Jason. Her coded language is easy to understand.

“No,” she says, peeking at me from the corner of her eye. “There weren’t any problems I couldn’t handle... Okay.” When she hangs up, she removes the SIM card, snaps it, and throws it out the window.

“Do you have to return home immediately?”

Her gaze sharpens, prickling my skin. “Don’t you already know? You seem to have all the details about my life, like where I need to be and when.”

The grin that takes over my face is beyond my control. “I’ll take that as a no.” I let the silence drag, feeding her curiosity until she can’t help but blurt—

“What does a no response mean?”

“That I get to take you on a proper date. Something with a smidge of romance that doesn’t include blood and murder.”

“Oh, is killing a cartel thief not romantic enough for you?”

I take my attention off the road to capture her gaze. “I’ve told you already, you’re all the romance I need. But you deserve more, and I’m more than willing to lay the world at your feet.”

She lowers her lashes and a ruddy tint tinges her cheeks. Like everything else about Nadira, her confidence, her courage, and her brilliant mind, her blush captivates me. I have to find more ways to draw out the bashful side of her. It’s new and causes a gentle warming in my chest.

Another exit approaches and I turn off, heading toward Seville. Since leaving the castle wedding, the sun has completely set and the moon begins its ascension into the sky.

“How far are we going for this date? I have to feed Leaper. She doesn’t do well when her schedule is disrupted.”

“There’s no need to worry about her. As you’ll learn, I know how to pamper a puss.”

“Ho-ho, big talk coming from you. You’ve done nothing to show that you aren’t just talk.”

“Nadira, don’t.” I slice a warning glance at her. “There’s a price that comes with our being intimate.”

“Like lady blue balls?” she grumbles and breaks off our stare to look out the window.

“Like trust. Yours. Without it, I refuse to be intimate with you. So, don’t belittle my abilities because I haven’t shown you the full gamut of what you’re missing out on. Once I’ve earned your trust, believe me when I say, you won’t be able to go a day without my kind of pampering.”

“Trust doesn’t come easy for me.”

“It rarely does for people in our profession.”

Although I can’t see her face clearly in the window’s reflection, a cloak of overwhelming sadness surrounds her.

When I glance in the rearview mirror, a vehicle catches my eye. I don’t make any surprise moves, but I keep the vehicle in my sights. We spend another two hours on the road, tailed by an unknown person. Are they following me or Nadira? I doubt I’m their target since this is Nadira’s car. Does she know? Nothing about her posture gives me a clue. I pull up to a newly constructed building in the Los Remedios neighborhood and lead Nadira inside.

My butler, Alastair, greets us. “We received your instructions. We’ve laid everything out in readiness for your arrival. And your honored guest has eaten, and I believe she’s taking advantage of the view from the roof.”

Nadira glances at me with a question in her eyes. Although Alastair’s British accent is a surprise given where we are, I doubt that’s what’s driving her curiosity.

“Thank you.” I hand him the keys to the car and lead Nadira inside, knowing he’ll unload the automobile without my saying so.

“She?” she asks into the silence.

Her reluctant question causes a smile to twitch on my lips. I make a detour from my original destination to the rooftop. “Yes, you’ll be happy she’s here.”

When we get to the glass-enclosed roof, Nadira glares at me.

“Are you not happy to see Leaper?”

The cat raises her head. Upon sighting Nadira, the feline springs forward with a chorus of meows to greet us.

“Your sense of humor leaves a lot to be desired.” Nadira rolls her eyes and opens her arms in time to catch the cat leaping into her arms.

While Leaper soaks in Nadira’s affection, I steer them toward the bedroom. “Take your time and refresh yourself. I have something to take care of.”

She drops Leaper on the bed and spins toward me before I can leave the room. “Your errand wouldn’t have anything to do with the Citroen that was on our tail from the time we left the wedding, would it?”

“You knew?” I turn to face her.

“I discovered a tracker on my car when I arrived. Before you met me on the way in, I’d already disposed of it. I figured they’d investigate my last location.”

I nod, appreciating her no-nonsense manner. “So you understand why I need to step out?”

“Did you pack my things while you were reorganizing my life today?”

“If you’re asking about your arsenal, yes. You should find your suitcase in the closet.”

She follows my directions and selects a case. She removes the false bottom. “I’ll be ready in five. I should probably change so I don’t mess up my dress.”

I shake my head, unsurprised by her response. “There’s no convincing you to stay and relax?”

“How will I know what they’re after?”

“You could trust me to relay the information.”

“But what if I also want to send a message?”

“I don’t know how I missed the signs.” I shake my head. “You’re too calm, which means you’ve entered the tundra level of pissed. I would feel bad for whoever got you this mad, but considering I don’t appreciate anyone else keeping tabs on you, I need to make my feelings known. Unfortunately, they’re the type this person won’t walk away from.”

Nadira positions her body in a loose fighting stance, placing her right leg ahead of her left and resting her weight on the balls of her feet. “Do we need to fight this out?”

A smile spreads across my face. “Sparring with you will be a nice appetizer for the meal awaiting me outside. Should I wait for you to change first?”

“Not on your life. You’ll leave me waiting, and I’m not falling for that smile you wield like a weapon.”

“Good to know you aren’t immune to my smile.” I check my watch. “If you’re ready by the time I’ve gotten *my* gear, we can leave together.”

Nadira raises her arm to access the side zip and slowly slides it down.

“Otherwise...” I follow the slider as it releases the elements, revealing the warm brown skin hiding beneath.

She drops the dress to the ground. Brown boob tape that perfectly matches her deep complexion restrains her breasts, and a pair of lace boy short panties highlight her thick thighs and upper pussy area.

“Rest...easy,” I finish although I’m not sure what my earlier point is. I reach out to her, forgetting my vow not to initiate anything before she trusts me.

The vision of her reaching for a set of blades to strap to her thighs jolts me out of my daze. I spin around and withdraw before temptation wins and she leaves me behind.

Despite my rush, we meet at the door. Dressed in breathable black, Nadira is no less enticing than when she stood in her underwear.

“Where do we start?” she asks.

Alastair reappears. “I believe there is a person of interest making his way to the roof as we speak. He tripped a sensor on the way.”

Nadira and I glance at each other and change direction.

“You wouldn’t have any drop cloths handy would you?” I call behind me.

“I pride myself on being ready. I’ll prepare the spare room for our new arrival.”

“Where did you find him?” Nadira whispers.

“If I offer to share him, will that soften you to my suit?”

She rolls her eyes. “I hope you pay him well for his service.”

“I do.”

Light footsteps, almost indiscernible from ours, sound ahead. Nadira and I still and glance at each other. I signal for her to cover me. Surprisingly, she agrees without argument.

A slim man, a few inches shorter than me and wearing all black, rounds the corner. His mask hides his identity but not the shock widening his eyes. I step into the opening he leaves and deliver a chop to the side of his neck. He falls into my arms, and I shake my head.

“Almost anticlimactic, huh?” Nadira’s lips wobble with the effort to suppress her amusement.

“Makes me wonder why I got all dressed up.” I haul the unconscious man over my shoulder and lead her to the room Alastair is preparing.

“You work fast.” Nadira steps on the drop cloth, nodding at his efficiency.

“I try,” he responds dryly before leaving.

Nadira and I settle our uninvited guest into a chair, tie his hands behind the chair back, and shackle his feet to the chair legs.

“Now, let’s see who we have here.” I pull the mask off our intruder. “Look familiar to you?”

“Not even a little.” Nadira removes the weapons hidden in her outfit to place them within our hostage’s view for when he wakes.

While we wait, I stand behind her and wrap her in my arms. When she doesn’t protest, flinch, or fight, I clutch her a little closer, loving the softness of her waist, and the subtle fresh notes of her perfume.

I fill the waiting silence by asking her, “This message you intend to send, what does it entail?”

“Nothing too strenuous. I carve my alias into his chest.”

“Kind of puts a target on you, doesn’t it?”

She shrugs. “It also exposes their organization when they come after me. All who’ve tried never survive.”

I nuzzle her neck. “You have no idea how sexy your abilities are.”

“But you want me to stay home.”

“What can I say? I’m a walking contradiction.”

“You’re a fucking traitor,” says the unmasked man.

Nadira and I gaze at each other with the same question in our eyes. We return our attention to the man.

“And who is the traitor?” I ask.

“You dipshit. When I report this, there’s no place you can hide.”

I leave Nadira to slap the man with my pistol. “Report to who?”

He smiles as he raises his head. “The past is best left to yesterday.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Nadira asks. She eyes me warily. She has reason to.

I’m stiff, running scenarios through my head. Then I take a breath. My company doesn’t know about me yet. I point my pistol at his head and pull the trigger.

“Hey! He didn’t answer my question.” Nadira pushes me to the side to see the smoking hole in the middle of the man’s head.

“He didn’t have to. What he said is a phrase our operatives use to recognize each other. He works for my employer, which means I’ll have to take a rain check on that date. We need to leave now.”

“But why are your people following me?”

CHAPTER 11

Nadira

Now that Julian has revealed the man breaking into his Spanish home was a coworker, I watch him with more suspicion than before. In our profession, trust isn't easy to come by. Sometimes to carry out our assignments, we have to do whatever it takes to make a target trust us. I wish I could say Julian's actions tipped the scale to get me to believe him. He has been consistent since he broke into my home, but we come from a world where we create realities to support our con.

We eat, breathe, and sleep with the alternative narratives we invent until our true identities seem like imaginary ones. And with this recent development about his organization, I'm less convinced that he isn't running a con on me for purposes I haven't figured out yet. For all I know, he's playing a long game and will take advantage the second I drop my guard. What that advantage is, I don't know.

"You can't go home." Julian's comment breaks from my thoughts as I stare blindly out of the airplane window.

"That's obvious."

"You should also stay out of the office. Your cover's probably broken."

"Again, you're stating the obvious. I agree that they know about my current identity, but they're not aware of what I've discovered. Now if I don't show up, they'll know I'm onto them."

“Assume that they know.”

“Even more reason to go into the office.”

He stares at me, an incredulous smile growing on his face.

“You want to trap them.”

“Got a problem with it?”

“A few, but I doubt they’ll sway you from undertaking such a dangerous task.” He scrubs his face. When he removes his hands, all trace of amusement disappears. His lips are firm and a grimace brackets his mouth. “Before you enact a plan that endangers your life, will you let me help you?”

His offer comes as no surprise, but his assistance would open me up to other dangers, namely his hidden motives behind everything he does for me. My hesitation keeps me silent until my lack of response creates an awkward tension between us. I’m stuck between wanting to believe he is who he says he is and a sense of self-preservation that needs to doubt him.

Unable to bear looking at him as hope dwindles in his eyes, I turn to the window once more. The tactic doesn’t make me any less aware of him. I’m used to the tingling at my nape and now associate it with when he’s lasered his attention on me. So when a soft, almost inaudible, wisp of air sounds behind me, I recognize it for what it is. His disappointment. A twisting ache in my chest makes breathing hard.

“If that’s not an option, I’ll find you a safe place for you to stay until things blow over,” Julian says, sparking an idea.

I swivel in my seat to face him. “Where do you have in mind?”

“I doubt they’ll check the short-term rentals before you book a place. Even so, you’ll reserve under an alias.” He goes on with multiple options, none of which I expect. They’re all acceptable, providing different benefits that would aid me in staying off his company’s radar while trying to lure them into a trap.

To be fair, my suspicions are driving me to expect an invitation to his home, his perfectly curated space that is meant to draw me in and trust him. But he doesn’t offer his place at all. Is he playing a kind of reverse psychology on me?

“What about your place?” I finally ask, interrupting his list of options.

“My place?” All signs of life leach from his face, and for the first time since meeting Julian, he avoids my gaze. “Not a good idea.”

“What if I insist?” I push, needing to see how far his resistance goes. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing you won’t discover on your own. Either way, my place isn’t a good place for you to be.”

I sit back in my seat and fold my arms. “So what you said about wanting me to trust you, that was bullshit?”

His head springs up and he glares at me. “Nadira, I see what you’re doing, and I don’t appreciate it.”

“Oh? What did I do?”

“You’re trying to manipulate me by dangling something precious to bend me to your will.”

He considers my trust precious? The ache in my chest sharpens.

“Julian, you know the lives we lead. Only one of us claims to know the other, which means trust should come easier for you. I don’t have the luxury you do.”

His lips firm into a grim line. “This is what you need to be at ease with me?”

“I can’t promise that, but it’ll be a good start.”

We lapse into silence for the rest of the flight, leaving me to wonder if I’ll say my last goodbye to him when we land. Although, with his determination, I’ll have to keep moving. He’ll find me again and the next time could have deadly consequences for both of us.

When we land, I prepare myself to leave without him. He preempts my efforts by having Alastair take Leaper’s carrier off the plane and into a waiting car.

Still in my seat, I glare at Julian, ready to go at him with fists and kicks if necessary. “Are you catnapping pets now?”

The muscle in his jaw ticks, showing his restraint. “No, I’m giving us a good start.” He stands and waits for me to do the same.

“You could have said something instead of letting me assume,” I grumble as I pass before him.

A smile flirts at the corner of his mouth. “You like to make assumptions. You could have kept quiet, making all those plans to ditch me in your head, until I said where I was taking you.”

“It’s unnerving how well you read me.”

He shrugs unapologetically. “Some things don’t change.”

Julian leads me to the same car Alastair entered. Upon opening the door, my cat mews.

“She wants an unobstructed view of the ride. Let her out once we’re on the road, or hand her to me,” I instruct Alastair.

From the rearview mirror, I glimpse Alastair eyeing me and Julian. “She’s in excellent hands.” Despite his reassurance, he continues to watch us, as if wondering how to code his next words. “Is it your intention to avoid notice, sir?”

“Yes.”

The car starts and Alastair frees Leaper who immediately extends her front paws to watch the passing scenery.

When Julian doesn’t elaborate, I poke his arm. “Do you have a bat cave entrance or something that allows you to escape detection whenever you return home?”

Alastair coughs into his hand, but can’t hide the shining amusement glimmering in his eyes.

“Something like that.” Julian turns to his window, but from his reflection, a small smile peeks back at me.

An hour later, I get the joke. Off the highway, beyond the suburbs, we pull onto a private road leading to a massive iron-

wrought gate that swings open on our approach. The drive up the tree-lined path takes another ten minutes before opening onto Wayne mansion. Except it's not a fictional mansion from the comics.

I pull Julian around to face me. "This massive structure is your home?" I nearly shriek the question, as I try to understand my reaction.

"Technically, it's a safe house." Alastair gathers Leaper into her carrier before exiting the vehicle.

Questions whirl within my head as I follow Julian inside. Unable to keep my curiosity caged any longer, I stop him with a hand on his shoulder. "Why didn't you take me to your other house?"

Julian swings around and squares his shoulders. "A couple reasons. My organization knows about the other house. It would defeat the purpose of bringing you here."

I retract my hand. "And the other reason?" Although I ask, I'm not sure I want the answer any longer.

"This is the place where I don't have to pretend. If you were ever going to find a reason to trust me, I had to take you here."

I look up at the sprawling staircase and Renaissance-style paintings and sculptures on the walls and ceilings. I make good money from my legitimate company and have a massive fortune in off-shore accounts, but I never thought to live like this.

"Let me show you your room."

I nod, refraining from commenting on the purpose of giving me a room when he's bound to watch me sleeping at night, anyway. His calm assuredness is missing and for some reason, I don't want to take away any more of it.

We enter a room that looks like it's always prepared for visitors. No need to change the sheets or air the room. There's no dust on the furniture, and... I take a fresh glance around. This isn't a room for just any visitor. This isn't a visitor's room at all.

“When you said *your* room, you meant that everything in here is meant specifically for me, didn't you?”

Although not a replica of my room, Julian has recreated the color scheme, transitional furniture, and accessories that reflect the same vibe from my home. There's even a wig room with a larger collection than the one in my apartment.

He stares deeply into my eyes. In a low voice, he says, “One day, I hope you'll believe me when I say I'm here for you.”

CHAPTER 12

Hair Beads and Afro Puffs switched up their hair today. Hair Beads wore the front half of her hair in Bantu knots and the back half in a bun while Afro Puffs rocked mini-twists that came down to her chin. The change took a day for the boy to get used to, but the new styles grew on him.

As always, the three kids escaped from the rest of the kids with Afro Puffs in the lead. She steered them toward the back of the maintenance building. The boy and Hair Beads glanced at each other with a question in their eyes but remained silent.

The three kids circled the building, trekking further to a remote area of the orphanage's campus. When the sounds of the other children faded and they lost sight of the adults, Afro Puffs led them to a makeshift fort. It was small and camouflaged to blend in with the surroundings, which explained why it went unmolested. The adults hadn't noticed it.

The trio crawled inside and came to an abrupt stop once they registered the scene in front of them. A sign displaying the words Happy Birthday hung above a stool. On the lone piece of furniture sat a chocolate cake, a knife, and small paper plates and utensils lay beside it.

Tears glistened from the boy's eyes. He turned eleven today, but he didn't acknowledge it. No one else had either.

Hair Beads took one look at the cake and darted forward with, "Happy Birthday. If you stay standing still, you going to miss out on the good stuff." She reached for the knife, but

Afro Puffs snatched it before the other girl could cut a huge chunk from it.

“He goes first.”

Hair Beads released the knife. “He always goes first,” she said with a huff.

“You went first on your birthday.” The boy refuted Hair Beads, shaking off his shock and closing the distance toward the cake.

Afro Puffs sliced a piece of cake that took up the entire surface of the paper saucer she served the dessert on. She handed the confection to the boy and sliced another piece about three-quarters the size to give Hair Beads.

The other girl looked longingly at the rest of the cake but sat on the blankets covering the floor and ate her slice in silence.

The boy sat next to Afro Puffs. “Where’s your slice?”

She shrugged without providing an answer.

When he realized he wasn’t getting anything else from her, the boy tasted his cake and groaned. “This is even better than last year. How’d you get it?”

Because he hadn’t looked away from Afro Puffs, he caught the darkening tint to her cheeks when she avoided his gaze. “You should try it.” Without waiting for her to object, he forked another piece and pushed it against her mouth.

She opened in surprise and he shoved the rest in. Afro Puffs glared at him while chewing the confection. When she

finished, she quietly stood and cut out a small square for herself before returning to her seat on the floor.

The boy hid his grin while eating the rest of his birthday treat. Then he froze and stared at Afro Puffs as if he'd never seen her before.

“What? There something on my face?” She raised her hand to wipe her mouth.

Instead of answering her, he asked, “When are we leaving to find your parents? You already know how to leave the grounds undetected. So why are we still here?”

“I’m not strong enough yet.”

“I think you’re plenty strong,” Hair Beads said. “I mean up here.” She pointed to her head. “Cause when the bigger kids be trying you, you wait until you have an advantage before putting them in their place. I know. I been taking notes.”

“That doesn’t sound like a fair fight.” The boy frowned at Afro Puffs.

“There’s no fairness anything when they’re bigger than me. I make it fair when I take up a chair and knock the sense God should’ve gave them into their heads.” She picked up her cake and ate in silence, leaving Hair Beads to cheer her on and the boy to watch in amazement.

“Why’re you still staring at me?”

“Promise you won’t go off to find your parents without me,” he demanded. The sudden earnestness of his request caused Afro Puffs to drop her plate.

None of them saw Hair Beads approach the cake while keeping her attention on them.

“I promise,” Afro Puffs said with wide eyes. “I already told you I would. Why’re you pressed?”

The boy rammed his fork onto the plate, surprised when it didn’t sink into his dessert. He placed the saucer beside him and grabbed Afro Puff’s dish to do the same. Then he took her hand in his. “You said I belonged to you. Were you lying?”

“No.” She shook her head to emphasize her response. She stared into his eyes, unable to glance away from the solemnity shining through.

“Good, this is for you.” He reached into his pocket and retrieved a ring woven from baby’s breath flowers and grass. When she looked at him askance, he said, “When I’m grown, I’m going to marry you and give you an even better ring.” He placed a grass ring without flowers on his finger. “And when you’re older, you’re going to put a real one on me.”

CHAPTER 13

Nadira

For the first time in a while, I wake from a dream without a headache. I don't know if it's because of my new surroundings, exhaustion catching up with me from crossing eight time zones without sleep, or if the dreams are becoming clearer for another mysterious reason. Either way, being in Julian's space has helped to ease some of my misgivings.

His need to organize isn't isolated to my home. Every room I've seen is a testament to his need to put everything in its place. His behavior no longer strikes me as casual or a quirk. I wonder if he's ever linked this behavior to the trauma he suffered as a child and again in his teen years.

I dismiss the thought because I haven't seen every room in this colossal mansion. I spring out of bed, needing to tackle the more impending issue of the people hunting me. More refreshed after a night of odd dreams than I've been in a while, I head toward the kitchen where Julian will pamper my cat with bacon while making me breakfast. His consistency is a definite check in the pro column of why I should trust him, but it's not enough.

As I walk down the hall and approach the kitchen, my curiosity drives me into another room. If not for my background where snooping is a required skill, I still wouldn't feel guilty about digging into Julian's things. The whole reason for staying here is to get to know more about him by less traditional means.

Exploring his space comforts me. There is no explanation for it, so I'll accept the feeling without digging too deep.

A craft desk dominates the center of the room. Like everything else in Julian's home, the room has neat lines and everything is in its place. On the corner of the desk, an engagement ring and wedding bands lie on a satin pillow under a display case, speaking to the importance of the jewelry.

I reach out to the case but pull back and clench my hand into a fist. If I follow through and lift the glass, I'll try on the jewelry, and that is a mistake in the making. I quell the questions in my head asking how the rings would look on my hand and why Julian has them. Going down that path of inquiry might lead to answers I'm not equipped to handle.

I turn away from the temptation the rings pose. Books line the wall, drawing me deeper into the room. I select one with YF and last year printed on the spine. Beside it is another book with the initials YF and previous years. The trend continues, but I stop counting after fifteen years.

A foreboding tingle flirts along my spine, making me rethink opening the book and discovering the contents. *But Julian wants me to trust him.* Actions are a good start, but I also need to know who he is when he's not around me. Too many people discover the true character of a person too late, especially one whose livelihood depends on deception. I refuse to be lumped in with other gullible people who allow their sentimentality to overrule their instincts. And unlike the rings,

I'll learn more from his unfiltered thoughts than wearing the fancy but gorgeous jewelry.

With a prayer that I haven't found his stash of torture porn, I open to the first page. It's a letter surrounded by picture cutouts and dried flowers.

Dear Y,

I killed a man today.

*It's not unusual. I've killed many in the past and will continue to do so, but this time was different. This time, I took pleasure in ending his life. You remember as kids they **corrected** us whenever we asked too many questions about the missions they sent us on? Our handlers provided what we needed to know to do our jobs and no more. This time, they gave me too much, and I couldn't stop playing and replaying the many ways I wanted to kill him in my head.*

I hungered for his death. Thirsted for his blood.

Why?

Because he kidnapped children and sold them on the black market. After everything we've been through, how could I not remember the pain you carried with you for years? How could I not travel back to the time your eyes and voice were devoid of emotion?

But in my desperation to do to him what I wish I could have done to your abductors, I got sloppy. His victim, a little boy around the age you were when we first met, was beside him. He was so small, crouched in the back between the seats.

I didn't see him, but he saw me and everything thing I did to the piece of shit who'd taken him.

Don't get me wrong, I feel no remorse for the painful way the man met his end. What nearly broke me was the boy's blank gaze. It was the same emptiness I saw in your eyes when we first met. Reuniting him with his family hasn't erased the image or the memory of you.

All these years later, I'm in awe of your generous spirit. Even though I'm older, you've always been my hero. I still have a long way to go before I'm worthy to stand beside you, but I'll never stop trying to catch up with you.

Trapper

I sit, staring as the words begin to blur before me. In my search to find something that will provide insight into the person who stormed into my life and refuses to leave, I stumble onto thoughts more intimate than I expected.

What he says about the Y person he speaks to in the letter resonates with me. Instead of feeling like a voyeur watching his life from the outside, his words transport me into the middle of his emotions. Flashes of my dreams surge, lasting a second before disappearing. They are too brief for me to recognize anything, yet I understand the sense of emptiness he describes as if I've experienced it on more than one occasion.

Then a flash of golden-brown eyes staring down at me crystalizes in my mind. They are the same, but younger than the ones I fight not to drown in daily. A manic urge takes over me. I go to another shelf, select a random year, and open the book. I read the first letter my eyes land on.

My Dearest Y,

I wish I could find some trace of you to let me know you're okay. I'm so desperate for a sign that I'll take anything. Even if knowing means I'll never see you again.

Your Dearest Trapper

I select another book, this one is from ten years ago.

Dear Y, Owner of my Heart,

I'm sitting here in front of the birthday cake I baked for you, wishing there was a time we celebrated the day together. I can't believe it took me stealing your file to discover the date when you always made certain to celebrate mine. Did I not do enough to show you how important you were to me? Did I not tell you enough that the only future I saw had you by my side?

I wish you were here to tell me where I went wrong, but so many years have passed. A normal person would have moved on by now, but I can't. You're my soul mate and I haven't been complete a day since you've been gone. Not when I know deep down that you're alive and unable to come for me.

For now, I'll eat your cake and make a wish for you. Until we meet again,

Trapper

Book after book, I do the same thing, getting lost in the letters, learning more about Julian's devotion to Y but desperately seeking something to clarify the fragmented images bombarding me. Nothing makes sense except this feeling that I'm linked to this Y person.

This is when Julian finds me. I'm in the middle of the floor with his most private reflections surrounding me. I don't know what drew him into this room, but I realize my mistake when his eyes land on the books and the mess I've made of them.

The muscle in his jaw pulses with annoyance. "I was looking for you to let you know your breakfast is ready."

Without saying a word, he picks up the books and places them where they belong until the room is as pristine as before I set foot inside. He turns his back on me, and it feels like he slams a door in my face.

"Are you mad at me?"

He hangs his head, but his body loses none of its stiffness. "I won't answer that."

I grab his arm and swing him around. "Who is Y?"

"You know who Y is."

CHAPTER 14

Nadira

You know who Y is.

Julian's voice circles inside my head. Day after day, my concentration breaks whenever I hear him. I'm supposed to be planning the trap to catch whoever is after me, but all I want to do is read every letter in the room downstairs.

I'm Y.

I feel the truth of it resonate deep within my bones, but it still feels foreign to me. Yet, I haven't reentered that room since peering into the pain filling Julian's eyes. I've been Nadira for so long that I forgot the frustration-filled days when I struggled to remember who I was before Fostering Futures took me in, but the temptation to learn everything about my previous life grows with each passing day. And every time the urge becomes near unbearable, Julian's face flashes before me.

That room and the letters were behind his initial refusal to house me. From his behavior ever since, he regrets succumbing to my demands. Despite the pristine state of his home, Julian spends every day cleaning and reorganizing every room in this forty-room mansion. It doesn't matter if I'm in it or not. Julian cleans around me as if he doesn't see me. He refuses to discuss anything about the books I discovered or why my reading them pushed him into this frenzy.

Even the implacable Alastair watches with concern, ensuring Julian winds up in bed when the exhaustion from nonstop cleaning catches up to him. And me? I watch helpless,

with no idea how to help him, only that I'm the cause of his distress.

After five days of tension of waiting for Julian to open up and discuss the significance of the letters or why they are all lovingly bound in leather, I escape. Although confused because he insists upon being in my life but now can't seem to look me in the eye, I also know my presence is a hindrance.

I wait until he and Alastair are busy reorganizing another part of the house. As I slip away, I overhear Alastair advising Julian his coping methods aren't working and will prevent him from fulfilling the promises that have kept him going all his life.

I choke back an unexpected sob for his dilemma as I find my way off the property. Once free, I roam aimlessly. I don't know what to do with myself, and my thoughts circle back to Julian and his relationship with Y... me. As much as I want to probe him for the missing history that seems more important the longer these dreams plague me, I can't seem to lock my emotions away long enough to approach the task.

I end up at my office. It's a dumb move, considering I have no plan if the people Julian works for come after me. In my defense, the office is empty because today is Sunday, and I snuck in instead of walking through the front door. With the revelations in Spain, there's only one thing I can do that will ensure my employees' safety. I draft a memo informing the company of my immediate leave of absence. Afterward, I compile the high-priority projects I've overseen to summarize and leave directions for my number two.

The task takes less time than expected. Probably because I've always known that I could disappear without a trace at any moment, and I've religiously updated my files and processes for others to take over. With that done, I try to distract myself with other loose ends that may crop up during my absence, but nothing holds my attention.

The need to help Julian overshadows everything I do and everywhere I look. Eventually, I search for ways to help him navigate a situation I orchestrated. I don't know what I'm looking for but hope I'll stumble upon something somewhere with advice to help me navigate this odd turn in this strange dance with Julian.

As the hours pass without me knowing how many, I fall into a rabbit hole of research. Most articles are about obsessive-compulsive disorders, but I'm no psychiatrist to diagnose Julian. Also, the resources are for him to help himself, not what friends and family can do to minimize the triggering events that cause him to spiral. I'm so deep in my research, I barely register the tingling at my nape.

When it finally penetrates my concentration, I glance toward the door and gasp. Julian, the always put-together, neat, and composed man that I've never seen with a hair out of place, is a disheveled mess, glaring at me.

“You weren't where you were supposed to be. I searched and searched, but you weren't there. Don't you know what could have happened to you?” He throws a basket onto my desk, adjusts it then begins to reorganize my office. “What if

they found you before I did? No, I'll never let that happen. I won't lose you again."

A feeling of helplessness washes over me as he mumbles about never going back to those empty days of not knowing. When he's set everything in place for the second time, I get to him before he starts again. With my hands holding his still, I wait until he meets my gaze.

"I'm sorry I left without leaving behind a note. Next time, I promise to give you a way to get in touch with me."

The manic light in his eyes slowly returns to normal as my words register. "You promise?"

I surprise myself by agreeing and meaning it. Beyond my suspicions about his underlying motives, I thought Julian's efforts were a way to get me to depend on him. Now, I realize, he needs me.

I pull him toward my desk, and he follows with little resistance. "Will you eat with me?"

He glances around the office as if awakening from a dream. Binders stack the shelves in alphabetic order, though if given enough time, Julian would probably empty the binders to organize the contents, color coordinate the binders, and match them by size.

"Julian?"

He swings around to me and glances at the basket he brought. "I made you lunch." He empties the contents. There is a container for everything. Once he plates the food, we eat.

I allow the silence to fill the air until we're halfway through the meal. "Julian, other than giving you ways to reach me when I'm not with you, how can I help you? I still don't understand what caused you to clean the house."

"I was hoping to hide this side of myself until..."

"I fell hopelessly in love with you?"

A ghost of a smile flits across his lips before disappearing. "That would be ideal, but no. I was hoping you would remember something about me from your former life. I thought it would make things easier, but I'm not so sure now."

"But now that I have seen you, what can I do to avoid sending you on another five-day cleaning spree?"

He sinks into the chair until his head rests against the seat back and he stares at the ceiling. "I don't have many days like the past few. It used to happen more often when everyone I cared about disappeared without explanation. Nothing I did mattered or made a difference. Not that I could see, anyway. But when I clean? I decide where things go, how they're arranged, and if they're needed at all. I guess, being the person moving things gives me a sense of control I never had growing up. I thought I was managing pretty well, but then I saw you reading my letters..."

I don't refute his claim that he was managing. Based on the new placement of my things in my apartment, I'd say his tics probably started when he saw me again.

"I expected you to disappear again. And it would have been my fault." Julian straightens in his chair to pierce me

with the intensity of his stare. “If you leave, I won’t blame you, but I don’t think I can accept it either.”

I round my desk to sit on his lap. His eyes widen from my surprise move. It’s the first time I’ve initiated contact between us that didn’t start with a knife throw, kick, or punch. I cup his cheek, caressing the stubble growing on his face, knowing it’s there because he’s neglected himself while immersed in his personal hell.

“I have a proposition.”

Wary suspicion enters his eyes.

“Shortly before you reentered my life, I’ve been having these dreams. I used to have them when I was younger, but not as intense as now. regardless, I never remember much. Snippets of conversations, never faces. But after reading one of your letters, I saw a set of the most soulful golden-brown eyes so clearly, I felt they were in the room with me. I think they belonged to your younger self.”

“You had a memory?” Julian’s eyes widen in amazement. “What else can you recall? Was there anyone else with me? What were we doing? Wh—”

“Slow your roll, Julian. It wasn’t clear.” Before disappointment wipes out his budding hope, I continue, “But that’s where I want your help. You don’t want to tell me about my life, but maybe you can show me the places we used to go, things we used to do. More than ever, I want to know who I was.”

He curves his hand around my scarred cheek. “When do you want to start?”

I open my mouth to respond, but my phone rings. It’s the special ringtone for Tamara. We haven’t hung out since our shopping trip where she poured her heart out to me about her breakup. Guilt eats at me for failing Tamara in such a big way. “I need to take this,” I say to Julian before answering the phone. “Tamara?”

“Girl, where have you been?” Moni’s voice surprises me. “Nah, where you at right now? We finna roll up.”

“I’m in the office. I can come to you, just tell me where to meet,” I say.

“Didn’t I tell you the girl would be working?” Chelsea’s voice sounds over the phone.

“Is everyone with you?” I ask.

“Yes, and we’re about to pull up to your building. Seems Chelsea knows your habits better than the rest of us.” Moni hangs up, leaving me staring at the handset.

“Bad news?” Julian stands over me.

“I’m not sure. Considering Tamara doesn’t give up her phone without a good reason, I’m leaning towards terrible news. They’re on their way here.” I look up at him with an apology on my lips.

“I’ll let you guys talk. We can plan the other stuff later. Just... you know, let me know where you’re going to be next.”

I nod, grateful that he seems to be returning to some semblance of his normal self. “Promise.”

He smiles before leaving, and I release a relieved breath.

Not too long after he walks out the door, Danae and Chelsea come in.

Danae, who was silent on the call, leads the charge. “Nadira, baby, you coming with us.” She takes my hand and drags me from my desk.

Chelsea gets my bag and follows us out.

“What’s the emergency?” I am still confused because no one has said anything, but the tightness in their faces and the stiffness in their gait as they rush me out tell me I won’t like what they’re about to reveal.

Before we get to the car, I demand my phone. I send a quick text to Julian to let him know I’m leaving and once I know where, he’ll know, too. He sends an emoji of two hands pressed together in response.

In the SUV, everything clicks. Why Tamara wasn’t on the phone, why everyone is together, and why the serious demeanor. Tamara hugs herself tight while sporting a black eye.

“Give me a name,” I say.

Moni twists from her place in the passenger seat. “We all want one, but she ain’t saying what happened yet. So, we about to pamper the truth out of her.”

I sit in the back row, watching Tamara for any clues, though her silence poses a huge problem. “Was it the woman who left you?”

Tamara huddles further into herself. The only indication that she hears me is the tiny head shake she gives in response to my question.

With one suspect in the clear, I keep quiet for a few miles until another question pops into my head. “Where are we going?”

“The Ritz,” Chelsea says. At my frown, she rolls her eyes. “Not everyone can afford the Luxe Continental.”

“True, but you’re with someone who can. Danae, turn this car around and go where you know they treat us right.” While she follows my instructions, I dial my preferred hotel.

When I hang up the phone, Chelsea twists in her chair to ask me, “So who was that snack I saw walking out of your building?”

Everyone’s curious eyes spear me with their interest. Moni and Danae must not have seen Julian leave, or else they would have remembered him from the club.

“My life is not the topic we’re talking about.” I blink toward Tamara. “And until we settle topic A, topic B is not on the docket.”

“Did she really shut us down?” Moni asks.

“Shut down and bridge burnt, but we’ll get her soon.” Danae’s promise causes me to smile.

When I put my mind to it, I've always been able to deflect their interest. I'll do so now if they get too curious about Julian before I'm ready to put a label on who he is to me.

The Luxe Continental puts luxury to shame with its amenities, and Tamara deserves all the good stuff considering her past few weeks. As soon as we pull up to the valet, our dedicated butler whisks us to our suite.

"You requested our Platinum package, which includes the in-room mani-pedi. Inside your suite is a private sauna, and a personal chef. They'll be up shortly to prepare your meal. If there is anything I may assist you with, I'm at your service 24/7. Please, don't hesitate to reach out." After taking care of a few items, he leaves us to get our relaxation on.

I turn to Tamara. "Give me a name."

"What do you think you can do? Look, I don't want to cause a whole thing that puts my firm in the spotlight for the wrong reasons. Just let's focus on making me feel better." Tamara strolls over to the table laden with goodies. From the four-tier dessert plate, she selects a fruit tart.

Moni sidles up to Tamara, throwing an arm around her shoulder so Tamara can't easily escape. "How you going to feel better if you not offloading what happened? Use your words. Tell us the gory deets."

"I need names, not details," I say with a straight face.

Chelsea stares at me as if seeing me for the first time. Or maybe the look she's giving is of seeing someone familiar that

they haven't seen in forever and not believing their eyes. I'm not sure, but her gaze unnerves me.

"Tamara, it might be a good idea to tell us what happened. I'm genuinely concerned that Nadira will force the truth out of you." Chelsea backs away from me to stand beside Tamara.

"Really, Chels?" I give her the what-the-fuck look.

She isn't wrong, but I don't appreciate her letting the other women know. She shrugs, but it seems her tactic works.

"I was on a date." Tamara's soft voice trembles as the first words fall from her lips until they become stronger the longer she speaks. "We decided to go back to her place. I knew she was queer, but I didn't expect her to be bi. When we got to her place, her boyfriend was there. He wanted to have a threesome. Talking about his dick as the miracle converter because his girlfriend is bi. Then I tried to leave, and this happened."

"Tamara, I know you're a lawyer and words are your trade, but nowhere in that story did I hear the names of the pieces of shit that did this to you. Now, if you don't fess up and give me what I want to hear, I won't extend your stay here for a full week. And your pampering ends now." I know my girls' weaknesses and use them whenever they force my hand.

Tamara never goes all out for herself. Everything she earns, she reinvests in her company. So I don't mind treating her or the rest of the crew when they need something to get their minds, emotions, and health right.

"But Nadira..." Tamara whines.

“Give and take, boo,” I say.

I’m also fine with blackmail.

She reaches for her phone and taps something into it. Curious, I walk behind her to watch.

When she spies me behind her, she clutches the phone to her chest. “Promise you won’t do anything rash. I don’t need my name in the news.”

“I’m never rash. Now stop stalling.” I wait her out.

Our staring contest lasts until Moni, Danae, and Chelsea yell, “Tell her their names already!”

“We want to get into that sauna, damn.” Chelsea rolls her eyes, head, and shoulders to emphasize how fed up she is.

“Fine.” Tamara throws her hands up in defeat. Aside, she mumbles, “I need to work on not succumbing to peer pressure.”

“I wish you no luck with that,” Moni says. “I love peer pressuring every one of you into doing what I want. It’s soul defining.” She lets out a breath as if she’s cleansing her chakras.

“Tamara?” The one word from me jolts her into action.

“His name is Jadan Reales and her name is Royal Lane, but before you do anything, remember I’m a criminal defense attorney. Don’t reveal anything that will get me disbarred when I have to defend you.”

“Your concern is sweet and unnecessary.”

“So now that we got Tamara’s tea, will you tell us about that mystery dessert I saw walking out of your building today?” Chelsea wraps her arm around my waist before I can step away.

“I plead the fifth.”

“Nadira!” Everyone throws the softest object close at hand at me, and I barely dodge a pillow to the face.

“Look, I don’t know what’s happening between us. Until I do, think of him as... a new friend.”

Moni selects a bag of gourmet popcorn from the goodies table. “Does this friend dick you down? If so, I need to know size, girth, if he hits it just right...you know, everything. It’s been so long since you’ve had a man to scratch that itch that we need to know how he’s performing.”

Moni’s invasive curiosity shouldn’t surprise me. Most often I find her refreshing. But a slight flush heats my skin because Julian and I haven’t kissed. “You know better. I don’t kiss and tell.”

When I picture Julian and his devilish smile, I wish I had something to tell them. I wouldn’t. Some things should remain secrets. But with lips like his, there’s no way I’d be the same after his kiss.

CHAPTER 15

Julian

I breathe deeply, in and out, relying on the practice I learned years ago to manage my stress. The urge to put things in their place continues to ride me, but it's an urge I can control now that I have Nadira's word.

A soft paw pats my face, and I open my eyes to Leaper's concerned stare. Surrounded by Nadira's things and her scent, a sense of peace settles over me.

"I'm alright now." I pet the cat until she curls up under my sweatshirt and begins to purr.

The vibration has a soothing effect and works to silence the voice inside telling me things are out of place. They aren't. It's a battle I've won time and again and will have to fight again in the future.

It's 2 AM but I can't sleep. I'm wired from my earlier conversation with Nadira asking me to help her recover her memories. Already, I have the perfect place to start; where everything started.

While I'm busy making plans for a visit to the place that holds some of the best and worst memories for me, the phone rings.

"How quickly can you get here, and how many tools can you bring with you?" Nadira's voice sends a jolt through my system.

"Depends. Are we leaving any traces behind?"

“No evidence.”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“Is this a job?”

“No, it’s very personal. Oh, and I’ll need a wig.”

“I’ll be there in thirty with everything you need.” I hang up and extract Leaper from my sweater despite her vocal protests. “Sorry my girl, but your mama needs me.”

As if she understands, she gives me another meow that sounds like permission and flicks her tail to get me on my way.

A surge of energy revitalizes me. Nadira reaching out to me has to mean she wants me to be a part of her plans. Like when we were kids, she was a lone wolf, working on her own. Especially when someone hurt her friends. She took everything on, meting out punishments without backup. That lasted until I proved I could defend myself. Then we worked as a team.

I try not to get my hopes up, but I’d be lying if I didn’t envision us working side by side again. Yet, her request didn’t specifically ask for my help other than to provide the weapons she’ll need for the unfortunate souls that pissed her off.

With time to spare, I pull up to the service entrance of her hotel and wait for Nadira’s arrival. I don’t wait long before she exits the building, her emotionless mask in place. If anyone looks close enough, they’ll see what I do. Her eyes betray her. Unlike the emptiness that takes her over when something hits

her soft emotions, in these early hours of the morning, life thrives in her black irises. Life and death.

“We have to make this quick.” Nadira checks her watch. “I have to return before my friends wake.”

“Tell me where we’re going.”

I follow her directions to a small suburb on the outskirts of the city. During the drive, she changes into the black leggings and shirt I packed for her.

To break the silence, I say, “They say the couple that slays together stays together.”

“We are not a couple.” Although there is no inflection in her voice, she can’t hide the trembling lips that betray her amusement.

“Yet. Give us a few more murder ventures and you’ll come over to my way of thinking.” I turn off the lights and crawl to a stop five houses from our destination.

Our target’s home is dark with two cars in the driveway. All levity vanishes from Nadira’s face. In its place is the same stoic facade from when she entered the car. We break into the home and work fast to shut off the electricity and secure the area in the living room. When everything is ready, I follow Nadira upstairs. Our marks lie asleep in bed. Nadira goes to one side where the woman sleeps and I choose the man’s side. In no time, we have them tied and gagged to prevent them from screaming for help. The whites of their eyes glow in the darkness, while they writhe and contort their bodies to free themselves of their bonds.

Nadira taps the woman's cheek until she gains her attention. I follow suit with the man and nod toward Nadira when he calms enough to listen.

“Hi there. You don't know who I am, and honestly after tonight, you won't need to. But you should know why I'm here. You see, it's come to my attention that you two need a lesson in consent and how not to assault unwilling women.” She removes her gun and points it at the couple. “Now, be a good boy and girl and walk downstairs. Don't make me use this because I'll make sure to shoot you in a place that will cause you the most pain.”

The two frantically nod and writhe until they fall out of bed. They right themselves, but because of having their hands tied to their legs, their stride is awkward. I turn on a flashlight to the dimmest setting so the light won't draw attention from any nosy neighbors who are awake this early in the morning. On the way downstairs, the couple stumbles into the wall and the railing.

When we reach the living room, I flash the light on the scene Nadira and I set up. As soon as the couple registers the drop cloths, their eyes bulge. The man falls on his ass when he attempts to run. Before he gets too far, I grab him by the neck and throw him on the barrier as a precaution in case he soils himself before we begin.

Nadira squats in front of the woman, dangling her gun between her thighs. “Royal, is it?”

The woman nods while tears stream down her face.

“Do you know why I’m not in a warm bed sleeping without a care in the world? The way you were before I woke you up?”

Royal shakes her head in the negative and a muffled sob escapes from her duct-taped mouth.

“Now, I don’t care if you like a side of dick with your pussy. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here because you fucked around with the wrong one and I’m making time. When you do a bait and switch on the most pussy-loving lesbian I know, as if you didn’t know she was all about the muff, you have to deal with me. And you, you’re Jadan, right?” Nadira glares at the man who looks at me with beseeching eyes. “I hear you wield a miracle converter so good it’ll turn lesbians into dick riders, whether they want your sorry excuse of a dick or not.”

I shake my head at him in faux sympathy. “I see you want my help, but I’m not calling the shots. First off, that woman is my queen, and as her devout subject, I can only follow orders. You’ve pissed her off, and I’ll let her set you on fire if that’s the only way to appease her anger. Second, rapist pieces of shit like you deserve to feel a lifetime of pain. Are we clear?”

Nadira approaches us but addresses the woman. “It’s a damn shame. From this day forward, the miracle converter will be out of service.”

Nadira steps on the man’s thighs, pinning him to the ground. Then she aims her gun between his legs. While staring into Jadan’s terrified eyes, she pulls the trigger. The silencer muffles the gunshot, but the impact is no less devastating, making minced meat of Jadan’s pride and joy. His writhing

dislodges Nadira and she turns to the woman whose screaming intensifies.

She frantically crawls away, but Nadira grabs her by the hair and drags her until she's even with the man bleeding and weeping on the floor. Then she shoves the woman on him.

I check for the time. "You need to wrap this up to keep to your timetable."

"That takes the satisfaction out of this, but I can't have anything blowing back on my friend." Nadira cracks her neck then presses her foot against Royal's chest. "It pains me to end things so soon, but you weren't going to survive more than a few hours, anyway." With her last word, she empties the gun into both people. With a mournful sigh, she says, "That was so anticlimactic."

"There's always the next time."

She rolls her eyes and begins collecting the spent shells. While she does that, I dismember the bodies. She soon joins me and we complete the work in harmonious silence. As we separate the parts, we throw them into leak-proof duffel bags and check the floor for stray blood splatter.

After we clean the room and wipe all the surfaces from the bedroom to the living room, Nadira stops me with a hand on my arm.

"My time's up and I have to return to the hotel." Her stare holds a lot of meaning as she says, "This means, I can't be with you when you dispose of the evidence."

When what she leaves unsaid clicks, I close my eyes. I don't want to see my hopes dashed if I'm wrong. "Are you saying you trust me to do it myself? That you know I'll protect you from being discovered?"

Her breath fans against my face. "That's what I'm saying."

My knees go weak with the power her words release inside me. I don't care about the bloody clothes and butchered bodies in the car. When I open my eyes, all I see is Nadira. I grab her face and draw her in until our lips are a breath away from touching. Then I press my mouth against her scar, tracing the line from her scalp to the corner of her mouth.

Her breath stutters, and a shudder runs through her.

"Thank you," I say. "Will you let me kiss you properly?"

She gives me a curt nod. "Ye—"

I take her mouth before she finishes giving me her sweet consent. It's my turn to tremble with the first touch of her full lips. I brush against her velvety texture, marveling how much better reality is than any dream I ever had.

Her lips part and I swallow the puff of air that escapes.

"Julian," she moans with a passion that zaps through me and electrifies my blood as it pools in my cock.

When her tongue swipes against her bottom lip, subsequently swiping against mine, one of the many invisible chains I use to control my need breaks, weakening me. I thrust my tongue inside her mouth, exploring and committing to memory her texture and flavor and the hungry little growls she makes in the back of her throat.

With each plunge, another link breaks. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her body into mine, crushing her soft curves against my hard body.

Nadira sinks her fingers into my hair, scratching my scalp. The sensation races to my cock, causing me to harden even further. I raise her leg over my hip and grind my erection between her thighs. She twists her face away to gulp air, but I have no use for air with Nadira in my arms. I trail my lips down her throat, licking and sucking her skin. This is my air. I nip the vein protruding from her neck. She is my sustenance.

With my need driving me and the last chain on the brink of breaking loose, I grip the neck of her shirt.

“Julian, stop.”

My body seizes at her command. Competing desires rage within me. Between the need to fulfill every fantasy I’ve had since the night I found her at the club and my respect for Nadira, it takes me longer than it should to loosen my grip on her and release her from my embrace.

I swallow hard, wanting to taste more of Nadira’s body. While I focus on breathing to calm the storm inside me and reestablish the chains around my control, I fist my hands, digging my nails into my palms until the skin breaks. The sharp bite of pain allows me to concentrate on what’s important.

Nadira cups my cheek. “We don’t have time for this right now. Please understand, I’m not saying I’m unwilling. I’m saying I don’t want to rush things our first time together.” She trails her hand down my chest and cups my cock. “And when I

get you alone, I'm going to drain you over and over until you can't come anymore."

CHAPTER 16

Nadira

After Julian drops me off, I use the service entrance. Before racing up the stairs, I check the surveillance cameras. When I left earlier, I used an infrared laser to blind them, but the people at Luxe Continental are efficient. With their wealthy clientele, it behooves them to stay on point with their security. Although I'm wearing a different wig, there's no such thing as too many precautions.

As I suspect, the cameras are working again. I point the lasers at each until I enter the suite I share with my friends. The silence is a sign no one is stirring, allowing me to race on silent feet to my room. I quickly shower and change into the complimentary pajamas and robe that came as a perk with the room.

By the time I dress for bed, the shuffling feet and sleepy voices greeting each other outside my bedroom door signal the other occupants are up. After my sleepless night, today will be a high-octane caffeine day. I take a deep breath and join them with a yawn that isn't completely fake and a stretch to sell the story that I've just woken up. I'm the last to join the group.

Danae and Moni sit on either side of Tamara, who looks more relaxed than last night. She rests her feet on the coffee table and her head on Danae's shoulder. Chelsea is on the phone placing breakfast orders without anyone's input. Since she has the best culinary palette of all of us, we never complain about her food selections.

“So, Tamara...” Moni says. “Since Nadira’s got the suite for a week, how about I keep you company?”

Danae and Chelsea perk up, not bothering to hide their interest in Tamara’s response.

Tamara glances at me, silently requesting permission.

“If you want us to stay, we stay.” I sit on the sofa facing them.

She smiles her thanks, though due to the circumstances it isn’t her usual vivacious expression.

Before the other ladies start to celebrate, I pointedly stare at each of them. “Don’t think you can charge everything to the room now. Although my friendship is limitless, my wallet isn’t.”

“Girl, please.” Moni rolls her eyes. “We ain’t no freeloading friends. We got our own money. Maybe not Luxe Continental level, but we hold our own.”

“Speaking of holding our own, I’m starting to plan my Christmas blowout for next month. Who’s staying in town?” Danae asks.

Chelsea disconnects her call and plops down on the sofa beside me. “Sorry boo. You know Christmas is off limits. My parents are high maintenance and demand I spend Christmas week to New Year’s with them.”

“I’ll be here,” Tamara says.

“Sorry, babe. My fam’s got dibs this year, too. As much as I’d prefer to stick with my friends, I haven’t been home in five

years.” Moni pops up and walks over to the fridge where our chef left three pitchers of various flavored mimosas. She pours four glasses and serves one to each of us. “Pray for me. I just know one of my aunties will bring a shadchan to dinner and the entire night, everyone will chime in on what my perfect match will be.”

I raise my glass. “Here’s a toast in honor of your passing sanity.”

“Here here,” everyone says before sipping their cocktail.

“What about you?” Danae asks since I’m the only one who hasn’t responded.

“I’m tentative for the time being. As of right now my calendar is clear and I want to attend, but you know my travel schedule is never consistent.” Although I’m on a leave of absence, I want a cover to explain my absence in case Gary calls me with a new job.

“I’m crossing my fingers that you do and you’ll bring your mystery man with you.” Danae sends me an evil smirk.

“Speaking of—”

“There will be no speaking of anything.” I shut Chelsea down before this topic gets out of hand. “For the rest of the day, there will only be light-hearted Christmas movies and stuffing our faces. I vote for Violent Night to be the first one we watch,” I say to a reception of blank stares.

“I thought you said light-hearted. Like, what the fuck, Nadira?” Moni’s comment reflects everyone’s expression.

“Yeah. You don’t get more light-hearted than Santa protecting a little girl and handing out life lessons to deserving mercenaries.”

“Next she’ll say Die Hard is a Christmas movie,” Danae fakes a whisper, causing Tamara to giggle.

“How dare you malign one of the greatest Christmas films of all time? There was a Christmas tree, a miracle, and what better gift is there than John McClane saying yippie-ki-yay, motherfucker?”

Danae, Moni, and Tamara all turn to Chelsea who hides her mouth behind her hand as her shoulders shake uncontrollably.

When she finally calms enough, Chelsea says, “Don’t look at me for backup. I’m on Team Nadira. Die Hard for life.”

Danae shakes her head. “There is something seriously wrong with you two.”

After a spirited debate, we land on Love Actually to start our movie fest. The chef delivers the food Chelsea ordered and we demolish everything. At some point, the ladies fall asleep and I sneak away to check my messages.

Julian: I’ve taken care of everything. When are you coming home?

My heart thuds at the word home. Then the feelings I’ve been suppressing since our kiss surge forth, heating my blood and filling me with regrets.

I’m staying here for a few more days. ☹️

Julian: At least you'll be off my company's radar during your stay.

There is that.

I still have to set a trap for the people who are after me, but now I can't see planning one without Julian's input. After all, who better than my rival to point out flaws and make sure my plan removes all threats to my life and livelihood?

Three dots appear on my screen and I wait in breathless anticipation for Julian's next text. And I wait. And I wait. When I think I'm about to rip off my wig, his response pops up.

Julian: Sneak out when everyone's sleeping. I booked a room.

His words quicken the kindling burning inside me, causing a raging inferno to melt any resistance and common sense I once had. There's no use. I've already admitted to wanting Julian, and it's not just to satisfy my curiosity. I have genuine feelings for him and want to explore them. Plus, he's fucking sexy and I'm tired of holding back when he's finally willing to fulfill his silent promises.

Giddy and reckless, I undress, set the timer on my phone to take a picture, and pose provocatively. I send the photo with a message.

What are you going to do when I show up looking like this?

Julian: Taste every inch of you. Even after my tongue goes numb, I'll continue to lick, suck, and tongue fuck you until

you're squirting your pleasure all over my face.

Well, damn. I crack the door to my room and peek into the suite. There's no movement, which emboldens me to lock the door. I search through my bag until I find my earbuds, then I get into position on the bed and dial Julian's number.

When his face appears on the screen, I whisper, "I've shown you mine, now show me yours."

He glances around him and I recognize the room he's in. It's the one he prepared for me in his home.

"Did you sleep in my bed last night?" I keep my voice low to keep my friends from hearing what I'm about to do.

Pink stains his cheeks. "I wasn't being creepy... I just... Being surrounded by things you've touched soothes me."

"As much as I'd like to talk about how sweet that is and how not creeped out I am, I have a more pressing issue at hand." I pull the phone away so he can see me as I trail my hand down my body and between my thighs.

When I raise my glistening fingers to the screen, he clenches his eyes and groans, "Nadira..."

"Don't Nadira me. This is your fault. Now, I could take care of myself alone, but that's not what I want."

"And what is it you want?"

"You. On my bed. Naked."

Julian opens his eyes and I gasp at the passion causing his irises to glow a molten gold. "I live to fulfill your desires."

The dark promise in his voice delivers a phantom stroke to my body.

My core clenches and my clit pulses with need.

Julian sets his phone down so I can watch him as he slowly disrobes, revealing inch by tantalizing inch of his muscled torso. As the hem of his shirt rises above his chest, the material uncovers a tattoo over his left pectoral muscle. Inked on his chest is Property of Trapper's Keeper.

I've seen his tattoo before, but after discovering his letters, the words take on new meaning. Although he hasn't called me Keeper since London, I haven't forgotten. Is there any aspect of Julian's life he hasn't devoted to me? The realization humbles me, but more than that, it turns me on. Julian unabashedly belongs to me.

"Julian." I lick my lips and circle my swollen nipple. "Can't you go faster?"

In response, he rips open his pants and I hear the ping of his button hitting something in the room. Within seconds, Julian lies on the bed. "What will you have me do?" His strained voice is music to my ears.

"Show me... when you think about using your mouth on me, show me how you touch yourself."

"I pretend you're touching me," he whimpers with his hand circling his dick.

"And I will. You have a beautiful dick. Now squeeze it gently for me."

He bites his lip but follows my instructions. His dick is long and thick, curving toward his belly. Pre-cum wells at his tip.

Unable to hold back any longer, I rub slow circles into my clit and moan at the stimulation. “Now spread that delicious fluid around and start stroking yourself. And don’t keep quiet. I want to hear all your pleasure.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“That’s right. And that’s my dick you’re touching, isn’t it?”

“Yes, all of me is yours for the taking.”

Shit! Having this power over Julian sends a rush to my head that journeys to all my nerve endings. While stimulating my clitoris with my thumb, I plunge two fingers into my needy pussy.

“Do you hear that, Julian?” I widen my thighs and place the phone closer to my pussy while I thrust inside myself. I’m so wet. Sloshing sounds emit from between my legs.

“Fuck, Nadira.”

“This is what you do to me, Julian.” I pant and increase my pace. “When I see you, I’m going to want to ride that big dick of mine. You won’t deny me, will you?”

“Never.” He gasps my name and the wildness in his eyes tells me he’s on the brink.

“Do you want to come?”

“Not before you.” The sexy baritone of his voice makes me whimper and slam my feet against the bed.

“I’m close, but I want to see you come first. Show me how hard you come and how much cum you’re going to feed me when we do this in person.”

“Nadira, fuck!” Julian yells and spurts cum over his fist. Jet after jet flies in the air to land on his chest and belly.

Watching him orgasm causes a chain reaction in me, and my body seizes. I struggle to keep my eyes open to watch him as deliciously punishing waves of pleasure wash over me. For endless minutes, the only sound is our heavy breathing.

When I can finally form a coherent sentence, I open my mouth, but Julian preempts me.

“Nadira, promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“When we see each other tonight, you let me get my fill before you destroy me with the vow you made.”

I lick my lips and toy with the idea of denying him. He does have a beautiful dick. One worth riding over and over until I break my pussy or his dick, whichever comes first. But then I look into his earnest gaze. If I want to be selfish, he’ll let me. He’s proven that time and again in our brief acquaintance. He’ll also let me be soft and vulnerable. For him, he cherishes every facet of my personality.

I smile when I give him my answer.

CHAPTER 17

Julian

For the umpteenth time, I debate whether to play music to greet Nadira as she enters my suite. The dilemma doesn't end there. Which artist, genre, mood, and so many other options swirl in my head. With the musical decision up in the air, I tackle what to do about the lights, dimming them then returning them to normal, forever weighing the benefits.

Low lighting will add a sense of intimacy, but won't grant me the privilege of seeing Nadira in her full glory. I can't believe my indecisiveness, but the stakes have never been higher. On another trip to turn off the radio playing an R&B station, Leaper, who I brought as a surprise, jumps on the table and slams her paw on my hand. The action prevents me from stopping the music, and I take it as a sign to let the radio play.

Everything else in the room is good to go. Although Nadira is no nonsense, deep down, she has a soft romantic bone. I couldn't spoil her in Spain, so tonight is my chance. Rose petals make a path from the entrance to the bedroom, filling the air with their heady fragrance. Champagne chills in an ice bucket, and a special chocolate cake sits in the kitchenette.

Leaper bumps her head against my arm. Instinctively, I lift her and she curls into my arm and hugs my bicep while we wait for Nadira to enter. Earlier in the day, I had the staff deliver a copy of the key to her. Ever since, she's sent me tantalizing photos of an exposed limb, each more revealing than the last. She keeps me in a constant state of arousal.

The beep from the door's automated lock tells me my waiting is over. I get into position, while the opening lines of SZA's "Snooze" plays on the radio. Anticipation thickens the air, and I lick my lips in readiness.

Her padded footsteps near the bedroom and my mind fills with all the images she sent. How will my queen appear?

When she enters, my mind blanks.

"You went shopping." The observation unintentionally pops out of my mouth and sounds dumb to my ears.

She immediately stiffens and wariness clouds her dark irises.

Her hesitation is clearly from my observation, but do I stop there? Of course not. My brain hasn't come online yet and my moronic mouth has taken over. "The wig... and the outfit..." I shake my head to reset myself and give Nadira a proper response to the image she portrays.

Her wig, bone straight and blacker than obsidian, falls to her hips. The severe cut of her bangs frames her face. Her hair isn't the only sign she means business tonight. Black adorns her, from her high-heeled patent leather stilettos, lace thigh-high stockings, leather bustier, and garter straps, to her silk crotchless panties, everything lovingly molds to her curves, announcing my inevitable downfall. She could put any dominatrix to shame. And I can't wait for my defeat and ultimate submission at her hands.

"I thought you were done trying to kill me, but I see this is your new strategy. I like it." I grin and widen my thighs to

show her the effect she has on me.

Her eyes follow my movement. My open appreciation is the key, erasing the shadow dimming her eyes and restoring the lustful sheen from our murderous outing. She licks her lips and my cock, that has been in a state of readiness from all her teasing photos, jerks and leaks pearly fluid.

“Why are you kneeling on the floor?” she asks.

“Is this not how I should greet my queen when she promises me a feast?”

A tremor passes through her thighs.

“And that also requires you to be naked?”

“Because you appreciated looking at it so much this afternoon.”

The corner of her lips wobble before she suppresses her amusement. “And Leaper?”

Hearing her name, the cat stretches in my arm and curls into my chest.

“She missed her mama?”

“I’m not so sure.” Nadira takes the feline out of my arms.

The cat issues a mild protest before butting her head against Nadira’s chin, demanding affection.

“You’re not grown enough to witness what’s about to go down, but I’ll give you all the affection you need later.” Nadira exits the room, but I hear everything she says to Leaper. “Because tonight, my kitty is the only one getting tended to.”

Now my thighs tremble in anticipation for what's coming. When Nadira re-enters the room, she doesn't stop until she reaches me.

“Good, you're still on your knees.” She raises her leg and places her foot on my shoulder.

Her hairless pussy fills my vision. Glistening brown lips expose a hint of dark pink flesh. At the top, her fat clit plays peekaboo between her labia. If the vision before me isn't enticing enough to persuade a saint into sinning, Nadira's sweet arousal wafting at me would even have the most chaste hurtling themselves to their ruin.

“Nadira...” My whimper is unintentional.

She tunnels her fingers through my hair, grabs a fistful at my nape, and pulls my head back until I meet her gaze. “So patient. How should I reward you for your suffering?”

“Don't tease me. You know what I need.” I lean forward, closing the distance between me and my prize.

She jerks my head back, causing a pleasant sting in my scalp. “I have rules.”

“Whatever my queen desires.”

“I'm feeling very possessive tonight, so only I can touch my dick.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“And you come when I say.”

“Yes, my queen.”

Nadira releases me and steps away, taking my path to heaven with her. “Get on the bed. We’re going to test how well you handle these thighs.” She caresses her thick limbs.

I rise until I stand eye to eye with her because of her heels. “I can handle your thighs, ass, and everything else you want to throw my way. I’m at your disposal to use me as you will,”

Her breath hitches. Then she places her hand on my chest and gently pushes me toward the bed. “Why are you keeping me waiting?”

I grin and slowly walk backward until the bed connects with my shins. Once I’m in position, Nadira crawls over me and hovers her pussy above my mouth. Her thighs gleam from her leaking arousal. When I raise my head for my first taste, she surprises me by swinging around and pushing her ass in my face.

“You said you can handle anything. Show me what you’ve got.” She flips her long hair over one shoulder.

“Yes, my queen.”

With a knowing smirk, she lowers her ass. I grip her globes, exposing her pretty dark-brown rosette, and lick. The first taste unleashes the ravenous beast inside me.

Nadira gasps and moans while the noises coming from me resemble those of a greedy gremlin. When I register the liquid dripping on my chin, my gluttonous ass switches to lick the nectar freely flowing from her pussy. But I don’t leave that backdoor unattended. With my tongue up her pussy, gulping everything she has to give, I press my thumb inside her ass.

I'd be lying if I said Nadira's pleasure was my sole focus. Somewhere in the lustful haze surrounding me, where I drown in her scent, my hunger takes over. My unquenchable thirst for her sweetness almost deafens me to her squeals.

Then she brushes her hair against my thighs. The tickling sensation heightens my senses, awakening my skin and the hairs along my legs to the slightest shift in the air.

“You suck my kitty so good, but...”

Her long pause causes me to stop. The thought that my selfishness is preventing her from getting what she needs triggers my doubts. If she finds me lacking, how will I make up for it?

“My dick looks so lonely standing to attention with nobody paying him homage. What should I do?” Her breath fans against my heated flesh.

I press my forehead against her thigh in relief. I'm not failing her. “Anything you decide will be a gift from heaven. You could punch me in the nuts and I'd come back for more if I could lick your pussy while you manhandle me.”

“As sweet as the sentiment is—” Nadira encircles my cock and strokes my length “—this work of beauty deserves adoration not abuse.” The heat from her breath blows stronger against my head, then she slows her strokes to a stop. “Did I say you were done? Or didn't you mean it when you said you were going to make me squirt?”

“I hope you remember those words after you gush into my mouth.” I latch onto her clit and plunge two fingers into her

tight channel, gently stroking the top of her vagina.

Her body tenses when I stroke against a firm area, so I do it again. A soul-deep groan issues from her before she says, “It’s on.”

Wet heat engulfs my cock. Sensations I’ve never experienced travel along the nerves in my body, electrifying everything on their way up to my hair follicles. My vision goes white, but being blind doesn’t stop me from licking and sucking or plunging my fingers in her ass and pussy.

I’ve waited a long time to experience this moment and nothing will stop me from living it to the fullest. The years of not knowing Nadira’s fate, but believing my soulmate would reappear to rescue me from my loneliness fed me for so long. But now, the reality of her, the warm flesh beneath my fingers and above my mouth, her sweet scent permeating my pores, and the sinful decadence of her vocalizing her pleasure, all make the years without her worthwhile.

My imagination is no competition for the way she dominates me and fulfills a craving I never knew I had. Yesterday, I said I was her subject, tonight I’ve become her slave.

Nadira lavishes my shaft and balls with attention, sucking at the skin, nibbling along my length, and sucking at the precum copiously pouring from my head. My balls tighten and my thighs tremble, signaling how close to the edge I am. If she continues much longer, I won’t be able to follow her rules.

“Nadira,” I gasp the warning, unable to say more than her name.

She slowly eases off my cock. “Too much for my dick?”

“Give...me...a...sec...to get under control.”

She presses her pussy into my face, and I eagerly open to receive her. “Mmm, I don’t think I will. I want your cum.”

I shudder, conflicted between wanting to prolong the delicious torture and fulfilling her new desire. Of course, there’s no choice for me. My body, like everything else, exists to please my queen.

With my mouth and hands fully engaged to give Nadira an orgasm worthy of her, I try to hold off my release. This time, when she envelops me in her mouth, she doesn’t stop until I’m in her throat. I moan her name into her pussy, a prayer for my salvation and eternal damnation because nothing this good could exist without also being bad.

Her rhythm becomes choppy, the first sign that I’m close to my objective. Then her body shakes and a muffled scream that rises from her gut to wash over my cock precedes the flood that gushes into my mouth. I gulp every drop while the walls of her throat massage my cock. Each swallow causes me to shudder as the chains guarding my restraint shatter, and I explode.

In the room, our greedy feasting plays with Miguel’s “Teach Me” in the background. We slow around the same time, licking the remnants of each other’s cum from our thighs. I’m sure my face is a mess, but etiquette isn’t my concern, reaching every inch of Nadira’s skin blessed with her cum is.

When she twists away from me, I follow, not having found my fill. Nowhere is safe. I suck through her stockings to the skin beneath, lick her thighs, and revisit the treasure trove responsible for my insatiable hunger. Only when Nadira pushes at my head do I cease my feast.

“If you keep that up, I won’t have the energy to ride you. And letting this go to waste would be a sin.” She strokes my cock, which hasn’t softened since ejaculating.

“But...” Am I really about to protest?

“But what? You don’t want to fuck me?” Nadira removes a condom from a pocket on her bustier.

“That’s convenient.”

“It is, but it limits our fun times since it only holds one.”

I hold out my hand, but she swats it away.

“I’ll dress my dick myself, thank you very much.”

I raise both hands in surrender. Thank God, she doesn’t make me suffer as she rolls the condom down my length.

She nods toward the wall while pulling down the cups concealing her breasts from view. “Back against the headboard.” Her engorged nipples create a new craving that rivals the one I barely satisfied.

I lick my lips and crawl backward until I’m in position.

Nadira straddles me. Instead of teasing me, she seizes my cock and sinks, burying me inside her wet heat with a deep groan. “God, my dick feels so good inside me.”

I close my eyes as intense pleasure short circuits every synapse in my body. A slight pressure against my lips causes me to open my eyes again.

“Open up.”

Without thinking, I follow her command, and Nadira presses her nipple into my mouth.

“Now, fill my ass while I ride you.”

“Yes, my queen,” I mumble around her breast, feeling her shudder at the sensation, which continues as I press the two middle fingers of my right hand into her back entrance.

She combs my hair away from my face. “That’s right,” she moans. “And because you’ve been so good, you can come whenever you want. I’ll have more fun reviving you and making you come over and over until I’m satisfied.”

Her praise exhilarates me while her threat electrifies me, and I consider the possibilities. All thought ends abruptly when Nadira vigorously rises and plunges herself on my cock. Her nails dig into my biceps as she fucks the sanity out of me. She uses me like a toy built for her pleasure—I am—and compliments me for making her feel so good.

I don’t know which gives me more satisfaction, her admiration or her sensual gratification. All that matters is I’ll spend the rest of my days delighting in meeting all her needs and relishing her responses.

CHAPTER 18

Nadira

“Look at me, Julian,” I demand while I fuck him.

He doesn't hesitate to comply, not that he has since my arrival. For all that he pushed himself into my life, he's surprisingly accommodating to everything I want—as long as I don't exclude him from being a part of my life.

His golden irises, raised in supplication, bare his soul to me. His utter devotion humbles me and causes me to gentle my downward thrusts. He is extremely expressive in the throes of passion. Every grimace, jaw clench, nostril flare, and darkening of his eyes enthrall me, spurring me to pull more of his reactions to the surface. This is what I missed when I buried my face between his thighs to satisfy my hunger for his dick, and I can't tell which is more gratifying.

I clench my pussy and delight when he whimpers for me. His response intensifies the feeling of fullness in my ass and pussy, and feeds a physical and emotional need I didn't know I had. In retaliation, he draws on my breast, lavishing one with his tongue before turning his attention to the other. But nothing he does hides the way his muscles contract, signaling he's close to another orgasm.

With his impending release, I pull him from my breast and take possession of his mouth, taming him with my tongue. He takes the hand not in my ass and clutches me closer to him as he shudders and yells into my mouth. I delight in swallowing his cries while winding my hips against him. The action

stimulates my clit and pushes me over the edge where I join him in a second orgasm.

After a lingering kiss, I extract myself and pant from lack of air. The slight shift causes me to raise startled eyes to his. “You’re still hard? But you just came, didn’t you?”

“I came and saw stars. Don’t be in doubt.” He shrugs with a sheepish grin. “I can’t help it if I haven’t gotten enough of you.”

“Have you always been multi-orgasmic?”

He wipes all expression from his face and gently swings me off him before turning his back on me and hanging his head.

“Julian?” Concerned, I touch his shoulder and feel him shudder beneath me. But this isn’t from pleasure. “Julian, what’s wrong?” I spring out of bed and round it to face him while I dig for the information I want. I raise his head until his worried eyes meet mine. “Talk to me.”

He shuts off the radio and gives me his attention. “I wouldn’t know if I’m multi-orgasmic, because you’re the only woman I’ve ever been with.”

I take an involuntary step back after his admission. “No way. No virgin could do what you did or make me feel what you made me feel. The way you handled my body...how if you haven’t been with other women?”

He shrugs. “I can’t speak for other virgins, but I let my desire to please you guide me. When will you understand that your pleasure *is* my pleasure?”

I sit beside him, too astounded that—“Oh my God, I took your virginity!” I jump up as the enormity of how I treated him hits me. No longer able to stand still, I pace in front of him as myriad thoughts bombard me. Did I unwittingly take advantage of him? My previous partners would never have let me dictate our sex acts. It doesn't matter that he's five years older than me if I'm more experienced. I should have—

He chuckles and grabs my hands, halting me mid-pace. “My virginity was always yours to take whenever and however you wanted.”

“But...how? You can't tell me other women never approached you.”

He releases my hands and clams up.

I narrow my gaze at him. “Julian, what aren't you telling me?”

“Take a number, Nadira. There's a lot I haven't told you, and you know this.”

I contemplate him and his odd response. The only things he refuses to talk about relate to my missing memory. “So this goes back to when we were kids?”

His reluctant nod confirms my suspicion.

“Do you think what we shared was beautiful?” I ask.

“Of course. I wouldn't have our first time any other way.”

“And I want it to remain beautiful for me, too. For that to happen, I need to know what you're not telling me.”

Unlike when Julian was in the throes of passion, his face gives nothing away. “In my mind, I’ve been your husband since I gave you a flower ring. What man would I be if I stepped out on my wife?”

“Flower ring?” I feel the blood draining from my face. I struggle to get the next words out, but I have to know. “Was there only the one?”

“Nadira?”

“Was there only one ring?” I demand in the face of his growing concern.

“No. You outgrew them as you got older. Whenever they no longer fit, you transferred them to a hemp necklace you made.”

“Oh my God.” I cover my mouth as an image of a teenager with bright golden-brown eyes flashes in my head, so similar to the image of the boy I remember from before and almost a replica of the man in front of me. In what I recognize as a memory now, he’s sliding the ring on my ring finger and promising to wait for me because they’re moving him to a different facility and it was our last minutes together.

“Nadira, what’s wrong? Tell me what to do. What do you need?” Julian’s voice sounds far away like he’s underwater. He shakes me, bringing his current image into focus. “Nadira!”

“That necklace... It was in my belongings when I survived the crash. I always wondered why there were so many rings and why the sizes and flowers were different.”

“I always made them based on what was in season.”

“And the last one you gave me, that happened on the day of my accident. But there was more than one that day.”

“You remember?”

I nod as tears spill down my face. “I was heartbroken when you walked away, but I tried to be hopeful at the same time. I felt like I was losing another person... Wait, who did I lose that would cause this crushing pain inside my chest?” I rub the area above my heart as if I’ve reopened a fresh wound instead of one long-healed and hardened with scar tissue.

“Do you remember anything else?”

I try, going so far as closing my eyes to recapture the memory to see where it goes. But only teenage Julian’s stiff spine as he walks away from me replays over and over behind my closed lids. With a frustrated growl, I admit defeat. “Nothing.”

His disappointment reflects mine, but his arms enclosing me in a comforting embrace eases my pain and dwindling hope. He kisses my forehead. “When you leave this place, there’s somewhere I want to take you that might help you regain other memories.”

I close my eyes and breathe him in. “You promise?”

Julian pinches my chin until I match his stare. “You said you needed this, right?”

I nod.

“Then I’ll do whatever I can to ensure you get it.”

“I need something else.”

Julian quirks his brow in silent question.

“Undress me and cuddle with me until I need to leave.”

“That sounds more like what I need.” He reaches for the laces and hooks on my bustier. When I’m naked, he pulls the covers on the bed back and reaches for me.

I eagerly join him, facing him while sharing the same pillow. I stroke his shoulder, trailing my hand until I touch the ink on his body. I trace the letters. The message takes on deeper meaning after the past few hours with Julian, but it also brings doubts. “Are you disappointed that I didn’t save myself for you?” I keep my gaze locked on my hand, afraid he won’t be able to hide the truth from me if I stare into his eyes.

But this is Julian. When I need truth from him, he delivers it whether I want to hear it. He tilts my head until his face fills my vision. “Why would you have? You had no memory of me, and I see no point in dwelling on something neither of us could control. The truth is, your body is a gift worth cherishing, regardless of how many came before me. What matters most is who we are now, and that no one else will come after me.”

I search his eyes, amazed by his conviction. “How can you be so certain of your feelings for me? Haven’t I changed since we were kids?”

“Absolutely, but all the changes endear you to me more. After all, you smile more now, and you don’t reserve them for when you’re killing people. And when I look into your eyes, there’s life there that you no longer try to hide from. You’ve always been generous with the people you take under your

wing, but you rarely let them get too close. I was one of two exceptions. Now you have more. If I didn't know better, I'd say you're getting soft in your old age."

I poke him for his little dig. "I'm still younger than you."

"And you're still my hero. That will never change."

CHAPTER 19

Dark clouds obscured the sky long before the sun set and the moon took refuge behind the dark canopy. Rain was inevitable, but for the passengers of the BMW X5, the weather wasn't their immediate concern.

"Daddy," the little black girl sitting in the car seat behind the driver called out. "There's a weird noise."

The man turned down the radio he and his wife were singing along to and listened for the noise his daughter warned him about. An odd sound from a wheel came and went. While trying to identify the exact location, he jerked the steering wheel.

"Dammit," he cursed.

"Honey? Something wrong?" his wife asked.

"I'm not sure. The car's not riding as smoothly as it should. I thought it was because the road was just bad, but now with the sound Yolanda heard, I'm not so sure."

"Well, if it isn't the road, what else could it be?" Her tension filled the car, and the man rushed to reassure her.

"It's probably the tire. I could have driven over a nail or something that's causing a slow leak. Don't worry, there's a gas station about five miles ahead. If I'm right, I've got what we need to get back on the road and on the way home in no time."

"I hope that's what it is. I don't like the look of the weather and wouldn't like to be stranded this far away from home."

The husband reached across the gearshift to cup his wife's knee and give her a reassuring squeeze.

Soon, the neon light from the gas station served as a beacon, drawing them to the relative safety of a public structure.

"Mommy, I'm thirsty," the little girl with the afro puffs said when the car stopped near the convenience store in front of the gas pumps.

Other than their car, there was a panel van at the pump, but the driver was absent.

"What're you gonna give me to pay for a drink?"

The little girl paused to think, then a big smile spread her lips wide, exposing her chipped front tooth. "A googolplex of hugs."

"A googolplex? That sounds like a lot of hugs."

"Objectively, a googolplex is the largest denomination of numbers within bounds the human mind can understand. Although physically impossible to complete in a lifetime, I contend Mommy's time is worth it."

"Hey! Don't I rate at least one hug? I drive you around wherever you need to go," the father said, feigning outrage and ignoring his daughter's demonstration of her genius.

The little girl giggled, then whispered, "You get a sextillion kisses."

"That's more like it," he said.

The mom rolled her eyes and unbuckled her seat belt. “Sounds like favoritism to me. You always get the good stuff.”

He leaned over to her ear. “And I always give you the even better stuff.”

She playfully pushed him away with a laugh and a shake of her head. “Do you need anything, honey?”

“Just some sugar before you go.”

The little girl in the back seat watched in awe as her parents lovingly kissed each other. Only the harsh honk from the dad accidentally leaning against the steering wheel caused them to jump apart.

The mother wiped the traces of her lipstick from his mouth.

“Hurry back, now,” he said.

“Yes, mommy. Hurry back. It’s already past my bedtime. I need my beauty sleep if I want to be fresh as spring for my first day at my new school.”

“Where does she get that?” he asked.

“Don’t ask me, that’s your daughter.” The mom left the car before another smart comment from father or daughter stopped her.

“Alright pumpkin pop, you want to help daddy fix the car?”

“Okay, but remember my hands are delicate.” The little girl raises her hands that put the lie to her words.

Calluses harden her palms and fingertips from her many outdoor activities. And no matter how many scrubblings her mother subjected her to, a slight discoloration lined the edges of her nails.

“Uh-huh,” the father said and exited the door.

The little girl released the safety belt from her car seat and followed behind her father as he checked each tire. While assessing the last tire on the passenger side, he found the source of the car’s noise and wobbly steering. From the trunk, he removed the tools he needed to pull off the tire.

“Pumpkin pop, you know the little green box I keep in the back row?” At her blank look, he shook his head. “There’s a green box in the back row of the car, can you get it for me? The sooner you do, the sooner you get that beauty sleep you said you needed.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What currency are you going to pay me?”

“Currency? I’ll give you some currency.” He grabbed his daughter around the waist, raising her above the ground to blow raspberries in her neck.

Her laughter filled the air with joyful sound until he put her down. Her demands for more were met with a gentle shove toward the box her father needed. With heavy steps, she retrieved the package and squatted to watch him work as he removed the nail.

As he applied sealant to the damaged area, a sharp crack rent the air and a deluge of water began to fall. With no

protection from the elements, the downpour soon soaked father and daughter.

“Pumpkin pop, go to my door and get the umbrella out of the pocket.”

She rushed to do his bidding. When she had the umbrella in hand, she turned to slam the door and open the umbrella to protect her from getting wetter as she returned to her father.

Before she took two steps, a hand slammed over her nose and mouth and an arm picked her up from the ground. Too stunned to react, she didn't begin to kick until the person holding her shoved her into the back of the panel van. He was medium height and unremarkable except for the large mole protruding from the side of his nose. The man quickly followed inside to silence her.

After recapturing her, the stranger said to the driver, “You better leave now before the wife remembers what you look like.”

The driver shares a meaningful glance with her abductor. “She never got a good look at me, and the owners of the gas station are cheap, lazy bastards. They never hooked up their camera. Any robber would notice the wires dangling from the back of the devices.” The driver shook his head as he drove off, leaving the umbrella swaying and collecting water while the girl's father busied himself with repairing the tire, unaware of the crime taking place.

CHAPTER 20

Nadira

I gasp and shoot up in bed. The residual effects of the dream that's not a dream but a memory remain clear and terrifying as I try to catch my breath. I barely notice the lack of headache that accompanies these dreams because, for the first time, everything is vividly clear. My mother's copper brown skin and light brown eyes filled with affection. My father's soulful black eyes and full lips always on the brink of smiling. And the men who took me from my loving family.

“Nadira?”

When did I fall asleep?

“Nadira!” Julian's voice penetrates the despair surrounding me. He holds my face between his large hands while concern brackets his mouth.

I blink until he comes into focus. Then I search his eyes, but I don't know what I'm looking for. From the letter I found at his house, I knew I was abducted, but it felt alien then. As if another child went through the horrors and I experienced the events as a bystander. Not anymore.

Julian presses his forehead against mine. “You're okay. I won't let anything happen to you.”

“Y stands for Yolanda,” I say, shocking him into releasing me.

A fleeting smile disappears from his lips. “I want to think you gaining another memory is good, but from your reaction,

it's not all roses, is it?"

I shake my head and get out of bed. I've spent longer with Julian than I should have and need to return to my suite before my friends wake. "I remember the men who took me from my parents." When he moves as if to comfort me, I stall him with an upraised hand. "Don't. I need to process what I'm feeling before I can accept comfort."

He firms his lips but ultimately accepts my decision with a nod.

"Thank you," I say before retrieving my discarded clothes, including the robe I left at the door.

"Here." Julian hands me a set of pajamas and I smile my gratitude.

If anyone catches me sneaking into my room, at least I won't have to clutch my robe in fear of exposing my tits and pussy. At the door, I pause and glance back at Julian. He must be fighting something fierce because his expression betrays the conflict inside him. Instead of leaving, I return to him, cup his cheek, and press a soft kiss against his lips.

"If you're worried about things changing between us because of what I remembered, don't. I'll see you again, tonight."

Relief loosens the tense muscles in his face, and he nods. "Until tonight."

Leaving Julian after so many highs is harder than I expected. As soon as the door closes behind me, I want to use my key and run into his arms, but I won't use him as a crutch

to forget my problems. But when I enter the suite I share with Moni, Danae, Tamara, and Chelsea, I don't have time to examine my fresh memory.

Chelsea flicks the light switch before I arrive at my door. She has her arms folded and her aura of silent judgment screams at me to confess my sins.

"You're up early," I say.

"Don't even play with me. Are we having this discussion here so everyone who wakes up hears us or in a bedroom where we have privacy?"

I nod toward her door and follow behind her.

"Where were you tonight?" she demands. "Heels like those mean you went places."

If she only knew.

"What's with the interrogation this early in the morning?"

"Are you serious right now?"

I give her a blank look.

She retrieves her phone and shoves it in my face. On the screen is an article about a missing couple.

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Nadira, these are the people Tamara said assaulted her."

"They are?" I feign surprise and take her phone to peruse the article with more interest. I hand Chelsea the phone and shrug. "I don't see what that has to do with me."

"You don't feel sorry for them?"

“Assuming they didn’t just leave town on a trip, why should I? You saw what they did to Tamara. Anyone who throws hands at my friends deserves the fate they get.”

For a moment, Chelsea’s stare feels more like she’s probing me for something, and if she seeks long enough, she’ll find what she’s searching for.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” I back away.

Her expression clears. “I guess there’s something different about you, but I can’t figure out what it is.”

Since it’s a toss-up between phenomenal dick and a dream memory, neither of which I intend to tell anyone before I’m ready, I shrug. “Can’t help you there. So if there’s nothing else —”

“Who said there was nothing else? I’m still waiting to know where you’ve been tonight.”

I turn around to leave. “That pesky curiosity. Shoot that bitch and get some sleep, because she’ll die unsatisfied before I tell you where I’ve been.”

“Damn, Nadira, that’s cold.”

I send her a smile to take the bite out of my comment. “And you should warm up in bed, if only for five minutes before everyone wakes up.”

When I leave Chelsea’s bedroom, I come to a full stop. Moni, Tamara, and Danae are awake and have replicated Chelsea’s pose from when she caught me sneaking in.

“We awake,” Moni says in her bonnet and fluffy slippers she bought while we shopped yesterday. “And we want to know why you’re carrying—” She snatches the bundled garments from my hands before I can stop her. “Lace stockings, a bustier, garter straps, high heels...and crotchless panties? Girl, you got some splaining to do.”

“Did Moni say crotchless panties?” Danae asks.

Tamara gasps. “That’s what I heard. You heard that, too right Chelsea?”

I swing around to see Chelsea standing at her opened door with a stunned expression.

“The man from your office?” Dawning horror takes over her face before she replaces the emotion with amazement.

But I’m stuck on Chelsea’s initial reaction.

“I want some details! Tea and errthing to go along with it; sandwiches, cookies, scones, muffins. I want it all.” Moni retrieves the basket of baked goods the hotel replaces daily and pinches a corner off a Snickerdoodle cookie.

“Wait, when did you have time to buy crotchless panties? And why is no one else shocked that our Nadira is a closet freak?” Danae glances at everyone with her eyebrows raised in what-the-fuck-is going-on-here-ish.

When the other ladies turn equally incredulous glares at me, I cover my mouth and pretend to yawn. “I better get some shuteye.” I spin toward my bedroom, but Chelsea beats me.

“You’ve been outvoted, and we’re not letting you get away without giving us something.” Chelsea nods toward the other

women.

“Damn right.” Moni pops the rest of her cookie into her mouth and folds her arms like a prison guard daring the inmates to riot.

But I’m the only inmate here. I have few qualms in life, but I draw the line at hurting my friends. I have to remind myself of this as I eye their weak points, sure I can take every one of them out. Damn, friendships really know how to hamper my privacy.

“I know!” Danae says. “Since y’all are ditching me for Christmas, come over to my place for Thanksgiving.” She points a finger at me. “And don’t think you can show up on my doorstep without that man. We need to vet him, and make sure he’s good enough.”

“We aren’t at the meeting of friends and family stage yet.”

They are deaf to my protests.

“If you’re at the sneaking-out-on-our-girl-time stage, you’re at the time-to-introduce-him-to-your-girls stage.” Tamara’s firmness speaks for everyone.

“And don’t think you can cop out by claiming business travel.” Chelsea’s determination shines brightly through her eyes.

Seeing no way out, for now, I land on one thing to bide my time. “If that’s the case, I’m not spilling anything until Thanksgiving.”

A collective, “What?” resounds in the room. Then a chorus of “Ah, hell no,” “Is this chick really trying us today,” “No the

fuck she didn't just cut us off," and "Nadira?" comes all at once, making it difficult to distinguish which protest comes from which person.

"I said what I said. And if I hear another word asking, needling, or imagining things about my love life, I'm leaving. I've drawn a line, don't cross it."

Chelsea is the first to back down and move away from my door.

"Well, damn," someone whispers behind my back before I close the door and sink to the floor.

I feel awful for shutting them down, but I've barely held myself together since leaving Julian and I need time alone to think. I don't know when I'll be okay or if I'll bounce back, but suppressing my feelings could lead to unknown dangers. It's a hard lesson I learned as I recovered from my accident.

The hours pass and I don't turn on any of the lights in the room, don't leave to eat, don't sleep... I sit against the door and silently weep as I mourn the life stolen from me and the family that raised me. The version of myself in my memory is not the child I remember from being in the hospital. I used to be quick with the smiles and physically affectionate. I used to be a genius. The reason for me starting at a new school was at six years old, I understood concepts middle schoolers struggled to grasp. So much of my life ended because those men stole me from people who loved me.

A soft knock on the door reminds me where I am.

"Nadira?" Chelsea's whisper is full of concern.

I wipe my face but the puffiness will betray that I've been crying. Weary from the emotional toil, I drag myself off the floor and open the door.

Chelsea holds a plate of chocolate cake. "Can I come in?"

I eye the dessert, knowing Chelsea's generosity ends at everything chocolate, so this offer is big. With a nod, I step aside and let her in.

She sets the cake on the nightstand and returns to lead me onto the bed where she tucks me in before joining me. She hands me the plate and produces two forks. When I quirk my brow, she says, "Cut me some slack. I'm growing. Don't they say sharing is caring?"

A ghost of a smile whispers across my face before I fork some of the dessert into my mouth.

"Are you crying over that man? Is that why you shut us down?"

I shake my head. "You know I don't cry over men, I get angry."

"True, but if he's not the reason, what's got you isolating yourself?"

I rest my fork on the plate while I consider if and what to share.

"We're all worried about you."

I draw my legs up to hug them to my chest, then I rest my cheek against my knees. "I dreamt about my parents."

Chelsea's eyes widen but I can't identify the underlying emotion behind her reaction. When she clears her expression, I wonder, not for the first time, if she's hiding something from me.

"That sounds like a big deal. What happened in the dream?"

"A man with a mole by his nose and a driver took me from my parents." I study Chelsea's reaction, but she gives me nothing.

"So you had a nightmare."

I shrug. "I guess... The funny thing is, it wasn't just a dream. I finally have a memory from before my accident, and it's nowhere near the joyous occasion I expected."

Although I have a curated identity, I keep a lot of details as close to the truth as possible. Chelsea knows about the car crash and that I was in an orphanage. From there, my life is a meticulous work of fiction Chelsea has never questioned.

"How—that's still amazing. What else do you remember?"

Chelsea's earnestness is on another level. She almost reminds me of... A vision of braided hair in beads flashes in my mind, but it's too vague for me to place.

"Nadira? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. Did we ever know each other as kids?"

CHAPTER 21

Nadira

Tonight is my last night in the hotel. Everyone will pack the things we bought during our stay and depart in the morning. I'll be happy to leave, but also a little sad.

After my friends confronted me about Julian and it became obvious that I had more going on than keeping my relationship under wraps, Danae, Moni, and Chelsea banded together to focus on me and Tamara for the rest of our stay.

Despite my initial embarrassment at being the center of attention rather than the person giving support, I began to appreciate the depth of my friendship with these women. True, I'll never be one hundred percent honest with them, but I share more of myself with them than almost anyone else. Except Julian.

He seems to be my exception for everything, and I'm not sure how to feel about his position in my life. Especially with everyone's expectations for Thanksgiving hanging over my head.

In the living room of our suite, my friends have popcorn and chilled margaritas in readiness for a Hallmark movie fest. Blankets cover them from chest to feet, and their bonnets and scarves are in place. They eye me as soon as I enter, eager to pounce but respecting the boundaries I established.

"Going to see your new beau?" Tamara asks, her voice more tentative than usual.

"I am."

They all nod as one. Then Danae rises and hands me an envelope. “Here, this is for him. Please don’t open it.”

“I thought you agreed to give me time.”

“And we are,” Moni says. “We might as well tell her what’s in it, otherwise she’ll toss the letters as soon as she leaves.”

“Letters?” I stare at the thick envelope in my hand.

“The last guy you were remotely interested in tried to humble you every chance he got. He made so many unnecessarily cruel comments about your scar, we thought you would lose your confidence.” Tamara hugs herself. She must feel some parallels with her recent experience.

“Instead, I lost him. Or, more accurately, I tossed him out.” I close the gap between us and sit on the center table to face each woman.

“But we don’t know if this guy is different.” Tamara nibbles her bottom lip. “And we understand that you don’t want to share him with us yet. It’s just...even if we don’t meet him, we need him to know there’s nowhere he can hide if he hurts you.”

“You want to threaten him?” I smile while envisioning Julian’s reaction.

“We might be law-abiding citizens, but we’re smart. With my medical expertise, we can unalive and disappear a body. And if we get caught, Tamara will get us off, Danae can hide all our money for when we go on the run, and Chelsea will teach us whatever language we need to learn in our new home

country.” Moni throws and catches popcorn in her mouth as if it’s the equivalent of a mike drop.

“And what will I do?”

“Girl, you’re the most important. You’ll smuggle us out of the country with your shipping contacts. But make sure, we get a luxury container with air, electricity, proper furniture, food—you know I need a daily supply of chocolate. And—”

“How do you not have diabetes with that sweet tooth of yours?”

“Take that back! I don’t need those curses following me. I rebuke thee! I rebuke thee!” Chelsea mimics throwing holy water on me and we all burst into laughter.

“Alright, I’ll deliver the letters.” I hold my hand against my heart. “And thank you for being the most amazing friends a girl could ask for.”

“Damn, you here making us all teary-eyed and shit and we didn’t even start the movies yet.” Moni fans her face. “You’re a menace.”

“I can take a hint.” I leave with a lighter step as I make my way down the hall to Julian’s suite.

I open the door to a familiar site. Julian kneels, knees spread and naked, as he’s done every night since we slept together. And I...I’m nothing like I was. For the first time, I’m not wearing makeup to conceal my scar, and the sexiest thing about what I’m wearing is... Actually, there’s nothing sexy about the flannel hotel pajamas I have on.

But from Julian's heated stare and rising dick, my sleepwear must be pretty damn provocative.

"How long have you waited for me like this?" I ask.

At my voice, Leaper runs from a side room to rub her head against me. I squat to pet her while Julian responds to my question.

"Since the food arrived, so I'd say a minute."

"Thank you." I leave Leaper to stand beside Julian. I tilt his face up and lean down to kiss him.

He opens his mouth in invitation, and the temptation is too much for me to pass up. I stroke my tongue inside and moan. "You ate chocolate."

He grins. "I couldn't resist the opportunity to have a taste of you on the side."

I kiss him again, lingering over our connection with a needy moan. "Mmm, I think you might become my new favorite dessert." I leave him to survey the food he had delivered.

A colorful spread tantalizes my vision. The deep purple and gold beets with herbed goat cheese, vibrant collared greens sauteed with garlic, and vivid carrots accompany a thick ribeye.

"Everything looks delicious. Join me."

Julian rises and seats me before pulling a chair beside me.

I'm still getting used to this new dynamic between us. A couple nights ago, I questioned why he always had food

waiting for me when I arrived. He said it was one way serving me fulfilled him, which reminded me of his joy while cooking for me, even if at the time I was less than welcoming of his advances.

Because of that, I offered to eat with him once a day. His gratitude, kneeling and kissing my feet in reverence, left me speechless. Alongside my inability to speak, another sensation I couldn't name grew. His happiness touched my heart, making me want to find more ways to please him.

As Julian noted on more than one occasion, I go hard for my people, but there's more meaning when I do so for him. I don't understand it, but I like the feeling too much to resist it.

“Did you follow me again today?” I ask while he spoons food onto my plate.

An unrepentant grin flits across his face. “You saw me.” At my nod, he chuckles. “That's why you went into the lingerie store. You were toying with me.”

“Are you disappointed I didn't buy anything?” I lick my lips before taking a bite of steak.

Julian's heated irises zero in on my mouth. “Not at all. I bought everything you liked and had it delivered.” He nodded toward the stack of packages in the corner I hadn't noticed upon entering. The bags sport more than the lingerie store's logo.

I shake my head. “Of course you did.” I hand him the envelope from the ladies. “My friends know about you. They caught you leaving the office.”

He removes the letters inside while I eat. Every once in a while, he chuckles. “They seem like good people. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think your bloodthirsty nature rubbed off on them.”

I quirk my brow but ignore his dig. “They want to meet you.”

He studies me in silence. “What do you want?”

“I don’t like discussing you when you aren’t around, so maybe it’s not a bad idea.”

“When?”

“Thanksgiving.”

“I’ll be there.”

His easy acceptance lifts the invisible weight I’ve carried since they first interrogated me about Julian. Maybe it won’t be so bad for both my worlds to intersect.

When we finish eating, I ask, “What did you do with the man in the bookstore?” I stand and slip the top button on my pajama shirt free.

While browsing the Denver specialty shops, I spied a man following us. He was oblivious to Julian. When I thought I would have to find an excuse to leave my friends and intervene, the man and Julian disappeared. Although I have an idea, I want confirmation, and to reward Julian for his good work.

Julian’s gaze focuses on my movements and he pushes his chair away from the table, granting me an unobstructed view

of his naked body. “What any good protector would do.”

I free another button and expose the curve of my breast.
“Who is he?”

“He *was* an associate who chose the wrong target.”

“And what did you learn?”

With the last button loose, I let my top hang open.

Julian licks his lips and swallows. His voice is strained when he answers, “He was surprised to see me, which works to our advantage, but...”

“But?” I play with the pajama bottom’s waistband.

“He was more concerned with your memory returning.”

This development concerns me, and I cease toying with Julian. “What did he say, exactly?”

My frown causes Julian to mull over his interaction.

“He asked if you remembered anyone else from your past, then said there was still time before you destroyed everything with what you know.”

“What am I supposed to know?”

Our eyes meet as the enormity of the revelation hits us.

“Whatever it is, it’s big enough to threaten the organization.”

A new realization hits me. “The last time you saw me before the nightclub, I was ten years old. What knowledge could I have had?”

“You were searching for your parents. Maybe you saw or heard something you weren’t supposed to.”

I think back to the few memories I remember from my youth. The clearest are the ones after my accident. Shit! I gasp. “If that’s the case, my accident might not have been by mere chance but a hit on my life.”

“Well, fuck! They just put a ticking clock on jogging your memory.” Julian pulls me into his arms. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

“Hmm.” I push him toward the chair.

“Nadira?” He releases me but the frown crinkling his brow tells me he’s not sure if I’m pushing him away again.

“There’s nothing we can do about them tonight.”

“True.” He watches me with an intensity that belies his simple response.

When he bumps against the chair, I shove him until he drops onto the seat. “And because of you, I know more than I would have without you.”

“Also true.” His shoulders, tensed from the moment I separated from him, now droop in relief that I don’t equate him with the man he killed for me or the rest of his organization.

I drop my pajama top and bottoms. “That’s deserving of an award. How do you want me?”

Julian licks his lips. “I can get whatever I want?”

“Within reason.”

“I want an entire night holding you in my arms where you don’t sneak out in the early morning hours and your face is the first thing I see when I wake.”

His response shocks me into stillness. “I’m standing naked in front of you and the reward you ask for isn’t sex? Have you tired of—”

“I could never. You are incomparable. Being inside you is almost as necessary to my sanity as being able to watch over and protect you.”

“Then why?” I wave my hand in front of my body.

“Because I’ve waited over twenty years and I still haven’t experienced having you to myself for a whole night.”

I close my eyes as the sweetness of his need washes over me. “That is definitely within reason.” I open my eyes to see him rise from the chair, so I forestall him. “But, you have some more work to do, because I need to feel you inside me, to taste your screams as you come, to look in your eyes as pleasure breaks...” Verbalizing all the ways I want him causes my core to clench in anticipation.

“I’m here for you—” Julian kneels “—My queen.”

Fuck! Does Julian know how seeing him this way affects me? Inside, my body stages a revolt at the calm I exert over myself when all I want to do is lay him out and make him forget his name. But if I do anything now, I’ll come before he does.

Instead, I position myself on the bed and spread my legs to show him the state of my arousal. “Strap up and get to work.

My pussy can't fill herself, and my dick is looking awfully lonely over there.”

Julian jumps up to follow my commands, his eagerness matched by my need.

When he joins me, I pull his head to mine for a filthy kiss, full of tongue and teeth, licking and biting and sucking. He nudges the head of his dick along my clit, toying with the bundle. But I'm too impatient to play around. I wrap my fingers around him and position him at my entrance.

Without further direction, he enters me, stretching me. The slight burn sends endorphins throughout my body as he continues to fill me and touch places inside me I can't; at least not without toys. But no toy compares to the hot flesh between my thighs pulsing with life.

“Nadira...” he moans into my mouth, and it's as delicious as kissing him after he's eaten chocolate.

I clench my walls, and he moans again. I fist his hair and pull him away from the kiss. “Fuck me, Julian. Tonight I want to see how many orgasms it takes before you get soft.”

“Yes, my queen.” He thrusts inside me. Controlled. Powerful. Amazing.

“You fuck me so good, you know that?”

He clenches his jaw and closes his eyes. “Keep saying stuff like that while I'm inside you and I won't last.”

“Look at me.” I wait until he meets my gaze, then I rake my nails down his nape, freeing his hair, and gently scrape

around to his chest. With our sights locked on each other, I twist his nipples. “Then don’t try.”

He shudders, his eyelids droop to cover all but the tiniest sliver of his eyes, and he groans from his gut. “Nadira...” He presses his forehead against mine.

Our closeness allows me to see every desire-cloaked brown and golden shard in the tiny glimpse of his irises.

I twist his other nipple, delighting in his reaction. A tremor passes through me as well, and it’s not solely from his dick game. How is it Julian’s pleasure magnifies my own? His every gasp and moan, the tiniest quiver that tells me he is closer to an explosion, they’re all gifts offering me endless delights and unimaginable pleasure. I reach around and grab his ass, soaking in his powerful thrusts as he flexes his globes. “Give me what I want, Julian.”

His body shudders, muscles contract, and his movements become more erratic, signaling his oncoming orgasm.

I raise my head to meet his in a kiss as he opens to scream his release into my mouth. I swallow every delightfully tortured note, feeding on the music of his soul while he empties himself into me.

He slumps over me and I push him on his back, groaning at the emptiness as he withdraws from my body.

“That’s one,” I say.

To give my body time to cool down, a way of self-denial, I remove the condom covering his erection and take him deep into my throat. God, he feels and tastes so good. I lick and bob

on his dick, cleaning his emissions and slobbering over him because he's so mouthwateringly good. No night is complete without satisfying my hankering for his dick.

“Fuck, Nadira, I'm going to come again.” He gasps and clutches my shoulder without pushing me away.

I rise long enough to glare at him. “And your point is what, exactly?” I grip his shaft and stroke in a firm up-and-down motion.

“Did I have one? I forget.” He throws back his head and covers his face. His stomach clenches and releases in a faster and faster dance, a foreshadowing of another climax.

When his body seizes and shudders, I proclaim, “That's two.”

I caress his chest until his breathing normalizes. The moment I deem him ready, I straddle him.

“Wait... You've touched and tasted me to your heart's content, let me do the same.”

Poised above his dick, my pussy weeping to be filled again, I calm the passion raging inside me to give into his needs. I sit on his thighs, his dick standing upright and rubbing against my clit. Unable to deny the delectable shocks from the contact, I wind my hips to give my clit the stimulation my body needs. “Okay,” I moan. “What part of me do you want to taste?”

“Your breasts.” He licks his lips. “I want you to feed me your breasts.”

I pull him into sitting upright and place one of his hands on my right breast. He immediately rubs his thumb in circles around my areola. While he toys with my breast, I rise and impale myself on his dick. “You want to suck on my titties?”

I slowly drag my pussy along his dick, torturing myself alongside him, and delighting in the sparks that burst along my nerve endings.

He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down until he foregoes speech to nod.

What else can I do but fulfill his request? I raise my breast and brush my nipple against his lip. When he opens, I push the nub into his hot mouth and close my eyes as sensations overwhelm me when he flicks his tongue against the sensitive bud.

With him inside my pussy and Julian doing his best to suckle me into a screaming orgasm, I double my efforts to make him come, clenching my pussy and twisting his nipple. Sweat pours down our bodies and our pheromones fill the air as we race toward an epic explosion. My trembling thighs make a mockery of my initial determination to hold out and delay my gratification.

With one last thrust, I plummet over the edge, buffeted by waves of unending pleasure, blinded by sensations. When I come to, I’m on my side, clutched to Julian’s chest with his face buried in my neck. We’re still connected, but he’s no longer hard inside me.

“And that’s three,” I mumble and start to pull away.

Julian tightens his arms, pulling me closer. “Not yet. Let’s stay this way awhile.”

My core pulses at the thought of keeping him inside me, of sleeping like this, although he’s more likely to slip out during the night. While connected, I comb my fingers through his hair and softly whisper words of praise and gratitude to him until he loosens his hold. When he lifts his face, I cup his cheek and kiss his lips.

“You keep treating me this way, and I might have to keep you for good.” My eyes widen as he hardens inside me again.

“Please, don’t dangle my dream in front of me.” He rolls me onto my back and pushes inside me. “Tell me you’re going to keep me or don’t say a word. Or else I’ll have to act out.” He punctuates his point with another thrust.

This time, I lose count of how many times he comes because he pushes me over the edge time and time again. After my voice disappears, lost from the many ways he makes me scream, he continues, punishing my pussy with his energizer dick. If he didn’t feel so good inside me, I would protest his way of acting out.

Julian twists and bends my body, stretching my limits as he fucks me over and over until I black out. When I come to, I’m in his arms, my back to his chest, with his dick carving a home inside my pussy.

The clock reads 9 AM. At least I’ve given him the reward he wanted last night.

But what about the other?

Within the security of his arms, I wonder, what's stopping me from completely claiming him?

CHAPTER 22

Julian

As I watch Nadira walk out of my suite, I hold back the words that would delay her departure. We'll see each other soon since she's on leave from work and we're going to dig into her past. I could also watch her on the cameras I installed in her suite to ensure her safety, but doing so won't satisfy my need. I'm in a bad way. Have been since last night when she dangled the possibility that she might not claim me.

The urge to assert myself again until she gives me what I want is a fight I have to win. My status in her life must be freely given or her claim will be tarnished. And I refuse to diminish the value I've always placed on being hers because of my impulsiveness.

My fingers itch with the need to tidy the room. In my current state, I won't stop at making the bed and piling the dishes from last night's dinner into a neat stack. Instead, I call Alastair.

"Honestly, must you call when I'm preparing to restock? We're running low on your inventory of inconspicuous methods to transport bodies. Excluding the body bags, you have one audio travel case. Everything else requires a cover story to explain the furniture and rolled carpets. Then there's the ammunition, rifles, projectiles..." Alastair lists an inventory of items I haven't requested.

"Thank you for the rundown," I interject when he takes a second too long to add to the items he's already told me about.

His mini-diatribes work to distract my mind, and the tingling in my fingers dissipates.

“I’m calling because I need you to meet me at the hotel. I’m taking Nadira to the orphanage, but don’t want to haul the things we’ve accumulated during our stay. And Leaper needs a ride home.”

Alastair’s silence makes me tense as I await his response.

“Alastair?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Don’t mind me. Since this isn’t a call to replenish your supplies, I’m returning the knives, guns, nerve agents, garrote—”

“Wait... Bring the garrote. You never know what will happen.”

“As you wish.”

“And a syringe or two. I might meet people that will need a little extra convincing to give me the information I need.”

“Of course. We must always prepare for contingencies.”

I grin at Alastair’s dry wit before hanging up.

When he arrives, Alastair surveys each room and sniffs the air. I glance around the neat suite; I cleaned enough to satisfy my need for order without devolving into a frenzy. When Alastair moves out of earshot, I mimic him and sniff the air, wondering what he intends. In the bedroom, I realize his purpose. He sprays a scent neutralizer in the air.

He turns to me and says, “Congratulations on the new phase of your relationship. Would it kill you to protect the

lady's reputation from the gossiping staff?"

"Er... I'll keep that in mind."

"Now while you're away, should I prepare the master bedroom for her move?"

"What move?" Nadira asks, entering the room.

"Alastair, in his unsubtle way, was probing to find out if he should move your things into my room. You don't have to answer him," I say while glaring at his smug grin.

Nadira shifts her glance between us before settling on me. "Do you not want me in your space? I don't want to cause another incident after the last time."

I take her hands in mine. "My inability to cope wasn't because you read my private thoughts. I feared they would push you away, and a life without you in it after finding you again would have been untenable. But I was trying not to force the issue."

"And honestly, having to move your things into the master bedroom can only improve the dreary austerity he sleeps in." Alastair moves to the cart he commandeered from the bellhop downstairs.

"Dreary? Austere?" Nadira asks.

I shrug, but her stillness prompts me to add, "Unfinished. I was busy with other things."

"I don't get it. The other rooms I saw were warm and welcoming."

“I was saving the master bedroom for last.” I walk to her side and whisper in her ear. “My queen should dictate what goes in that room.”

Her breath stutters as she exhales after my admission. “Understood.”

“Will there be anything else?” Alastair asks.

My answer is the glare I shoot at him. On his way, he whistles a tune I can’t place.

“I like him.”

“You can’t have him,” I reply.

“We’ll see.” Nadira pats my chest and walks toward the door Alastair exited through. “Ready to help me get my memory back?”

* * *

I pull up to Creative Gifts, the orphanage that started me on my current path. Phantom screams of children from my past life echo as we walk the abandoned playground side by side. Nadira brushes her hand against mine. The action coming from her prompts me to lace our fingers together.

I’m glad I do. Her fingers tremble against mine, belying her calm exterior. I now recognize the gesture for what it is, a subtle call for support. How could I forget that she sometimes finds it difficult to ask for comfort when she is in need? This is why I’m here, why I’ll make myself invaluable to her. Nadira is so used to being everyone’s support system, she neglects herself. It’s a habit she no longer needs to practice.

I kiss her knuckles, hoping she will gain strength from my small show of encouragement. I understand her nervousness because I share the sentiment albeit for selfish reasons. Somewhere inside her, Nadia has convinced herself she needs to be whole before fully accepting me. I disagree, but I haven't come up with an irrefutable argument to win her over. Since I'm at a disadvantage, I offer silent prayers for her to get what she needs so I get what I've wanted for most of my life.

“Do you want to tour the buildings first or the places we used to escape to?” I ask.

“Where would I have spent the most time?”

“The adults kept us busy with various lessons and physical training. But you were on a mission to find your parents, so when you weren't helping or protecting me and our friend, Chloe, you were sneaking into the private offices and reading through the files. I accompanied you more often after I turned thirteen, but you searched on your own a lot.” I gauge her face for signs she remembers or any hint of distress.

“Chloe?” She rubs her temple and closes her eyes. “The name is familiar, but I can't associate a face with her name. Maybe I've met too many Chloes.”

The disappointment in her voice is difficult for me to swallow. If I could, I would wave a magic wand to restore Nadira's memories and solve all her problems for her. But Nadira isn't helpless and doesn't require coddling. She's one of the strongest people I know, the person I admire most in the world, and I'll stand beside her when she decides to lean on me in whatever capacity she needs.

Despite all that, I try not to center myself and my lifelong desire in her struggle. Because in the end, the Nadira walking beside me is a combination of the Nadira I fell in love with as a child and the woman she's become. At her core, she is the same. The changes in her could have been inevitable or due to the experiences she had since her accident. We'll never know, and it's irrelevant to my love for her.

“What happened with Chloe?” Nadira asks.

“She took your disappearance hard. At first, she thought like I did, that you would never leave us. But as time passed, she felt you'd betrayed us. That you escaped our world to live happily with your family and you never intended to get us. Eventually, she became bitter and we fell out because I never lost faith in you and my presence was a painful reminder of the promises we made to each other. Promises she thought you broke.”

Nadira clutches the space above her heart with her free hand. “I don't know a lot about who I was, but I feel deep inside that if I made a promise, I would have tried to keep it, no matter what.”

“I know.” I squeeze the hand I hold to reassure her, but a sadness settles over her shoulder I'm powerless to remove or lighten.

We continue walking aimlessly around the campus in the hopes something will trigger a memory or some familiarity that I can add context to.

“What's over there?” Nadira points toward a remote area on the campus.

I search her profile for signs of recognition. But the frown and tightness around her eyes as she glares only points to her struggle. I wrestle my flaring expectations to a low flame.

“Let’s check it out.” I lead her past the old maintenance building.

As we approach the door, her hold on me strengthens, and she rubs her temple. “This feels so familiar.” She tugs at the door, but due to the building’s long abandonment, it doesn’t budge.

I assist her until the building slowly opens.

“What used to be in here?” She swipes at the cobwebs and coughs due to the dust floating in the air.

“It’s the old maintenance building.”

She spins around in excitement. “Did I used to garden? I remember taking gardening tools—” she runs to a shelf “—from here. Funny, I don’t have a green thumb. My knowledge about nature comes from tracking and identifying poisonous plants.” She raises her hands and studies the racks.

“That’s because we never used the tools to garden. When you showed up, I’d already been here for four years and I was an outcast. At first, I was bummed about my mom and resisted participating in the combat lessons. After a year, I started paying attention, but the instructors ignored me and I didn’t pick up the exercises quickly enough. Then you forced yourself into my life and took the time to teach me. The three of us used to sneak in here at night to get what we needed.”

Nadira walks around the building and opens doors. Amid the broken windows, debris from the elements, and wild animals that took up shelter, are dusty shelves and rusty, old equipment that stopped working long before the orphanage closed.

“Knowing who I am now, I’m guessing I snuck out to do more than tutor you. I must have created a base. It’s something I still do, despite the danger. My current organization encourages me to live a nomadic existence, but I’ve always resisted.”

“You’re right. Follow me.” I lead her to the area our fort used to be. My heart is full of optimism. “It looks like someone discovered it. You’d built a fort—”

“We celebrated birthdays here.” Wonder and excitement fill her voice and eyes. “To make it hard to find, I kept it small and we had to crawl inside!” She spins in place as if envisioning where everything was. “And this is where we used to plan my next moves on how to find my parents. Ooh, I..I remember, when I was about seven, that’s when they started giving me solo missions. Mostly pickpocketing and gathering intel. Whenever they let me out, I would collect local papers, sneak into libraries to get archived publications, and watch the uncensored news whenever it coincided with the small freedoms they allowed us. All to find clues to my parents’ whereabouts. My biggest hope was to find an interview with them.”

“Yeah, Chloe and I did the same. If there was an article about a missing child, we brought it back, regardless of the

description.”

Her shoulders slump with fresh defeat, mirroring her reaction years ago when we realized the girls were rarely Black. The missing children notices for children of color either didn't have a photo or the picture wasn't recent. Just like in the past, Nadira shakes off her gloom.

“I will find out what happened to my parents one day,” she vows.

“I have every confidence, you will.”

She smiles at the conviction in my voice, then she holds her hand out to me. “Okay, I'm ready for more. If things continue to jog my memory, I'm sure we'll find the key to what your people want to keep hidden.”

Hand in hand, we walk toward the main building housing the dorms. When she doesn't pause or show a sense of familiarity in the room she and Chloe used to sleep in, I swallow my disappointment. She glances at me and I clear my face, but not in time.

“What is it? Is there something special about this place I'm missing?”

“This is where you and the other girls your age slept.”

With fresh eyes, she surveys the room of empty bunk beds. When they shut this place down, they didn't bother to resell the furniture, leaving the old utilitarian pieces here.

“Do you know which bed was mine?”

Warmth suffuses my cheeks as I point out where she slept.

Instead of heading to her old bed, she approaches me, her curiosity peaked. “You’re blushing. Did you sneak in here after lights out?”

“I had little choice. We found out a week before my cohort was moving to a new orphanage where the training was more advanced, and we wanted to spend as much time together as possible before they separated us. Every night of that last week, I snuck in here or you slipped into my dorm to hold each other and renew our promises to be with each other when we got out.”

Nadira gives me a thoughtful nod before going to her old bunk bed. “I’m sure they assigned the bed to someone new after I disappeared.”

“They didn’t. Chloe wouldn’t let them. At first, she told them she was saving it for your return. When she stopped believing you would come back, she fought anyone who touched it, saying that the bed was to remind everyone there was no place for traitors here. She injured several staff and other girls until they stopped messing with the bed.”

Nadira walks around the frame, but other than scratches from wear and tear, there is nothing to distinguish it from the others. She turns her attention to the trunk at the foot of the bed and opens it. She knocks on the interior sides. She continues with the top, but when she reaches the bottom, our eyes meet. She bangs against it again. The hollow thunk tells us the panel is a false bottom.

I close the distance between us.

“Did you know about this?”

I shake my head and kneel beside her.

She removes the piece of wood. Folders, yellow with age fill the space. We glance at each other before we each select a folder. The first page in the file I hold is faded, but I recognize the girl in the photo as a girl from the orphanage. I glance at the file in Nadira's hands.

"Why would I hide a file about this boy?" she asks.

"I'm not sure, but he was like us, another student being taught the skills to steal and kill. So was this girl." I hand her the file in my hand.

We continue perusing files, hoping something will resonate with her. Some hint that will lead to why she hid information about kids we learned alongside. When I no longer sense movement from her, I glance in her direction. She looks shellshocked.

I gently remove the file in her hands, understanding her reaction. Staring up at me is...me. Or rather, the six-year-old version of me. "Why would you need a file on me?"

"I don't know, but I think whatever I got involved with, whatever I discovered, I must have been trying to protect you. With us being as close as we were, that is the only reason I can think of for not telling you about this."

With this discovery, the hair on my nape tingles. "I think we should pack this stuff up and leave. This place may be more dangerous than we thought."

"I agree." Nadira sets the files back in the trunk and resets the panel. She surveys the rest of the room, a frown pulling at

her lips.

“What?”

“Just wondering. There’s a chest for every bed, but the files in there represent a handful of the kids here.”

“You think there are more?”

“It’s possible.” She kneels in front of another trunk and checks for another hidden panel.

The hollow thunk spurs me into action. While I knock on the insides of another box, she gasps.

“Holy shit.” She picks a folder out and I do as well.

We turn to count the trunks. There are eighteen in total.

“When we were here, there were probably a thousand kids from fifteen years and younger. Each chest holds about fifty files. Even if we condense them, we don’t have room to transport everything. We’ll have to return another day,” I say.

She sighs and nods. “I agree, but let me take a few with us. Maybe there’s a clue in there that will jog a memory or lead me where I need to go.”

“Good idea. I should have a case in the car that will protect the papers. We don’t want to manhandle them too much in case they disintegrate before we can read them.”

We exit the building to the sun dipping halfway below the horizon.

On the way to the car, I whisper to Nadira, “Do you feel that?”

“Mm-hmm. Someone’s watching us.”

“Quick, follow me.” I grab her hand and sprint toward the tree line, dodging a gunshot that splinters against the ground where I stood moments before. Another bullet whizzes by us from another direction.

We zig-zag until we make it to the relative safety of the woods. I motion for her to follow me. Without knowing the equipment our enemies have, we’re at a disadvantage. I have to assume they’re using a thermal scope and can pick up our heat signatures. To hide our presence, I lead us to a dense copse of trees and trees with trunks wide enough to camouflage us.

But staying hidden and being on the defensive is not a survival strategy. Although this is my terrain, a place I’ve memorized from all the times Chloe, Nadira, and I snuck into the woods to do extra training so we became the top of our classes, our weapons can’t compete with the long range of a sniper. And there are two on our heels. Despite the obstacles facing us, we can even the odds.

I lean into Nadira and whisper as low as possible to not betray our position. “Hug my waist and step where I step.”

She nods and wraps her arms around my middle.

I wish I could take the time to relish the unquestioning trust she places in me, but I’ll have to wait until we’re safe before I celebrate this milestone. I navigate us through the woods, disturbing areas to lead our pursuers astray. When we clear the most dangerous area, the sun has completely set and darkness blankets the woods.

“Can you still climb?” I ask.

She nods and points to a tree with enough foliage to hide her from view while giving her the advantage of a sneak shot for the people following us.

I point toward another tree, then to myself. The other position will give us the advantage and will allow us to ambush whoever is after us. After ensuring she gets a safe distance from view, I take my place.

The people following us are good. In the night’s stillness, they don’t make a sound, snap a fallen twig, or crunch a leaf in their pursuit. The minutes fill with tension, but Nadira and I have faced this type of danger before. We have the patience to wait for the right time to make our move.

A feminine scream cut short followed by a spray of high-powered bullets hitting the surrounding trees leaves me with a sense of satisfaction. One pursuer has fallen into one of the many traps Nadira, Chloe, and I made as kids. But one person remains. I doubt they will fall victim so easily to the underground spikes hidden under years of fallen foliage.

Two muffled shots sound from Nadira’s direction. I stare into the darkness, trying to penetrate the denseness that will tell me if she’s okay, but my vision can’t pierce the shadows. I silently make my way down, unwilling to risk being safely hidden away if Nadira’s in distress. When I round her location, I barely have time to avoid the knife that thunks into the tree trunk where my head was. A slight sting on my cheek tells me I didn’t escape unscathed.

“Shit, Julian! I could have killed you.” Nadira grabs my face and wipes the moisture away. “Dammit. I hope it doesn’t scar.”

I pull her hand away. “So what if it does? We’ll be a matched pair.”

She shakes her head. “Does nothing faze you?”

“Not when you’re by my side.” I remove her knife and return it to her. “I assume the shots I heard came from you.”

“Yeah. I left him alive, but we’re not safe here.” She pulls the man’s gun over her head and slings it toward her back.

“I have a place. Let’s get him secured then get as many files as we can.” I heft the unconscious man over my shoulders. “I’ll lead the way.”

We retrace our steps to reach the clearing and pause. Neither of us senses anything amiss, so we rush to the car.

“Those motherfuckers shot out all four of the tires.” Nadira kicks a flat tire in frustration.

“I can’t say that’s unexpected.” I open the back of the SUV and dump our hostage inside.

“I guess I’ll have to kill this asshole, or else he’ll be more trouble than we can handle when he wakes.” She pulls her gun and aims.

“Don’t be too hasty.” I find the case of syringes Alastair packed and inject the unconscious man with the one I need. Then I call Alastair.

“This better be important. My souffle is at a delicate stage.”

“We were ambushed and our car’s disabled.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Before you leave, I have a list of things I need you to bring.” I give him everything Nadira and I need.

“My poor souffle,” he laments before hanging up.

“We can’t just twiddle our thumbs while we wait for Alastair,” Nadira says.

“We won’t. I have an idea.” I lead her back into the woods where the dead woman lies impaled. “She’s going to help us make you disappear.”

We retrieve her body and gun, then hide the evidence of the disturbed trap. Afterward, we place her behind the steering wheel of my car.

“Now what?” Nadira swipes her hands against her thighs.

“Follow me.” I lead her into an office building on the campus. In the old file room, I find what I need. “When they shut this place down, I figured they probably needed storage boxes to transfer files and would have had more than they needed.” I lift a dusty box of perforated cardboard. “We can start filling these while we wait for Alastair.”

Before we leave the office, we check to see if any files remain. Like the maintenance building, there’s nothing but cobwebs. We take the boxes and transfer the files from the dorm, using the light of our cell phones to aid us. At one point,

I leave Nadira in her old dorm room to check the others. None of the other rooms had hidden files. When I join her, we pile the full boxes by the entrance. As Nadira finishes packing her last box, my phone vibrates.

I tell Alastair to back up to the door and open the trunk. While he stays inside and acts as our lookout, Nadira and I pack the boxes inside. When we finish our task, we jump in and drive to the stationary vehicle. Our hostage remains unconscious, and we quickly secure him in the new car.

Nadira and Alastair assist me in soaking the woman's body and interior of the car with the gasoline Alastair brought, but the gas is extra insurance. My organization won't be fooled by a charred corpse, even if it's the same gender as Nadira. The true protection is the C4. I set the bomb and sit behind Alastair in the second vehicle.

Once we're a safe distance, I trigger the detonator, satisfied when a dark mushroom cloud billows in the sky. As soon as I turn to the front, Nadira grabs my face and uses the first aid kit to clean the cut on my cheek.

"I suppose now's a good time to mention that while hiding in the woods, I remembered the treasure buried under one of those death traps."

I grab Nadira's hand. "What else do you recall?"

CHAPTER 23

Nadira

“You. I remember you.” I press Julian’s hand against my chest where my heart beats. “I recall feeling drawn to you. On that first day we met, your sadness touched my heart. It was so like my pain that I felt less alone when you were close.”

Julian cups my face with his free hand, his eyes searching mine. His lashes flutter, but can’t hide the glimmer of tears that spill onto his cheeks. “You remember me,” he whispers brokenly.

“Yeah, I do.” I move to straddle him in his seat and kiss him, uncaring that Alastair can hear everything we say and need only glance in the rearview mirror to watch us, or that there’s an unconscious body in the back.

Uppermost in my mind is a desperation to be closer to Julian. To reestablish the connection we used to share and strengthen the one we’re building. After escaping another threat to my life, I am more grateful than ever for his presence in my life.

I sink into Julian, devouring his lips and moans, unabashed by my vocal responses to him. Desire, like nothing I’ve experienced, slams into me. Although I could wait until we get home, I’m not willing to be separated from him for another second. I need to merge our bodies and souls in an act that reflects our unity. I rise and through awkward movements, pull down my pants, slipping off one shoe to free my leg and permitting me to straddle him again.

“My queen?” Julian asks in a low voice, his attention going to the back of Alastair’s head.

“Eyes on me,” I whisper into his ear. “And don’t make a sound.” I lean back for his response.

He nods, and I caress his cheek. He turns his face to kiss my palm.

With absolute adoration shining in his eyes, I unbuckle his belt to free his dick from his pants and stroke him until he fully hardens. I rise and slowly impale myself on his length, relishing the slow glide as he stretches me.

When my ass connects with his thighs, I take a few moments to soak in the sensation of having him inside me again. Julian grasps my waist, steadying me and providing me with extra stability. I comb my fingers through his hair and ask him in a voice only he can hear, “Would you like to wear my mark?”

He inhales and he takes a few seconds to answer me with a nod, but his assent is all I need.

I pull his head back, exposing his neck to lick the muscle bobbing with his every swallow.

Julian’s heavy breathing and slight trembling betray the control he exerts over himself.

I clench my pussy and suck his exposed skin, causing him to quiver every time. The world narrows to the two of us. His scent surrounds me; intoxicates me.

When his shirt hinders me from creating more signs of my claim, I debate whether to rip the offending item to get to the

prize underneath. I decide against destroying his clothes, opting to unbutton the shirt to expose the rigid muscles underneath.

Little by little, I leave a roadmap of marks, over his pecs, nipples, heart, and down his throat; anywhere I can reach. The next time he looks at himself in the mirror, he'll remember he carries a piece of me wherever he goes. When I'm satisfied, I lean back to admire my artwork.

Julian's eyes are at half-mast and the muscles in his jaw contract, speaking to the strain he's under to keep from uttering a sound.

"You are so beautiful wearing my mark." I brush his hair away from his face and stroke him, paying close attention to his hardened nipples.

A tiny whimper escapes him, but he cuts the sound short with deep breaths.

His struggle might be due to the combined sensation of my pussy working his dick while toying with his sensitive nubs. His fingers clench my side, probably leaving a few marks for me to admire later.

"You're doing so good," I moan into his ear while gliding along his shaft, filling my body and rubbing my clit against his stomach.

Julian buries his face in my neck and releases my waist to grab my ass, steadying me without my needing to ask. His lips flutter against my skin, the slight exhalation of breath tickling me.

When I realize what he's doing, tears prick my eyes and I suppress the sob crawling up my throat. Because I told him not to make a sound, Julian silently professes his love to me. I don't know why this takes me by surprise. He's shown me time and again by his actions that he's in love with me. Yet the silent words, uttered in secrecy, are a direct hit to my heart.

I can't hold the emotions inside me any longer. I whisper, "I love you, too."

Julian shudders and clutches me closer to his body, climaxing in silence. He spurts cum inside me, setting me off. I wrap my arms around his neck, riding out my orgasm and milking his dick of everything he has to give. As often as we've had sex, this joining in these stolen moments is the most beautiful yet.

I pull Julian's head from my neck and cradle his face in my hands. "Are you okay?" When he eyes me, I give allow him to speak.

"Did you mean what you said?"

I stare into eyes that glimmer with the same unshed tears that are in mine. "I wouldn't lie to you. Not about this."

"Then I'm better than okay."

"Glad to hear it." Alastair's voice startles me into scrambling off Julian and fixing my clothes. "Now if you two are done, I doubt your passenger will remain unconscious for much longer."

"Thank you for the update," Julian says drily while zipping his pants.

We share a glance and a laugh bursts out of me. Chuckling, he opens the door and exits.

In the back of the SUV, our hostage moans, showing signs the sedative Julian used is wearing off.

I survey our surroundings. Lit sconces spread a halo of light around a stone structure in the middle of a wooded area. From the looks of the building, it's well-maintained and is probably as old as Julian's mansion. Beside me, Julian pulls the man over his shoulder and follows Alastair inside.

Unlike the mansion with its welcoming interior, this place displays the tools used primarily by hunters to skin and butcher their kill. We breathe white puffs of air into the chilled room. Julian chains the man's hands and loops the iron over an S-shaped hook attached to a lift. Alastair presses a button and we watch the man's body rise until his feet dangle in the air.

"Do you know him?" I ask Julian.

With the bright lights inside the building, we have a clear view of the man's face. Alastair disappears through a side door, but I'm more interested in the two men in the room with me.

"Yes, he was one of the older kids I met after changing facilities. From what I remember, his assigned name is Night Stalker."

"I'm flattered the Reaper knows my name." Night Stalker's head lolls, but his sinister grin hides untold secrets. "With all the operatives going missing, the organization suspected someone was helping her."

“Why are you after me?”

Night Stalker turns to me and eyes me before saying, “The hell if I know. Asking questions could put me on the wrong end of the organization. For all I know, that’s why you keep inching your way up on our top target list.”

“You’re awfully forthcoming.” Julian narrows his eyes at our hostage.

“Because I don’t know shit. Nothing I say will help you. Once you’ve killed me, she’ll still be in hiding, running for the rest of her life. You on the other hand, no one knows about you yet, but they will. You can’t pretend forever.”

“How did you know where to find me?”

Night Stalker laughs. “Look to the people closest to you. Maybe someone in your organization wants you dead, too. Hell, maybe I’m wrong about Reaper. Am I?” He taunts Julian, who becomes stonier with every accusation Night Stalker levels at him. “Maybe he’s working both sides. He gets your trust, only to betray you. You should know never to trust anyone.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Surprised, he asks, “What are you thanking me for?”

“For saving me time. I’d much rather spend the rest of the night wrapped in Julian’s arms than torturing you for answers I won’t get.” I aim my gun at his head and shoot.

“Nadira?”

I turn to Julian's doubt-filled eyes. "Come on, we have work to do. I assume you have a method for disposing of his body."

"I do, but what..."

"I believe he's finding it difficult to accept that you didn't believe the utter nonsense this sack of human excrement was spewing about him." Alastair reappears wearing an apron and holding a body bag. He lowers Night Stalker's body, removes him from the hook, and unchains him.

"Is that true," I ask Julian. "You think I'd believe him?"

Julian shrugs but he doesn't shy away from looking me in the eye. "He only repeated what you once said to me."

"That was before..." For loss of words, I circle the air with my hand.

"Before..."

"I believe she means before professing her love for you while doing the nasty in the back seat."

"Alastair," I glare at Julian's butler, but he ignores me while digging out the bullets I put into Night Stalker's knees.

"Is that true?" Julian parrots my question from earlier.

"No."

Julian's shoulders slump in defeat and Alastair spins around to glower at me.

"I've trusted you since I read the letters you wrote to me. Everything you've done since then has reinforced my belief in you. I know you won't betray me."

Julian pulls me into his arms and I lean into the sweetest kiss he's ever given me.

“Although I'm fitter than most men my age, I would appreciate a little assistance,” Alastair says while zipping Night Stalker into the body bag.

Julian and I leap to help him.

As we bury the latest casualty in the war against Julian's organization under enough wood chips, sawdust, and grass to decompose his body within a month, Julian breaks the tension by saying, “I told you after more murder ventures together you would agree we're a couple.”

I shake my head at him, unable to fight the grin breaking across my face. “You got me.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah, and there's no out for you now.”

“I never needed one.” He takes my hand and the three of us walk back to the car.

On the ride to the mansion, which I discover is on the same property as the building we left, I can't help but wonder if there is any truth to Night Stalker's claim about a traitor within my circle.

CHAPTER 24

Nadira

For the past few weeks, Julian and I haven't left his mansion. Instead, we busy ourselves with the files we took from the orphanage. Because there are so many, representing the thousand kids who were there during my stay, we've established a process to minimize the handling of the documents. It's cumbersome and at times frustrating.

As we go through the files in one of the empty basement rooms, we make copies and laminate them before vacuum sealing the originals and storing them in an air-tight container. Once we copy a file, we feed the papers into a scanner to digitize, then use a program to enhance the contrast into readable text. Julian then screen grabs the text to put into a data mining software. Alastair, dry wit and all, has been a godsend in getting us what we need to stay somewhat organized.

So far none of the names spark any memories, not even with Julian providing extra background about my past interactions with them, of which there were only a few. Just like in my past, I'm not one to be overly friendly. When I click with someone, I stick with that person. For everyone else, they barely exist in my world.

On top of not recognizing anyone, neither of us has found what links the rest of the children the orphanage took custody of, or Julian's connection. We haven't gone through all the files yet, so it's possible we won't find a common theme until all the data is in.

“If you keep poring over those files, we’ll be late to Danae’s get-together.” Julian strolls in with Leaper on his heels.

I glance at the time display on the computer. “I can’t believe the time got away from me so quickly.”

“Yes, it’s easy to spend a few hours on all this stuff and think only minutes passed by.” He looks over my shoulder at the most recent documents I scanned into the computer. “I picked out an outfit for you so you won’t have to debate what to wear.”

“Thank you.” I turn my head to kiss his cheek but stop at the intense concentration on his face. “Do you see a clue?”

“What?” He shakes his head as if he was in a cloud. “No, I wish though. Go get ready while I pack the food I made.”

I nod and head to my bedroom. To Alastair’s dismay, Julian moved into my room rather than transferring my things into his. When I saw his space, I understood. A bed and dresser are the only pieces of furniture in the room. There’s nothing to soften the interior, not even drapes over the windows. Since Julian delights in being surrounded by my things, I haven’t insisted on a change. No small part of my decision is the delight I receive being surrounded by his arms all night.

On the bed is a cream cable-knit sweater and suede pants that complement the slightly darker shade of the exact outfit he has on. The items are new to me, which makes me wonder when Julian bought them. I smile as I imagine the pointed looks we’ll receive as we enter Danae’s home in these outfits

clearly chosen to paint us as a couple to the world. Next to the close are thin golden hoop earrings, and what I call my auburn vixen-next-door wig. I quickly dress and meet Julian at the car.

When he spins to face me, his mouth drops and his gaze warms with appreciation. I fluff the giant curls framing my face and trailing to my waist.

“Do I meet with your approval?”

“When you’re the blueprint, what’s to approve?” He closes the distance between us and leans in to kiss my lips.

One brush isn’t enough for me, so I lick the seam of his mouth until he opens and submits to my silent demand. Julian wraps his arms around my waist, and I tunnel my fingers through the hair at his nape to pull him closer to me while I devour him. I can’t ever get enough, and from the pressure poking my lower belly, he’s just getting started. With genuine regret, I separate us and wipe my lipstick from his mouth.

“Let’s go before I forget my friends and tie you to the bed for the rest of the day.” I walk around to the passenger side and enter the car.

“Tease.” His lighthearted response belies the heat simmering in his golden irises.

“You want to be tied up?”

He glances at me from the corner of my eye. “At your hands, there isn’t much I don’t want.”

My skin flushes with the power he willingly cedes me. It’s a gift I won’t abuse, and I begin to think of all the things I could do to him while he’s at my mercy. But the wetness

seeing into my panties warns me to curb my thoughts. Entering Danae's home and dragging Julian into an empty bedroom to handle me will put me at the center of my friends' jokes. Julian and I will already be everyone's focus as they drill him to gauge his character.

With my body on a low simmer, I study Julian. He has an odd look, similar to the one he wore when updating me on the time. I let it go before, but my instincts are telling me to dig deeper now.

"Something is bothering you." I take his hand from the gearshift and lace our fingers together.

"Jason called, requesting me for a job." Julian's lips firm.

"Is it odd for him to reach out?"

"Maybe if I hadn't told him I would be on an indefinite break." He lapses into silence while I contemplate what this request means for him.

"Do you think Night Stalker lied? That they know you're protecting me?"

"The thought crossed my mind. After all, we've been skeptical of everything else he said when we interrogated him."

"True, but if they know you've defected, you won't be able to infiltrate their systems. With the files we have not jogging any memories or giving me any clues, we'll have to go to the source."

He brings our joined hands to his lips and presses against my knuckles. "I hate to break it to you, but I think they've

suspected me for some time. During my last interaction with Jason, I warned not to send anyone for me. He didn't reassure me that would never happen or tell me I was being paranoid."

"Sounds like we have another task on our never-ending list. Find clues surrounding my accident and recover my memory so we know why we're fighting them. Whatever I knew as a kid must have been explosive since they keep coming after me."

Julian turns into Danae's suburban subdivision. As we near the house, Julian asks, "How many times have you visited Danae here?" The super calm way he speaks puts me on alert.

"Quite a few."

"For Thanksgiving?"

"Once before."

"And did the neighborhood look this lifeless?"

I survey the streets. There's freshly plowed snow and a lot of cars parked in driveways and along the streets, but no one is outside. This is peak weather for snow decorations to commemorate the holiday, but the absence of kids playing with their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers or the men admiring the brand-new pickup trucks in the driveways feels off. There aren't neighbors calling to each other from across the street promising to stop by for a drink or just wishing each other a Happy Thanksgiving.

"No, in this tight-knit community, people usually run between houses sharing stories and food, especially those who need to borrow an ingredient they ran out of but don't want to

do a store run to get.” I check the side mirror for signs of someone following us.

“Keep your eyes peeled.”

“Already on your wavelength, my man.”

He jerks the wheel, but easily corrects himself, a flush blooming across his cheeks.

To hide my smile, I check the hidden panels in my coat. With our line of work, we rarely leave home without a weapon, but since the escalated attacks against me, we pack mini-arsenals into our clothes and vehicles. I might not get away with hiding a shotgun under my coat, but there are other deadly objects I’m well-versed in using.

When we’re ten doors away from Danae’s house, I catch the first glint. “Off to your left.”

“Up ahead on our right as well.”

I search in the direction he pointed out and see something else that worries me. I retrieve my phone and do a quick property search. “Shit.”

“What now?”

“The couple standing on the porch across from Danae’s house? They’re white.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

“Because the real neighbors are an elderly Black couple. The house has no record of being sold in the last twenty years or being listed for rent. So we’re looking at four possible hostiles.”

“They are trying me today. Not only do I finally get to spend a holiday with you, you’re introducing me to your friends, and they want to pull this shit today? Can’t I get one relationship milestone without having to kill someone to enjoy it?” Julian breathes in and out until he calms himself, while I stare in silent amazement that something can make him this mad.

I’ve seen him triggered, but that stems from a different emotion. His usual sanguine approach to every obstacle and danger we’ve faced is admirable, but this side of him... *Down girl*. I should not be horny at how upset my man is because his people are ruining our first outing as an official couple.

“Okay, okay.” He breathes out slowly and straightens, returning to his usual calm. “I’ll park a few streets over. The snipers are our first concern.”

We agree on an attack plan and split up to take out the snipers. I enter the first house from the outdoor entrance to the underground cellar and silently make my way upstairs. An extended family spanning three generations lies unconscious from the kitchen to the living room. I check their pulses and sigh in relief. Whoever’s upstairs must have used a knockout gas. The method is effective, no fuss, and leaves no evidence behind.

I creep up the stairs and head to the front room where my would-be assassin is having a conversation with himself. This new crop of killers leaves a lot to be desired. They’re impatient and careless.

“I can’t believe I took this assignment when I knew deep in my gut the rumors about the bitch’s death were true. She got blown into minced meat, yet the higher-ups are on some Jason Bourne shit. There’s no way she survived with Night Stalker on her ass.”

“Survived and thriving,” I say before I pull the trigger and shoot a hole into his forehead.

He drops with a thud.

I stand over him and try to place his face. Puberty did a number on him and not in a good way, but I recognize him from the files Julian and I confiscated. I squat beside him and search his belongings. The only personal item he has is a cell phone that I suspect he’s encrypted. Done with my inspection, I wrap him in the white garbage bags I retrieved from the kitchen. “Now be a good boy and don’t get blood on my clothes.” Then I haul him downstairs and dump him behind the evergreen shrubs, relieved he blends in with the snow. It’s sloppy, but I’m running late and there’s another couple on my list.

They better pray they didn’t hurt the nice couple across the street.

Julian meets me at the side of the house across from Danae’s and checks me for signs of injury.

I brush him off. “I’m fine. You?”

“He gave me a little trouble. When the occupants in the house wake, they’ll wonder why their furniture has gouges in it.” He shrugs since there’s nothing to be done about it.

We're about to round the corner when the back door opens.

I reach for my knife, ready to attack if we're put on the defensive.

"You take that side, I'll take this side," a woman says.

"Let's get one thing straight. I take my orders from headquarters, not you. Unlike your just-out-of-training ass, I know how to do my fucking job."

Julian and I share a glance. It's unusual for contract killers to work together, at least not without trust. I understand unleashing the excessive manpower to shut us down which this organization has, but the least they could do is ensure the people they partner together can work together.

I guess Julian's employers never encouraged the children to believe in each other. More so than ever, I'm thankful for the strength of the connection between me and Julia that's kept him going all these years. As we wait in readiness to attack the first person to walk around the corner, something traveling at high velocity whizzes through the air and ends with a choked oomph and thud.

I look toward Julian, but he shrugs as in the dark as I am. Another whizz and thud follow. Convinced another entity discovered our position, I motion to Julian to back away. I take one step and stop when an arrow embeds in the side of the house. We duck and he tries to pull me away. I resist and point at the arrow. Dangling from the shaft is a note. I take the risk and sprint toward it and grab it. It's lodged deep into the post under the siding, but I'm able to pull it free.

“What the hell?” I push the arrow into Julian’s chest and round the house.

The couple after us are lying in the snow, an arrow lodged in each of their hearts.

“Looks like you have someone else protecting you from the shadows.” Julian frowns at the note that says, ‘Happy Thanksgiving. Enjoy your gifts.’

“What I want to know is how all these people keep finding my whereabouts.”

“Until then, we have another house to sweep and a dinner to attend.”

While Julian hides the bodies, I check on the couple inside. Like the other residents, they were drugged or gassed into unconsciousness. Because of their age, I call for an ambulance and leave.

Taking precautions, we scout the area around Danae’s house. From the living room window, I spy Moni and Tamara lying unconscious on the floor like the rest of the homes I’ve been in, making me wonder if the reason the entire neighborhood is silent is due to our foes filtering knockout gas inside the homes.

Julian and I go through the house to ensure no enemies lie in wait for us. Other than Moni, Danae, and Tamara, no one is inside. I wonder if I have the mysterious archer to thank for that. By the time we complete our search, Tamara moans. I nod toward the door and Julian follows my lead. We wait

outside for the other inhabitants to show signs of life before we ring the doorbell.

While we sit tight, I can't help but wonder why a person is missing from my crew.

CHAPTER 25

Julian

While Nadira and I stand on the front porch and wait for her friends to situate themselves, I keep an eye out for other threats. From the increased activity, I can't fully relax. The question about how everyone knows Nadira's whereabouts needles the back of my head. There are only a handful of people who expected her to be here today, her four friends, me, and Alastair.

I know no one bugged us because Alastair and I sweep the house daily. And I have complete trust in Alastair. Thanks to me, he lives without looking over his shoulder. After all, he's a former target. I would have killed him, too. Except when I snuck up on him, he was sitting beside a hospital bed inside his private residence. My curiosity got the better of me because nothing in his file mentioned this scenario.

When I moved closer, the image of him holding the small hand of an eight-year-old boy hit me in the gut. From the emaciated appearance of the child, the boy had little time left. I must have made a sound because Alastair glanced back at me. No surprise showed in his face, only weary resignation. But he pleaded for me to let him live until his son's passing.

I still don't know what stayed my hand, but I granted his request. For weeks, I watched him care for his son. His wife had passed some years ago and although he could afford a staff to look after the child, he did everything himself.

When I inquired, he said, “Because I’m selfish and I need to remember his last days. He was my wife’s last gift to me. When I was busy fighting for her life, she overruled me. Instead, she fought to bring him into the world. And when he was born, he looked just like my Emmaline. He still does. So how can I leave him in the hands of strangers? This is my last goodbye to the wife I’ve loved my whole life and to the future I thought I could have through my son.”

His devotion resonated with me, and each day that passed I was less inclined to kill him. When his son breathed his last, I gave him a new identity and faked his death. Alastair’s response was to work for me. I questioned how a man who employed hundreds could be satisfied as an employee for an absent employer.

He peered into my eyes and said, “Although my fight is over, you’re still looking for someone, whether to discover how they died or to live without them. Until your struggle is over, I’ll be at your side as repayment for a priceless debt.”

Ever since, he’s lived up to his word. He wouldn’t betray me when he’s experienced unimaginable heartache twice before. So that leaves Nadira’s friends, but I hesitate to point the truth out to her. Not without evidence. She’s fiercely loyal and any hint of betrayal will devastate her.

Someone inside turns the radio on and the tune of a Christmas song plays loud enough for us to hear outside. Nadira rings the bell, and a light-skinned Black woman rubbing her temple opens the door. She’s the one Nadira calls Tamara. My preliminary check into her background didn’t

raise any red flags, but after the last few events, I'll be doing a deeper dive into her history; hers and the rest of Nadira's friends.

I plaster a smile on my face and say "Happy Thanksgiving!" along with Nadira.

"You made it. Come in." Tamara takes the dish from my hands and beckons us inside. "Come on, let's do the introductions one time. Chelsea will be upset she missed this, but it can't be helped."

"Why? Where's Chelsea?" Nadira asks, voicing the same question I have.

Another woman three shades darker than Tamara appears. From my intel, she is Moni. "She stopped by to drop off her homemade cranberry sauce and apologize. Can you believe her boss is making her work today? He only gave her a few hours to pack for a flight. She needs to find a new job because the hold they have on her schedule is worse than mine. And you know the hospital loves to play hot potato with the doctors' time."

While I weigh the likelihood of the missing woman's excuse, Nadira responds, "Yeah, but I doubt she will. Not until she tires of traveling. Some places she goes, normies like us could never hope to see."

"I know, right? The last trip she went on, she had to attend a ritzy gala. The hardship." Tamara grins and leads us into the kitchen where Danae runs around muttering about losing track of time.

“Sis, look who’s here,” Moni says.

Danae stops and does a double-take when her eyes land on me. “You?”

I point to my chest, a question on my lips.

“You were the guy from the club that ghosted Nadira!” She folds her arms in silent demand for my reason.

“What?” Tamara asks. “I never saw the guy. Moni, didn’t you say what a shame the dude was a flake? How did you not recognize him?”

“No wonder he looked familiar,” Moni says with a shrug. “Wait, you ghosted Nadira and then came back?” She pulls Nadira away from my side. “Girl, we need an intervention?”

“I’m right here. And I never ghosted her.”

After spearing me a glance, they turn to Nadira for confirmation.

With a sheepish smile, she says, “It was a misunderstanding?”

Their doubtful frowns are evidence they don’t believe her.

“He left me at the club, yes. But we met up again, and we’ve been together ever since.”

“Inseparable.”

“What he said.”

“How’d he redeem himself?” Tamara asks. “Because I don’t buy it if you were hot and heavy at the club, melting skin with the heat I heard you two were generating.”

Nadira turns an accusing frown to Moni and Danae. “Who is telling these lies about me? We danced and spoke in private. That’s it! It’s not like we were busy kissing and feeling each other up.”

“I would have kissed and groped her all night, but I wasn’t looking for a hookup.” I walk toward Nadira and pull her into my arms to stare into her eyes. “I told her she was my destiny, but she didn’t believe me. Yet when we found each other again, there was no denying fate.” I glance at the other women in the room and wink. “And of course, I cooked for her and Leaper. No one can resist my culinary skills.”

Nadira rolls her eyes, but the smile flirting at the corner of her lips is enough to get the women to back off after issuing a warning similar to the ones each gave me in their letters.

The rest of the evening goes smoothly, with a few minor issues, causing me and Nadira to switch off making excuses for our absences. While she’s away, I dominate the conversation to ensure no one questions what takes her so long.

A shadow or movement from the outdoor shrubs will catch our eye. Each time either of us investigates, a gift of a dead body with an arrow poking out of their chest or head awaits us.

I should be happy someone is protecting us, but I hate not knowing who’s leaving behind the bodies. More egregious is Nadira and I have to dispose of them. Doing other people’s cleanup is not a hobby I enjoy; Nadira being the exception. Whatever protects her keeps me happy.

After dinner, we make a big show of leaving. Now comes the actual work. All the bodies we hid will get discovered if we don't do something more permanent. However, when we double back to where we stashed the remains, no one is there.

“What do you make of this?” I ask Nadira.

“I honestly don't know. I'm uneasy, that's for sure.” She looks out at the darkening sky. “Let's go. Someone is bound to notice us creeping on their property.”

When we're on our way home, Nadira says, “They drugged my friends.” The calm note in her voice belies the leashed violence underneath.

“I was wondering how you were taking things so well. You aren't.”

“Everyone who had a hand in this will die.”

CHAPTER 26

Nadira

Kids' faces of various ages, ethnicities, and genders stare back at me. They mock me for being unable to solve the riddle I left behind. Sometimes they implore me to find the answer before it's too late. When they peer at me that way, I wonder if the clock I'm running against is mine or theirs.

One positive of looking through the files is bits and pieces of my memory are beginning to form a tapestry, a sort of early Christmas present. Assignments and conversations with some of my handlers paint a picture of a highly prized student. The instructors in charge of training us for combat and intel gathering selected me for the toughest jobs, passing up older kids who lived at the orphanage longer. I was infamous. If not for Julian and Chloe, I would have been a loner.

"You need to eat." Julian places a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me and raises my head for a kiss that isn't long enough for my taste.

When he pulls away, I grab his neck, and he slackens, ceding control of the kiss to me. I sip from his mouth, loving the way this big man becomes putty in my hands. He has the strength and skills to overpower me but prefers my dominance. And his submission is so delicious. I moan into his mouth, reluctant to end the kiss, but knowing I'll make time for us later.

With a grudging sigh, I separate our lips. His hooded eyes and the heat underneath have me reconsidering. I glance at the

time on my phone. Eight o'clock. "You're slipping." I smile and squeeze his arm. "I didn't realize I've been here since five and haven't eaten. Thank you."

"Getting anywhere?" He sits beside me but faces the computer.

While I've been busy searching for the connection between the kids, Julian immerses himself with tracking down the headquarters for a shadow organization that keeps its leaders' identities as secret as the operations they handle.

"Not where I need to get. How about you? Have you heard from Jason?"

"No, but whenever he checks in, I'll trace his call."

"Could he have left you a message at your cover home?"

"He hasn't."

I sit back and study him, dissatisfied with his response.

He sighs and pulls up a live feed of a house I haven't been to. Then he pulls up video files and plays them at four times the speed. "You'll notice I've gotten a lot of visitors since my sabbatical. Jason isn't among them, and none of them leave anything behind."

I glare at Julian's glaring omission. "Except for a hidden camera or two."

He shrugs. "There's nothing in that house anyone can trace to this address. Anything personal in there is a misdirection and will lead them nowhere."

"So you're no closer to finding your headquarters."

“It’s possible other operatives know where it is and they singled me out because the distrust extends both ways.”

I glance back at the photos, my frustration getting to a point where I’ll be less productive if I continue to force myself to connect the invisible dots of an unsolvable riddle.

Noticing my growing displeasure, Julian spins my chair until I face him. “It’s Christmas Eve and you need a distraction.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, my phone rings. I raise a finger for him to hold his thought and answer. Before I get a word out, Grady’s voice barks over the phone.

“How soon can you get to Douglas?”

“Hello to you too, Grady.”

The silence that follows my greeting leads me to imagine Grady gritting his teeth as he calms himself enough to speak.

“We just got a top-priority job in Douglas and you’re the closest operative we have. You have to complete it today.”

I glance at Julian as an idea unfurls in my head. “With little time to plan, it might get messy.”

“Messy is good. The client wants to make a statement. They’re paying ten mil.”

As Julian listens in, his lips wobble.

I mouth to him, “You said I needed a distraction. What better way to clear my head than to clear someone else’s right off their shoulders?”

He turns away, but his shaking shoulders betray his amusement.

“So are you in?” Grady asks.

“Yeah, send me the details. Douglas is three hours away.”

“Already in your inbox.”

I hang up and spin Julian’s chair with more enthusiasm than I had earlier. “Murderventure anyone?”

“If we keep this up, we should start taking assignments as a team.”

His suggestion makes me consider the possibilities. I’ve gotten so used to working with him I already think of us as a team, in sync with each other’s rhythms and inseparable.

“If you hate the idea—”

“I love it,” I interrupt Julian before he tarnishes the vision in my head. “We’ll be the assassin’s version of Misty Knight and Iron Fist, the comic book version.”

“Instead of fighting crime, we’re... how does that work exactly?”

“You’re ruining it. Point is, we’ll be the best killers out there.”

“Like Kate but black, and John Wick. I dig that.”

“Kate? Really? Doesn’t she get poisoned?”

“Well, obviously you won’t die. I’m not putting that shit out in the universe to come through. We’re going to keep taking contracts even in our golden years.”

I eye him up and down. “So you’re in?”

He pulls me from my seat. “Try to keep me away.”

“We’ll need to pack and get on the road.”

“Minor correction.” Alastair enters the basement. “You’ll just need to get on the road. I’ve already equipped the Land Rover with what you’ll need.”

I glare at Julian who shrugs in response.

“He’s usually on top of things,” he says.

“Are you sure I can’t take him from you?” I study Alastair, wondering what method will work to bribe him away from Julian.

“Not a chance, but he might be open to sharing.”

“Rather than discussing me as if I were a piece of property and not a person able to decide his fate for himself, shouldn’t you be getting on the road? Your assignment will be difficult as is if we get half the expected snow they’re reporting.”

Julian leads the way. I collect Leaper. If what Alastair said about the weather is true, we might have to spend the night. Leaper hasn’t spent a day away from me since I got her. Julian drives while my cat watches the scenery from the dashboard, and I read the dossier from Gary.

“Who are we after today?” Julian asks.

“The head of the Douglas mafia family, Sansone De Luca. There’s a list of properties he frequents. Hmm, from this profile, he’s been pretty active recently, spending a lot of time in his downtown condo.”

“Is that where we’ll stage the hit?”

“Not sure. Let’s visit some of the other places on the list first. I want to get a feel for his security. A man with his reputation is likely to have an army around him.” My stomach growls, reminding me of the untouched breakfast Julian made for me.

I peek at him, but he remains silent. The only indication he heard my body’s demand is when he pulls off the highway in search of a gas station. After the brief detour and a bag full of food, we hit the road.

“Hopefully, the weather holds out until we finish the job. I don’t like the look of those clouds.”

I glance up from my file to see the sky darkening, although it’s still early in the day. We get off the main highway and are on a state road traveling west. This stretch runs through the mountains and can be treacherous during heavy storms, but we’re making good time.

Regardless of the weather, I’ll complete the job. Although I redeemed myself with the last assignment, the blemish from my record still irks me. Despite forgiving Julien for ruining my perfect kill, I can’t help remembering it when I take on new assignments. And the memory makes me more determined to execute a flawless contract going forward.

When we enter the city limits of Douglas, the Christmas decorations are more lively than in Denver. The cheerful Santas, elves, and reindeer, the colorful explosion of garlands and wreaths, and the music playing from the stores remind me of my parents.

Ever since the night I dreamed about my abduction, small pieces of my life with my family pop up at random times. With the holiday season in full swing, memories of shopping and baking fill me with nostalgia and feed my anger toward the people who keep sending killers after me.

As we drive through the busy streets, a group of black SUVs catch my eye. “Double back,” I tell Julian. “I’ve just found our quarry.” I refer to the dossier. “Looks like I saw him entering one of his homes. Let’s see if we can find a neighboring building that can get me visibility into his place. If I can avoid his security, I’d prefer it.”

“Same here. If we had more time to plan, that would be another story.”

Julian rounds the building and points out possible buildings we could infiltrate. Lucky for us, there’s a hotel across the street as tall as Sansone’s. While Julian parks, I reserve a room.

We set up in a room overlooking Sansone’s apartment, and we wait. Julian stretches out on the bed and Leaper pounces, curling up on his stomach and purring her contentment. Activity from across the street, causes me to rush to the scope on my rifle.

“Finally, he makes an appearance.” As I adjust the scope, my phone rings.

“It’s Grady.” Julian hands me the device.

“This better be good because you’re about to mess up my shot.”

“Then I’m in time. The hit’s been called off.” At my silence, Grady says, “I need you to confirm you’re standing down.”

“Yeah, I’ll pack it in. I still expect my commission for my troubles,” I grumble.

“Already relayed to the customer they won’t get a refund.”

I hang up the phone and start packing my sniper away, muttering about Grady and the insufferable client ruining my murderventure with Julian.

“The trip doesn’t have to be a total waste.” Julian hugs me from behind. “We have a hotel room and a warm bed.”

I turn within his arms and cup his cheek, my frustration melting away under the warmth of his gaze. “As much as I appreciate the thought, I’d much rather go home and spend our first Christmas snuggled up before the fireplace than in a hotel.”

“I can’t argue with that.” He kisses my palm and we check out of the hotel.

While packing the car, Julian pushes me aside and lands on me with a jolt.

On alert, I open my mouth to ask him what’s happening.

“They’ve found us,” he whispers into my ear. “I’m going to lure them away. Get in the car and prepare for my signal. Nod if you heard me.”

By the time I nod, he’s up and gone. I jump into the car, retrieve the extra gun Julian keeps in the console, and recline

the seat. Picking up on the tension, Leaper stares at me and remains still.

Minutes that feel like hours pass before Julian appears at the passenger side door. He enters the car in a rush, displacing Leaper. “We have to go now. The asshole called it in from the gas station we stopped at, and there will be more on our tail soon.”

I start the car and peel out of the underground garage. The weather is still holding, which gives me hope we’ll make it home before anyone else discovers us. Within five minutes, a white SUV pulls up behind me, following every lane switch I make and dashing any hopes of leaving Douglas unmolested.

I exit toward Denver, knowing that the ride will pass through small towns with a sparse population. Another vehicle pulls up next to us while the white SUV from earlier cages us in. I speed up, narrowly dodging a bullet to our tires, but so does the vehicle behind me.

They rear end me, and I almost lose control of the steering wheel. “I need some cover.” I drive while dodging their bullets and attempts to run us off the road.

The car beside us shoots, shattering the rear passenger window and missing their targets.

“I got you.” Julian rolls down the window. First, he aims at the windows of the car driving alongside us. When the bullets barely make a crack in the glass, he says, “Speed up.”

I stomp on the gas pedal and accelerate, giving Julian the distance he needs. He adjusts his target to the hood and

empties his gun into the engine. The car swerves, scraping against the car behind us, which barely escapes a collision with the mountainside. The second vehicle continues its pursuit.

Julian gestures over a control and the sunroof slides open. He braces himself against the seat, stands, and aims. This time he takes out the tires, causing the white SUV to flip onto its roof.

“Thanks,” I say as he settles himself in his seat. I glance over to catch his grimace. “Julian?”

“Keep driving to the next town and stop at the first hospital or clinic.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a bullet inside me and I need you to remove it.”

CHAPTER 27

Nadira

The moment I pull up to a closed clinic, the sky decides it no longer wants to cooperate with me. Fat snow flurries begin to fall. We're still two hours out from Denver if road conditions remain clear. During snowfall, that two hours easily doubles. Without knowing the extent of Julian's injury, I'm not willing to risk his life.

I break into the closed building and search for the supplies I need. There's no time to cover my tracks. The town we're in may be small, but I'm sure a guard and possibly the police will come by soon to check on the breached security system. I need to be gone long before they arrive.

Faced with a room full of supplies, I call the one person I trust to keep this secret. "Moni, I have a hypothetical situation that requires a proper solution. Gunshot wound to the abdomen, no access to X-ray machines or anesthesia or hospitals, how do I get it out and not kill the person in the process?"

"Girl, it is Christmas Eve. How you going to—"

"Moni! I don't have time to explain. Please, what do I need?" My voice breaks. It's the first time I've ever shown strong emotion before, and it works to get Moni talking.

I fill a bag with everything she lists and a little more for safe measure, hoping it will suffice given my limitations.

"Thanks, Moni."

“Will you tell me what this is for?”

“Probably not. Just know that if all goes well, I’ll owe you for the rest of my life.” I rush to leave the building and get Julian to safety.

Outside, the ground already has an inch of snow and visibility is fading fast. At this rate, our chances on the road are as bad as returning to Douglas and meeting up with my assailants.

“We need to get off the road.” Julian hands me his phone. On the screen is a map of the area showing the rooftops of homes surrounded by trees. “There are some homes about ten miles out. Maybe we’ll find an empty one.”

Occupied or not, I’m stopping at the first house without smoke rising from their chimneys. I randomly choose a house and enter it into the GPS. It takes more than half an hour to traverse the road due to the snow falling fast and heavy, and the GPS stalling from connectivity issues.

Julian is paler than when I stopped at the clinic. He wrapped the wound with strips from his shirt, but he bleeds through the makeshift bandage. I barely resist the urge to speed toward safety to treat him. The thoughts running through my mind center on one thing: I don’t want to lose Julian.

I blink back the panicked tears that could blind me and try to remember how to be the rational, cool-headed person in a crisis. After all, emotional driving will do us no good if we skid off this mountain and die. I’m so busy keeping the car on

the road I almost miss the turnoff for the house I recall seeing on Julian's phone before the signal acted up.

The trees thicken the deeper we go, confirming I guessed correctly. The dense forestry hides the house I'm seeking. Only an aerial view like the one on Julian's phone will give away its location.

I utter a prayer under my breath that the house is empty and I won't have to take any hostages. I may kill for a living, but I don't do so indiscriminately. I pull up to a dark house.

"Stay here until I check things out." I glance at Julian who is barely conscious.

I have to do this fast because he isn't able to defend himself. Leaper takes up watch in his lap as if she can protect him from a larger predator. If I had time, I would joke about the picture they make, but I don't. When I step out of the vehicle, I drop into half a foot of snow.

Urgency drives me as I break into the house. If the weather continues unabated, we won't have a choice but to stay here. The silence inside gives me reason to hope. As I go from room to room, I confirm that the place is empty. Next, I check the kitchen. The place is fully stocked, which means the owners, a couple I guess to be in their mid-fifties based on the pictures around the house, expect to return. Given sane people won't be on the road right now, I have to bank on them being stranded away from home, the same way Julian and I are.

This risk I must take. I return to the car where another inch has accumulated since our arrival. After getting Julian situated on a sofa inside the den, I collect the things from the clinic.

Leaper jumps out and disappears under the snow. Her forlorn calls prompt me to dig her out and juggle her with the mountain of other things in my hands as I go back into the house.

She leaps out of my arms, and I drop the supplies to check on Julian. His skin is clammy but his forehead feels warm. Given the heat in the house only suffices to keep the pipes from freezing, my concern escalates. I run around, increasing the heat, boiling water, rooting through the supplies I stole, and a myriad of other tasks I need to complete before I can see to Julian's wound.

When I finally have everything set out, I inject him with morphine to dull the pain I'm about to inflict on him. I unwrap the bandage saturated in Julian's blood and expose the entrance wound in his abdomen where the bullet hit him. Although he told me the ammunition is inside him, I roll him over to check for an exit, praying he's wrong. No one in heaven is listening to my plea because there is no exit wound.

"Julian, you know how you like to grant me whatever desires I have? Well, right now, I need you to not wake up," I say, hoping he can hear me in his unconscious state. I don gloves and clean the area, slicing through the hole to make it larger and easier to search for the bullet.

He groans as I feel for where the slug lodged during his earlier fight, but he doesn't regain consciousness. When my finger brushes against a hard metallic material after feeling soft tissue, I grab a pair of forceps with my free hand and remove the round. Blood spurts out of the affected area and I

work to stem the bleeding. When it slows, I do my best to close and bandage the wound, praying I haven't done more damage in removing the projectile.

I rummage through the medicine until I find antibiotics and give him the dose Moni suggested. Then I transfer him to a bedroom where he'll be more comfortable. During the long hours that follow, I watch him, change his bandages, and wipe him clean. Anything that allows me to touch him and feel that he's still breathing, still alive, and still has a fighting chance, that my actions haven't killed him.

Leaper sits atop the headboard, peering down at him, drooling with concern. She's as worried as I am, refusing to leave his side.

In the next twelve hours, his body begins to shiver, and sweat dots his brow.

"Julian, can you hear me?"

He opens feverish eyes, but there's no recognition and no focus. His temperature is 103.

I hold crushed ice to his lips, but he shies away, crying, "Yolanda, why won't you come back to me? Why? I need you."

"I'm here," I say, but if he sees me at all, he doesn't recognize me.

He's lost either in a fevered dream or through the pain meds. Although we've spoken about how my disappearance affected him, his voice is full of fresh pain, as if he's reliving a

low point. His hurt is so visceral, it feels like he's yanking on my insides and ripping out my heart and guts in one go.

The night continues like this. While the snow outside piles up, I split my time between caring for Julian and making sure we won't be trapped inside when the snow stops. Already, I've cleared a path to and around the car three times. Each time feels shorter than the last. This time, like the last, I step out and into another three inches of snow and plow the area.

Each time I re-enter the home, I'm soaked and my muscles scream in protest. But I can't rest. I check on Julian, make sure he's hydrated, and wipe him down to keep his fever under control.

Inside the master bedroom, Julian vacillates between the present and the past. Sometimes he recognizes me, most times he doesn't, but he always cries out for some version of me. At one point, he brushes his hand against my face, causing me to think he's lucid.

“Nadira, my queen, how long must I wait?”

“Wait for what? What do you need? I'll give you anything.” I grab his hand between my two and kiss his knuckles.

He lapses into silence then closes his eyes, leaving me in a state of suspended confusion.

The lights flicker in and out until we lose all power. With my breath streaming in the cold air, I retrieve the firewood the owners have in a dry room and start a fire. Soon a humming from a generator comes on, turning the lights on again.

We go into the next day with Julian's fever fluctuating and keeping me awake. I won't rest easy until he does. Leaper has stopped eating, and I only stomach the sight of food long enough to heat the broth I found in the pantry and feed it to Julian.

The snow finally stops in the early morning hours. There's no signal on the TV, radio, or phone to get news updates, but I doubt anyone is traveling. Between the snowdrift and natural snowfall, my guess is four feet of the cold white stuff is on the ground.

I go into the bedroom to check on Julian and find my body giving out. I slump in the chair beside him, unable to move a muscle.

"Nadira?"

"I'm here, Julian."

A bitter laugh burst from him. "Julian, Julian, always Julian." He shakes his head. "Never the name I want to hear from your lips."

I manage to grab his hand and get closer. His eyes are glossy as he blindly stares through me.

"What name do you want me to call you?"

He twists his head and a frown appears on his brow as if he hears me. "There's only one title I've lived to be worthy of. Is my devotion not enough? I worship my queen because the world doesn't deserve her. All I've ever wanted is to stand by her side."

“You do stand by my side. You’re the only one I want beside me. How can you not think you’re worthy enough?”

He sleepily blinks until his lids fully close, blocking me from seeing if my words penetrated.

Tonight, Julian twists violently. I fear he’ll reopen his wound and worsen his fever. I lie atop him, making sure not to put pressure on his wounded side. The moment we connect, he settles and buries his face in my neck.

“Mr. Caddel...Mr. Zane... Mr. Flott... I don’t care what name as long as she calls me husband. Just call me husband...”

I barely hear him, but when the words register, a wave of guilt washes over me. I’ve accepted Julian’s presence in my life, his protection, and his love. I’ve taken so much, yet what have I given in return?

Yes, I told him I loved him, but have I shown him? He doesn’t know what seeing him this weak does to me. I’m hanging on by the last bit of fibers on a thin rope preventing me from falling into complete despair. Like Julian, I’ve lost loved ones. My parents, being the freshest loss I’ve relived. I can’t lose him, too.

I grab his face, but he’s asleep, no longer tossing and muttering. A broken sob escapes me as a tear falls from my lash to land on his cheek. “You are such a fool, you know that? How else do you explain why you don’t know you’ve come to mean more than my murky past and my uncertain present?” I swipe my runny nose. “For you, the name Julian isn’t as significant as the title of husband, but that’s because you don’t

know what Julian means to me. Julian is the sun by which I tell time, the moon that heals, and the air that breathes life. You are Julian, no matter where you go or how many aliases you have. And I can't believe you don't know that Julian is tattooed on my heart. Even when I didn't know you, you were there."

Silence meets my confession, but I'll tell him again when the time is right. I can't stand to watch him in pain whether it's physical or emotional. I'm even less equipped to handle his distress while knowing I'm the cause. But until we remove the danger his company poses to our happiness, I'm leery about confessing the depths of my feelings. I'm not a superstitious person, but the scenarios that play in my mind prove me wrong. I keep imagining his joy when I admit how deeply embedded in my heart he is, then one of us dies at the hands of his company. After everything they've taken from me, I won't survive the pain of losing Julian, and he would be even worse off.

Another day goes by while Julian's fever slowly ebbs. I take heart in his progress because he has more lucid moments. The antibiotics seem to be working, and the tight vise around my chest begins to loosen.

Outside, I continue to shovel snow bit by bit to clear the driveway, but it's turned to mostly ice and takes a lot more out of me. Exhaustion drags at me, making every step, arm raise and muscle movement more onerous than the last. I have yet to sleep more than twenty minutes at a time, too concerned Julian will begin tossing again and backslide.

Today is the fourth day we've been holed up. The generator is out. Thankfully, two hours later, the heating system kicks in again. I go to check on Julian, who is sitting upright in bed, and I rush to his side to take his temperature.

He grabs my hand before I can place the external monitor on his forehead. The beautiful golden brown of his irises is the clearest I've seen since we took refuge here.

“Julian?”

“What have you done to yourself?”

My hand immediately goes to the corn rows in my hair. I discarded my blonde wig days ago and haven't thought about wrapping my hair once. I must look a mess. While I feel self-conscious for the first time in recent memory, Julian reaches out to caress the thin skin under my eye.

“When was the last time you slept?”

I brush his hand away. “You don't get to ask me that when all it'll take to blow you over is a stiff wind.” I blink away the tears of relief that make his image blurry.

“Now sit still while I take your temperature.”

He frowns at me as I touch his forehead. “I bet you haven't eaten properly without me to look after you.”

The thermometer reads ninety-eight degrees. “Your temp is good, but don't think that I'll allow you to overexert yourself. I don't want you getting another fever.”

“Nadira, do you realize you've been swaying this whole time? Lie beside me and rest.”

“I’m not swaying...” I blink, fluttering my eyes to keep him in focus, but he seems to get farther and farther away. “Maybe I’ll sit for a ...”

CHAPTER 28

Yolanda searched inside the training facility for Julian. She went from room to room scanning faces as quickly as her brain could process. When he didn't appear anywhere, she jogged outside. She spied a familiar silhouette walking toward the dorms and raced to catch him.

“Julian!” She grabbed his arm and spun him around. The misery on his face threw her off. “What’s wrong?”

Julian glanced around, then led her to their secret fort. “They told me to pack my bags. A car will be here to pick me up in two hours.”

“But I thought they were going to give you until dinner.” Yolanda hugged his waist and hid her face in his belly. “It’s too soon.”

Julian wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. “I don’t want to leave either, but remember my promise.”

Yolanda nodded. “You’re my forever family.”

“That’s right. No matter where you are or what you’re going through, I’m always going to be your family. And when we’re older...”

“I’m going to make you my husband.”

Julian kissed her forehead. “And I’ll make you my wife.”

Yolanda pulled from his arms, her eyes gleaming like wet onyx. “I’ll help you pack and stay with you until you have to leave.”

The solemn pair walked toward the dorm, the weight of their sadness blanketed them. As Julian packed up his belongings, Yolanda reached out to him but pulled her hand back without uttering a word. She had something she needed to tell him, but his imminent departure meant he would suffer alone. She couldn't abide that. She'd hold the pain on his behalf until a better time, not that there was such a thing.

Time and again, she fought the impulse to reach out to him and share what she discovered. In the end, Yolanda sat and listened as Julian painted a picture of their lives when they got out. It sounded like heaven to her. She loved Julian the way her mom loved her dad; wholeheartedly and unconditionally. That was why she never feared being separated from him despite not liking the circumstances.

Yolanda's faith in Julian and his promises to her was stronger than steel and would last longer than Egyptian pyramids. He wouldn't forget her.

"Alright, that's everything, except this." Julian took her hands and drew her close before pulling an object from his pocket. "In case you outgrow the one you're wearing, I made you eight more; one for every year we'll be separated." He placed five grass rings in her palm and closed her fingers over them. "Know that when I give these to you, it's not a mere promise, but a piece of my heart. You hold within your hands the power to destroy me and give me the greatest gift on earth."

She placed her free hand over her heart and the hemp necklace lying next to her skin. "I'll treasure these for the rest

of my life even after we meet again.”

Julian took her free hand, retrieved his suitcase, and walked out of the dorm without looking back. As they waited in front of the orphanage, words failed them. When they spied the oncoming car, Yolanda pressed his hand and ran, unable to face watching him walk away. She didn't want the last image he had of her to be with tears free falling from her eyes. She was supposed to be the emotionally mature one, never losing her cool.

But knowing she wouldn't see him for years when she spent a part of every day with him was unbearable. And she wouldn't let him see her pain. She found a spot where she could observe him from afar because no matter how devastating watching her heart walk away was; she needed to memorize this last image of him. He was tall, confident, and... sad. Despite his apparent conflict, Yolanda watched him load the car and enter it, disappearing behind the closed door.

This was the image she would use to endure, to survive until she met Julian again.

“Hey, Yolanda.” Chloe tapped her on the shoulder. “The administrator wants to see you in the main building. Are you crying?”

Yolanda turned away from Chloe to dry her eyes. “Why does she want to see me?”

Chloe shrugged. “Beats me, but she didn't look too happy with you. What did you do?”

Yolanda studied her friend and considered sharing the secret she discovered with her, before discarding the idea. Chloe was too passionate to keep from sharing her confidence.

“It’s probably nothing, but I better find out before they send a hit squad out for me,” she said deadpan.

Yolanda left Chloe’s side. Instead of going to the main building, she detoured into the wooded area, looking for the telltale signs she, Chloe, and Julian left behind. She made a stop at the maintenance building to get a shovel because she had to rush. She didn’t trust any of the adults, and not one that seemed unhappy with her. If the administrator suspected her of finding out the truth, Yolanda had to protect herself, and this was how she intended to do it.

When she found what she was searching for, she began to dig. The activity was easier now that she was tall enough to handle a shovel versus the trowel she used to borrow. She dug until the spikes atop the stakes stuck out. She removed enough to give her access to the treasure beneath, a tin can containing the last remaining memory of Julian’s father.

Yolanda unlocked the lid and sprang the box open. More than the watch sat before her, causing her to gasp. Inside the cold metal were the rings Julian outgrew. As much as she would love to pore over Julian’s treasure, she knew the administrator would be impatient.

She dug into her pants pocket, took out a sealed storage bag full of memory cards, and placed it in the treasure box before resetting the trap and covering her tracks. As she returned to the main campus, she looked down at her hands

and the dirt under her nails. Despite knowing more delays would cause more of a hassle, she went to her dorm to wash away the evidence of her recent activities.

When she finally made it to the administrator's office, Yolanda was as cool as ever.

The administrator didn't greet her as she entered. Instead, she barked, "You have an assignment. A car is on the way to get you."

Yolanda responded, "Is there a file?"

"Your driver will provide all the details to you."

"What about supplies?"

"I assume if those are necessary, the driver will also have what you require. You should leave now. Your ride will arrive in thirty minutes. If you had come when summoned, you would have more time to prepare yourself." She sat down, dismissing Yolanda, although the girl remained in the room long after the administrator stopped talking.

When Yolanda didn't get the expected rise from her, she retreated. She now had less than twenty minutes to prepare for a task she couldn't plan for. In the absence of information, she gathered her lock-picking tools.

Her driver arrived early. She got in the car feeling uneasy but not knowing how to avoid this trip.

"Do you have a file for me?" she asked.

"File? Oh, yeah. I'm supposed to hand it over in an hour."

Her apprehension grew after his response and she set about making herself smaller while hiding behind the passenger seat. An hour into the drive, he handed her an envelope. She unwound the string closing the document inside.

One piece of paper fell out. On it, was a message.

Curiosity killed the cat, but I'm the one killing you.

At the bottom of the page, the administrator signed her name.

Yolanda crumpled the sheet and said, "Turn around—"

A blast jolted her, causing her to bang her head hard against the seat. Confused by the sudden blast and unable to hear, Yolanda peered out of her window in time to watch the car tumbling into a ravine. Pain lances through her head as glass shatters and metal crunches. Then complete blackness.

CHAPTER 29

Nadira

I gasp and rub the scar at my temple, wondering why the pain has disappeared before realizing these are residual effects from my dream.

“Nadira?” Julian’s concerned voice pulls me from my recent. His gaze warms me, his undeniable love shining through his golden irises. When I cup his face, he kisses my palm.

“How long was I out?”

“A day. How do you feel?”

My automatic response is to say okay, but I listen to my body this time. The last time I didn’t I passed out. “I could sleep longer, but I’m okay. Wait!” I sit up quickly and stagger under a wave of dizziness.

Julian helps to settle me against the headboard and Leaper jumps into my lap to comfort me.

“You shouldn’t strain yourself. You’ll ruin my hard work to get that bullet out of you.” I push at his shoulder until he sits beside me. When he does, I peel away the bandage and gently probe the area, there’s no abnormal discoloration or unusual swelling.

“When was the last time you ate?” he asks, blocking my attempts to feel his forehead for signs his fever returned.

My stomach growls, and his mouth turns down in a stern frown.

“Stay here.” He disappears before I can protest.

Leaper looks from me to him, undecided where her loyalties should be.

I tickle under her chin. “Girl, I’m team Julian too. I hope you know you’re the only female I’ll share him with.” I pat her rump, and she leaps into action, going to look after our man.

Despite his order, I stumble into the adjoining bathroom, weak from days of worrying without eating. I sniff myself and wonder how Julian could stand to be near me. Under the spray, distorted images from my dreams flash before my eyes. I try to make sense of them but to no avail. After a shower, I recover some of my energy.

Julian returns with a plate of chicken and broccoli and scolds me until I sit in bed to eat. While I chew, I go over the parts of my dream I can recall. Most of my memory centers on watching Julian walk away and the heartache I still feel from losing the one person I had a connection so deep he marked my soul.

“I dreamt about the day they took you away from me,” I say.

Julian’s jaw clenches, but he remains silent. That day ranks as one of the worst for him, and now that I remember it, for me too. Then other parts of the dream come back to me, and my eyes widen.

“What?” Julian stands, immediately alarmed by my expression.

“The trap!” I pull at his arm with an urgency I haven’t shown him before. “We need to go back to the orphanage. That day...I buried something with your father’s watch.” I rub my forehead but I can’t get a clear image. “I can’t remember, but I feel in my gut that it has something to do with what your organization wants to keep secret.”

I set aside the plate and jump out of bed in search of my shoes. “We should go now. It will take forever to shovel our way out, not that you’ll be lifting a finger. Not to mention when we get there, we’ll have to be careful because snow will have covered the signs telling us where the traps are.”

Julian intercepts me when I’m about to rush out by grabbing my arm and swinging me around. “First, a plow came while you were sleeping. We can leave whenever you’re ready. And second, we don’t have to go to the orphanage. The treasure box is at my place.”

“Then you opened it?”

He averts his gaze. “I... No, I never did.” At my inquiring look, he says, “I could only torture myself so much with the evidence of your absence.”

I cradle his face until he meets my eyes gleaming with pent-up excitement. “I’m almost one hundred percent certain the answer we’re looking for is in your treasure box, so let’s get out of here.”

Julian doesn’t argue with me. We pack up what we came with and I leave some money for the owners. Unbeknownst to them, they saved our lives.

The drive home is slow but steady, the normal two-hour trek taking three hours because road conditions in the small towns along the way aren't as clear as the main thoroughfare.

When we arrive, Alastair greets us at the door. "Everything you asked for is in the basement." His clipped words can't hide his worry.

"We're fine," Julian says, patting him on the shoulder.

Downstairs, I bounce on the pads of my feet while I wait for Julian to transfer the data from the memory cards. To distract myself, I poke through the rings inside the tin box, while an idea coalesces in my mind. When the first file loads onto his server, I redirect my attention and access it from a tablet to peruse the information.

"These are photos of newspaper articles." I swipe to another image. Each one is another article.

"Let me see." Julian pulls up a file on his screen. "Why would you collect obituaries? Were these people they sent you to observe or kill?"

"Unfortunately, I can't say. I wish I could be like a computer and have every memory transferred to me at one time." I shrug and go back to reading the articles I photographed. There must be a reason I thought they were important.

"Have you noticed for every obituary, there are articles about a murder investigation?" Julian pulls my chair next to his. "What's the connection?"

“There’re medical examiner reports, too.” I stare at the screen as the dots finally connect. “I can’t believe this. The truth has been staring at us the whole time.”

Julian’s frown communicates he hasn’t made the link yet.

“What does every child at an orphanage have in common? Here’s a hint, it’s in the name.” I grab the keyboard to enter a search for a specific file.

“Orphan?”

“Exactly! As in, dead parents.”

“But that didn’t apply to you and me when we entered Creative Gifts, yet my file is in with the rest.”

I take his hand in mine before turning the monitor toward him, prepared to be his support. “What if I told you we aren’t exceptions?”

On the screen is his file and articles dated thirty-four years ago profiling the death of a woman who was murdered in her home. The last images are autopsy photos.

Julian reaches out to the screen, a denial on his lips. “This is around the time she dropped me off, but... Why?”

“We were all from vulnerable populations or broken homes. No one would look for us if we turned up missing, or put the resources into finding our parents’ murderers. The organization took our families from each of us.” I squeeze his hand to comfort him, unable to decipher the look on his face. “Julian? What is it?”

“I’ve known since I was ten that she died, and I mourned for her. But...”

“This is different. I still believe in my heart she would have come back for you, but she never had a chance.”

Julian pushed away from the desk and paced, his steps getting choppy and angrier with each word. “No, they took her life, and they stole my future. All our futures. They deserve to burn.”

I stand in front of him to prevent him from working himself into a frenzy. “I believe this is why I was so dangerous to them. If we revealed what we know to every kid from the orphanage, I bet most would seek their own form of vengeance.”

“Especially the ones that came from happy homes. Remember how they treated you as if you weren’t supposed to want to...go...back. Shit, Nadira. I didn’t think about you. You found all this while you were searching for clues for your parents.”

I hug myself and twist away. “Remember, I told you we aren’t exceptions.”

He wraps his arms around me. “Don’t close yourself off. I can’t stand that you’re mourning again for what you’ve lost, and... I know it’s selfish of me, but I don’t want to be alone in this pain either.”

I spin in his arms and hug him, careful of his wound. “You are the least selfish person I know.”

We lapse into a silence full of sadness. I don't know how long we stand in each other's arms, saying nothing. But slowly our pain begets a new emotion. On top of all the near misses we've had, the manhunt forcing us into hiding, this is the last. As Julian peers into my eyes, fury burns within the depths of his golden-brown irises; a rage that matches mine.

"Jason is our best bet at finding the ones responsible for our pain," Juliann says.

"If you reach out to him now, he'll suspect your motives and probably set a trap for you."

"If I may interrupt..." Alastair enters the room with a satisfied air although I see no reason for his smugness. "While you two were out causing me heart palpitations, I entertained myself with a look into the files again. We previously believed the analytics software only found outlier information. But from what I've heard you discuss, they purposely withheld any information about their headquarters. So I thought, what if someone made an error? With a thousand files, it was bound to happen."

"Alastair, you're saying a lot of words when I think you need fewer," I say, the hope surging inside my heart making me flush and short of breath.

"Did you find an address?" Julian is way too calm for my liking, but he asks the question that gets to the core of our situation.

"After the stress you put me through, the least you can do is listen to the tale of my brilliance."

“Alastair, how about we celebrate your genius once we’re in the clear? Until then, do you have an address?” I use my sweetest voice when I’d rather be anything but charming.

Alastair eyes us in disgust while feeling around his breast pocket. “I can’t believe I put up with this level of ingratitude.” He withdraws a piece of paper.

Julian and I read the information, and my excitement grows.

I hug and kiss Alastair on the cheek. “You are priceless. Run away with me?”

Before he can answer, Julian pulls me away from the other man. “Nadira, that’s not a joke I can take lightly.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll find some other method to lure Alastair away. In the meantime, we have some planning to do, and an organization to destroy.”

CHAPTER 30

Nadira

It's New Year's Eve and Julian and I are sitting in front of the fireplace. Since a car chase and a slug ruined our Christmas plans, we decided to wait until tomorrow to enact our revenge. Today is supposed to be for us to fuck, eat, sleep, and fuck again. Although I should be more stern with Julian because he shouldn't strain himself, I also know the man I'm dealing with. He leaves his risk-taking to work and to protect me, everything else he does is to ensure our future.

The peace of the crackling fire, Leaper's purring on her cat bed, and Julian's arms around me lull me into a state of contentment I rarely experience let alone get the time to truly immerse myself in. My sore muscles are thanks to Julian, and my body hasn't stopped humming from my many orgasms. That's why when Alastair hands me my phone, my first reaction is to push it away and pretend he doesn't exist.

"You have four missed calls from your friend Chelsea," he says.

"That's not like her." I take the phone and return the call.

"Nadira, where have you been?" Chelsea's voice transmits her concern over the phone as clearly as if she's in the room with me.

"I got stuck in a snowstorm, but now I'm with Julian. Why?"

"I need to see you. Can we meet? Today?"

“Of course, where?” I sit up, ready to forego my relaxing day with Julian to find my shoes and go into bestie mode.

“Our usual spots aren’t safe. I’m sending you instructions. How soon can you be there?”

I pull up the encrypted message she sends, wondering when she became so paranoid. “An hour.”

“See you then.” Chelsea disconnects and I stare at the phone puzzled by our interaction.

“Where are we headed?” Julian helps me stand.

“Downtown... Something’s wrong.”

Without questioning if I want him with me or what I need, Julian leads the way. I understand because I don’t want to be apart from him, either. When we get downtown, we follow Chelsea’s directions. They read like a spy novel. We arrive at 16th Street Mall among the crowds of people gearing up for the festivities tonight.

As we pass a narrow door, a hand grabs my elbow. I swing my hand in a chopping motion to target the person’s wrist.

When I see it’s Chelsea, I deflect the momentum of my blow to the wall. “Dammit, Chelsea, I could have hurt you.”

“I know. Follow me.” She leads me and Julian into an empty speakeasy, goes behind the bar, and retrieves two bottles of vodka.

When she takes a seat, I demand, “What the hell is going on, Chelsea?”

“I need your help.” She opens the bottle and takes a swig.

“Girl, you already know I got your back, whatever it is.” I share a worried glance with Julian.

Chelsea shifts her attention away from me, acting cagier by the second. Then she settles on Julian. “So, this is the guy you’re seeing?”

He steps forward, his hand extended. “Name’s Julian.”

“Yeah, I know.” She eyes him, a wealth of thoughts hidden behind her eyes.

“Chelsea, why’re you changing the subject?”

“Because what I’m about to ask is huge, and when I tell you everything, you probably won’t want anything to do with me ever again.”

“That’s not in Nadira’s nature. She’s loyal to a fault, and you should know this.”

“Yeah, but everyone has a breaking point.” Chelsea’s glance lands on Julian again. “You might be an exception.”

“Sorry? Do we know each other?” Julian studies Chelsea as if he’s putting together the fragments of a jigsaw puzzle but he’s missing most of the middle pieces.

“We do, but I’ve had plastic surgery since the last time we saw each other. And although I lied to you when you asked, Nadira, we know each other as well.”

Confused, I shake my head. “So why did you lie?”

“Because I’ve been spying on you.”

Julian jumps in front of me and pulls a gun on her, shielding me from this new threat.

“Julian, let me explain,” she says, hands raised in a sign of surrender.

“Start with who the hell you are.” I sidestep Julian with a weapon aimed at her.

She sits unsurprised by our reactions. “You knew me as Chloe when we were at Creative Gifts.”

I stumble into Julian, who wears the same shock on his face that I feel in my body.

“Fucked up, right? You have no idea how I felt the first time we met as adults, and you had no clue who I was. God, I was so fucking mad at you and your nerve, showing up like you hadn’t abandoned me.”

“So, this is payback?” I ask.

“Was payback. I couldn’t decide if you were playing me now or if you played me when we were kids. You were super smart back then and could have fooled me so easily.”

“What changed your mind?” Julian pulls a seat out across from her and offers it to me. When I decline, he takes it instead.

“The couple that assaulted Tamara went missing and on one’s found them. It’s something Yolanda would have done without being asked. You have no idea how shitty I started feeling for carrying this sense of betrayal with me for so long.”

“I knew you could hold a grudge,” I say, remembering her feelings for her mother held even on the last day I saw her. “Hold up, you have parents. The last I checked Creative gifts never placed children for adoption.”

“They don’t exist. I used models as a cover.” Chelsea eyes me while taking a long drag from the bottle. “So your memory is coming back. I always wondered if the drugs I put in your water would have long-lasting effects.”

“What the fuck?” Julian upturns his chair as he shoots to his feet, a scowl darkening his features. “You drugged Nadira?”

Chelsea nods. “I’m not proud of it now, but I thought I had good reason to get back at her. Agreeing to slip her the memory blockers was the only way the organization would agree to keep her alive. Can you believe it?” She laughs derisively. “I was so mad at you and wanted you to hurt so badly. But even then I couldn’t stomach the thought of your death.”

“You were giving them my location after they put a bounty on my head.” My body shakes with rage and tiny fissures spread along my heart.

“Not on purpose!”

“That’s bullshit. Someone was on her tail in Spain.” Julian’s body vibrates from the control he exerts not to attack Chloe.

“That wasn’t me, I swear. My only slip was about Nadira getting her memories back.”

“Then how’d they know I would be at Danae’s on Thanksgiving?”

She takes a swig from her vodka bottle. “That was a trap. I planned to kill everyone who showed up before you arrived,

but they sent more assassins than I expected.”

“You were the one shooting arrows?” Julian glares at her. “You could have killed us.”

“That would have defeated the entire purpose of laying a trap.” Chelsea turns to me. “Julian wasn’t the only one you taught about luring people where you wanted them. I never forgot what we practiced, and it came damn handy on Thanksgiving.”

I rub my temples as a memory crystallizes in my head. “Whenever we did weapons training, you always chose archery. You said because no one ever saw it coming and you could still be far away.” I drop the hand holding the gun.

“Yeah, and you forced me to practice until I never missed a bullseye.”

“Okay, you’ve explained yourself. What I don’t get is why you’re coming to us for help after admitting we can’t trust you,” Julian says.

“I didn’t stop at Thanksgiving.”

“So you had something to do with Julian being shot on Christmas Eve?”

Chelsea’s eyes widen. “This is the first I’m hearing about this, but it tracks. And no, I didn’t know your plans, so I couldn’t have tipped anyone off. But it makes sense why my traps stopped working after Christmas Eve.”

Julian and I fold our arms in unison and glare at her.

“I’ve been giving them bogus locations and times for where I expected you to be, then eliminating the threats as they arrived. That all ended a week ago when their assassins started hunting me instead of looking for you.”

I take another chair and sit across from her. “You’ve been protecting me this whole time?”

“Nadira! You can’t be thinking what I think you are,” Julian protests.

“She needs our help.”

“Really? Because all I’ve heard is she’s a backstabber since the day she met you as an adult.”

“Then you need to listen again. What I heard was she had my life in her hands every day. I was vulnerable to her every day for years. If she drugged my water, she could have ended me without me knowing. She chose to keep me alive.”

Julian slams the chair he overturned and sits beside me.

I rub his shoulder, silently coaxing him to rid himself of his anger. To Chelsea, I ask, “Do you know why they’re desperate to kill me?”

“You’re going to trust her with this, too?” Julian clenches his teeth, his jaw spasming as he tries to calm himself.

“I trust her.” Before he objects, I say, “Even with what she’s said, I still trust her with my life.”

“Dammit Nadira. If you die because of her, I’m—”

I press my fingers against his lips. “That won’t happen. If anything, reuniting as our old group will give us better odds

when we end the organization.” I turn to Chelsea. “So do you know?”

“No, but I assume it has to do with you two renewing your relationship. They did separate you before. Am I on the right track?” She looks from me to Julian and back again.

“They separated us to keep me from telling Julian what I discovered. Then they tried to kill me before I could tell anyone else.”

She frowns at me. “You were ten. What could you have known that would make them go after you so hard?”

“That the organization stole every child and murdered our parents to profit off us as assassins.”

“No... My mom died in childbirth.” Chelsea pushes away from the table and backs away.

Julian’s expression softens as he watches Chelsea’s denial. “Your mom died when they ripped you from her belly. There was an investigation and autopsy report.”

I rise and close the distance between us. When we’re close, I hold her hands. “Chelsea, what I need to know is if you want in on our plan to destroy them.”

CHAPTER 31

Julian

It's five in the morning, and Nadira, Chelsea, and I are in a town on the outskirts of Denver. Chelsea sits in the back of the Land Rover while I bite my tongue, amazed I haven't severed it completely.

Chelsea isn't the known entity she used to be, but Nadira won't listen to reason. I can't deny there's a kernel of longing inside me for the old days when the three of us bonded and became friends, but that was before Chelsea admitted she'd drugged Nadira.

The warm hand on my fist draws my attention to my queen. Her black eyes are clear, no sign of doubt to cloud her confidence in us and our plan.

The organization's headquarters stands before us, a low-rise commercial building surrounded by woods.

Through my binoculars, I spy a sleek Audi S8 pulling into the vacant parking lot and a familiar face steps out. "And I thought Jason didn't know where headquarters' location was."

"That's Jason?" Nadira's strained voice causes me to glance at her as she stares at the man through her binoculars. Her chest rises and falls at increasing speeds and her nostrils flutter with suppressed rage.

"He's my handler."

"Mine, too," Chelsea says.

“He’s also the man who abducted me from the gas station when I was five.”

“He did what?” I grit.

“I’ll never forget that mole on his face. He’s the asshole.”

All this time, the man I report to has been the person I most wanted to kill for the hell he put Nadira through as a child, the hell she continues to process with the onslaught of her old memories. I do my best to modulate my breathing while my skin heats with the burning desire to leap out of the car and destroy Jason.

“You two need to calm down and remember the plan,” Chelsea says as she pokes her head between me and Nadira.

As much as I resent her presence, I appreciate the warning.

“You’re right. We still have a while to wait for the shot callers to show up and before hell breaks loose.”

“In the meantime, hand me the duffel bag in the back.” I might not like to leave Jason breathing for longer than he deserves, but he won’t escape our wrath. When Chelsea hands me the item I requested, I search until I find the device I need. “I have my earpiece on. Be my eyes while I work.”

Nadira nods and I leave the vehicle. While I act, the thoughts of all the ways I’m compromising our end goal float in my head. If anyone arrives while I tinker with Jason’s car, I’ll have to neutralize them. The downside is the parking lot is in an open area. Other than the woods, anyone could see me from the office building and ruin our plans. But this is a risk worth taking.

When I return to the car hidden in the woods, tension fills the cab. Minutes tick by into hours with the air getting thicker. My muscles stiffen under the constant strain of being immobile. Never have the stakes been more important. Jason leaves, nothing in his manner giving us reason to worry that our plans won't go as we expect.

At eleven o'clock, Chelsea says, "It's showtime." She hits my and Nadira's shoulders with more enthusiasm than the moment warrants, but the soreness alerts us to the figures leaving their cars with a determined tread. A few openly carry their shotguns.

"More people took the bait than I thought." Nadira's eyes light up with every car that enters the lot.

Over the past months, the three of us have culled a decent number of the hit staff, but none of us put a dent in their overall operations. The organization had a thousand kids when we were at Creative Gifts. I bet they had more staffed across the country. But of the thousand, there were still nine hundred in the system that would have received the information regarding the murder of their parents and headquarters' location.

"Pull up the feed," I say.

Nadira opens her laptop and clicks the application showing a live security feed on all the floors as men and women enter the office building to take collective revenge on the puppet masters who destroyed our childhood.

Within half an hour, there's no one from the back office standing or breathing. I bring Nadira's hand to my lips. "Are

you disappointed we weren't part of the action?"

"I had enough time to set my expectations appropriately when you pitched the idea." She shakes her head, but her eyes aren't telling me the whole truth.

"Well, I heard the plan, agreed to the plan, and still wish I were part of the action." Chelsea settles against her chair. A grin spreads across her face. "We still have one opportunity to get satisfaction though, don't we, Nadira?"

"That we do," she says, and it clicks.

Once she recognized Jason, her priority shifted. I pull up the app for the tracking device I left inside his car.

"That's a residential neighborhood," Chelsea points out.

Nadira uses the address to find a street view map of the area.

"We have to be careful in case he's got the place booby-trapped." I switch the engine and creep out of the woods to leave for our next destination.

"The last hitter has left the building," Chelsea informs us.

"You know what to do." Nadira stares at the building in the side-view mirror.

Chelsea faces the rear of the car and presses a button on the handheld detonator with a wide grin. Charge after charge of explosives blasts off, creating a gigantic dust cloud as the building crumples to the ground.

Before long, we near Jason's location. His car hasn't moved. Everyone puts in an earpiece and we exit the car three

blocks away. Chelsea skirts toward the back of his house while Nadira closes in from the left, and I approach from the front.

I plaster myself against the building and creep toward the entrance, praying we haven't triggered an alarm system. Before I worry too much, the front door opens and Jason appears. I immobilize him and alert the ladies.

Luck is on our side as we transport him to my hunting lodge and string him up by his feet. Thankfully, we don't have long to wait for him to wake and take the three of us in. His eyes widen when they settle on Nadira.

She approaches him with a glowing smile. "Hello, Jason. It's been a while."

EPILOGUE

One month later

Julian

My queen: Meet me in the bedroom and get into position.

I glance at the text from Nadira again as anticipation races down my spine. We recently ate an early breakfast, but I happily return to our bedroom and kneel in front of the door, naked and waiting for whatever she has planned.

Ever since we captured Jason, we haven't had a moment like this. It didn't feel right to either of us while he still breathed. He lasted longer than I expected, but within the month of torture, there was one positive outcome. I reestablished my bond with Chelsea, though I begrudged her at first. I didn't stand a chance with Nadira in her corner.

The door to the bedroom opens, drawing my attention to what's about to happen.

Nadira enters. Her natural hair is in a twist out bracketing her lovely face with thick, juicy coils. Black eyeliner highlights her beautiful dark eyes, and purple lipstick puts me on notice before I take in the rest of her. She wears a black lace and satin cami that exudes her feminine power. In her hand, she holds a large black leather case wrapped in a black satin ribbon.

“My queen?”

She pads over on bare feet until she stands inches away. “I was going to wait until March to do this, but I'm not as patient

as you are.”

It takes a few seconds for me to understand what significance March holds for her. When I do, my heart melts. Even as an adult, she prioritizes my birthday, a date I stopped celebrating long ago since it didn’t mean as much without her by my side.

Nadira kneels, her knees brushing against mine. “Then I realized, today had to be the day. It’s a day that has caused both of us pain in the past. When I was younger, I refused to acknowledge the day because it reminded me of the parents I missed so much. My denial of this day took something from you, too. Whereas I delighted in making the smallest wish of yours come true even with my limited resources, I never gave you the same opportunity.”

“Nadira.” I swallow and lick my dry lips as understanding hits me hard.

“So, I want to ask you if you’ll make my birthday wish come true.” Her eyes shine with deep emotion as she pulls the ribbon and opens the box.

Inside, three rings lie gleaming against a black satin cushion. They’re the rings I bought years ago to remind myself why I needed to live every day even when it was the last thing I wanted.

“I know you don’t care about my name, but I have a fondness for yours. So for my birthday, I would like to change my name to Mrs. Nadira Caddel. Can you make this happen?”

Words are beyond me. All I can do is nod as I reach for her.

“Not yet,” she says, halting me. “Before we celebrate, there’s something else. You made these rings and I had them resized to fit for our ceremony, but I want you to wear my claim as proudly as I’ll wear yours.”

“These are wedding rings, they represent our mutual claim.” I settle back on my feet.

“True, but our history isn’t in them.” She lifts the cushion from the box to reveal two leather and steel cuffs beneath. She hands one to me and keeps the other.

I turn the jewelry in my hand, studying the design before turning startled eyes to hers.

“I had a mold made of our grass and flower rings, then had a designer link them in a chain circling the leather. I guess I haven’t outgrown the need to wear the promises we make.” She shrugs.

Without a word, I hold out my wrist for her to place the cuff on me, then I do the same for her, marveling at the way our childhood jewelry intertwines. “If I’m going to make your birthday wish come through, we should get going.”

She stands with a seductive grin. “Leave without doing justice to all this?” Nadira waves her hand in front of her body and the sexy lingerie. “Don’t be stingy. By my estimate, I should get at least one happy birthday orgasm before my newlywed ones.”

I grin as my cock hardens. “You’re right. It’s the least I can do as thanks for granting me the title I’ve longed for.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melverna McFarlane loves stories with Happily Ever Afters. After years of characters taunting her imagination with their potential, she decided it was time to write her own scorching hot romances.

She moved to America from Jamaica at a young age, and has lived up and down the east coast most of her life. The bitterly cold winter of 2013 was the last straw, driving her back to island life—this time to Hawaii.

When not writing, she is reading romance, YA, and Fantasy, country hopping, or vicariously obsessing over other people's cats (she awaits the day her landlords succumb to the truth: feline domination should be everyone's goal in life).

MAFIA DON
SABINE BARCLAY

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**MAFIA DON
THIS COULD BE AN
ARRANGED MARRIAGE MADE
IN HEAVEN...OR HELL.**

Our wedding is in two weeks.

I just met my bride.

It only takes one look to know she's mine.

Let them try.

Nothing will keep me from her now.

CHAPTER 1

Sylvia

The man crossing the tarmac toward my family's jet is known as *Pantera*. Papa told me it's Panther in English. It fits. His sleek black hair lifts in the light breeze, but even it's disciplined enough to know not to dare fall in his face. He doesn't walk. He prowls. He commands everything within sight. People move out of his way. People nod as he passes. People greet him with smiles—one that holds a tinge of fear. This man is Don Salvatore Mancinelli. My fiancé.

I'm standing at the top of the stairs outside the plane's hatch, waiting for my parents and uncles to descend to the tarmac. Part of me wants to turn around and dash back to my seat. Part of me wants to push past the rest of my family and meet this man I'm to spend the rest of my life with but have never met. An arranged marriage. I've known since I was a child that it was inevitable. I just didn't know who the man would be until a month ago.

I've seen photos, and of course I've heard of him. He and my father, Don Alberto Toretta, have done business for at least twenty years. Ever since Salvatore was an underboss. The man approaching me exceeds anything I've ever heard about him. Exceeds what a photo could capture. He is the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. That's saying something since I grew up in Sicily, went to university in Paris, and have traveled all over the Mediterranean. I've traveled far farther than just that. I've been around the world, traveling to every continent but Antarctica. He makes my mouth water.

I make my way down the steps and reach the ground just as Salvatore stops in front of my parents. When his gaze meets mine, I feel singed. He has the most unusual eyes I've ever seen. His left is green, and his right is brown. But it's the shades of each that are entirely unique. The green eye is practically emerald but infused with shards of sapphire, making it a hazel unlike anything else. The brown eye is a rich whiskey with amber threaded through it, like honey and chocolate blended into something delicious. What the fuck is wrong with me?

He thrusts his hand between my parents as though they are no longer there, and when our hands touch, my stomach tightens. He doesn't just shake my hand. He draws me forward, and my parents have no choice but to step apart. He backs up enough for me to stand before him. Closer now, I can see a few hints of gray at his temples. I'm in my mid-thirties, but I know Salvatore is already in his forties. His entire aura is of a man who's been in control of everything for long enough that no one doubts who he is—what he is.

“Signorina Toretta.”

His voice reminds me of whiskey as much as his eye does. Smooth going down, but strong enough to leave a burn.

“Don Mancinelli.”

I offer him a smile that he matches. He's had time to look me over when I stood on the top of the steps, so his eyes don't wander. I force myself to keep the same focus when all I want to do is devour him. And not just with my eyes. I've never had such a visceral reaction to anyone. I've admired attractive men

before. Even lusted for a few. But this... This is disconcerting in its intensity.

“*Benvenuti a New York. Spero che il volo sia stato tranquillo.*” Welcome to New York. I hope your flight was smooth.

“Thank you... *Lo era.*” It was.

I speak several languages, but English is not one of them. I never imagined I would move to America. I’ve been to London countless times, but whether it was for business or for pleasure, I always spoke Italian or French. When I’ve come to New York, I’ve gotten away with Italian and Spanish. I’m certain most people would wonder how I haven’t learned it, but I just never needed to.

Salvatore’s smile broadens, and his teeth look like something out of a toothpaste commercial. Dazzling white and straight. His perpetually tanned face only makes them seem brighter. Lines form around his eyes as they crinkle, making them and the few gray hairs the only physical sign he isn’t in his twenties. His size and build can only come from a man who works out daily. The way he fills out his suit... *Porca puttana*. My sister Allegra taught me that when I was ten, and she was almost twenty. She told me last week that the English is holy fuck.

For my sake, he continues in Italian. My father and three uncles speak fluent English, and my mother is proficient. He doesn’t take his eyes off me, and even though I know he’s addressing everyone, he makes me feel like I’m the only person in the world.

“My men will take your luggage to the hotel while we go to my home for lunch. I know it’s a long flight from Palermo, so if you’d like to rest this afternoon, we can fly to the city immediately after we eat. If you feel up to it, I can take you out on the boat or show you around Quogue and Southampton.”

My brow furrows as I finally look around. We arrived at a private airfield, but I didn’t think much about where it was. I assumed it was just outside the city, but he said something about flying. How far away are we?

Salvatore hasn’t let go of my hand yet, which I just now notice. He wraps my arm around his as he turns us toward the waiting limo. There are black SUVs that surround it, and I notice men loading our suitcases into one of them.

“Do you know anything about New York, Miss Toretta?”

“I’ve been to New York City for work, but I haven’t explored it. It’s always been for client meetings and nothing else.”

He turns his head to look at me, and there’s something speculative about his expression that I can’t read. I’m certain he’s like every *Cosa Nostra* man. He hides his thoughts and feelings until he’s ready for others to know. I don’t care that my father, uncles, cousins, and everyone else are like that. I don’t like the idea that my husband will be like that. Cagey. I know there is plenty he will never tell me. I won’t want to know, and I definitely won’t ask. But I’d like to think there will be times when Salvatore lets me in. That he won’t hold

me at arm's length. At least not metaphorically. Our shoulders keep brushing each other.

“I have a beach house here on Long Island in a town called Quogue. We're at an airport in what's called Westhampton, Long Island. My home is in Southampton. We can explore the area if you'd like to see where I hope we'll spend some of our weekends and many of our holidays. If you would rather go to your hotel or explore the city, we'll take my helicopter into Manhattan.”

“I'm not sure what my parents will want to do.”

Salvatore draws me aside, and the piercing stare he shoots over my shoulder warns my father not to interfere. He whispers to me when he responds, and my toes practically curl in my shoes.

“Let me make something perfectly clear to you, *piccolina*. This marriage came about because of the alliance between the Mancinellis and the Toretas, but you are my wife. I am marrying you, not your parents or uncles. There'll be times when I can't put your wants ahead of our people, but you will always matter more to me than anyone else. What your parents want is not my concern. What you want is the only thing that matters.”

Little one. Are not will be. Our not my.

He already considers me his wife, and from the fierceness of his expression, I pray neither my father nor uncles push him too far. They are used to me acquiescing to their wishes when I'm with them. When I'm on my own, I do as I please. When

I'm with my family, I'm the perfect Mafia daughter. Don't call me a fucking princess because I'm not one.

"I'd like to go out on your boat."

"Then that's what we'll do, Sylvie."

He watches me to see how I react to the diminutive. My panties were already wet just from being near him. Hearing him call me *piccolina* soaked them. The way he just said my name may have dropped them to my ankles. I almost want to look down.

"Thank you, Salva."

Did his nostrils just flair a smidge? He'd released my arm when he turned me so we could talk without my family watching. Now he holds out his hand, ushering me toward the limo's open door. When I turn back around, his hand rests on my lower back. I force myself not to shiver, but the possessiveness is something I've never experienced before. It could feel threatening from a man like Salvatore—from his persona and his position. But it feels—nice. I feel safe with him. I feel cared for. I feel desired.

As I slide into the limo, I can see my mom, dad, and uncles have already taken seats farther in. It leaves the rear bench seat for just Salvatore and me. Once I have my belt on, I'm not sure what to do, so I look out the window. I don't know what the men will discuss, but my mom and I know to remain quiet unless someone speaks to us directly.

"Sal, what—"

"Later, Alberto."

I almost flinch. My father is a man who is just as accustomed to getting his way as Salvatore, and he's older than my fiancé. Such a brusque command won't go over well. But Salvatore's knee presses against mine for just a moment before he points past me.

“This is both a civil and military airfield. Our private planes can fly in and out, but we must defer to the Air National Guard and let their planes come and go as they wish.”

He feels me stiffen when he says Air National Guard.

“They aren't what the *Guardia Nazionale Regia* was. Their mission is to protect the country and the states during natural disasters and to go into combat when called up. There are other things too, but they aren't the fascist, hard militiamen you probably learned about.”

I relax back into the seat. I know a lot about American culture and history, even if I've never lived here and don't speak English. But there are still tons for me to learn. Salvatore keeps pointing as we drive past a hanger.

“Our plane is in the one to the left. It's kept at the ready for whenever the family needs or wants it. Is there anywhere on this side of the world you'd like to visit?”

I glance at my father, who is fuming. He doesn't think this conversation should take precedence over whatever he wishes to discuss with Salvatore. I shake my head. When he whispers, I can barely hear him, but I'm certain the others see his mouth move.

“Remember what I told you.” He sits back. “Where would you like to travel to?”

I blink several times before I realize I’m the one who’s making it awkward now.

“I’d like to see the Grand Canyon one day.”

It’s the only American landmark I can think of right now. I don’t know what else to say.

“You can ride a mule or donkey all the way down to the bottom of the canyon, and there are tours that will lead you along it. Do you ever travel by train?”

Of course, I have. I’ve lived in France and Italy all my life. How could I not?

“Yes, often.”

“There is a glass-domed train that travels through the Canadian Rockies. I hear the views from that are as spectacular as going to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. We could do both one day.”

“Salvatore, we must discuss—”

Salvatore shoots *Zio* Ignacio such a withering stare that the man snaps his mouth shut. He’d spoken in English, probably hoping my not understanding would allow him to gain Salvatore’s attention. It wouldn’t surprise me if my uncle and my fiancé weighed the same amount even though Salvatore looks half *Zio* Ignacio’s size. Where my uncle is all bulky girth from too much food and not enough exercise, my fiancé is lean muscle that I can practically feel from how close we’re sitting.

His broad shoulders kept bumping mine when he pointed out the window. I can tell from the breadth of his thigh that there's nothing but bone and sinewy muscle beneath the tailored fabric. My breasts feel heavy, and I ache thinking about how he must look naked. When I look up at him, I'm certain he knows what I'm thinking.

“Ignacio, Alberto, we'll discuss whatever you want later. I'm not about to ignore my bride the moment she lands. Massimo and Luca will meet us at the house. If it's urgent speak to them.”

I don't understand anything Salvatore said except for the names. Massimo is his younger brother and *consigliere*. His most trusted advisor, and the family's lawyer. Luca is Massimo's oldest son, and Salvatore's heir. He's the heir unless I give birth to a son. It's monumentally selfish, but I pray I never have sons. I think I would be a good boy mom, but I don't want to bring any Made Men or *capos* into the world or have them grow up to be don. I want my children to be safe. There's no guarantee of that if we have boys. Those thoughts make me retreat as I continue to look out the window.

I'm certain it's not a coincidence when the back of Salvatore's hand brushes against mine when he puts it on the seat between us. It bolsters me in a way no man I met less than an hour ago should. We're pulling into a gated beach community, so we must be near Salvatore's home. These houses are all mansions, and I watch as the gate slides open for the largest one I've seen yet. The limo stops near the front

door, and armed guards step forward to open the door on each side.

I'm about to swing my legs out when Salvatore's hand covers mine. I look over as he sticks one leg out of the door on his side. He lets go of mine only long enough to lean forward once he's standing. He offers it to me as I move to where he sat. He helps me out but doesn't move away. Now I'm blocking this door, which forces my family to get out of the other. The guard is already gone, so we're alone-ish.

“Sylvie, I can't ignore your father and uncles for forever. As much as I want to. But I meant every word I said earlier. What you want is what matters right now. I never want you to feel like you can't speak just because there are men in the room. You aren't to turn into a potted plant that no one notices because it's just there. We haven't said our vows or exchanged rings, but I expect everyone to treat you as *la madrina*. That includes the men in your family. If they won't give you the respect and courtesy I expect, then I will intervene.”

La madrina. Allegra taught me the word in English is Godmother. The don's wife. I've seen the dubbed and the subtitled versions of *The Godfather* movies. Great stories with maybe hints of how the Mafia was way back when. But that's not how it is now.

“Salva, please don't think the worst of my father and uncles. They want to make sure everything is perfect for us. They don't want you to be disappointed or displeased. They just want to check that everything is set for the wedding.”

“If they displeased me, they would already know.”

He offers his arm to me, but rather than take it, I place my hand on it.

“Are you angry that I just meddled?”

“No. You didn’t meddle.”

“You don’t sound pleased with me.”

He glances over his shoulder to where two men, who from a distance could each look like his twin, welcome my family. My mother is watching Salvatore and me, and she looks curious more than anything else. When he faces me again, his gaze is the most intense I’ve ever seen.

“*Piccolina*, I’m not angry or displeased with you. I don’t think you meddled at all. Just the opposite. I like that you feel comfortable talking to me, disagreeing with me.”

“I wouldn’t call that disagreeing. If you think that’s as much as I would say to be disagreeable, then we may not get along that well after all. I have far stronger opinions than that.”

We’re standing in a way that the open door blocks most of us from everyone else’s view. His hand rests on my hip, gripping it firmly.

“As long as it’s in private, you can disagree all you want. We will always look united in front of everyone, even if we’re in the midst of a fight. But if you want to argue with me, then do so. I won’t punish you for having your own opinions.”

“You make it sound as though you might punish me for something else.”

His fingers tighten on my hip, and our bodies sway closer together. He drops his voice low, so it can't carry on the wind.

“You know the safety protocols because you've known no life but a *Cosa Nostra* one. But if you *ever* do anything to endanger yourself, I will make that fine ass of yours match an apple. You won't sit for a week if you scare me, Sylvia. I can tolerate a lot, but the idea of you coming to harm—just the thought of it—is enough to make me lose my shit. So, unless you want a fiery ass, *piccolina*, I suggest you obey those rules. I would never punish you for doing what you want or for having your own thoughts, opinions, or wishes.”

I gaze up at him, and I wish we were alone. I want to know what he would do if we were. There's barely enough space for the Holy Spirit between us.

“I don't want to assume your protocols are like the ones I grew up with. Will you explain yours to me?”

Anything to create more time with him.

“While we're on the boat. I'll teach you whatever you want to learn.”

CHAPTER 2

Salvatore

I've never seen a more elegant woman than the one I'm marrying in a few days. The moment she stepped out of the plane and onto the platform above the steps, I thought I was looking at a princess. Forget Grace Kelly. Forget Princess Diana. Forget Cinderella. Forget all of them. Sylvia Toretta is beyond gorgeous. Her dark hair is pulled back in a chignon, and all I want to do is pull out all the hairpins and discover how long it is. Can I wrap it around my fist as I sink into her from behind? Can I fist it and hold her head in place as I kiss her neck and devour her mouth? Will it be as soft as it looks?

I can't get these burning questions out of my head as I follow her into my—our—home. I watch as she greets my brother and nephew. Massimo is only two years younger than me, and his hair is slightly lighter than mine. But we look so much alike that we could almost pass for one another. His oldest son, Luca, is the spitting image of his father. But he has a jagged scar that runs from the top of his cheekbone down his neck to his collarbone. A gift from his childhood friend I banished to New Jersey. It gives him an air of menace that exceeds his age of twenty-three.

I watch as he and Sylvia meet, and I have a flash of jealousy. She's between Luca and me in age, but he's handsome and charming. While I know Sylvia is in her thirties, there's something about her that makes me feel like she'd be better matched with Luca than me. That I'm far too old and jaded for her. But when she looks back for me, I see

her smile is different from the one she gave Luca. When he turns toward the dining room, it would have been easy for her to walk beside him. Instead, she waits for me.

“Your family resemblance is incredible.”

“Yes, Luca looks the way I did at that age.”

She doesn't react to that comment. She waits for me to say more, but I don't. Her brow furrows, and she whips her gaze toward him before locking eyes with me. She stops walking, so I stop too. She waits until everyone else has stepped into the dining room before she slides her hand into mine. She leans forward, and her warm breath wafts against my ear.

“He's a cute kid, Salva. I want the handsome man. The one who calls me *piccolina*. The one who makes my toes curl. The one who could do anything to me right now, and I'd ask for more.”

She lets go and turns on her heel. I watch her take two steps before I'm on her heels. My hand slips into the back of her skirt waist and tugs. I bring my body against hers, and I want nothing more than to grind my cock against her ass. Her pussy—especially in her pussy—would be preferable.

“Are you trying to embarrass me by making me hard in front of your family and mine?”

She turns her head to see me, and I catch the surprise on her face. I press my hips forward so she can feel what she does to me. She closes her eyes for a moment before they snap open.

“Maybe no one can see it, but you make me ache like I’ve never felt before.”

She steps away from me, forcing me to release her clothes. When we enter the dining room, I sweep my gaze over the table. Then my focus settles on Massimo, who’s watching me and smirking. I narrow my eyes and jerk my head. He grins but changes course from the seat he was about to take to the left of mine. Instead, he moves to the foot of the table.

When I guide Sylvia past the chair Massimo is now going to occupy, she glances up at me. Since I’ve already called her my wife, I know she assumed she would sit there. Not a fucking chance I’m having her all the way down a table that seats twelve. I pull out the chair next to mine. Luca stands behind the one to my right, befitting his position as my underboss and heir. Sylvia’s mother is already sitting, but none of the men take their seats until my fiancée is in hers.

I’m nearly six-and-a-half-feet tall. Well, six-three to be more honest. But most of my height comes from my legs. Underneath the table, I’m able to brush my knee against Sylvia’s. I slide my foot behind hers, so her calf rests on my shin. I have never been flirtatious like this in my life. I’ve fucked my share of women. Some might say I even seduced some. But I’ve never craved a woman like I do my bride.

I’ve wanted to come and have never been selfish enough not to get my partner off first. But I never gave a shit about them beyond getting my rocks off. Sylvia is entirely different. I don’t want to seduce her. I want to romance her. I want her to

know there's more than my physical attraction to her. I know I've already learned more about her than she realizes.

She defers to her father and uncles when they can see and hear. But the moment they can't, her spine straightens at least two inches. Her gaze sharpens. Even when she was basically apologizing for them, she wasn't meek toward me. She was polite, but she was assertive too. She doesn't bristle or pull away when I call her little one. She can tell I mean it with affection and desire, not condescension. When I told her I'd punish her, she didn't recoil or retreat. She doesn't fear me, but I'm certain the notion of me spanking her intrigued her. She's a highly intelligent, curious, and independent woman who knows how to adapt to the people she's around. She'll be the perfect don's wife.

Those observations don't even include what I know about her from her father and uncles along with my own investigators. She was top of her class at the Sorbonne, and she graduated her law program with honors. She's a well-respected attorney in Italy, and she earned her position in Rome. Undoubtedly, people recognize her last name and know about her family. But she's won each case with her skill, not coercion. I've read several of the contracts she's negotiated—copies of which I did get with coercion—and she's no one's fool. She's made her clients millions of dollars by finding loopholes or otherwise missed opportunities.

I raise my glass and smile at everyone before settling my focus on Alberto.

“A una grande famiglia felice.” To one big happy family.

I've avoided marriage like the plague. All the women my father and the other senior members of our branch tried to force upon me made me feel trapped. The women I've met since becoming don have wanted my money, my name, my reputation, and my dick. I didn't feel like giving most of them anything but a ride or two on my cock. But our New York branch needs to keep its connections to the Old Country. We do too much business with Sicily to not maintain an alliance that isn't severed easily. Catholic wedding vows, then children make it difficult for either side to walk away.

I knew I needed to marry someone who could ensure my family's business ventures in Sicily remained strong. I'm happy with Luca as my heir, and I'm in no rush to have sons. But I know I'm obligated to at least try. I know some of my men and their families are questioning why I haven't settled down. I couldn't give two fucks if they think I'm gay. But I give a fuck if those thoughts become rumors that become problems for my family and my businesses.

But I refused to just consider anyone. Sicily is larger than most people probably think. There's more to it than just Palermo, so there are several *Cosa Nostra* families the Mancinelli brotherhood does business with. There are also those that we'd happily watch God smite from the earth. There were a few eligible women among the families I considered, but the moment I saw Sylvia's photo, I couldn't give a damn about anyone else.

It was shot it as she walked out of her office with man she'd just had a meeting with. The guy was obviously a douchebag. They were clearly having a disagreement since his

hands were raised and gesturing. He was leaning forward as though he might use his height and probably volume to intimidate her. But her bearing said she was having none of it. She stood up straight with an unimpressed expression and her chin raised. Her briefcase hung from her left hand, and I'd made myself smile, envisioning her swinging it at the *stronzo's*—asshole's—head.

She'd pulled her hair back just the way it is now, and she had on a trouser suit with low heels. She was the image of sophistication and determination. I knew in that photo stood the woman I wanted to marry. I knew she would weather the inevitable storms that come from the position she's marrying into. I knew she would have a backbone to stand up to me and tell me when I'm wrong. I knew she had the intelligence to lead alongside me.

The photo came from a private investigator Massimo hired. Once I saw it, I demanded to read the man's report. It's one of the few times I've ever kicked Massi out of my office. But I wanted to read and reread it at my leisure. Within the hour, I sent him a two-word text.

La sposerò. I'm marrying her.

He sent me a reply just as brief.

Niente merda. No shit.

I would have called Alberto right that moment if it hadn't been the middle of the night in Palermo, and I had no interest in making myself seem desperate. I've exchanged a couple emails with her that were little more than pleasantries to say I

was glad she accepted my offer and that I looked forward to meeting her.

I'm forced back to the present when Angelina, Sylvia's mother, finally speaks.

“When is your appointment to get the marriage license?”

Sylvia nearly chokes, but she hides it by dabbing at her mouth with her napkin. She looks at me, and I see fear flash in her gaze. I dart mine to Alberto, Ignacio, Raffaello, and Teodoro. The last two have been virtually silent the entire time they've been in this country. I saw them whisper a few times to their brothers while we were in the car, but they said nothing loud enough for me to hear. All four men stare at me.

“Our appointment with the City Clerk is at nine a.m. tomorrow morning. Alberto, make sure my brother has all the necessary documents. Massimo has already completed the permanent visa paperwork for the United States Citizen and Immigration Services. But we can't submit anything until we have the marriage certificate. Once we do, we can send off everything. We know someone who will expedite the visa's approval.”

“Can they conduct a civil ceremony when you get the license?”

Angelina persists, and I can see how uncomfortable Sylvia's growing with each breath.

“New York law requires couples wait at least twenty-four hours before marrying.” I reach out my hand, palm up to Sylvia. She hesitates, then puts hers on top of mine. “Sylvie,

do you want to get married at a courthouse then have the church ceremony? Or do you only want to get married at the church?”

She more mouths her answer than says it.

“Church.”

I squeeze her hand. She pulls hers back, but I don’t let go.

“My fiancée only wants a church wedding, which is already planned for two weeks from now.”

“But—”

I shoot Angelina a glare that is only slightly less hostile than the one I shoot Alberto. When I speak, it’s to both of them.

“You’re already married. You had your turn for a wedding. This one is Sylvia’s and mine. What you want doesn’t matter.”

When Sylvia turns tear-filled eyes at me, I realize I was far harsher than I should have been. Far harsher than I intended. I just don’t want her brow-beaten into something she doesn’t want. But now I’m on the verge of being guilty of the crime I wish to prevent. I try to make amends with a calmer tone.

“I hope Sylvia can have the wedding she wants. I don’t want anything rushed that’ll make her miss out. The church and the reception venue are booked. My sister-in-law, Nicoletta, and my sister, Paola, have made appointments with several bakeries, musicians, florists, and whatever else they know we need. Sylvia can confirm the dates and times work for her. She can go with whomever she wants, or she can go

alone. Each shop knows I expect them to provide whatever Sylvia requests.”

“That’ll cost—”

“I don’t care, Alberto. I’ve already taken care of it.”

My thumb glides over the back of Sylvia’s hand, and no one misses the gesture. If I didn’t have to let go to use my fork, I would hold it throughout the rest of the meal. The conversation is a little stilted until Massimo shares a story about his daughter, Maria, who’s about to go to university. Luca, along with his brothers Marco and Lorenzo, my other nephew Carmine, and their friends Matteo and Gabriele took her out with them to celebrate Marco’s twenty-first birthday. While Massimo brags about how thoughtful his sons are to include her, Luca’s a shade of red that makes his ears glow. When our gazes meet, guilt fills his expression. Massimo notices me looking at Luca and turns his attention to his son.

“Luciano?”

Luca tries not to cringe. No one calls him that. Not even his parents when they’re angry at him. Massimo must sense something happened to his youngest for him to address his oldest with his full name.

“Yes, Papa. We might have given Maria a little more to drink than we realized.”

Massimo glowers at his son, but I laugh. My younger brother turns his attention to me. I shrug.

“We did the same thing to Paola, but she was only fifteen.”

Our sister didn't get to have a twenty-first birthday celebration since she had a two-year-old at home. Carmine was the product of two nineteen-year-olds having fun and not thinking about the worst that could happen when having unprotected sex. Our father forced Paola to marry Carmine's father, Cesare, whose own father was just as adamant. Utter disaster. At least, it has been until recently. They haven't told Carmine, but when he leaves for college, they're separating. They've both agreed Cesare will move out, and they will do as they please. Divorce isn't an option, but they're both happy to let each other carry on with their own life.

As I return my gaze to Sylvia, I can't imagine ever being all right with her moving on to someone else. Definitely not while we're still married. I can't imagine moving out of any home I shared with her and our children and making a life with someone else. Just the thought of it makes my head pound and rage bubble into my chest. I inhale through my nose to calm myself. I can't think of many times where my reaction to an idea has ever been so visceral. But then again, everything about the woman has caused an immediate and overwhelming reaction for me today.

Massimo's glare turns into a smirk as he laughs.

"Papa was so mad at you. I thought that vein in his temple was going to rupture. If you hadn't been a college track star, he would have caught you and handed you over to Mama. You wouldn't have sat for a month if she'd had her way with that wooden spoon."

“Sure. Laugh now, Massi, but I’m pretty positive I found you begging Mama to spare you from reciting the rosary for two hours. She wanted to hear every damn word.”

Luca stares at his father before his face erupts in a grin.

“You got Auntie Paola drunk? You both did? I’m surprised I’m even alive. How’d you convince *Nonna* not to throttle you?”

Massimo sits back as one of the staff sets a platter of antipasto in front of my brother. They place another in front of Sylvia. I raise an eyebrow at the man, and he flinches. He glances at Angelina and realizes his mistake. But he can’t move the plate from where it is now to in front of the other woman at the table. Without missing a beat, Massimo holds out the platter to Angelina while he speaks.

“Your mama saved me. She claimed I gave in to her when she wanted to try the alcohol, too. She said it was her fault that she and Paola had too much since she didn’t realize how strong it was even though I warned her.”

Luca looks over at me, and I grimace.

“Your mama loves your papa. She tolerates me. She didn’t come to my rescue. I spent those two hours reciting the rosary for Mama.”

Massimo waggles his eyebrows at me as everyone serves themselves some of the bite-sized appetizers.

“She’s always said she loves you like the big brother she never knew she didn’t want.”

Nicoletta is as much my sister as Paola. She and Massimo are perfect for each other, and they've created a wonderful life together with four children. They have the marriage everyone should aspire to. But Paola wasn't so fortunate, and I haven't been yet either. As I look over at Sylvia again, I pray I was right that good things come to those who wait.

The rest of the meal goes much smoother than how it started. When the last of the plates are cleared away, and the staff retreats to the kitchen, I focus on Sylvia.

“Would you still like to go out on the boat?”

Before I can answer, Alberto chimes in.

“She and Angelina are going to the hotel to rest. We have contracts left to sign.”

I'm still watching Sylvia, and I can see the word contract upsets her. It makes it sound like she's chattel. Even if that's basically how it would look on paper since this is an arranged marriage, her father could have a little more tact. But the marriage agreement isn't even what he's talking about.

“My vineyard isn't going anywhere. We can sign the contracts for your restaurant to buy the next four harvests' vintages before you leave. Sylvie?”

She doesn't look anywhere but at me.

“I'd like to go sailing. I can sleep when I'm dead.”

Before anyone can disagree with her, I turn my head toward my brother.

“Massi, can you and Luca go back to the city and make sure everything is settled at the hotel?”

“Of course. Luca, tell the drivers we’re ready to leave. I’ll call the helo pad.”

Sylvia and I watch from the front steps as everyone piles into the limo. She waves until we can no longer see. The moment we’re inside and alone, I press her against the wall beside the door. Our mouths come together, and we can’t get enough. She wraps her arms around my neck, and one hand goes into my hair while the other rests against my neck. With her back pressed to the wall, I can’t encircle her with my arms, but I grip the top of her hip bones. I tighten my hold, expecting her to stop me or to whimper or give some sign that it’s too much. Instead, the more I squeeze, the wilder her kisses grow.

I trail my lips over her neck and down to her shoulder, nipping the skin I can reach within the opening of her shirt collar. My left hand skims up her ribs until I palm her breast. Fuck. She may have the finest tits I’ve ever felt. I knead the flesh, and all I can think about is thrusting into her over and over until I make her scream my name. Until I’m screaming her name.

When she says my name, it’s not with the ecstasy I want to hear.

“Salvatore, I’m a virgin.”

CHAPTER 3

Sylvia

I can't believe I just blurted that out. I wince as Salvatore pulls back. But I don't see shock or disgust. I see tenderness as he kisses my right cheek as he cups my left.

"I'm sorry I'm rushing you. I thought this was what you wanted."

"It is, Salva. I didn't say that to make you stop. I don't know why I did. I guess I'm worried you'll think worse of me. It was one thing to flirt and push the envelope. It's another to wish to strip you in your foyer. I didn't want you to think you're getting a woman who'll embarrass you."

His brow furrows, and his face is a thundercloud. He takes my hand and tows me down the hall until we get to a door with a punch pad on it. He presses in a code, and the lock clicks. We enter a luxurious study with deep toned wood and large leather furniture. The walls have shelves of books, and I recognize many are law school textbooks. They're in English, but I can tell from the style. I didn't know he had anything to do with the law besides being the older brother of an attorney. I mean, anything to do with the law besides the ones he breaks. He draws me to a sofa and sits down. I almost squeak when he pulls me to sit on his lap.

"*Piccolina*, what on Earth do you mean about embarrassing me? I can't think of anything less likely to happen."

“You won’t meet men from my past who’ve slept with me. Salva, it’s not like I haven’t dated or been intimate, but I know my place.”

“Your place? Fuck, Sylvie. Has your father or uncles threatened you?”

“They haven’t threatened me, but they’ve been very clear about what a future husband will expect. I assumed I’d marry an Italian from Italy or a Sicilian from Sicily, not an American. I knew the expectation was for me to be a virgin.”

“I’d be a liar if I said knowing this doesn’t do something for my ego and my curiosity. But I also know I’d still desire you and insist upon marrying you even if you weren’t. I assumed you weren’t. You’re almost thirty-five.”

“I know not every father would insist upon what mine did. I figured my father would have mentioned it as a selling point. When you didn’t treat me like I guess I figured you would, it just tumbled out of my mouth.”

“Your father and I most definitely did not discuss your dating or sexual history, *piccolina*. I wouldn’t care if the list was a mile long. I knew the moment I saw your photo I wanted to marry you. I knew you’d be right for me.”

“Did my father send a headshot? Oh, God.”

I want to crawl into the sofa and hide beneath the cushions. I feel like an animal in a catalogue before an auction.

“He sent some photos, just like I sent some of me. But I didn’t see them until after I had one taken of you.”

That makes me freeze.

“You had me followed?”

“Yes.”

He doesn't hesitate to tell me that. And he doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with it. I scramble to get off his lap because I no longer feel as safe as I did only moments ago. I push at his hands when he initially tries to keep me in place. But he soon lets go, and I dart to the door.

“Sylvia, wait.”

“You had someone stalk me. Take photos unbeknownst to me. What else did you expect that person to do? What kind of photos, Salvatore?”

My hand is on the knob, but I don't leave. But I'm prepared to depending on his answer. He stands and approaches me, but he stops several feet away.

“I wanted to know the real you, not what your father told me. I wanted to see what your life is like day-to-day. I wanted to see what you looked like when someone forced you to pose for photos. I wanted to know *you*.”

“Must have been nice.”

No one afforded me that opportunity.

“Would you let me show you something?”

He keeps his right hand where I can see it while his left reaches into his pocket. I'm certain he has a knife in each pocket and a gun at his lower back. But I don't fear him withdrawing a weapon. He pulls out his phone, and it's as though he moves in slow motion, worried he'll frighten me.

Does he fear I'll lash out like a wounded animal? He unlocks his phone and taps the screen. Then he's turning it toward me and holding it out.

I recognize where and when the photo was taken. An opposing attorney stood across from me on the steps outside my office building. I'd let my briefcase hang loosely from my hand, but I wanted to pummel the man with it. He was a complete piece of shit. He was no better than his client. I specialize in NGOs and their interactions with other non-government organizations and national leaders.

Not being able to practice was something I'm still struggling to give up. It's something I resent being forced into. I had hoped that marrying someone from the *Italian Mafia* wouldn't interfere with my international work. They are not involved in the same activities.

I've remained quiet, willing to wait Salvatore out. I want to know why the photo matters, but I don't want to give in far more. When he grins, I know he's recognized the power struggle, and for now, he's willing to concede.

“Do you know what I learned just from this photo?”

I don't react. I don't even cock an eyebrow or blink. His smile broadens as he continues.

“What I see in front of me now is what I saw in the photo. A confident woman who doesn't back down. One who's sure of her own intelligence and won't be intimidated by anyone, no matter their size or their volume. I see a woman who can hide her thoughts and emotions to remain in control of any situation. I see the woman I want to consult before making

decisions I can't take back. I see the woman who will challenge me to make the right decisions. I see the woman I need by my side to help me run New York."

"If you needed those things, you'd already be married."

"I've always needed them. I'd just never met the woman who could fulfill those needs. I knew I had when I saw this photo."

"You're reading a lot into something that was just a flash in time."

He slides his finger over his screen without looking at it. I recognize a photo from years ago. Not long after I finished my studies and moved back to Italy. My hair is down, and I'm wearing a dress with a blazer and ballet flats. I'm on the same steps as in the first photo, with the same briefcase in the same hand, in the same pose. Except it's *Zio* Ignacio who's towering over me. He's Papa's *consigliere*, and he was livid that I took a position in Rome rather than going home to work for him. Papa knew, but rather than argue with me over it, he let my uncle discover it, get angry, and fly to Rome to try to coerce me into returning to Palermo with him.

"How'd you get this photo? It was nearly ten years ago, and I didn't know it was taken."

"Your uncle suspected you were up to something, so he had you followed. I heard about that when I started asking about you to people I know in Rome. I did a little more digging to find out who your uncle hired, and I went to him."

"He still had a photo that old?"

“The man keeps meticulous records.”

I sigh, pressing my lips together over my teeth. I look at the floor as I shake my head.

“Salva, you know so much more about me than I do about you. It doesn’t feel fair.”

“Then come back and sit with me, or we can go out on the boat. We’ll talk. You can ask me anything. Anything. There might be things I can’t answer, but I won’t get angry if you ask.”

Maybe he isn’t as cagey as I feared. Or maybe he’s a master manipulator who’s luring me in. I don’t look up, but I see the tips of his shoes approaching me. He slides his right arm around me while his left thumb and forefinger tilt my head back. I don’t fight him when he kisses me. I grip his biceps before he pulls me closer. As frustrated as I am that he has all the advantages in the relationship, I still desire him.

“Sylvie, I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I probably made you feel unsafe and unable to trust me. I know it’s little consolation, but I’d investigate anyone entering my family. When my nephews and niece marry, when my cousin’s son marries, when anyone in my family marries, I’m going to dig for every piece of information I can find. It’s not about business. It’s about protecting the people I hold dearest to me. My wife is going to be around my brother, my sister-in-law, my cousin, and his wife, all the children I’ve watched grow into adults. Nothing matters more than protecting them. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my wife, *piccolina*. That meant knowing about anything in your past that might be a threat. I

warned you I'd be angry if you endangered yourself because I can't stand the idea of anything happening to you. I'd feel that way about any woman who's about to become my wife. But the depth and strength of this feeling shocks me. I never imagined I'd feel something so viscerally after only meeting a person a few hours ago. But I do. I don't regret investigating you, but I do regret how it makes you feel."

"It still feels like you have the upper hand, and it was scary to think you had someone stalk me. But I understand. If our positions were reversed, I would do exactly what you did. I'd be a liar if I said otherwise. It just doesn't feel good to be the subject of such scrutiny."

"I know. Your father did the exact same about me. We've known each other since I was Luca's age. But he doesn't see me every day. He dug into everything he could."

"Which I'm sure was far less than what you learned about me."

"True. As my wife, I'll make sure you're as untraceable and inaccessible as I am. I won't tolerate anything less."

"What would have happened if I showed up, and I didn't impress you as much in person or didn't turn out to be the person you assumed I was from the photos and secondhand reports?"

"I wouldn't be marrying you."

"You'd break a betrothal?"

"If I didn't think I could be the right husband, yes. If I didn't think the woman was one I could come to love, yes."

I don't know what to say to that. I feared Salvatore would be a man I couldn't stand or one I could never love. But if this is truly him, then I'll be in love by the end of the week. The difference, though, is that he could break the betrothal and move on. I'd be forced to marry him, anyway.

"If you don't want to marry me by the wedding rehearsal, tell me. I will let you go with nothing held against you or your family. The alliance will remain regardless as far as I'm concerned."

"That's gracious of you. But if I refuse to marry you, my father will hold it against you. He'll blame you, and it will end the alliance."

"Fine. I won't trap you for the next fifty years."

My eyes linger on his lips before they shift to meet his. He cups my cheek just as he had after I blurted out that I'm a virgin. His kiss fills every sense. Sight, taste, touch, smell, sound. It consumes me, and I allow myself to revel in it.

"The things I want to do to you, *piccolina*. The passion I want to introduce you to. The way I long to claim what's mine. I want you against this door. I want you on my desk. I want you in our bed. I want to make you moan my name and beg me to let you come. Does that shock you?"

"No more than it might shock you to know I want you to do those things to me. I may never have had sex, but it doesn't mean I've been a nun. Salva, I would never move this fast with another man. Even if I desired you as much as I do, if we weren't marrying in two weeks, I wouldn't allow this."

“I know, *cuore*. You don’t have to justify yourself to me.”

The pet names make me feel more special than I ever have.
What can I call him?

“Thank you, *caro*. How do you say that in English?”

“Dear. *Cuore* is sweetheart.”

I practice the two in my head before I repeat them.

“Is it all right for me to call you either of those?”

“Never ask permission to show me affection. I didn’t know how little I must have in my life until now when I crave that from you. I wouldn’t hold you this way, touch you or kiss you as I have so soon after meeting you if I weren’t going to marry you.”

I cock an eyebrow. But he stares blankly at me or rather at my response.

“Salva, you’re in your forties. I highly doubt you haven’t hooked up with a woman and not even known her last name. I doubt you haven’t had a least a one-night stand.”

He flushes, and it’s adorable.

“You’re right. I have done those things, but long before I even knew you existed. I meant, if you were a potential woman to marry as opposed to one I’ve already agreed to marry, I wouldn’t be so forward.” He hesitates. “I don’t want you to think I assume I can touch you however I want simply because we’re pledged to each other.”

“I don’t. If you were a potential husband and not my fiancé, I wouldn’t behave this way, either. But I won’t lie and

say I haven't hooked up with men and not known their last name. I've done it in nightclubs before. You know I haven't had sex, but I've done other things with men I wasn't in a committed relationship with. I know they say you shouldn't talk about your past relationships on a first date, but we aren't in a typical situation. I'd rather you just know. You will never meet a man who'll know me more intimately than you do."

He pulls away from me and fists his hands. His expression is etched with regret.

"There are women you may meet who I've slept with. Some I've slept with for pleasure, and others I've slept with for a purpose. It's not like my list of past partners is in the hundreds, but it's in the double digits."

"For a purpose?"

"Yes. But that doesn't mean I would ever do that now that I'm engaged and soon to be married. Infidelity is absolutely not an option no matter what I might want or need from a woman for business. I will never cross that line, Sylvia. Never."

I don't know him well enough to believe that, but I want to trust him. The resoluteness in his tone makes me think he'd cut off his own hand before he dishonors himself like that or betrays me.

"Will I meet these women at events?"

"Some."

"Did any of them think you'd pursue something more serious with them? Did you pursue something?"

“There are women I’ve dated who had no idea who I am, and there are those I’ve dated who knew exactly who I am. But I never led any to believe I wanted something permanent.”

“That last bit means nothing. Were there any who thought they could change your mind?”

“Not in at least fifteen years. All of them ended because they complained I was emotionally closed off, and I just shrugged.”

“Do you intend to be emotionally closed off to me?”

CHAPTER 4

Salvatore

“No.”

That might be the easiest answer to a question since my *nonna* asked me to help her peel potatoes when I was five. Sylvia’s smile is a far better reaction than my grandmother’s, who threatened to skin me alive with the vegetable peeler if I didn’t get to work. At five, I believed her. At twenty-five, I believed her. At forty-five, I’d still believe the woman from the grave.

“Sylvie, will you sit with me again, please?”

She nods. I think we’re both exhausted from this conversation, but we both want to see where it leads. She walks back to the sofa, but this time, I don’t pull her onto my lap. But when I see her lost expression and her uncertainty as she looks at my lap and the cushion beside me, I open my arms to her. She’s hesitant and barely perches on me until I wrap my arms around her. She leans against me, and we both sigh then laugh.

“I don’t understand how I’m so comfortable with you, Salva. We only met a few hours ago, and you know more about me than I do you. I pray I’m not being made a fool of because it would crush me to find out this is all an act. Please don’t do that to me.”

Her voice is faint, but I hear every word. I’ve spent a lifetime inducing fear in others, so I recognize its various tones and pitches. I loathe hearing it in hers.

“My father was many things that many people admired, but he wasn’t a good husband or a good father. He never strayed from Mama, but he ignored her and took her for granted. He never noticed all the things she did to hold our family together. All the things she did to hold our community together. Everyone assumed he was the force to be reckoned with. The one who ruled this city. It was Mama. If he was the head of our family and our branch, then she was the hand that turned it. She silently comforted the mothers and wives who lost their sons and husbands. She made sure the children had what they needed when their father was no longer there to provide for them. She calmed the syndicate leaders’ ruffled feathers at events when Papa was too gauche to care that he made an ass of himself. She made quiet suggestions, leading Papa to think he’d come up with them. She did all of this tirelessly while raising three children who were each stubborn as a mule. *Piccolina*, I never want to be my father. I haven’t wanted to lead like him, and I definitely don’t want to be a husband or father like him. Plenty of men fear me, but I believe just as many respect me. Papa assumed fear made men respect him. It didn’t. It made them resent him. I never want to do anything to make you resent me or regret giving up absolutely everything to marry a stranger.”

“I don’t see you letting any man or woman be the hand that turns your head.”

I practically snort.

“Try telling that to Massi and Paola. They’d both say differently.”

“I think your little sister might be persuasive, maybe even have you wrapped around her little finger. And your brother may be your confidante and most trusted advisor. But I don’t think you do anything you don’t want to.”

“Maybe not, but I hope you know I welcome your opinion. I hope you’ll be comfortable giving it. I hope you’re someone I can turn to just like Massi.”

“But there are things only Massimo can discuss with you.”

“True. And I won’t endanger you by bringing those things to you. But it doesn’t mean I won’t rely on you. I know from your education and your job that you’re intelligent. I also saw how deferential you are to your father and uncles. I don’t think it was just because you considered yourself in public. I think you’re always like that with them. I never want you to be that way with me in private, and I hope you’re not in positions where you have to be in public.”

“This is really important to you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I didn’t realize how adamant I’d be until now. I guess I don’t want to watch you wither in my shadow like I watched Mama do with Papa. *I* resent that. I want a happy life with you, Sylvie. If I didn’t think that was possible, I wouldn’t have agreed to marry you. But like I already told you, if you don’t feel you’ll be happy with me, then we’ll walk away. No hard feelings.”

I might cry myself to sleep for the rest of my life. But I’ll let her go if that’s what she wants.

“And if you realize I’m not what you thought I’d be, and you’re the one who wants to walk away? I won’t force you either, Salva.”

“I won’t, but thank you.”

“You really are convinced, aren’t you?”

“Yes. There’s something else I want to talk to you about since we seem to be putting all our cards on the table.”

“Oh?”

“When you’re ready, I’d like you to complete the New York State Bar’s Foreign Evaluation Form. With your education, I can’t imagine how they would think you aren’t qualified to sit for the state exam. Once they approve you, I’d like you to take the bar exam to become a licensed attorney in New York.”

“You do? Why?”

“Several reasons. I don’t want you to feel adrift with no purpose here. I don’t want you to feel you threw away your career and everything you did to accomplish your success. Massi is torn between criminal and civil law and does both well, but I hope you’ll take over our legal endeavors and let my brother focus on other things.”

Other things being what make most of our millions, and the things that could see all of us on death row. That sorta stuff.

“I need to learn English first.”

“You speak seven languages already. I think you’ll master English.”

“You really read my dossier, didn’t you?”

“Every line.”

She speaks Sicilian, Italian, French, German, Spanish, Latin, and Japanese. It doesn’t hurt that three are romance languages that derive from Latin, but they’re each unique and not interchangeable.

“I don’t know the American legal system that well. I’ve had American clients, but they’ve always been held to French and Italian law while doing business in Europe. I haven’t done business here.”

“I haven’t been a litigator since I was an underboss, but I can help you study, *cuore*. I won’t force you, but I hope you’ll want to do this.”

“You’re an attorney?”

“Massi and I both went to the same law school. He was two years behind me, so he started my last year.”

“Where did you go?”

“Harvard.”

She grins.

“Of course.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It fits.”

I tickle her ribs, and she squirms. That only makes me groan since I'm already hard. Not a good idea on my part. She goes still when she feels me. Our gazes meet just before our lips do. We're once again insatiable as our hands roam over each other. I lift her to straddle my lap, pushing her skirt up her thighs to give her room to open her legs wider. My hands glide along the bare flesh, but I skim them over her clothes until I grip her ass. I push her pussy against my dick and grind her against it. It's not enough. Not nearly enough. I wrap an arm around her waist and twist until she's beneath me. I grasp both wrists and lift them over her head, clasping them in one hand while my other goes back to her bare thigh.

"I'm not going to fuck you on a sofa. At least not this time. I'm not going to fuck you at all, but I am going to make you come, *piccolina*. I am going to taste what's mine. If you want me to stop, say so right now."

"Stop talking and get on with it, Salva."

My laugh is dark and sensual. I watch her arch her back, pressing her tits toward me. I nip at her earlobe before kissing just behind her ear.

"Little one, I wouldn't start issuing orders right now. You'll be my equal and my partner in all things, including our sex life. But we both know you like it when I take and you give, and that's not because you're a virgin."

"Yes, sir."

That makes me pause. I push up on my free hand. Our gazes are locked, and I notice the defiance creeping into her

gaze, the way it makes her lips twitch, the way it makes her hips tilt to feel more of my cock. Little seductress.

“Sir? Is that what you want? Do you want to obey?”

I rake my teeth over her jaw until I steal her breath in a punishing kiss that exerts my dominance. Her legs cradle my hips, her feet pushing down on the sofa to lift her hips off the cushion. I thrust against her, giving her a hint of what it’ll be like when we’re naked. When I fuck her tight little pussy for real.

“You didn’t answer me, *piccolina*.”

She tries to shrug one shoulder.

“Do you think I’ll be patient enough to ask a second time?”

“You’re patient enough to ask that.”

I lower myself onto her, my foot on the floor keeping me from pressing all my weight onto her. I slide my free hand beneath her and grab her ass. I squeeze until she moans. I squeeze harder.

“You like having your hands restrained, and you like the pain. What are you into, Sylvie? What do you know?”

“I know I like this. I’ve had boyfriends who liked to spank while we made out, and I’ve had a few who talked about tying me to a bed. But that was before I told them we’d never go that far.”

“Are you curious about more than that? Do you want more than that?”

“With you, yes. If it were anyone else, I don’t know. I never suggested more in the past.”

“Do you want to obey?”

I ask her a second time. Her chin rises, and she shrugs one shoulder. I rear back, letting go of her wrists. I grasp her waist and flip her onto her belly. I pull her hips up, and my hand lands across her ass over her skirt.

“Answer me, or the next will be on your bare ass.”

She twists to see me, and she cocks an eyebrow. The most perfect woman in the world is on her hands and knees in front of me, and I get to marry her in two weeks.

“I’m serious, *piccolina*. If you don’t consent, stop me now.”

“If I don’t like it once you start, would you stop if I told you to?”

“Absolutely. Choose a safe word. If you say it, everything ends immediately.”

She considers this, and I know she’s taking this seriously.

“Macadamia. I’m allergic to them, so I’ll never ask for them.”

That makes me pause. It’s a dose of reality. It shows how little we know about one another.

“Do you have any other allergies? Other nuts? Do you carry an EpiPen?”

“No, no, and no. Just that, and it’s never been serious enough for an EpiPen or the hospital. I break out in hives and

throw up.”

I watch her for a moment, then she shakes her hips, shooting me a speculative glance before looking straight ahead. I wrap my arm around her, my forearm between her tits as my hand rests on her throat. I pull her back until she’s kneeling in front of me. I find the hair tie that’s holding her hair up and unravel it. Long chestnut tresses swirl down to the middle of her back, some covering my arm near her ribs. I run my fingers through it, and she sighs as though I’ve released tension from her head. I guide her back onto all fours before my hands push her skirt up to her waist, revealing the most perfectly plump ass I’ve ever seen.

I see her tense, and I wonder if she’s having second thoughts. When I run my hands over her ass and realize she’s flexing, I suspect she’s worried I won’t like what I feel. I knead both ass cheeks until she gives in.

“*Piccolina*, I could stay like this until my last breath. I’ve never seen a more glorious sight, and I’ve seen the finest art Italy has ever produced. Nothing compares to what’s before me.”

I bring my right hand down on her right cheek. She yelps, then pushes her ass back to me. I bring my hand down a second time in the same spot. She sways forward on her hands, but she resets her position a moment later. I land the next one on her left side, appreciating that her thong means I have a clear view of all the deliciousness in front of me. I can see she’s wet for me. I felt her heat when she straddled me, and I saw her pussy gleaming the moment I caught sight of the

promised land. My next three smacks cover both cheeks in quick succession. Her skin is a rosy pink, so I stop. I don't want to harm her or scare her by pushing it further this time.

I help her kneel back against me again, my arm wrapped around her the same way as before. My left fingers skim up her thigh until I'm almost to her pussy. I move them to her inner thigh before grasping hold and squeezing.

“Your sweet little pussy is already mine, *piccolina*. Mine to taste, to touch, to fuck, and to make love to.”

I've fucked hard, and I'm fucked gently. I've fucked fast, and I've fucked slowly. But I've never made love because I've never had any emotions beyond lust or manipulation, sometimes both. With Sylvia, I'm already certain she'll be my first and my only.

I slide my fingers beneath her panties and feel the bare skin. I cup her pussy and hold it while I kiss her neck, loving how she shivers every time I do. Her hands rest on her thighs as she waits to see what I'll do next. My right hand still rests at the base of her throat, so I slide it beneath her blouse to cup her breast. As much as I want to strip her naked and see every inch of her, I won't. But my fingers inch beneath her bra, so I can feel her nipple against my palm.

“Tell me what you want, *piccolina*.”

“You.”

I chuckle.

“I know that. What do you want me to do?”

“Touch me more. Finger me.”

“Pull your panties down.”

When they're around her knees, I pull her left thigh to widen the space I have to play.

“Wear panties again, and I'll burn every pair. You can go ahead and throw them out. When I want your pussy, I'll have it.”

“If you can insist upon that, then I insist you don't wear boxers or briefs or whatever you have on.”

“If I do that, everyone will know that my wife makes me hard. They'll see my cock every time I see you. They'll know I'm fantasizing about fucking you. There's no way my trousers can hide that.”

“Oh, well. Good thing you work with men. I'd gouge women's eyes out.”

I pinch her nipple. Hard. I press the heel of my hand against her clit, my fingers stroking the outside of her pussy and her inner thigh. I'm teasing her, and it makes her restless. She's breathing faster, but otherwise, she barely moves. I know the anticipation is getting to her when I look over her shoulder and see her hands fisted on her lap. The tip of my middle finger dips inside her, and she moans.

“Put your hands behind your back. Cross your wrists.”

I make enough space between us for her to do that. Then I slide my finger into her before drawing it back and rubbing her clit. She tries to move her legs farther apart, but mine now bracket hers. I'm unprepared for her to cup my dick, then rub it.

“Am I allowed to do that, sir?”

“It feels too good to say no. Next time, wait until you’re told to.”

Fuck that. She can touch me whenever the fuck she wants.

I slide my middle and ring fingers into her as the heel of my hand goes back to rubbing her clit. Her moans are quieter than I want. I thrust into her, harder and faster. Each time I plunge into her, my balls ache more for it to be my cock. She’s rubbing me while her hands grip my length. When she feels around, then cups my balls, I’m the one groaning.

“Don’t you dare make me come, *cuore*.”

“Why not? You must have clothes here.”

“If I have to go up to our bedroom and take off any of my clothes, I’m taking you with me. Then I’m stripping you, throwing you on our bed, and ravaging you.”

“Promise?”

She grips me tighter. I pull my hands from her, and she reaches for them in protest. But I’m stronger and quicker. I have her on her back again in an instant. I yank her panties off and toss them toward the fireplace.

“I’m serious. Wear panties again, and I will shred the ones you have on. Then I will find every other pair and burn them.”

“Fine, but you can’t leave those there for your staff to find.”

“I won’t. I’m keeping those.”

I inch backwards like my nickname. When our gazes meet, I won't let her look away. I kiss from her left knee up to her hip. When I'm where I want to be, I drape her legs over my shoulders, then tug her hips to my mouth. I lick from her asshole to her clit before I wrap my hands over her thighs and peel her open for me to see where my cock is going to live for the next fifty years. I intend to live into my nineties or hundreds just so I can stay with my *piccolina*. I might not get it up by then, but I'll still be able to taste her and finger fuck her.

I continue to swirl my tongue. Sometimes flicking it inside her, sometimes sucking her clit. When she tries to raise her hips, I pin her down. When her hand goes to my head to press me closer, I growl. I pull back and slap her cunt, then rub her clit with my thumb until I know she's close. I draw away and watch her. Her eyes had drifted closed, but they snap open the moment I edge her.

“Salva, please.”

“Please what?”

“Anything. Just don't stop.”

“Not yet.”

I attack her pussy again. Licking, sucking, nipping until she's writhing and can't stop. Each time I suspect she's getting close, I freeze. We go around and around, time having no meaning to either of us. I have no idea how long we've been doing this. She hasn't safe worded, instead, begging for more as often as she begs for release.

Fuck it. I'm going to have to change pants. When I know she's close to going from aroused to agony, I shift until my body hovers over her.

"Put your hands over your head."

She obeys instantly. I restrain them in mine while my other hand continues to work her cunt. Now I rock my dick against her, feeling how she dampens my pants. My cock presses against her clit as my fingers stroke her g spot.

"Ask."

She stares for a moment.

"May I come?"

"May I come what?"

"May I come, sir?"

"May I come what, sir?"

"May I come, please, sir?"

"Yes, little one."

I feel her tighten around me. Her body goes taut, and I feel her nails bite into the back of my hand. Our kiss is sloppy but hungry, as though we want to feast on each other. When I feel her body settle, I pull my fingers from her and taste her. I press them to her lips.

"I should make you taste yourself. Make you know how much I crave you now."

"I'd rather taste you."

She glances down between us. I shake my head, and her face flashes hurt before she raises her chin. I sit back and help her up. She's not a thin woman, but I easily pick her up and move her however I want. I arrange her, so she's straddling my lap again.

“Salva, did I do something wrong? You're hard, but you don't want me to reciprocate.”

I press her head to my chest as I stroke her hair and kiss her forehead.

“I didn't do that to make you get me off in return. I want you to know I desire you for you. Not what you can do for me.”

I return to kissing her forehead and stroking her hair. My other hand rests on her bare ass. I glance down when I feel her body twitch. Her eyes are closed, but I don't think she's fully asleep yet. But I'd like her to be. I never imagined I'd want to hold someone while they slept. Holding my niece and nephews when they were babies doesn't count. She nestles closer, her arms tucking between us. She kisses my neck.

“You smell so good. You feel so comfy. Will you hold me while I sleep, Daddy?”

It takes her a moment to realize the word she said—in English—because she's so close to being out. Then she goes rigid. Mortified, she sucks in a breath.

“You're *piccolina mia*. Daddy will hold you as long as you want.”

We're still speaking Italian, but I use the name in English too. She sits back and shakes her head.

"I don't know why I said that. I've never, *never* said that to a man before in any language. I'm not into that kind of kink."

"I didn't think you were. You're not a little. You know what that is, right?"

"Yes. I'm not interested in age play at all. That's why I don't know why I said that."

"Do you feel safe with me now that we've talked?"

"Yes. Completely."

"Did I take care of you? Your wants while I pleased you, and your needs now that we're both coming down from what we shared?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you'll feel safe and taken care of in the future?"

She cups my face and leans forward to press a soft kiss to my mouth before she responds.

"Absolutely."

"Then that's why you said it. I don't think you want a father figure to replace the one you have. I think it's a term of affection no different from me calling you little one. I don't see you as a child or someone who can't make decisions on her own, and that's why she needs taking care of. I see you as someone physically smaller than me. I see you as someone I want to protect. I see you as someone I want to share my life

with. Do you see me as someone you want to share your life with?”

“I wouldn’t have my bare cunt pressed against your cock if I didn’t.”

“Then that’s why we call each other that. I—”

I feel my phone vibrate three times before it stops. A heartbeat later, it vibrates again. I fish for it in my pocket, but it stops ringing after the third one.

“Sylvie, I already know this is work. Hold on.” I tap the screen when it rings again. “Massi?”

“Umberto just put a hit on you.”

CHAPTER 5

Sylvia

I don't know what Massimo just said in English, but I heard him. His tone and now Salvatore's steely gaze tell me something is not right. Salvatore looks straight ahead rather than at me, so it makes me think it's about him, not me. Maybe there's more than one Umberto who'd want to harm Salvatore, but the one I immediately think of is back in Sicily. It takes no effort to believe his reach is long enough to come all the way to New York.

Salvatore and Massimo continue to speak English, and I know it's so I can't understand. All I can do is sit patiently until they end their call. Salvatore is watching me now, and his hand is stroking my ass, but his attention is on his brother. Actually, I'm not sure he realizes his hand is on my ass, much less moving it. I think it might be comforting him as much as it's comforting me.

I remain silent as he hangs up and puts the phone on the couch screen down. His hands rest on my hips as he considers what to say. The longer it takes, the more nervous I get. I smile and try to ease the tension.

"No boat after all?"

"No, *cuore*. We need to go into the city."

"Can you tell me anything about what's happening?"

"I can and I will, but I need to think about what's safe for you."

I climb off his lap and look down at the mark my pussy left. He does the same, and his grin is purely predatory as he meets my gaze. He stands and helps me to my feet before pulling me close.

“If we didn’t have to leave, I’d keep these pants on as a reminder to both of us of how wet I get you.”

“Will you skip the underwear when you get changed?”

He laughs.

“You don’t want me to do that in front of my sister-in-law and my cousin’s wife. Neither would look, but I’d be embarrassed. And you’d be embarrassed for me. My nephews, brother, and cousin wouldn’t let me live it down.”

“They’d talk about me like that?”

He grows serious in an instant.

“Never. They know better than to speak about women that way in front of me or their parents. They’d tease me, not you.”

All I can do is nod. I don’t really see the difference, but I know he knows what he means.

“Is there anything I can do? Anything you need me to get ready while you change?”

He cups my cheek as he watches me. He says nothing, and it’s disconcerting.

“Sylvie, I’d marry you right now. You’re either going to be my greatest asset or my greatest undoing.”

He lets go and turns away, but I grab his hand.

“Wait. What does that mean? What do you think I’m going to do to you?”

“I meant I may never concentrate on a single thing but you. You told me earlier not to play you for a fool. That it would crush you. It goes both ways. I can already feel I’m giving you my mind, body, and heart.”

“Salva, nothing could be more precious to me than that. I want to love you and be loved by you. I think we can have that if you don’t let others get in the way. Be a different man when you’re with me. Be the man you wish you could be every day. Trust me with that, and I’ll give you my heart.”

He presses a hard, fast kiss to my mouth before we head to the foyer. He sprints upstairs, and he’s back in five minutes in an entirely fresh shirt and suit.

* * *

There was a driver outside when we stepped through the front door, then a helicopter waiting for us at the local airport. Once we were in Manhattan, we came to his penthouse. I’ve been listening to a swirl of hushed voices speaking English and Italian for the last two hours. My family is here, and Salvatore is meeting with my dad and uncles along with Massimo and Luca. He glances at me periodically and even shoots me a smile, but the tension in the condo is so thick it threatens to suffocate me. I’m certain no one will let me out on the balcony, but I wish I could at least open a window.

“Sylvia, how were things with Salvatore? How was the boat?”

My mother takes a seat next to me on the sofa after fixing everyone a snack. She's been quiet since we arrived, knowing she'll have to wait for my dad to decide what he wants to tell her. She also knows I didn't go on a boat. My hair isn't even remotely windblown, even though I put it back up in a bun. I'm not in the mood to be manipulated.

"You know we didn't go out on the boat. We talked and started to get to know each other better."

"Talked?"

"Yes, Mama. He kissed me, and I enjoyed it. I think he did, too. We're moving in the right direction, and I'm happy about it."

That's all I want to say. It was uncomfortable as fuck when she flat out asked me if I was still a virgin. I never want to talk to her about my sex life, especially when I know she reported that back to my father. Now she's prodding again, and I definitely won't share a single detail about what I shared with my fiancé with my mother. I wouldn't share it with anyone. Not even my sisters, Allegra and Sophia. Sophia's much closer in age to me, but they're both married. I didn't know why I was the hold-out, but I hadn't met anyone I wanted enough to spend the rest of my life with. There were other candidates my parents presented, but none appealed to me.

When I saw Salvatore's photo, I couldn't stop staring. He's hot beyond words if you like brooding with a sense of menace. Apparently, I do. When we exchanged a few brief emails, there was something heartfelt about them I hadn't gotten from other prospects. That's why I agreed.

I didn't expect to be so attracted to him immediately. Yes, his face and body are amazing. But I've met plenty of desirable men I'd love to fuck. That wasn't it. It's how he makes me feel. I know I'm a means to an alliance that's good for him and his people. But he's been willing to snub my father and uncles to put what I want first. He put my mom in her place about the wedding, so I could have the one I want. He keeps looking at me to check on me. Not because he's suspicious. He wants to make sure I'm all right.

“Tesora—”

“What's that in English?”

I want to learn anything I can.

“Treasure. Don't let infatuation distract you from your purpose.”

I freeze. All I can do is stare at my mom. Purpose? Holy fuck. Do they expect me to spy for them or something?

“You must know we expect you to share what's happening with the Mancinellis once you become one. I'm certain Salvatore knows you will.”

I don't like that. Not even a little bit. I stare at my mother for a moment before I lurch off the sofa. Salvatore is on his feet immediately.

“Salvatore, where are you—”

“Alberto, just a minute.”

My fiancé I really love thinking of him that way—walks around the table and takes my hand. He draws me down the

hallway, even though we can hear people calling to us. He guides me into his bedroom and closes the door. He pulls me into his embrace, and I can't help but sink against him. I'm scared.

“What happened, *piccolina*?”

I shake my head and tighten my hold around his waist. He kisses my forehead and hugs me until I loosen my arms.

“Once I'm a Mancinelli, will I still be a Toretta?”

I pull back to see his face as I ask. His anxious expression eases into one of his smiles that makes me feel like everything is fine when it's not.

“You'll always be a Toretta, but I hope there are some things you won't tell them.”

“You know.”

My heart sinks. I feel like I've already betrayed him.

“Shh, *cuore*. Come here.”

He leads me to the upholstered bench at the end of the bed and sits. He pulls me onto his lap, and I nestle against him again. This is now my favorite place to be. On his lap with his arms around me. I've never felt so protected in all my life, and I grew up with bodyguards accompanying me everywhere—even into restrooms.

“Before I met you, this was as much a political match to me as it is everyone else concerned. I hoped I'd grow to have feelings for you and believed I would, but I wasn't certain. Never did I imagine that the moment I met you, I'd stop giving

a shit about what this marriage gains me except for you. I know what you're expected to do. And it flows both ways. Your family wants our secrets, and my family wants theirs. But I won't put you in the middle. I can't. I want to confide in you, Sylvie, which means I have to trust there are things you won't repeat."

"I don't want to repeat anything. Not in either direction."

"I know. But you had to know this would be an expectation from both sides."

"I did. But it's different now. I—"

"Look at me."

It's a command. It's said quietly, but it's not a suggestion. I sit up so I can see his face. He cups the side of my neck and brushes the softest kiss to my lips.

"Daddy."

The word comes out on a sigh.

"That's right, *piccolina*. We already feel something for one another, and it's more than lust. You know that as well as I do. I know you don't want to do this. I won't ask you for any information. Tell me what you're comfortable about your family, and I'll trust you'll know what to keep within the Mancinellis."

"I don't want to tell them anything. I don't want to betray you, and even telling the most benign thing feels like I would be. It wouldn't just be something said in passing or while sharing what's happening in our lives. It would be to inform. I don't like that. It feels so fucking wrong."

“You know it’ll be years before they don’t pressure you. And that’s assuming they’ll stop.”

“No, it won’t be. I’m marrying you. I’m becoming a Mancinelli. My loyalty is to you and our family. The one I marry into. If they wanted me to stay loyal to them, then they shouldn’t have given me to another family. They shouldn’t be putting me in a position where I change my name to show I’m no longer one of them. You are putting me first already, Salva. I won’t do any less.”

“You’ll create a battle with your parents.”

“Will that create a battle between our families?”

“It might. They’ll accuse me of keeping you from them.”

“Would it end the alliance?”

“It shouldn’t. But it certainly won’t make Christmas fun.”

“Christmas?”

“I figured you’d want to go to your family for at least the first few ones we have together.”

My brow furrows.

“You don’t want to spend them with your family?”

“Of course, I do. But you’re the one moving here and giving up being with your family whenever you want. I figured going over there for the holidays would be the least we can do.”

I cup his face and press a kiss to his lips that isn’t a gentle brushing. His hand skims up my leg and under my skirt. When he cups my ass, I gasp and pull back.

“My panties! We left them in your office.”

“No one goes in there unless I let them in. The only other people who have that code are Massi, Paola, and Luca. Massi and Luca are here, and Paola has no reason to go over. The staff won’t find them because they’re only allowed in when I open the door to them.”

I’m slow to nod, still doubtful that I won’t be humiliated by someone finding them. What if they think they’re some other woman’s? What if they think I’m a slut?

“Sylvie, I can practically hear your thoughts. No one is going to think badly about you because no one is going to find out. And no one would ever believe I brought a woman I’m just fucking into my office. Even if they did, you’re my wife, as far as I’m concerned. What we get up to is our business.”

His hand squeezes my ass, and I lean against him. The tighter he holds my ass cheek, the more I relax. It’s something to focus on. He’s in control, and I don’t have to worry. I feel safe again.

“I still don’t want to tell them anything. And I appreciate the offer for Christmas. I’d like that.”

“We’ll sort it out when it comes up.”

“Salva, it’s already going to come up. We spent hours alone today. The moment we leave here, they’re going to want to know what you told me. They’re going to want to know what I told you. *Zio* Ignacio is persistent.”

“Look at me again.”

I sit up at his command. The way he makes his voice sound... I doubt that's how he speaks to his men or the ones he—interviews. From now on, it's for me alone.

“If Ignacio or anyone else pressures you, I expect you to tell me that. I won't budge on this, Sylvie. If they make you uncomfortable or upset you, then I decide where you go and who you talk to. Not them. You're my wife, and they'll remember that.”

“But I'm not. Not for another two weeks.”

“Do you need me to fuck you right now? Do you need my cum dripping from your pussy to understand you're mine? The moment we signed the marriage contract, you became my wife. Civil ceremony or not. Church ceremony or not. You are my wife, Sylvie. No one makes you do a damn thing you don't want. If you don't believe I'm your husband yet, then I'll fuck you until you do.”

The things those ideas do to me. The way they make me hunger for him to do just that. It's possessive as fuck, yet he just told me he won't tolerate anyone telling me what to do. It doesn't make me feel caged in. It makes me feel—dare I say it? Loved. At the very least, special.

“Can we have that civil ceremony tomorrow? Just the two of us. They can find out later if you want. But can we really make it true?”

When he hesitates, it makes me feel like a fool. Maybe everything he just said was bullshit.

“Sylvie, I can still hear your thoughts again. I’d marry you right this fucking minute. But I’m in a place I control. I’m with my family who aren’t going anywhere. I know the people I’ll spend the rest of my life with. I know my way around the city. I know my homes. I know my cars. I know the restaurants I like and the parks where I go running. I know the grocery store that has the best cheeses in the city. You’ve been here a few hours. I don’t want you to rush your decision about staying and then regret it.”

“You mean regret marrying you.”

“All of it. I want you to have time to decide for yourself.”

I glance toward the door, then look back at Salvatore.

“What’s really going on? I could barely hear any of you, but there’s been a threat. It’s toward you, and it involves Umberto Fichera. I’ve met the man many times, Salva. If he’s threatening you, he will follow through.”

Umberto Fichera is a senior *capo* in the Randazzo family. He’s not their underboss, but he’d like to be. He probably will make sure he is. He’s the *capo dei capi*—another phrase Allegra taught me: the boss of the bosses—and has the power to put out a hit on a man like Salvatore. There are few who are or would. My sister taught me because Domenico—Salvatore and Massimo’s second cousin—currently holds that title until Marco—Massimo’s second son—is ready. She made sure I knew the English for several Mafia positions in case I heard them.

Salva studies me a moment before he speaks.

“Did you know he just divorced a second wife?”

“No. He’s the type of man who would have been a widower twice back in the day. I’m surprised either of those women got away.”

“They both came from powerful families. It surprises me more that either woman’s family allowed her to marry him.”

“They come from families in the same Palermo *mandamenti* as the Randazzos, and he’s the *Porto Vecchio capo madamento*.”

The *Madamento* is a geographical grouping of districts and families that basically band together in an agreement not to fuck with each other too much. Within that are twenty-nine *mandamenti*. There are eight in Palermo alone. Each one is run by a *capo mandamento* who has a seat in the Cupola, a council for all ninety-four Sicilian Mafia families.

The Toretas belong to one, and the Randazzos belong to another in Palermo. We don’t get along. *Zio* Teodoro is the *capo mandamento* for our *mandamenti*. Umberto killed a Lombardo to become *capo madamento* for the one their families belong to. We don’t get along with the Lombardos any better than we do the Randazzos.

“He is. Did anyone tell you he approached your family and asked to marry you?”

“No.”

My eyes are so wide they hurt. Fucking hell. I know where this is going.

“Salva, did he put a hit on you, so you can’t marry me? Is he trying to force Papa’s hand?”

“Yes.”

I run a hand over my face before looking at him again.

“Marrying me is going to get you killed.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Salva—”

“Listen to me, *piccolina*. I am not giving you up. Not now that I’ve finally found the woman I want to marry. Not now that I’ve met you.”

“He put a hit on you because you’re going to marry me. The day we get married isn’t the day he’s going to capitulate. Just the opposite. He’s going to try even harder.”

“I know. Your family, Massi, and I have been discussing your safety. We aren’t coming to an agreement.”

“I’m doing whatever you say. You live here. You know where I’m safest.”

Salvatore doesn’t respond right away. I shake my head.

“No, you are not sending me away, Salva. I’m staying with you. Hide me in a hole somewhere in New York, but I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“Your father’s men have protected you your entire life. They know what they’re doing.”

“I know that. But I’m not running or walking away from you. Umberto is worse than most. Once you’re dead, he’ll

come after me for agreeing to marry you. He can't go after Papa, *Zio* Ignacio, or *Zio* Teodoro because of their positions. *Zio* Raffaello scares the shit out of him from when they were kids. I don't know the entire story, but my uncle is probably why Umberto's never had kids. Something about a hammer to the man's balls. He's going to punish me through you, and he's going to punish Papa through me."

"We know. That's why I want you to go to one of my homes in the Caribbean. We can get you there with no one noticing."

"Any you're staying here?"

"I have to."

"No. If you're confident it's safe enough for you to stay in the city, then I am, too. I'm serious, Salva. I'm not running away the first time there's a threat to us. I won't make any of us look weak. But I also won't feel safe if I'm that far from you. I know my father's men. They have dedicated their lives to protecting my family. I trust them implicitly. But you—there's no one safer to be with than you. No one will protect me better than you."

I finish the last sentence on a whisper. I hope I haven't overestimated my importance to him. It's his turn to cup my face. His unique eyes hypnotize me. The intensity of his gaze heats every inch of me until I feel singed. The determination makes me shiver.

"Your father's men would give up their lives for you. I'll burn the fucking world down for you."

“Daddy, please don’t make me go.”

CHAPTER 6

Salvatore

My hands slide down from Sylvia's cheeks, over her shoulders, along her arms, until I rest them on her waist.

"I don't want you out of my reach, let alone out of my sight. But if I feel it's too dangerous, then you're going whether or not you argue. I have the final say on this, Sylvie."

"And I trust you. Is there anything else I should know? Anything else you can tell me?"

"I want you to stay with Massimo and Nicoletta. They have a home in a part of New York called Queens. It's massive since they have four kids, and Domenico's son is like an honorary fifth one. They live in a gated community on a gated property. They have twenty-four hour highly armed security patrolling the grounds. I want you behind those gates unless I'm taking you somewhere. You can trust Massimo, Domenico, and all my nephews. If they say you need to go out, that's the only exception. If it's not someone directly related to me, then you stay put and call me as fast as you can."

"I don't know everyone. I don't even know all their names."

"I don't expect you to remember all of this, but I'm going to tell you. Massimo is married to Nicoletta. They have Luca, Marco, Lorenzo, and Maria. Massimo's best friend is also our second cousin. Domenico is married to Carlotta, who's been Nicoletta's best friend since they were in kindergarten. They

have Emilio and Matteo. I hate saying this, but Emilio is the one member of my family I can't completely trust. Only go with him if someone else is with you. My sister, Paola, only has one child, Carmine, but he has a best friend, Gabriele, who may as well be family."

"I know Gabriele and have his entire life. The Scottos have worked for my family for generations. I've met Carmine since he's the same age as my niece Serafina."

"Then you know you can trust Benedetto and Chiara. No one else, Sylvie."

I watch her nod, and I know it's a lot to take in. I'm sure she recognizes names, but she may not know how they're all related to me. She lived in Paris for years, so we never met during my family's trips back to Sicily.

"What are we going to do when my parents don't agree? What do they want?"

"They want us to marry tomorrow, then they'll take you to either Brazil or Morocco."

"Brazil because it's another continent but at least on the right side of the world to get back here quickly. Morocco for the same reason, except it's closer to Sicily."

"Exactly."

"Do you really want me to stay? I told you what I want, and you're agreeing. But is that what you want?"

"I told you: I don't want you out of my reach, let alone out of my sight. You go nowhere without me or someone in my family. I want you exactly where I know you are and only with

my family. My family wants to keep ties to the Old Country and to have a safe place to pass goods through on the way to Europe and the Middle East. Your family wants my family's money to fight the Randazzos and Lombardos. Your family needs mine more than the other way around. I could walk away, and that would end this. There's not a chance in fucking hell that's going to happen. By the time we get married in two weeks, Umberto won't be a problem anymore."

I'm going to be a big fucking problem for him. I'm not ready to tell Sylvia there's a good chance I'm going to be away for a week while I go to Sicily to deal with this. I hope it doesn't come to that, but if it does, I want her somewhere I don't have to worry. Somewhere that lets me focus.

"You keep saying you can hear my thoughts. It goes both ways, *caro*. I know you don't want me to know you might have to go to Sicily. You want me somewhere that won't distract you. That's why I'll go wherever you say, but I don't want to leave you."

The way we read each other's minds is uncanny. If this were truly a business deal, I'd call it another early indicator that marrying Sylvia will be the best thing that ever happened to me.

Someone's knocking at the door. Nosey fuckers. Like I'd be fucking someone's daughter right down the hall during a crisis management meeting.

"*Cosa?*" What?

"Daddy!"

Sylvia hisses to me. My tone isn't exactly warm. But I'm not pleased that anyone thinks they can interrupt whatever I'm doing with my fiancée. My home. My wife. My rules. Apparently, no one else sees the marriage as a foregone conclusion like I do. And that's odd to me since Sylvia and her family flew halfway around the world for this. Her sisters and their husbands, along with Allegra's daughters, aren't arriving until the day before the wedding. But they're all coming for the singular reason that Sylvia and I are getting married.

“Salvatore, dobbiamo finire di parlare.” Salvatore, we need to finish speaking.

“Quando ho finito di parlare con sua figlia.” When I'm finished speaking to your daughter.

Alberto can kiss my ass.

“Salvatore.”

I ignore him and focus on Sylvia.

“We go out there when we're through talking. I don't take orders from your father, and neither do you. Once we're done meeting, I want you to go to Massi and Letta's house. I'm going to have Marco and Lorenzo go by the hotel and get your luggage. It'll be there when you arrive.”

“How're they going to get into my room?”

I arch an eyebrow at her. She frowns and nods.

“My parents are going to be pissed if you just refuse to take me to the hotel.”

“Is that where you want to go?”

“I’ve already told you what I want, and I know what you want. I’m just stating the inevitable.”

“The alternative is I just buy you an entirely new wardrobe.”

I grin at that idea. She rolls her eyes.

“Only if you allow me to at least have bras if not panties.”

I nip her earlobe before whispering to her.

“You shouldn’t have suggested that. Take yours off. Your top is thick enough for no one to notice, but I’ll know I can suck your tits whenever I want. All I have to do is lift your shirt.”

“I can’t go without a bra! There’s no way people won’t be able to tell. Salva, no. I won’t be presentable. Do you really want your men to stare at my chest once we leave here?”

“They know better than that.”

She shakes her head, but she lifts her shirt and pulls up her bra. She doesn’t take either off. Fuck. They’re divine. They’re not overly large, but they’re full and tipped with dusk nipples that harden the longer I look at them. I run my thumbs over them before leaning forward to suck on her left one. I groan as I knead the other. She whispers in my ear as I continue to use my tongue to play with her nipple.

“See, Daddy. You can have whatever you want whenever you want. I don’t have to be half naked.”

“Sylvie, you’re making it very hard to hold out to our wedding night.”

“Our wedding night? Is that for my parents’ sake? It sure as shit isn’t for either of us.”

“You’ve waited this long. I don’t want us to have sex. Then you realize you don’t want to marry and regret what we’ve done.”

She pulls down her shirt and bra and stands, but only long enough to shift and straddle my lap.

“Salvatore, we don’t live the life most people do. To the rest of the world, our families are morally devoid. They think we just kill indiscriminately and engage in crimes for the money and just because we can. They don’t know us. They don’t know the responsibilities you shoulder. They will never understand how fast you have to make decisions you can’t take back. They’ll never know what it’s like to marry a man with your type of power. They’ll never understand the reason I want to spend my life with a man like you. Fuck them all. I don’t care about anyone else in this marriage but you. It’s why we came in here. I don’t feel right telling my parents things about my new family. My loyalty is to you. Whether or not we ever love each other, I know I won’t find a better husband than you. Stop trying to give me opportunities to leave. If I want to go, I will. But I can open that door on my own. Stop doing it for me. I want it shut and locked. I’m not fucking going anywhere.”

Goddamn. She is magnificent. The fierceness in her expression turns me on like no other woman ever has. Part of it is that she’s fucking gorgeous. But mostly, it’s knowing I can depend on her to help me run this family. I know I can trust

her. I've learned the hard way how to tell who is and isn't trustworthy. I learned that lesson young. I'm rarely wrong these days. This is a woman who will chew you up and spit you out, then ground you into dust with her designer heel. She'll do it all with a serene smile.

“I think of you as my wife already for two reasons. One is that the contracts are signed. The wedding is set, and the only reason you're sitting on my lap right now is because we're already engaged. The second is because I knew the moment we met I wanted to marry you. In the space of five hours, I've never been more certain of a decision. I know the past two hours have been boring, but I watched you. You take everything in stride. You listened to everything you could understand without being obtrusive. You're obviously knowledgeable about the conflicts among the families. You're shown you're determined and bordering on stubborn. I think it's fucking sexy and will probably result in a lot of spankings for your pleasure and mine. So I don't fear anyone pushing you around. Do you look at me as your husband yet?”

“Yes. The moment you told me what I want matters. Period. That's when I knew I was making the right decision. Everything since then has confirmed it. You make life-altering decisions in the blink of an eye. I don't have to do that. But this is the only life I've known. I can tell a bad man from a good one. I know who and what you are, Salvatore. You're my husband.”

“Where do you want to spend the night, *piccolina*?”

“With you.”

“Would you sleep next to me and just let me hold you?”

She grins at me and tries not to laugh. She pulls her lips in, but she can't stop herself. She laughs, and it lightens my mood a hundredfold.

“Do we need to protect your modesty, Salva? I know it's not your virginity.”

“We're going to my brother and sister-in-law's home. I'm not fucking you there, even if I have my own room. The first time we're together, whether it's our wedding night or before, is going to be somewhere I can make you scream.”

“Daddy, why do you have to say such things when we have to go back out there and deal with real life?”

“Because if I'm going to be so hard my balls feel like they'll explode, then I can leave your pretty little pussy aching for me to get you off.”

“Will you later? Or is everything strictly innocent?”

“I'll take care of you, *piccolina*.”

We look at each other, and something shifts between us. Some type of solemn, silent agreement that we're in this together. I brush a wisp of hair away from her temple before we share a gentle kiss that has to last us for I don't know how long. I help her back onto her feet before I stand. I look down and point at my cock.

“Imagine how noticeable this would be without boxer briefs. As is, your father's probably waiting to hand your mother a butcher's knife to carve it off.”

She stretches to kiss my cheek as she takes my hand. I entwine our fingers before we head back into the living room. My penthouse is an open floor plan, unlike my beach house with its formal dining room. The men are still gathered around the table, and all of them but Massi and Luca are glowering at me. Fuck them. I don't answer to them. If they'd fucking taken care of Umberto years ago like I suggested, we wouldn't be dealing with this bullshit. As is, I'm the one who has to fix this shit. The fuck shit put the hit on me. We've just been debating how not who.

Sylvia's ready to release my hand and go to the sofa with her mother, but I don't let go. I bring her to the table and pull out a chair. My brother and nephew smile at Sylvia but don't bother to look at me. My soon-to-be father-in-law and soon-to-be uncles-in-law aren't so accepting. Raffaello is the first to dissent aloud.

“Salvatore, this isn't an issue for the women.”

“If you believed that, then they wouldn't have been able to hear any of this conversation. We've spoken English, which Sylvia might not understand, but your sister-in-law does. None of you have tried to hide anything from Angelina. I'm not hiding things from my wife. If something happens to me, once she's officially a Mancinelli, she needs to know what to do. As *la madrina*, she'll have duties. She needs to know things Massi and Luca won't have time to explain in a crisis.”

We spend fifteen minutes arguing. Or rather, the Toretta men argue. The Mancinelli men ignore them and keep making plans. An hour later, Sylvia knows I'm probably going to

Palermo in a day or two. She knows where to go if she has to run from Massi and Nicoletta's house on her own. I can't imagine a situation where she would, but just in case. She knows what to do if I wind up arrested or injured in the U.S. or Sicily. She knows where the extra cash and extra passports are in the penthouse. It surprised her to see counterfeit ones with her name as Sylvia Mancinelli already on them. There's a counterfeit marriage certificate dated a week ago, just in case. She also knows the combination to the gun safe in my closet and which drawers or cabinets have weapons.

We haven't told her family that she's staying with my brother's family. We definitely haven't told them we're spending the night together. But we're almost ready to go, so I can't put it off any longer.

"My driver will take you to the hotel. An SUV is waiting for Massi, Luca, and me to take Sylvia to their house."

Luca doesn't live there anymore, but it's just an easier way to say it.

"Why?"

Angelina is the first to demand an answer.

"Because that's where it's safest for Sylvia."

"No. Until she's your wife in God's eyes and the law's, she stays with us."

"*She* is standing right here, Mama. Salvatore and I discussed it. I'm going to Massimo and Nicoletta's."

She reaches out her hand above the table, and I don't hesitate to take it. She turns them so we can lace our fingers

together. She doesn't take her eyes off her mother for a second while she makes it clear which side she's on now. She dares any of them to disagree with her as her gaze sweeps the table.

Alberto glares at me before speaking up.

“Where are you staying?”

“In my room at my brother's house. He has four adult children who don't live at home. My sister also has a room there, plus one for Dom and Carlotta and one for their son. That doesn't include the rooms that are for guests.”

And Sylvia won't stay in a damn one of those but mine. Alberto opens his mouth, but Sylvia is faster.

“Papa, I'm going with my husband. You picked a man you believe I can trust and depend on. You're leaving America in two weeks and leaving me behind. If you don't think you chose the right man, then say so. But if you did, then there's no point in arguing. Either way, Salvatore is my husband as much as I'm his wife. You ensured that when you sent him a contract to sign, then signed it yourself.”

I watch as her gaze hardens, and I wonder what she's about to say next. I'm kinda excited.

“For this cause shall a woman leave her father and mother, and shall cleave to her husband; and the two shall become one flesh. So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.’ Papa, you're the one who made me leave.”

That's not quite how the Bible verse goes. As the man, I left my mother and father a long time ago, and they're both

dead now. I'm certain they went in opposite directions; God rest my mother's soul. I'm happy to cleave to Sylvia any time and make our flesh one. Literally and metaphorically. From the way she's holding my hand and staring down her father, I'd say she believes that verse just the way she said it.

"I didn't send you to Catholic school for you to use the Bible against me, Sylvia."

"Don't look at it that way, Papa. Look at it as money well spent. Plenty of it stuck with me."

"How about honor thy mother and father?"

"I'm here to get married, aren't I, Papa?"

She shoots him an innocently inquisitive expression, but her gaze challenges him. It's not "check, please." It's "priest, please." Can I marry her right this minute? Or could everyone leave, so I can strip her naked and show her just how much I appreciate her assertiveness? But I can't do either of those.

"The drivers are waiting. I assigned Benedetto and Gabriele to you for this evening and tonight. They'll be outside your rooms along with Matteo and Carmine."

Carmine's at the top of my fucking shit list right now because of a fucking mess he caused that I'm still digging him out of. But as much trouble as that boy can cause, he's loyal to this family. He's already proven that and that there's no limit to what he'll do to defend us. That's the entire reason he's in the fucking mess. But no one who isn't a Mancinelli needs to know. Well, Gabriele knows because he's practically Carmine's fraternal twin. That means Benedetto and Chiara

know too, but they won't say a word. Carmine's like a second son.

Sylvia's family knows they're fighting a losing battle. I know they want to win the war, so they'll concede this one. I won't concede shit if Sylvia's safety is concerned. We all get on the elevator, guns resting against our right thighs, women in the center. You never know what might be on the other side when these doors open.

CHAPTER 7

Sylvia

Nicoletta might be the kindest woman I've ever met. The moment I walked through her front door, I felt like I was her sister. I love Allegra and Sophia, and I already miss them. I think Nicoletta will keep me from getting too lonely. She whisked me into the kitchen, assumed I was starving—which I was—and started pulling things out of the fridge. Before I knew it, we had a virtual feast on the counters while we cooked dinner together. I nearly ate too much cheese, antipasti, and fruit to have dinner. Everything she picked up, she said in English. She made me say it three times before we moved on. It was a lot, but I feel like I remember plenty.

By the time we sat down for dinner, my head was spinning. I met Marco and Lorenzo, who are home from college for the summer break. Their older brother, Luca, already graduated. I wasn't sure about their ages until dinner. Maria, their sister, is on a high school graduation trip to somewhere called Cabo. She'll be home in a few days. I'm looking forward to meeting her. She sounds a lot like Sophia.

This is a far better meal than anything my family is having from room service. Not only is the food better, but so is the company. I laugh until my cheeks hurt. But I'm dragging by the time dessert arrives. Salvatore can tell I'm exhausted. We excuse ourselves and head upstairs. Someone put my luggage in a guest room at the opposite end of the hall from Salvatore's room. When I opened my mouth to say it was fine, and I could sleep down there for a night, he shot me a look that had me

snapping my mouth shut. He retrieved my bags and took them to his room. He's just shut the door.

“Do you want to take a bath, *piccolina*?”

His arms slide around my waist, and I lean back against his chest. It's a solid wall of muscle, and his shoulders are so much broader than mine that I bet no one could see me if they stood behind him. Maybe my legs.

“I'd like to take a shower. I'm too tired for a bath.”

Unless you're getting in with me.

“Which bag do you need things from?”

“Everything I need is in my hand luggage. I wanted it to be easy to get to once I arrived at the hotel.”

I open the bag and pull out my toiletries bag. I'm about to reach for my pajamas when I realize they aren't even remotely cute. At least they're not old. They're just plain shorts and a tank top. Salvatore comes to stand behind me again, and I feel my skirt loosening.

“What's the matter, *cuore*?”

“Nothing. I was thinking about what I might need for tomorrow and which case it's in.”

“Take your shower and get ready for bed. You look ready to drop. We'll find whatever you need in the morning.”

He hands me the toiletries bag and turns me toward the bathroom. He gives me a little push then a tap on the ass. I guess he's taking care of the pajama issue. I'm either coming out in a towel or naked.

“Do you need to brush your teeth or anything?”

“Yes, and take out my contacts.”

He follows me into the bathroom, and there are his and her sinks. I watch him in the mirror as he pulls out saline and a case from the medicine cabinet. He already has a toothbrush and toothpaste standing up in a cup. We take out our contacts at the same time, then brush our teeth together. It seems so—normal. When he kisses my cheek before turning to leave the bathroom, I feel like we’re an old married couple. But when I strip and step into the shower, I wonder if I’ve just let Salvatore’s charm sweep me away. We’ve known each other less than a day. We aren’t declaring love that neither of us feels, but we are declaring undying loyalty and commitment. Am I crazy?

Probably. But I really, really like him. He gets me, and I think I get him. I haven’t had that kind of immediate connection with anyone. Male or female. Romantic or platonic. It’s intoxicating and dizzying to meet someone who can read your mind and whose mind you can read. Part of me also feels like our marriage is such a foregone conclusion because they arranged it. They’ve signed contracts like they were two hundred years ago. We’re in the States now, so there’s no point in fighting any of this.

I may as well accept it as fact and my current reality. It’s not like I’m giving up or giving in. I’d just rather not fight the inevitable, and I’d rather get along with my future husband than not. Since we’re so attracted to each other, what’s the point in fighting it? In hiding it? Regardless, we’re getting

married in two weeks. If we fuck now because we know it's going to happen in two weeks, does it really matter?

I'm glad my father presented Salvatore as a potential husband. I appreciate that he let me decide whether I accepted the offer. He could have made a unilateral decision. I could have fought him on it. But then we'd all be miserable. From my lips to God's ear. I'm happy Salvatore came into my life and the decision I made.

I just fear we're moving too fast. I don't want to give my heart away to a man who might not reciprocate after all. A teeny, tiny part of me worries this is all too good to be true. Salvatore must be a master liar and manipulator to have been in his position as don for more than a decade and a half. He's a man who gets what he wants. If he wants me because he wants to fuck me or he wants me to look pretty on his arm, then he'll get that. I just hope he also wants to love me as much as I want to love him. I want a marriage that isn't just transactional. One where we fuck until I get pregnant a few times, then we have next to nothing to do with each other. One where we barely talk to each other because we don't care about each other's lives.

I wash my hair before slathering the length in conditioner. As I scrub myself, I wonder if going out there in a towel is too much for the first day. But I have no choice since I didn't bring in my pajamas. What about him seeing me naked? He's already sucked my tits and my pussy. He's stared at and spanked my ass. Being naked doesn't seem such a big deal when I think about it that way. But it is. Being fully bare feels

more vulnerable. He knows I'm a virgin, but will he still think I'm a slut if I let him see me that way on the day we met?

I rinse the body wash and conditioner off. I'm about to turn off the water when I hear a knock.

“Sylvie?”

“Yes?”

“I'm putting my robe on the counter. I realized you didn't bring any clothes in with you. Sorry about that.”

The mirror is foggy, but I can tell he's not looking at me through the glass door. He's not even look at me through the mirror. His hand is inside the bathroom, but his head is turned away. My shoulders droop, and I can't help but smile. He's giving me what privacy he can while still giving me some clothes. He's not assuming that because of what we did earlier that I want him to see me naked now.

“Thanks, Salva. I appreciate it. I'm almost done.”

I watch the door close in the mirror and hurry to finish rinsing off. The towels are purely decadent. I've never felt anything so soft and fluffy in my life. Not even in the best hotels in the world. I just want to stay wrapped up in it. But then I spot Salvatore's robe. It's like the towel, but when I slide it on, I can smell his cologne. It drowns me, and I love that. It feels the same as when he wraps me in his arms and lets me lean against his chest. I grab my comb and open the door. I step where I can see him as I detangle my hair. He's in a pair of pajama pants and t shirt. I guess I was hoping he'd leave his chest bare.

He's reclining against the pillows, but when he sees me, he gets off the bed and prowls toward me. He holds out his hand for my comb, and after a moment's hesitation, I give it to him. He leads me out to the bed, where I sit. He turns me a little and sits down behind me. He's incredibly gentle as he runs the comb through my hair. Easing through the few knots he finds.

"Do you want to blow dry it?"

"I should, but you're lulling me to sleep."

"Do you want to get out pajamas?"

I have my eyes closed, and I'm really close to drifting off.

"Can't I sleep in this? It smells like you, and it's comfy."

"Whatever you want, little one."

I hear him set aside the comb before he stands up. My eyes are half open as he turns down the bed and pats the mattress. I move over and climb in. I'm a little more awake as I watch him move around to the other side of the bed. Once he's under the covers, too, he turns off the bedside lamp. Now I'm wide awake. I feel him roll toward me.

"Come here, *piccolina*."

I scoot closer until I feel his arms come around me. I adjust, so my head rests on his shoulder. I can't help the bone-weary sigh. I feel him pull the belt loose, then his hand skims up my thigh until he's holding onto my ass. He pulls me even close, then he's stroking it like he did when Massimo called him earlier.

"Daddy?"

“Hmmm.”

“That feels so nice, and I’m enjoying it.”

“But?”

“No buts. I like it. It’s super soothing after a really long and sometimes fucked-up day. If you want more, I won’t stop you. But if you’re happy to hold me while I fall asleep, I’m happy with that, too.”

“Jet lag is likely to wake you up early, and I’m an early riser. Sleep now, little one, because you’ll need your energy for how many times I make you come in the morning.”

“Will you let me make you come, Salva?”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to stop the moment I feel your body against mine.”

I inch toward him some more and draw my leg over his hip. My hand trails down his chest until I get to the waistband of his pants. He doesn’t stop me when I slip my fingers under the material. When my fingers brush the tip of his cock, I realize he’s longer than I expected. I push his pants down enough for his cock to come out. I wrap my hand around him and stroke. I’m barely aware of what I’m doing now that he’s caressing my ass, hip, and thigh. He’s lulling me back to sleep faster than I can get him off. I shift again, and his tip rubs against my pussy. We both freeze. Then he rolls me onto my back.

“Sylvie, you’re exhausted. You can barely keep your eyes open. I can tell even though it’s dark. You don’t even realize you’re dozing off in between strokes. I’m going to pull my

pants up, and we're going to roll over again. You're going to sleep on me. If you want more tomorrow night, then we'll go to our penthouse or back to our beach house."

"Our?"

"Yes, *piccolina*. Our. If you want our first time to be tomorrow or any other night, then say so when you're ready. We'll go somewhere other than here. After that, you're going to sleep on me just the way you are tonight, but we're going to fall asleep with me buried inside of you with my cock keeping my cum in your pussy."

"That sounds perfect."

I know I'm slow to respond for a moment, and I fear he thinks I'm not really that agreeable. But I caught myself as I was about to fall asleep. The need to close my eyes is just too strong now that I'm lying down in his arms.

"Daddy, I wish you were inside me right now. We don't even have to fuck. But I admit it. I'm too tired to even think straight. Hold me, please."

He rolls us, and I wind up sprawled across him. One leg between his, my pussy against his hip. His arms are around me, and my head is on his chest. It's not like I haven't slept next to a guy before. It's not like I haven't slept in this position before. I'm a virgin, not a nun. But nothing with Salvatore is anything like my past. I let my eyes drift closed, and I feel myself twitch twice. Salvatore's breathing is steady, and I'm almost totally out. I'm certain Salvatore doesn't think I'll hear him.

“Piccolina mia, I hope you can love me back one day.”

“I already do.”

I don't know what happens after that because I'm asleep like the dead.

* * *

I've never slept as well as I did with Salvatore, but Massimo knocked on our door at three in the morning. They whispered for a minute, then Salvatore was kissing me goodbye after a quick shower. Of course, I didn't fall back to sleep, but it was too early to get up. I wound up watching American TV and not understanding any of it. It was just nice to have the company. That was two days ago, and I haven't seen him since.

Massimo hasn't been home either, and I believe Nicoletta when she says she knows nothing. Their sons have been in and out at all hours. Neither of us knows what to think. My parents and uncles are still here, but they're just as tight-lipped. They've been coming to the house for dinner, and they've tried to convince me to move to the hotel. That's the last thing I'll do while Salvatore is gone.

The one thing Luca could share was that Salvatore told him to make sure I can keep all my appointments for wedding stuff. I've been mostly sleeping off the jet lag, but Carlotta is coming over today. She, Nicoletta, my mom, and I are going to a couple bakeries to taste cakes. I met Carlotta the morning after Salvatore left. I thought Nicoletta was the kindest woman ever. Carlotta is her kindred spirit for sure. They're hilarious together, and they've made me feel like I've always been part of this family.

Carlotta's husband, Domenico, is one of our guards today, and he's been hanging out at the house with Carlotta, Nicoletta, and me. If he's here with us instead of one of Salvatore's nephews, it's because Salvatore and Massimo want someone more experienced. That freaks me the fuck out. But I keep it to myself.

“Are you ready?”

I look up from slipping on my shoes as Nicoletta comes into the foyer. Carlotta and Domenico are right behind her. I look past them and see Luca, Marco, and Lorenzo in tow. When Domenico opens the door for us, I see Carmine, Matteo, and Gabriele waiting by an SUV. For now, I'll ride with Nicoletta and Carlotta, but this makes me think they're going to split my mom and me off from them. I look at Gabriele since I've known him his entire life.

I wonder if I can tell anything from his expression, but he's probably the most stoic of them all. At eighteen, he's not the tallest anymore, but he's the most muscular. He was always the biggest in any group of kids his age, but he was such a sweet boy. Quiet and polite. He loved to read anything he could get his hands on. Even some of my law school books. I don't know if this life has left anything sweet in the man he is now.

He opens the door of the SUV and helps us all get in, with Carmine and Domenico already in the third row. I didn't realize Benedetto was in the driver's seat. Gabriele gets into the front passenger's. Matteo, Luca, Lorenzo, and Marco are in the second vehicle. I hear the rifles being moved around

behind me as Domenico and Carmine ready them just in case. I already know my handgun is in my purse. I'm positive the other two ladies have theirs. This isn't any different from Sicily except the SUV is larger. One of these tanks wouldn't fit down half the streets in Palermo.

I listen to the chatter around me, but no one tries to draw me into the conversation as I sit with my eyes closed. I never expected to miss someone as much as I do Salvatore. It makes no sense. We had one day. Yeah, we did some seriously intimate shit, but nothing I haven't done before. We talked about some seriously heavy shit, but we still don't know each other that well. But it's like there's a hole in my heart that just aches. I'm not scared. At least, not all the time. I just miss his voice and how he pays attention when I'm talking. How he does his best to make me feel special. And more than anything, I want to know he's safe. If he were dead, someone would have told me. But that doesn't mean he's safe.

It takes us nearly an hour to get into Manhattan because of traffic. I watch as the second SUV pulls around us and up to the curb in front of our car. I'm ready to get out of the car and join my mom in the other. Carlotta puts her hand on my arm.

"I'll go."

There's something about her tone that makes me pause. I look out of the windshield then at Carlotta as my mom walks toward the SUV.

"She'll—"

"I'll go."

She just repeats herself, then Gabriele's climbing out of the car. She lets him open her door before he escorts her to the other SUV. I watch my mom greet her, then look toward the vehicle I'm in. I can see her frown, but I see Carlotta smiling. They both disappear into the massive black tank. I slide over to give Nicoletta more room as Gabriele returns. He speaks in English, but I don't understand.

“She's pissed.”

I look at Nicoletta, but she just smiles and waves it off. I need to hurry up and learn the fucking language. I don't like not knowing what's happening. When I sigh and look out my window, Nicoletta takes pity on me.

“*Lui dice che è incazzata.*” He says she's pissed off.

That's no surprise. Wonderful. Things are tense between my family and me. Partly because of whatever the fuck is going on with Umberto, but largely because they didn't expect me to side with Salvatore so fast. I guess I didn't either. But what do they want from me? Loyalty is everything in our world. It's the difference between life and someone stabbing you in the back. But my loyalty has to be to my husband before anyone else. He's the head of my new family, and the don of my new branch. He's who I'm going to live with for the rest of my life. He's going to be the father to our children. He's who I want to love and be loved by. If I'm not loyal to him first, it'll make for a miserable home life, but it'll also put both of us under way too much scrutiny by the men who follow Salvatore.

Mama knows that. She went through the same thing when she married Papa. But they didn't hit it off as well as I have with Salvatore. I need to speak to Allegra. She's married to the *Mala del Brenta* don in Venice. They're the Venetian equivalent to the *Cosa Nostra*, which is specifically Sicilian. They met in college and fell in love. But they could only marry because both families agreed it was advantageous. Piero's father was still alive, so it wasn't quite the way it is with Salvatore and me. They were twenty-two when they married, and that was twenty-one years ago. There's a sizeable gap between Allegra and me—eight years—but only eighteen months between Sophia and me. Mama lost some pregnancies between Allegra and me, and for a while they stopped trying.

Sophia was thirty-one when she got married, but she's been with Daniel since they were nineteen. Between grad school for her and med school for him, then waited to get married because they didn't want money from either set of parents. Sophia definitely wasn't a virgin when she got married. Part of me thinks why the fuck did I wait? Another part of me is glad my only memories will be with Salvatore. It doesn't bother me at all that he's had sex with other people. Like I've said, I'm a virgin, not a nun.

My mind is wandering as I watch the buildings pass. It's easier than worrying about how pissed my mom must be. It's easier than worrying about Salvatore. But we've just pulled up in front of the first bakery. It looks very sophisticated and almost French. I sweep my gaze over the window display as we approach. Definitely *almost* French.

I meet my mom at the door, and I'm surprised at how much I appreciate her hug. Despite how things have been on this trip, we're close. And I usually welcome her advice. The hug reassures me more than I realized I needed. I glance at Carlotta and wonder if she's why my mom isn't being as standoffish as I feared. When she winks at me, I know she is. Now I'm really wondering what she said. The man behind the counter greets us, and I look away. Dear God in Heaven. There isn't a part of the French-speaking world that has an accent like that.

How does he pass this off in New York of all places? This is one of the most international cities on the globe. Nicoletta's talking to him about our appointment while I look around. I'm listening to them, and something is not right. I move a little closer to Luca as though I'm checking out a display.

"Luca, how did your mom find this place?"

I'm glad we're speaking Italian instead of English.

"She heard it won some competitions."

How? The items in the displays are at least a day old. The man doesn't sound as confident as he should if he's an award-winning baker.

"Something is off here. That man isn't French. These are shit pastries or old. My niece is an amazing baker but not a professional. I would serve her cakes before I would ever serve these."

I look around and gesture for Carlotta to come over. I know she bakes a lot.

“Lotta, what do you think?”

“That TV made these look much better than they are. This place has exceptional reviews, though. I don’t get it.”

I look over at the man and study him.

“Luca, we need to go. This doesn’t feel right at all. Something’s wrong.”

He looks over at the other guys, and they must understand some silent command. They spread out, someone by each window, door, and the archway to the kitchen. I look at my mom, and she must sense something’s up to. She comes to stand behind me, blocking my back from the window. We might argue, but she’s still my mom. I step next to Nicoletta and keep my voice low.

“*Dobbiamo andarcene.*” We need to go.

It’s the same thing I said to Luca. She glances at me and nods. I don’t understand what she’s saying in English except for thank you. The man looks insulted, and that makes me want to bolt. I smile and turn back to Luca, who’s now standing with Domenico and Benedetto.

“Get my mom and the others out now. I’m the bride. One of you stays with me, and I’ll ask a few last questions. I’ll act like I just thought of something. What did Nicoletta say?”

“She said you all wanted to try slices. He’s headed in the kitchen now. We all go.”

“No. Take them. I need to know for sure.”

“Sylvia—”

“Get my mom and yours out of here with Carlotta. Now, Luca.”

I shoot him, then Domenico a look that says I’m not budging. They look torn since I’m certain Salvatore threatened them within an inch of their lives, but I know Benedetto and Gabriele will stay with me. That means Carmine will too.

My mom doesn’t want to leave me, but I shoo her away and promise to be outside in a couple minutes. None of the three older women look pleased with me, and neither do any of the men. I’m standing with Gabriele behind me. Benedetto’s on my left, and Carmine on my right when the guy returns with a tray that holds four slices of about six different cakes. The moment he notices the others are gone, his demeanor changes.

I step forward and smile, gesturing for Carmine to come with me.

“Will you interpret, please?”

He nods and looks at the man.

“Tell him they stepped out because Carlotta got a video call from her daughter with her first granddaughter.”

I listen as Carmine speaks to the man in English. He says something back that I don’t understand, and Carmine doesn’t bother to translate.

“Ask him what each type of cake is, please.”

All of them should have French names. The ones he gives in English don’t sound close. I lock gazes with him and offer

him my innocent smile I use when I play dumb to find out what I really want.

“*Avez-vous des secrets pour vos pâtes friables?*” Do you have any secrets to your pâtes friables?

He’s completely surprised by my French. He just looks at me. Not only can’t he answer in French, but he also clearly doesn’t catch the baking term for a particular type of dough. It’s the one used for quiches and tarts. *Pâtes battues*—beaten dough—is what’s used for most cakes. I only know this because of Serafina. But it’s come in handy.

“*Quali è lu missaggiu?*” What’s the message?

I don’t bother with Italian. I ask it in Sicilian. The man smirks at me and crosses his arms. I watch Carmine do the same thing, except his shirt strains over his board shoulders. I’m certain Gabriele and Benedetto mirror Carmine since this man’s gaze rests on them, and I see fear flare in this imposter’s eyes. Carmine leans toward the man and whispers in Sicilian.

“*Curri.*” Run.

Carmine pulls his handgun from his lower back while Benedetto and Gabriele escort me from the shop. Carmine is behind us a moment later, then they’re rushing me back to the SUVs. Marco is just outside, his gun poised to shoot as we leave. Luca is standing beside a rear door with it open. I see Nicoletta and Carlotta in the far back. My mom’s in the middle. I climb in, and Benedetto follows. Luca gets in the front passenger seat, and Domenico is driving now.

My mom doesn't hesitate the moment the door locks snap, and Domenico pulls into traffic.

“What the hell were you thinking staying in there if you knew something was wrong?”

“Because maybe it was nothing. But if it was, I wanted my mother and friends as far away from there as I could get them. If they wanted me dead, I would have been the moment I stepped through the door. Before anyone could do anything. They want me alive, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't have hurt one of you in the process.”

Luca looks back over his shoulder at me.

“How'd you know?”

“The window displays. Whoever owns that place or is the baker either wasn't there this morning, and those are leftovers. Or they purposely made them look unappealing. At least to anyone who knows French pastries. Those were not award-winning anything. Then his accent was entirely wrong. It was like a Corsican and Québécois mixed. No one speaks like that.”

I know I'm not the only French speaker in the car, but I'm the only one who lived there for most of their adult life. I've traveled to French-speaking countries all over the world for work. I can recognize accents and dialects. That man's matched nothing it should have. It was a shit imitation, and I don't even speak English.

“Where's the next place?”

Wishful thinking. I know. There's not a chance in hell we're going anywhere but back to Massimo and Nicoletta's. Le sigh. Pepe Le Pew had it right even in dubbed Italian. So much for a nice day out. We take what must be a roundabout way to get back to the house because it takes nearly an hour-and-a-half. Or maybe it's just traffic. I don't know, but it was slower than getting into Manhattan. I've barely made it into the bedroom to change into something more comfortable than the dress I chose when my phone rings.

“Salva? Are you all right?”

“*Piccolina*, when I get home, you're going over my knee for a real spanking. Nothing will be pleasurable about it. What the hell were you thinking staying in that bakery once Luca knew something was wrong?”

“Luca? I'm the one who knew something was off.”

“And he's the one who was in charge today. I know he wanted you to leave with the other women, and you refused. I know if he wanted you away from there, you should have listened. And I fucking know if I'd been there, you would have. Sylvia, how could you endanger yourself like that?”

“For starters, I would have insisted whether or not you were there. And second, if that man wanted me dead, I would have been before anyone knew what was happening. Two big SUVs pull up with women surrounded by bodyguards still get noticed in New York City. Anyone in that bakery saw us walking up. They were there because they knew we had an appointment, and they were prepared. I wasn't alone, Salva. I was safe.”

“No, you weren’t. If it was dangerous enough for you to send you mom, Letta, and Lotta out, then you knew you shouldn’t be in there.”

“Salva, listen to me, please. That man was more likely to hurt them than me. They had to get out. But all of you needed to know for sure if there was a problem.”

“Gabriele and Carmine would have found that out without you being in the middle of this.”

In other words, intimidated an innocent man or beaten the shit out of a guilty one. I run my hand through my hair as I kick off my shoes. I climb onto the bed and hit a button on my screen to turn it into a video call.

“If you can’t turn on your camera, fine. But at least you’ll be able to see I’m all right.”

The call changes over, and I can see him. I don’t see a mark on him. I can’t tell where he is because the lighting is so dim. He’s in a suit, but that doesn’t really mean much since I’m pretty certain he came out of the womb wearing one.

“*Piccolina*, you really scared me.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

I hold the camera out and angle it so he can see me from the tips of my toes up to the tip of my nose.

“Can anyone else see your camera, Daddy?”

“No.”

I grin as I get off the bed and prop the phone up against a pillow. I turn my back to the phone and pull down the zipper

to my dress. Then I face the phone again as I step out of the dress.

“See. Not a scratch on me, *caro*.”

“And no panties either. Good, girl.”

Since he had his face in my pussy the other day, I figure him seeing it now doesn't really make it a big deal. I reach back and unfasten my bra, but I step out of the range of the phone camera.

“Are you safe, Salva?”

I hurry to grab a sports bra, t shirt, and some shorts. I'm certain we aren't going anywhere again today. I pull the sports bra on as I walk back to the bed and step into the jean shorts as I appear on my phone screen.

“Yes. Such a tease, *piccolina mia*.”

“Only for you.” I pause for a moment before I pick up the phone. “I miss you.”

I don't want to sound whiney and needy. I don't want Salvatore to think I can't handle being on my own for a few days. But I also want him to know he's special to me.

“I miss you too. Tell me what you've been up to the past two days.”

“Don't you have to go? I feel badly that I'm taking you away from whatever you're supposed to be doing.”

“What I'm supposed to be doing is talking to you. Tell me how your days went.”

“I slept a lot. But I think I’ll get over my jet lag faster. I watched several episodes of *Big Bang Theory* with the closed captions on, so I could read along with what I heard.”

I climb back onto the bed. I’m still in Salvatore’s room. I didn’t switch. I prop the phone up again on what was his pillow and roll onto my side.

“Do you think you learned anything?”

“Maybe a little. Nicoletta is helping a lot with things around the house. She and Carlotta are hilarious together. I kinda feel for Massi and Dom. They don’t stand a chance against those women.”

“No, they don’t. I’m glad you’re getting along with them.”

“How could I not? They’re wonderful. How’re you?”

I want to tell him how worried I’ve been, but I don’t think I should. I don’t know.

“We’ve made some progress, but not as much as I’d hoped. I talked to him, and he’s pissed I’m marrying you rather than his sister. I didn’t even know he had a sister.”

“So, it is about me. But not because I won’t marry him, but because you can’t marry his sister if you’re married to me.”

I can’t look at him, so I look at the sheets. This sucks.

“Sylvie, I’m not sending you away to marry some woman I could have considered years ago.”

“You didn’t know I existed until a month ago.”

“Of course I knew you existed. I just didn’t know you. I’ve heard about you for years. Your father boasts about you all the

time. I didn't know you might be interested in marrying—I didn't even know you weren't married—until a month ago. But I'd heard of you plenty of times.”

“But ending—”

“*Piccolina*, I'm already going to spank you for risking your safety today. If you finish that thought about us breaking up, I'll make sure you can't sit for a week.”

I breathe a sigh of relief—literally and figuratively. He must see the difference.

“*Cuore*, we'll figure this out. But don't you dare do that again. I'm serious.”

“I know. I don't want to distract you.”

From the look he's giving me, he knows I'm hedging. But he won't push it. I'm still resting my head on my pillow, and this is as good as I'm going to get having Salvatore in bed with me. I don't want to argue.

“I wish I was beside you, Sylvie. It looks awfully lonely.”

He waggles his eyebrows, and I laugh.

“It is. I might get lost in such an enormous bed all by myself.”

“Don't you worry, little one. I'll find you. I'll always find you.”

I hear someone call his name in the background. I watch him nod his head, but he says nothing to whoever it is.

“I know you have to go, Salva. Be careful, please.”

“I’m coming home to you soon.”

It would feel totally natural to say, “love you, bye.” But it’s way too soon. Isn’t it?

“Bye, *caro*.”

“Bye.”

He blows me a kiss! What a softie. I blow one back, and he pretends to catch it as he winks. Who would have known?

CHAPTER 8

Salvatore

I'm ready to kill a motherfucker. I've been all over Sicily for the last six days. Today marks a week since I took an early ass morning flight to Palermo. To say I'm pissed I had to come is an understatement. To say I'm ready to rage because I can't find the bastard is an even greater understatement. Umberto has burrowed into some hole like a little bitch. I won't let anyone see me sweat, but my anger is only partly because he's disappeared after our one phone conversation. Mostly it's because I've had to go silent and not call Sylvia. We can't risk my calls being tracked.

I've missed my parents before when I was a kid, and they traveled. I've missed my siblings and their kids when I've traveled. I've even missed some of the women I've dated in the past. But I have never longed to be with someone as much as I do Sylvia. It makes utterly no sense how she's gotten under my skin so much in so short a time. But she has.

When Matteo called me from the car to tell me what happened at the bakery, I was ready to order the jet be fueled and ready to go in fifteen minutes. I calmed myself down by the time I called her, but hearing my nephew tell me she stood up to some fuck nut no one knew gave me palpitations. I won't lie and say I'm not proud of her courage and her intelligence. But I was serious when I said I would spank her for endangering herself. I'm already worried enough as is.

“Sal!”

I look up from the travel manifests I'm studying at Comiso Vincenzo Magliocco Airport, a municipal airport near Ragusa. It's diagonally across the island of Sicily from Palermo. This was his last known whereabouts. Of course, his name doesn't appear on any of these reports, but he has some aliases he prefers.

Massimo looks ready to explode as he hurries toward me. What the fuck now?

“Yeah?”

“The fucker is in New York.”

“What?”

“The piece of shit was in the air when we were. He was probably fucking waving when we passed by.”

“Where's Sylvia?”

I'm trying not to panic. This means he's been there the entire time I've been away. I'd know if he'd done anything to her.

“I just got off the phone with Lorenzo. She's with the ladies at a florist. They'd narrowed it down, and now they're back signing the contracts.”

“Fuck. We still don't know how he had men at the bakery and the hotel.”

Someone got too close while Sylvia and Paola visited the hotel where we're having the reception. They were there so Sylvia could meet the event planner. Paola was their interpreter. All the boys—my nephews by blood and by choice

—were there, too. But Dom and Benedetto had other jobs that day. Sylvia was the one who sensed something was wrong again, but this time she left when she told Luca. She didn't see anyone, but she told Luca she felt watched. Carmine and Gabriele hung back and found a guy with a listening device and a camera. I'm going to make sure my guys sweep room from top to bottom. In the plaster and under the carpet if I have to. No one is bugging my fucking wedding reception.

It's going to be the who's who of New York—the underworld included. The Ivankov bratva, the Irish mob, and the Colombian Cartel will be there. We'll all be flexing our wallets as much as our muscles. It's a chance to see and be seen by all the allegedly upstanding citizens of New York City. The mayor and city council members will be there. The wealthiest businesspeople in the U.S. along with several international ones have already RSVP'd yes. We don't need anyone with supersonic ears. And we also don't need a fucking gunfight. There isn't a chance in hell any syndicate member is entering a room with all of us together without at least one knife. But no guns.

Knowing someone was there, observing Sylvia and Paola reconfirms why my men will run all hotel security that night. Not a damn person is breathing in that building without my men knowing they're there. The hotel wanted to piss around about releasing their guest list, but adding an extra mid six-figure bonus was very convincing.

“Carmine's working on it. If anyone can figure it out, it's him.”

Our nephew is only out in public when we absolutely need everyone working as bodyguards. I'm shipping his ass to California to go to Stanford in the fall. It's as far as I can get him from here while keeping him in the country. He needs a low profile after the shit he got us into with Liam O'Rourke. I can't even think about it without my blood pressure skyrocketing.

But he's still our best intelligence gatherer. He was a nosey fucking kid and still is, but he's one of the smartest guys I know. And that's saying something with most of the men in my family having gone to Ivy League schools. Nicoletta and Carlotta both went to a Seven Sisters, Paola went to Princeton, and Maria is going to Duke. Sylvia went to the Sorbonne, which is pretty much a European equivalent to an Ivy League.

"How soon can we be wheels up?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Good."

It would be a three-and-a-half-hour drive back to Palermo, but we flew this morning. We have the jet with us. We never unpack during trips like this. We take out what we need for the day, and we bring our luggage with us for this exact reason. The moment the plane is gassed up, we're gone.

I tilt my head back and look up at the ceiling. This is so damn frustrating. But at least this means I can turn my phone back on and call Sylvia. I want to be the one to tell her we're on our way home. I want to surprise her, but I also want to be the one who admits this remains unresolved. I've failed, and I feel shitty about it. I watch from the airport's main building as

our plane taxis out of the hangar. Fifteen minutes later, we're boarding. Once we're at our cruising altitude, I pull out my real phone instead of the burners I've been using.

My phone buzzes the moment I turn it back on. I assume it's texts populating, but I see Sylvia's name flash on the screen.

"Sylvie?"

"Oh, thank God. I didn't think I'd reach you. Umberto's in New York. Salva, he's staying at the Peninsula."

That's fucking across the street from the St. Regis, where we're having the reception.

"How do you know?"

When she hesitates, I know I'm going to lose my shit.

"I slipped outside for a breath of air. Mama and Papa are here, and it's just—a lot. It's one of your men, Salva. I overheard someone say my name. At first, I thought they were calling out to me, so I turned in the voice's direction. I only took three steps before I realized the guy was on the phone, talking about me. I slipped my shoes off and got closer. He was telling someone about the schedule for this week. How it all got rearranged so your family could be with me. How it meant some of your deals were being left to just Made Men to handle. He was telling the person on the other end about a shipment that's supposed to come in tonight. I was about to go find one of guys, but I heard him call the person he was talking to Bertuccio. Only people close to Umberto call him that. The longer the guy spoke, the more I realized I

recognized his voice. Umberto was in Paris about two years ago, and we wound up at the same restaurant for lunch. I was there with a client I can swear is not linked to our world. This guy was one of Umberto's guards. How did he get a job with you?"

Who the hell do we have who's newly from Sicily? No one.

"Sylvie, are you sure? We don't have anyone who's joined us in the past two years who moved here straight from Sicily."

"Salva, I know I recognized his voice. I went back inside and happened to walk past the window near where he was standing. I glanced out, and I recognized his face. I saw his profile in the restaurant, and I saw his profile ten minutes ago."

"You could be mist—"

"I'm not, Salva. I went out with the guy that night. We—we—did stuff together."

She clearly didn't want to admit that, and I'm not thrilled to know someone who works for me has seen any inch of Sylvia that isn't covered by her clothes.

"What's his name?"

"Mancuso Gebbia."

I fist my hand on the chair's armrest.

"Where are you right now?"

"Looking for any of your nephews or Matteo or Gabe."

“Find Carmine and Luca, go into Massi’s study, and put the call on speakerphone. I’m putting Massi on the line too.”

“Wait. Are we still private?”

“Yes.”

She drops her voice to a whisper.

“Daddy, I only went out with him once because he got too rough. He didn’t know who I was. At least, that’s what he said just before I shoved him out my door. He didn’t want to take no for an answer. I broke his nose and cracked at least one tooth. One of my guards broke his collarbone when he put up a fight with Gio.”

I’m going to kill the motherfucker. I listen to her talking to Luca and Carmine, then I hear footsteps. I put the call on speaker, so my brother can hear too.

“*Zio?*”

It’s Carmine. I answer in English, which I know is going to make Sylvia suspicious, but I don’t care right now.

“Take Mancuso to the garage. Keep him there until I get back. We’re on the plane now. Make sure he speaks to no one from the moment you approach to the moment I deal with him. String him up by his ankles but don’t touch him. Either you or Luca stays with him the entire time. Switch off if you have to. The others don’t leave the house. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

I hear Luca and Carmine at the same time. I switch back to Italian for Sylvia’s sake.

“Luca and Carmine are going to take care of it. Sylvie, I want you at the house until I get back. I’m about twelve hours out, so it won’t be until tonight. Stay inside, please.”

“I will. Salva, he knows about whatever you have coming in tonight. Umberto knows now too. Assume Mancuso told Umberto about everything he knows or could have even remotely heard.”

“I know. Dom and Ditto will take care of it.”

Domenico and Benedetto couldn’t be better guys. I’ve known them both my entire life. Domenico is my second cousin and grew up two doors down from Massi and me. Benedetto was my best friend every summer when my parents took us to Palermo. I encouraged him to move his family here, and I’m glad I did. This is exactly the situation both men are best at. I don’t have to worry about them handling the compromised shipments. They’ll take the men they need and keep it clean.

“We’re supposed to go to the dress shop for Paola, Nicoletta, and Carlotta’s fittings. I asked them to be in the wedding.”

Massi is my best man, and both Dom and Ditto are groomsmen since they’ve been close to me since we were kids. I would have had all the younger men too, but Sylvia only had Allegra and Sophia until now. I’ll ask Luca and Cesare to balance the numbers. It’s fitting since Luca’s my underboss and heir, and Cesare is my brother-in-law.

“Call the shop and have them bring the dresses to the house.”

“This is America. They don’t do things like that.”

“Sylvie, we’re rich Americans. Yes, they do.”

She laughs. That was one way to put it. The store is owned by an old Italian family, but they aren’t connected to us at all—as in, they don’t pay for protection. That’s the old-fashioned way of saying we extort business owners so they can exist. I think their family goes back to Genoa, but their seamstresses are talented. My family’s been using them for at least four generations.

“If you say so. I’ll call when I get off with you.”

I switch over to English to talk to my nephews.

“Is there anything else I should know about?”

Luca sounds about as excited as he did when he made his first confession.

“Yeah. Two men followed us yesterday when we went to see the DJ. Only the guys went. She noticed first. She’s got the best situational awareness of anyone I’ve ever met. Better than yours. If anything happened to you, she’d lead our men better than I ever will.”

He doesn’t want to name names, so Sylvia is less likely to guess what we’re talking about. I know he’s right about Sylvia. I hate she has to be so conscious of everything around her, but she’s a beautiful woman who lived in a foreign country with only a couple bodyguards with her at any time. She had to be.

But for now, I’d rather everyone downplay just how smart she is. If people realize she’s so astute, they’re less likely to

speaking freely in front of her once she learns English. I'd rather keep it just between the two of us for right now. I don't hide things from my family, but neither do I tell everyone everything.

"Keep them all away from the windows just in case."

"We will. I'll tell the others."

"Good." I switch back to Italian. "Sylvie, you can take us off speakerphone. I want to speak to you alone."

My nephews nod and leave. I shoot Massi a look and head back to the private cabin. Once I'm in there, I switch it to a video call.

"Hi, *piccolina*."

"*Caro*, I'm so glad to see you."

"Same. Let me see you."

She looks confused for a moment, then she blushes. She holds the phone out in front of her as she unfastens her jeans. She pushes down on one side.

"Good girl. All the way off."

"I can't in here!"

"Then go up to our room. I'll wait."

I watch her fasten her clothes, then she slips down the hallway. She can get to the stairs without going past the living room or the kitchen. She points up to someone. Since I don't hear another voice, it's probably one of the guys. I watch as she must take the stairs by twos. When she reaches our room and closes the door, she's out of breath. I like knowing I

caused that, but I'd rather it be because my cock is pounding her cunt.

“Strip.”

“Yes, Daddy. But only if you do it, too.”

CHAPTER 9

Sylvia

I can't believe we're about to have phone sex. At least, that's what I hope we're about to do. I put the phone on the bed and get my clothes off in record time. I keep glancing at the phone to observe Salvatore doing the same. He has the most incredible body I've ever seen. He must still go to the gym at least once a day, if not twice. He doesn't look like any other man I know in his forties unless he's an enforcer. Those guys are at the bottom of our hierarchy, but they play just as important a role as Made Men—Italians, or more specifically Sicilians—who've reached a status of being among a don's most trusted men. It's not exactly hereditary, but pretty much.

In America, there are associates. These are non-Italians, so in Sicily, we have a few Frenchmen and Spaniards, and such. But not as many as in America; they're still pretty rare in either country. The *soldarti* are foot soldiers. They do most of the lower-level street hustle type jobs. Then there are enforcers. Right now, Gabe is one of those. From what I understand, he has the patience of a saint even if he's a sinner. His size must have something to do with it. It would be intimidating as fuck if I hadn't put Band-Aids on his scraped knees. His strength goes along with it.

All right. I'm naked, and so is Salvatore. Fuck. My mouth is watering. I need to make sure I don't drool. I wait for him to give me instructions.

“*Piccolina*, do you own a vibrator?”

That's where we're starting?

"Yes."

I brought it with me because I had no idea what my marriage would be like. I thought it might be keeping me company most nights for the rest of my life. I don't think that anymore.

"Get it."

I haven't unpacked my luggage, so I have to go to one of my suitcases and rummage a bit. I bring it back and pick up the phone. I hold it up for him to see. He's stroking himself since he was already hard. I want to be doing that.

"Get on the bed."

I'm quick to follow each instruction as he settles on the bed in the jet's private cabin. I arrange the pillows behind my head and grab one of his to put beside me, so I can prop up the phone. He does the same.

"Offer me your tits, *cuore*."

I cup them as I twist to put them closer to the phone camera. I squeeze and press them together, let them fall apart a little, then squeeze and press again and again.

"I'm sucking those sweet little nipples and making your pussy ache. Pinch them. Hard."

I do as he says and barely remember not to moan.

"Harder."

I do it as much as I can, and pain shoots down my belly.

“Twist and pull.”

My toes are curling, my eyes shut, and I’m biting my lip not to make a sound.

“Good girl. I’m still sucking them as my hand skims down your belly to your pussy. Such a sweet, smooth cunt. All waxed and ready for me. Play with your clit.”

I let go of my left breast and do exactly what he described before rubbing and pinching. My hips lift off the bed as I watch him continuing to stroke the most endowed cock I’ve ever seen. I’ve given blowjobs and hand jobs. I’ve been fingered and eaten out before. I’ve just never had full-on sex. I have enough knowledge to compare.

“Are you wet for me, *piccolina*?”

“I have been since the moment I heard your voice. I wish it was my hand on you, but I really want it to be my mouth.”

“Is that so? You want to taste me?”

“So much, Daddy. I want to lick you and swirl my tongue around your tip. Then I want to slide my mouth down and try to take all of you. I want to see if I can swallow you. I don’t know if I can, but I’d try.”

For some reason, Daddy in English works so much better than Papa. Probably because I call my father Papa. It would make it weird because I don’t think of Salvatore as a father figure at all. But he is someone who makes me feel taken care of.

I watch as his strokes increase, and I think he’s squeezing. I want to watch him come and know I helped do that. That it’s

me he's thinking about.

“Put your two middle fingers inside your cunt, then let me see how wet you are.”

I dip them into me, then hold them up.

“Mmm. Suck them like I would. That's my mouth on your fingers, just like it was my fingers inside you.”

I never like the taste of myself. I guess I think it would be a little odd if I did, but I know other women who don't mind. I do as he says, closing my eyes again, and imagine it's him. I slide them in and out, hopefully making him think of what it would be like if I were giving him head.

“You're teasing me, little girl. Roll on your stomach.”

I do what he says, and I have a sneaking suspicion what's coming next.

“Squeeze your ass hard enough for me to see your fingerprints.”

I do what I can. I don't have a small, perky, apple-shaped ass like some women. Salvatore's hands are much bigger than mine, so he can cup more of each cheek. Mine is more like a watermelon to other women's peach.

“Spank yourself and tell me why.”

I lift my hand and bring it down hard. The sound makes me turn my head and look toward the door. Please don't let anyone walk by. Definitely don't have anyone come knock on my door.

“I teased you, Daddy.”

I spank myself again, trying to reach across to the other side. When it doesn't work, I switch hands. He doesn't tell me to stop, so I alternate sides, giving myself five more each.

“More. Hard enough for me to see your fine little ass turn pink.”

I do my best while watching him. When my hand lands, I see him suck in a deep breath. He likes it too.

“Roll over.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Say that again.”

He's stroking faster.

“Yes, Daddy.”

I'm saying those two words in English, and I think there's something to that, that he especially likes. Maybe because it's really my only solid phrase other than thank you and you're welcome. It's special.

“Turn the vibrator on and put it against your left nipple.”

I do what he says.

“On high.”

I've never done this before. It's a much more effective stimulation than I expected. Maybe because I'd pinched them so hard, then pressed them into the mattress when I was on my stomach. The vibration makes the nipple go hard.

“Turn it down to low and put it in your pussy. Slowly. Ease it in just like I'm going to ease my cock into you when I get

home.”

I wonder if that means he’s going to take me to the penthouse. He calls it ours now, but I’m still getting used to that.

My vibrator is the type with the little arm to rub my clit. I position it, so it hits my g spot and just below my clit. I can’t keep from shifting on the bed as my body reacts.

“Pull it all the way out.”

I was looking at the wall in front of me, concentrating, but my gaze flies to him. What? That’s the last thing I want to do.

“Do it, *piccolina*, or I’ll have you spanking your pussy instead of getting off.”

I withdraw it, and I want to pout.

“Bring it closer to the camera.”

I obey.

“I see how wet you are. You coated your toy. You really want my cock, don’t you?”

“Salva, I’ve never wanted to fuck so badly in my life. Hearing you, seeing you. Fuck, Daddy.”

“Put it back in.”

I follow his instructions. We’re quiet as we both pleasure ourselves. My abs tighten as I’m about to come.

“Take it out.”

He barks the command. He must know I’m right on the cusp. I whimper, but do as I’m told. We go around and around

with this orgasm denial for twenty minutes. I watch him slow his hand whenever he tells me to stop. He must need to come too. It makes me wonder if we'll come at the same time when he finally allows it.

“Turn it up.”

“Daddy, I'll come. I won't be able to stop.”

“Do as I say, little one.”

I do, and this time, I don't hide my moan. It isn't loud, but I make sure he can hear it. I knead my breast, my fingers gripping my flesh.

“You're so beautiful, *cuore*. I can't wait until I'm the one holding the vibrator. Until it's my cock filling your cunt with my cum. I can practically feel your mouth on me. Feel your pussy tightening around me before I shoot my load.”

I have the sudden flash of finding out I'm pregnant and telling him. Of him putting his hand on my belly. I don't realize I've let go of my breast and am pressing my palm against my belly button. I'm so close, thinking about knowing I have something no other woman ever will. Thinking about how a family of our own will bind us. That nothing could prove I'm his more than carrying a baby we make together.

“I'm going to fuck you hard and often, *piccolina*. But when I make love to you, we're going to make a baby. It's my cum inside you that will do that. I know that's what you're thinking about. I want my hand on your belly as much as I want my cock inside you right now. Nothing will make me

yours and you mine more than the family we'll have together. Come, Sylvie. I can't hold off."

I adjust the vibrator, and I go rigid except for my hips lifting off the bed.

"Daddy."

It's a moaned whisper as I watch Salvatore come on his stomach.

"Oh, Sylvie."

I can barely hear his whisper, and I'm not sure if he heard mine. But we're left watching each other. As replete as I feel, there's a touch of sadness that we aren't together for this.

"I know, baby. I'll be home soon. I wish I was holding you now."

I turn off the vibrator and let it rest on my hip bone. I pick up the phone and hold it over me.

"Salva, I'm in my thirties. I don't want to wait too long to have kids. Is that something you really want?"

"With you, absolutely. I wish we could have more time just the two of us. But I want to have kids just as much. I wonder if they'll look like you. I hope so."

"I was thinking the same thing about you. I can imagine little boys running around who are miniature Salvatores. Brooding and all."

"I don't brood."

He scowls playfully, and I laugh.

“*Caro*, I can’t stay up here much longer if I’m going to call the dress shop. But I don’t want to hang up either.”

“I know. I need to plan with Massi, but I’d rather look at you a while longer.”

We remain quiet for a few minutes, just watching each other on our phone screens. Then we both sigh and get up. Back to the real world, and back to adulting. It blows.

“I have to take care of something when I get back, then I’m coming to you. I’ll be beside you when you wake up in the morning.”

“You better fucking wake me when you get into bed, Salva. I mean it.”

My adavance surprises me, but it makes him laugh.

“Yes, *piccolina*.”

“Mmm. You’re going to need to say that more often. I like it.”

“Yes, *piccolina*.”

He says it in English to mimic me, and I think it’s fucking hot and cute. We say our goodbyes, and I force myself off the bed. I tidy myself up in the bathroom, then slip my clothes back on. I make sure to hide my freshly cleaned vibrator back in the bottom of my suitcase. I don’t need anyone spotting it if they come in here.

I check the mirror one last time to make sure I don’t resemble someone who just got off from having phone sex with her fiancé. In the medieval days, consummation was

enough to make a betrothal a marriage, even without saying any vows in a church. The pledge to get married, then having sex was all they needed. Salvatore already calls me his wife. Maybe by those standards, I really will be his wife tomorrow.

I scroll through my phone to find the dressmaker's number and give them a quick call. They can have someone come over in two hours. I know they hesitated, but I told them Salvatore would make sure it was worth their inconvenience. I don't know how much that will be, but it got them to say yes when they'd already said no twice. I make my way downstairs as I finish the call.

“Letta?”

“In the living room.”

I find Nicoletta, Carlotta, and Mama sitting together watching a movie. As I take a seat, Carlotta puts on the Italian subtitles for me. She's so thoughtful.

“I just got off the phone with Salvatore. I'm guessing you already know they're on the way home.”

I figure Massimo already texted his wife. They all nod.

“He suggested I have the shop bring the gowns here for their last fitting, since he doesn't want us going out.”

I figure Massimo also mentioned that if Luca or Carmine didn't. My mom looks over at me.

“What time are they coming?”

“Two hours.”

We settle into the movie, even though I have no idea what happened in the first hour of it. Then it's lunch, and the seamstresses show up. The afternoon flies by, but the evening drags. My mom goes back to the hotel to have dinner with Papa and my uncles. I wish we could just fast forward to when Salvatore gets home.

Luca and Carmine disappeared, and I'm sure it was with Mancuso to wherever they go to get rid of people. I know there has to be somewhere I'll never know about. I'll never ask, I'll never look, and no one will ever tell me. It's likely in a neighborhood they control. Some place where no one is paying attention to who comes and goes, and who checks in but can never leave. I remember something close to that from an American song.

My guess is that's where Salvatore is going straight from the airport. He will ask Mancuso questions and punish him for either infiltrating the Mancinelli brotherhood or double crossing our don. That's who Salvatore is to me now, besides my husband. I like that title way more than just fiancé. My don isn't my father anymore.

I don't know for sure how they handle things at these places, but I know there's torture and disposing of remains. Frankly, I'm fine with that. Anyone who crosses a don, or the family puts people at risk. No one has a right to jeopardize one of our people's lives. And no one has a right to fuck up our businesses that keep roofs over heads and food in bellies for our Made Men's, associates', and *soldarti's* families. If they're foolish enough to do it and stupid enough to get caught, then they get what they deserve.

I can justify all of it because, in our world, these rules are absolute. I guess morally gray is my favorite color because knowing Salvatore will take care of this doesn't faze me in the least. When we have children, he'll be the merciful one between the two of us. I dare someone to look in our kids' direction.

As I look over at Nicoletta while we watch another movie, this one dubbed into Italian, I know she's eager for Massimo to get home. We both jump when we hear the front door open, but it's Paola and her husband, Cesare. It's been ages since I've seen him. He's a great guy, but he and Paola never should have married. They were fine as a couple of nineteen-year-old kids having fun going out, but the moment Paola got pregnant, it sealed their fates. But as much as they fight—and they have some nasty ones—they are amazing parents to Carmine. They are as unified as any set of parents can be.

I've heard the stories about him. I know he's not an easy kid to deal with. *Piantagrane*. Troublemaker. Allegra and I talked about him before I left. Neither Carmine nor my niece, Serafina, know this, but their betrothal is going to be announced at the reception. It's something my brother-in-law Piero's and Salvatore's fathers arranged when both of them were babies. Now that they're both eighteen, the older members of both Mafias are pushing for it to be official.

Considering Serafina can't stand him, it won't go over well. They haven't seen each other since they were twelve. She broke his nose when he shoved her in a wave that wound up spinning her around and scraping up her arms and legs. It nearly knocked her unconscious when she hit her head on the

ocean floor. It was a good three hours before Paola and Cesare allowed him out of the room he was staying in at the Mancinellis' villa. I don't know what else they said or did, but he was a different child the rest of their visit. The best behaved I'd ever seen him.

The younger men come out of Massimo's office where they were watching a soccer game, and everyone greets Paola and Cesare. It surprises me when Cesare doesn't accept the guys' invitation to watch the game. Instead, he stays close to Paola, and I can tell she prefers it. She's practically leaning against him. I blurt my question before I realize it's going to come out of my mouth.

“What happened?”

Everyone looks at me, but I'm looking at the couple. Paola looks up at Cesare but says nothing. She's waiting for him to speak. I've met Paola and Cesare several times, but it hasn't been since this week that I've gotten to know Paola. I don't get the feeling she's usually this deferential to Cesare. When he wraps his arm around her shoulder, I get the sense it shocks everyone.

“Someone followed Paola through a department store. Her guards told her to go into the dressing room. The man either thought she was alone or didn't realize she had three men because he attempted to enter it. When he saw her guards appear, he fled. He bolted to the escalator. Giacomo went after him but lost him in the food court.”

“I didn't recognize him, but he creeped me out. I noticed him watching me while I was looking at bras. He was a few

racks over from me when I moved to look at the winter coats. I wanted something bulkier between us. I grabbed a dress off a rack and headed toward one of my guys. They'd seen him, and Pauly told me to go to the dressing room. He and Tony stayed with me. I got a photo of him just as I went into the dressing room."

She pulls it out and shows me first. Clearly, she thinks I'll recognize whichever one of Umberto's goons this is, but I don't. I've never spoken to Umberto at length, even if I've seen him many times. Other than Mancuso, I've never paid attention any of his guards. And I definitely wouldn't know his regular men. Part of the reason I chose a university in France was to get away from all of this. The other is because the Sorbonne has a top law school program. The process is different in France, so I could stay there for all three stages.

All I can do is shake my head. No one else recognizes him either. From a distance, Paola and I most resemble each other. Our hair is darker than Nicoletta's or Carlotta's. Paola and I are closer in height. Carlotta is taller and Nicoletta is shorter than Paola and me.

"Did he think you were me? Or did he expect us to be together again?"

Paola leans more against Cesare, and I see his arm wrap tighter around her. She shrugs, and he answers.

"We don't know. But it frightened Paola. No one's gotten that close to her in years. Women and children are supposed to be off limits. We don't know what he planned to do if he

cornered her. She called me from the dressing room, and I was close enough to meet them at the mall.”

When I see tears well in Paola’s eyes, I know there’s something more that neither she nor Cesare are sharing. We are not women who cry easily in public, not even in front of family. She blinks, and they’re gone. But she rests her head against Cesare’s chest. Every moment more that we talk about this, the more she’s leaning against a man she usually barely tolerates. He’s never this warm to her, either. She looks over at Matteo, Marco, Lorenzo, and Gabriele.

“Gabe, where’s Carmine?”

“He had to take care of something. He’s with Luca.”

It doesn’t take long for anyone in families like ours to understand that “take care of something” means don’t ask any more questions. Paola nods, and Nicoletta steps forward. I’m not sure if she wants to offer Paola a hug or what, but her sister-in-law and brother-in-law stay practically glued together.

“Do you want a drink? Gin, whiskey, Scotch?”

“Bourbon and ginger, please.”

“Cesare?”

“Nothing, thanks.”

When he looks down at Paola, I realize he considers himself on duty as one of her bodyguards. For a marriage that is an undeniable wreck, it’s good to see they know they can rely on one another when they need to. Paola looks at the younger men again.

“Let me tell Carmine, please.”

Gabe’s lips flatten, and he looks like he’s about to disagree. He nods, but I can tell he doesn’t like it. I notice he has his phone in his hand against his leg. Paola must have noticed too.

“If he’s already taking care of something, let him finish. What happened, happened. I can tell him later since there’s nothing to do about it now.”

I meet Paola’s gaze before I speak.

“Have you told Salva and Massi yet?”

“No. I figured Luca or Dom have a way to reach them.”

“They’re on their way home. They’re in the air.”

Nicoletta brings the drink over, and the couple sits together on a sofa. Gabe and the others retreat to Massimo’s study to go back to the game. The rest of us start the movie again, but I wonder if I should call Salvatore about this. Maybe one of the guys is. I keep picturing the photo Paola showed me. I’m wracking my brain in case I’ve seen the guy before. He’s older than me, probably closer to Paola and the others’ ages. But nothing comes to me. I wonder if I should suggest she send it to Salvatore and Massimo.

It grows late, and everyone goes to bed. I assume Salvatore and his brother have already landed, but they’ll be *there*. They’ll be dealing with Mancuso. I hope they get whatever they need out of him before dawn. I’ve slept like shit since Salvatore left. I’d love a good night’s sleep, but I know I won’t get it until he’s in bed next to me. Whenever that might be.

CHAPTER 10

Salvatore

I take out every bit of anger bottled inside me about being at the fucking garage instead of with Sylvia on Mancuso's ribs. I've already shattered his right kneecap with a metal pole. Now I have a Louisville Slugger that I've had since I played baseball in high school. I ran track in college, but I kept the bat because it never stopped being handy.

"Tell me when you started working for Umberto. I know it's been at least two years."

"Fanculo." Fuck off.

I drive my fist into his left eye. The other one is already swollen shut. The man is a mess. Luca and Carmine had him hanging upside down, off and on, for eleven hours. He's hanging by his wrists now. Turns out, the shit bag got spooked and thought Sylvia heard him. He left the house and tried to hide. Stupid motherfucker. He took a car from our fleet. They all have trackers.

I broke his sternum for that. He's lucky I didn't do more for stealing the car. As far as I'm concerned, that's what he did. He took a town car when he wasn't assigned to drive anyone. But I moved on to more important stuff. We've been here an hour and a half. My patience is gone. I swing the bat one more time before switching it for a pair of pliers.

"Answer me, or I'm going to pull your eyeball out and make you eat it."

I snap the pliers. He knows I'll do it, or at least try. He's seen me do some fucked-up shit over the years. He grew up in one of our neighborhoods. I've known him since he was a kid. He knocked off a gas station to prove to me he was ready to be a *soldarto*. He was thirteen. The same age as Luca back then. I had my nephew beat the snot out of him with a message that I decide when someone's ready. I made him wait two years for being so fucking presumptuous. But he learned fast and rose through the ranks. He's been a *soldarto*, and I was about to "make" him. Fucking shitbag.

When he says nothing, I nod to Luca—who he still can't stand—and my nephew grins. The loathing is mutual. He pushes a button to lower him, so I can reach his eyes. The garage looks like a rundown piece of shit from the outside, but it's in great shape inside. We purposely keep the garage door chains uncoiled. They make enough noise to drown out the screaming from the men we connect to hooks that also connect to the chains. When we open the doors, it must feel like their arms are about to be ripped out of their skin. It's definitely dislocated plenty.

Carmine steps forward, and Mancuso doesn't see him since Carmine was behind him. My nephew pries open his eye, and I get in his face. I put the pliers so close I know he can't focus on anything. I poke the outer corner with the closed tip.

"You know I will. How long?"

"Five years."

He knows he's going to die, but he's hit his breaking point with the pain. He knows he'll give up long before any of us do.

“Why?”

“The money was good.”

“Bullshit.”

This means he started spying two years after I finally let him work for me. I don't like being made a fool of.

“He let me fuck his niece.”

That I can believe. She doesn't have the most—discriminating tastes. I'm pretty sure Luca and Matteo have been with her. Mancuso's traveled with us a few times to Sicily, and I suspect he's gone there during some of his vacations, unbeknownst to me.

“There has to have been more than a piece of cheap ass.”

“Yeah. Your fiancée. There's nothing cheap about her ass, which I enjoyed long before you even considered her.”

I don't show any reaction, though it makes me wonder if Sylvia only considers herself a virgin because she's never had a cock in her pussy. Has she had anal? With him? I forewarned Luca and Carmine that he'd probably say something like this since he'd hooked up with Sylvia. That wasn't so pleasant to share, but they know she told me before they joined the call. They know he's exaggerating. I didn't reveal Sylvia's a virgin, but I said she injured him when he wouldn't stop.

“Tell me. Was it all fucking worth it now that you’re going to die?”

I push the pliers against his eyeball.

“Knowing Umberto fucked you over for years definitely was. You shouldn’t have made me wait.”

I figured that’s what this was over. He’s holding a childish grudge. If he’s been the leak to Umberto, that explains a few complications we’ve had over the years. But I don’t think he realizes we’ve caused way more problems for his boss than the other way around. It’s probably why Umberto kept him as a spy. Mancuso was a soldier. He went where he was told. He didn’t plan shit, and he wasn’t told any of the plans. Whatever he reported to Umberto was second hand—which is another problem to suss out—or misinformation we tell soldiers before missions. We do it for exactly this reason. They haven’t proven themselves worthy enough to be “made.”

“Who’d he hire?”

“The Ghost.”

Robert Simms. The man is one of the best mercenaries alive. He has no loyalties except to the paycheck he collects. He works for syndicates all over the world. A man could be his employer on Monday and his mark on Tuesday. He hides his money under the mattress and doesn’t believe in banks. He uses burner phones and rarely meets anyone in person unless it’s the one he’s about to kill. Even then, he prefers the sniper approach. He and I are going to have a little convo once I leave here.

“How much did Umberto pay?”

“How much is your life worth? Not nearly as much as you assume. Eight million.”

This dumb motherfucker. That was a down payment. I know it cost a fuck ton more because this won't be the first time I pay Simms off not to kill me. I wish it were as cheap as eight mill. Fucking waste of perfectly good money. But I'm definitely not ready to die now that I have Sylvia.

“What else?”

He smirks at me as best he can. Bad choice. I open the pliers and fit them around his eyeball. I dig into the inner corner, making him howl with pain. I keep adding pressure. It feels like I'm about to puncture his eye and stab his brain. I know because I've asked men to describe it. They all gave the same answer.

“What else?”

“He doesn't want you to marry Sylvia, but he doesn't care who he hurts. If it's one of the other women in your family, so be it. If he kills her, it's a win. But he'll go for the easiest targets first. I'd check on your cunt of a sister.”

Carmine's hand shoots out and wraps around Mancuso's throat. I don't stop him. Carmine adds the other and squeezes until Mancuso's face turns red, but he's careful not to crush his larynx or windpipe. He gives the asshole a shake.

“Who went after my mother?”

He eases up enough for Mancuso to speak.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“When you’re done Uncle Sal, I get to kill him. I already have an idea.”

“Fine.”

Carmine lets go and steps back, but not before he spits in Mancuso’s face.

“I ought to knock your fucking teeth out and make you swallow my cum since you’re already licking Umberto’s balls and ass.”

“Gebbia, you’re down to your last few minutes. Tell the rest of what you know, or I let Carmine do whatever the fuck he wants. Give me something useful, and I’ll convince my nephew to try being humane.”

He says nothing, so I change tactics. I use the pliers to pry out three teeth.

“Should I keep going and make it easier for Carmine?”

I reach in and take a fourth one. Two top, two bottom. Blood flows from his mouth, dripping down his bare chest. He’s naked, so I point the pliers toward his junk next, snapping them around the tip of his dick. He wails and thrashes, which actually makes me tighten the pinch.

“Fine! Simms is supposed to carry out the hit the morning of your wedding. Umberto’s got some guy waiting to get to Sylvia. He’s going to ransom her to Alberto.”

Umberto is a week younger than Alberto. He’s been teased his whole life that his parents copied Alberto’s, picking a

rhyming name, and he's been nothing but second best ever since. Knowing Alberto's daughter is marrying me definitely pissed him off. He only wants me to marry his sister to rub it in Alberto's face. Never would have happened even if Sylvia weren't in the picture. I made the mistake of fucking the bitch a few times in my early twenties. Way more fucking trouble than she's worth. She couldn't be faithful to save her fucking life.

“Where is he?”

Mancuso clams up.

“Luca, send some guys to Gebbia's. Umberto is there. Bring him in.”

I know how Umberto thinks. He assumes he can hide somewhere I wouldn't expect.

“Carmine, do what you want short of killing him. I'll let you finish when we confirm we've got Umberto.”

Luca signals three men I've known since they were born. I can trust them because they've each taken more than one bullet for me. They'll round up some more and head out. I leave Carmine to his new toy while I head into the office with the two-way mirror. I can see what's happening out on the floor, but no one can see in.

I strip off my clothes and toss them in a burn barrel. I get into one of the showers we installed and scrub myself from head to toe. I'm more thorough than a surgeon because we can't risk taking any DNA out with us. It's why I wear surgical booties over my shoes and always leave in a different outfit

than I arrived in. Thank God we're rich, otherwise our tailor's bill would bankrupt us.

When I'm dressed again, I sit in the desk chair and watch Carmine and Luca for a while before swiveling away to consider what I want to do with Umberto. Honestly, a bullet between his eyes will satisfy me. I just want him to watch me put it there.

* * *

I've been waiting two hours before my men drag Umberto in with his wrists bound behind his back, his ankles zip-tied, and a hood over his head. He struggles to shuffle in, and that's just one of the many humiliating ways his life is drawing to an end. I don't have to say anything. The men strip him and get him up on a hook. His belly hangs over his cock. He's sweating so hard he's got rivers gushing down his cheeks and neck. Once he's strung up, I come out of the office.

"Umberto, *pezzo di merda*." Piece of shit. "You should have stayed home. You should have minded your own business. But you didn't. You've threatened the women in my family. You've endangered my wife. And you've fucking pissed me off."

"She's not your wife."

"Our marriage is an alliance with the Old County. We signed marriage contracts. The old ways say we are."

"Only if you've fucked her, and she still looks like her pussy's locked up as tight as a virgin's in a whorehouse."

Fitting since I know you were in bed together when Massimo made you chase me.”

“Is that where you think I was?”

“One of my guys saw you through the window. Heat seeking goggles.”

Thermal imaging. That means he had someone in a tree outside Massi’s property wall.

“You’re going to die, and I’m going to live happily ever after.”

“If it’s not me, someone else will come for you. No one wants you and the Torettas in bed together. Be glad the hit was on you this time.”

I draw my gun from where it’s holstered at my back just like usual. I cock the trigger and point at his forehead.

“Your sister’s a whore you couldn’t pay me to marry. She should have paid me when I fucked her.”

I pull the trigger and watch his head jerk back. Then he goes limp. Mancuso’s already dead and in the acid vat, decomposing into sludge. Umberto’s headed to the same place. Massimo’s already back at his place; we’ll sort out the war I probably just started in the morning. It’s time to take my *piccolina* home.

* * *

It’s been one of the longest days of my life. It’s an hour before dawn, and I’m finally slipping into bed beside Sylvia.

“Salva?”

“Yes, *cuore*.”

She rolls over; her smile sleepy. She looks so beautiful. I wish we could stay like this forever. Just the two of us cocooned away from the real world. But we can't. I draw her closer, and she gladly snuggles against me. I kiss her forehead and stroke her hair. I feel her twitch, then shift.

“I don't want to fall back to sleep, Daddy. I don't want to miss a moment of you holding me. But you must be exhausted.”

That's putting it mildly.

“I slept a bit on the plane.”

She rolls onto her back, but her arms are open to me.

“Let me hold you while you sleep, Salva.”

I slip a little farther down the bed, so my head rests on her shoulder. It's her turn to stroke my hair. It's the most soothing thing I can remember since I was a kid sitting on my mother's lap. I drape my arm around her waist, but I pull my hand back to rest on her belly.

“I'm going to sleep a couple hours, then we're going to the penthouse to work on putting a baby in here.”

“I didn't take my pill last night. I want to stop all together.”

“Do you want to get pregnant right away?”

“Yes, and no. I'd like time with just you, but I also know I'm not getting any younger. Who knows how long it might take?”

“If you’re all right with it, then we let nature take its course. Maybe we’ll have more than nine months as just the two of us. Maybe we won’t. Either way will make me happy. I just want you, *piccolina*.”

“You say the sweetest things, Daddy. Now shh. We’re both tired. Finally, I can sleep properly.”

“You have been sleeping well?”

“I’ve worried about you. I missed having you next to me. It only took a few hours to spoil me.”

I nuzzle her neck before we’re both asleep. But morning comes way faster than either of us wants. We hear people moving around, and it sounds like the entire family is here. I cringe when I hear Angelina’s voice.

“Shit, that’s Mama. Hurry. If we get in the shower, she won’t know we’re in here together.”

“Would it really piss her off that much? We’re getting married in a few days.”

“It wouldn’t piss her off, but it would embarrass the fuck out of me. Please, Salva.”

We move silently into the bathroom, and I’m just about to turn on the showerhead when we hear someone knock. Sylvia opens the bathroom door.

“*Chi è?*” Who is it?

“Sylvia, it’s me.”

“I’m just getting in the shower, Mama. Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Fine. Tell Salvatore that Papa wants to see him when you’re done.”

Sylvia’s eyes widen, then she squeezes them shut. She peeks at me through one of them, then shrugs. So much for that secret. Though, I’m certain Angelina knows this is my room, and that I got back early this morning. It wouldn’t take a genius to figure out I must be in here. We step into the shower and hug. We stand together, Sylvia’s head against my chest, as we enjoy the hot water running over us.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Salva. Anything.”

“Do you consider yourself a virgin only because you haven’t had vaginal sex?”

She stares up at me for a moment, her brow crinkled. Then her expression changes, growing wary.

“You want to know if some guy’s fucked me in the ass.”

We watch each other, but she knows that’s exactly what I mean.

“No, Salva. I didn’t get around not having ‘sex’ by having anal.”

She gives me air quotes.

“Did Mancuso tell you that’s what we did?”

I nod.

“Do you want to know what we did together?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then why ask that? I’ve given head and been eaten out. I’ve been fingered, and I’d jacked guys off. But the only place *in* me a penis has gone is my mouth. Now you know.”

She glares at me for making her feel like I backed her into a corner. I already knew all of that from what she’d implied or just flat out told me. I just didn’t know about the anal part, and I should have kept that to myself. She turns around and sticks her ass at me. She spreads her cheeks, and I won’t deny the temptation.

“Do you want to make sure that’s all yours, too?”

I fist her hair and pull her back against me.

“Don’t provoke me, little one.”

“I’ll do whatever the fuck I want. You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t be angry about.”

“I didn’t say I could. Your feelings are yours to have. I wanted to know more about you. I was curious.”

“Do you want to know how many men I’ve blown? I sure as fuck don’t want to know how many women have sucked you off or how many asses you’ve fucked.”

“I don’t give a shit about any of that. I don’t care about my past, and I don’t want to think about anyone who isn’t you. I don’t care who you’ve sucked off or who’s eaten a pussy that belongs to me now. I wondered because I’ve wanted to fuck your ass since the first time you walked in front of me. I wanted to know if it’s something you’d be willing to do and whether I’d have to go slowly with you.”

“Since I belong to you, do what you want.”

She tries to step forward and lean toward the wall, but I don't ease my hold on her hair. My fingers bite into her hip.

"I'm going to. We are going to finish our shower. You are going to put on a dress without a bra and panties. We are going to go downstairs, say goodbye to everyone, and go to our penthouse. You are going to strip off the dress and bend over the bed. I'm going to smack that pretty little ass of yours. Then I'm going to fuck you. Hard."

"What if that isn't what I want?"

I laugh.

"We're both testy as fuck right now because neither of us has had enough sleep this week, and all we want is to fuck. You know we need this as badly as I do. If this weren't my brother's house, I'd be fucking you right now. We'll fuck here, I'm sure. But not our first time together. Not when I intend to make you scream over and over."

I spin her toward me, and my kiss is savage. I push her backwards to the wall. She's just as starved as I am. I lift her left leg over my hip, and I brush my cock against her pussy, letting the tip nudge into her. She grabs my hips and tries to push me into her. Oh, the temptation. But I'm in control. At least, that's what I have to tell myself over and over to keep from impaling her.

"Beg me to fuck you, Sylvie."

"Please, Daddy. Do want you know you can't stop thinking about. Do what you crave so much you can barely stop. Don't

torture yourself anymore and just put your cum where you want it.”

“Oh, my sweet little *piccolina*.”

I cup her cheek with my left hand. My thumb’s running over her cheekbone. I can’t help but smile. She challenges me in ways no other person can. She’s more than I ever dreamed of. She’s so damn perfect for me.

“*Cuore*, I love you.”

Her smile could light up the darkest night. Both of her hands cup my neck as presses the softest kiss to my lips.

“*Caro*, I love you.”

“Sylvie, I missed you so fucking much. I wish I never had to travel again. I want you to come with me when you can.”

“I’d like that. It was so much harder to be apart than I imagined. I just want to go home now.”

I still for a moment, not sure what she means.

“Our penthouse, Daddy. I want to go home and do the things you just said. I don’t want to see or talk to anyone, and I don’t give a shit if they figure out it’s because we want to fuck.”

Our kiss goes from zero to one-hundred-and-sixty in two seconds flat. I press her entirely against the wall, rocking my cock against her belly.

“Tell me what else you want to do to me, Daddy.”

“The details are a surprise, but I want us to watch as I enter you for the first time. I want you to know how much I love

you as I make you mine and your make me yours. I want you to know that I've never loved another woman. That being with you is all I want for the rest of my life."

"I think I like your kind of surprises. I want to give myself to you, and I want you to take whatever you want."

"Sylvie, I'm not a dom, and you aren't my sub. But the idea of dominating you makes my balls ache. But I only want that type of dynamic in our sex life. And I want you to know that we can have vanilla whenever you want. It's not solely up to me."

"I know, Salva. You've never made me think you expect me to submit and obey, not even really during anything sexual. You offer it, and I accept. But I don't think you'd ever force me into this roleplaying. I don't think you'd love me less for not wanting it. But I like it."

We lather ourselves with shower gel then shampoo. Sylvia lets me run my fingers through her hair as I put conditioner on it. We enjoy bathing one another and running our hands over each other's bodies. But we're done in only a few minutes, then we're drying off.

As I get ready, I watch her pull some clothes out of a suitcase. She lays a dress on the bed before putting other items back in the case. She slips into it, and I watch as she foregoes a bra and panties just like I told her. She wears little makeup, but she puts it on. I don't know how long we took in the shower, but it's only a few minutes before we're downstairs.

We find everyone in the dining room, and I know Sylvia feels obligated to have breakfast with them. We both should

eat. I enjoy passing her dishes and even serving her some of the food. It feels like she's always been part of the family. But we both speak only when answering questions, both of us in a hurry to finish.

“Sylvia and I are headed home. We have some things to do to get ready for the wedding. Massi, I'll call you later.”

“Salvat—”

“Alberto, Massimo can fill you in.”

I called my brother after leaving the garage. He knows what happened. We agreed upon what we'd say when the Toretts ask what happened.

“I want to speak to you.”

“Later. Sylvia and I have things to discuss now that she's *la madrina*. We need to talk about some things before she officially takes that title. I want her prepared.”

“And you can't do that here?”

“Alberto, I won't explain myself or anything to do with my marriage to you. That's between my wife and me.”

“She's not a Mancinelli yet.”

“Yes, I am.”

Sylvia doesn't speak loudly, but her tone dares her father to contradict her. Her gaze is one that I'm certain she uses against opposing counsel. It's not patronizing or insolent, but it's challenging. Her father turns a gimlet eye toward his daughter. They glare at one another, and it's obvious where Sylvia gets her backbone. Angelina can definitely dig her

heels in, but she doesn't have the scare-you-shitless stare that seems to drill into your soul. I'm glad Sylvia's on my side.

Eventually, the conversation flows around them again, but the standoff isn't over. However, when Sylvia and I are ready to go, she offers her father a hug. It's not as warm as it could be, so things have permanently shifted between them. But he'll have to adjust. We make our way out to the car. It tempts me to enjoy her lack of underwear. But when I lift her onto my lap, we both doze off during the drive into Manhattan.

When we enter our home, she glances at me and walks straight to the bedroom. I speak to my guards, telling them to wait closer to the elevator. I don't need anyone listening to us. When I follow her into the bedroom, she's naked and leaning over the bed with her wrists crossed against her lower back. I kick the door shut and loosen my tie. I slip off my suit coat and lay it across the top of the dresser. I toe off my shoes as I unfasten my cuff links. I place those in the small bowl at the end of the dresser. I'm moving slowly, making Sylvia wonder what I'm going to do. Should I use my tie as a blindfold, a gag, or to bind her wrists? It makes me pause. I walk to my closet and grab two more ties before making my way to the bed. I trail my fingers down her spine, enjoying her shiver.

I lean over her and slip one of them over her eyes before kissing her cheek. Then I take the second and wrap it around her wrists. I check to be sure there's still enough room between them that it won't cut off her circulation.

“Snap.”

She does with both hands.

“I’m going to gag you, *piccolina*. If you need to safe word, snap. Everything stops the moment you do.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She opens her mouth, and I slide it between her lips. I ensure it’s well away from her nose.

“You have a spanking coming for teasing me and for putting yourself in danger.”

She looks over her shoulder at me, her brow furrowed.

“You thought the spanking you gave yourself was enough? Oh, no, little one.”

I bring my hand down with five swift slaps. I run my hand over the pinkening skin before trailing my finger down between her ass cheeks until I nudge her legs apart. My fingertips along the inside of her thighs make her shiver again. She trembles, and I can see her getting wetter.

“You thought to issue me orders earlier when I just wanted to learn more about you. Maybe I didn’t put it well, but you wanted to bait me into an argument.”

My hand slaps her pussy, pushing her onto her toes. A startled sound comes from her before she shrieks at the second and third one. The fourth one makes her moan. The fifth makes her fingers flex and fist.

The next ten on her ass, five on each side, are soft. These are for pleasure. I caress her ass in between, dipping my fingers into her pussy. She’s writhing, and I can’t wait to be inside her. I step back and strip. Before I remove the blindfold and the gag, I leave her to wonder what I’m doing. I move the

armchair in front of my full-length mirror. I return to her and help her stand, but I leave her wrists bound. I guide her to the chair and ease her onto it. I sink to my knees, lifting her legs over the chair arms. I burry my nose in her cunt before licking her.

“Daddy.”

She moans the word, and it makes my cock twitch. Fuck. I want her. I suck her clit as I thrust my fingers into her slick pussy. I stroke her g spot, and her hips tilt, trying to get the satisfaction she craves. I draw my fingers away. I tease her over and over until she’s whimpering. I help her from the chair and turn so I can sit. But before I can position her the way I want, she drops to her knees.

“Please, let me.”

I fist her hair as she lowers her head. She licks me from the base to the tip. Then she leans farther forward and licks my balls before she flicks the tip.

“Fuck, Sylvie. I want you.”

She slides her mouth down my shaft before she tightens the seal with her lips. I nearly buck off the chair when she sucks. She bobs her mouth, and it takes all my restraint not to force her head down and hold it there while I thrust. I close my eyes and revel in the sensations she creates. Fucking divine. I let her work me until I’m the one who can’t take much more. I pull her hair, and she lifts her head.

She looks up at me. I see when the seduction slips into her gaze. Before I’m ready, she takes me into her mouth again and

practically deep throats me. I pull her off again. She licks her lips before flicking the tip with her tongue. She dives in to suck me again. She's edging me, even though I'm the one who keeps pulling her off.

“Stand up.”

She obeys, and I hold her hips as I twist her to look toward the mirror. I position her to step back, guiding her hips back and down.

“Watch as I slide my cock into your pussy. Watch as you take what belongs to you. Watch and know that my cock is the only one that will ever fuck you.”

We lock eyes in the mirror before we both look down to watch as I slide into her. She moans from the sensation as well as how erotic a picture we make. How do I know? Because I groan for the same reasons. Neither of us moves when she sinks to the hilt, savoring the moment we're finally one. When we both grow restless, I guide her hips as she rocks. Then she rises and lowers herself. We both watch as my cock disappears and reappears. I pull the tie from her wrists. She reaches back and grasps my upper arms, and I let her move how she wants.

“Daddy, I want to see you. Look at you properly.”

I lift her off, and she turns. She kneels, a leg on either side of my hips. She eases onto me, then sits on my lap. My hands rest on her ass, and she strokes my chest. We watch each other for a moment, then we come together in a cataclysmic kiss. I surge out of the chair, and she wraps herself around me as I carry her to the bed. I lay her back and move as I stand beside the bed. I thrust into her over and over.

“I want to hold you, Salva. Please.”

I pull out, and she shuffles backwards. I follow her onto the bed, resting on my forearms above her shoulders. I surge into her. Hard. She grasps my hips, her legs bending and opening. I balance on one arm as I cup, then knead her tits.

“Fuck, *piccolina*. You feel so fucking good.”

“So do you, Daddy. Harder, please. So much fucking harder.”

I’m happy to oblige. I pound into her over and over.

“Goddamn, Sylvie. I can’t slow down. I want you so fucking much.”

“I want you, too. Don’t stop.”

I won’t. I pull almost all the way out before slamming into her. Her hands move up to my biceps, clinging to them.

“I’m close. May I come, *caro*?”

“Yes. I need to come too.”

I keep working her, my pubic bone rubbing her clit. Her heels dig into the mattress to press her hips up to meet each thrust.

“Salva!”

I watch her abs flex as her fingers dig into my arm.

“Sylvie.”

I’m pretty sure I just growled. I settle back onto my forearms, and she hugs me. I brush back damp hair from her temple. Our kiss is soft and long.

“I love you, Sylvie.”

“I love you, too, Salva. Always.”

“*Mi vuoi sposare?*” Will you marry me?

“*Sì, amore mio.*” Yes, my love.

EPILOGUE

Sylvia

I gaze down at my left hand, the two rings sparkling on my finger, as Salvatore and I ride the elevator up to our suite. I can't believe how well today went. Our wedding was intimate with just our families and Salvatore's most senior men and their families. The vow exchange was in Italian for my sake, but my husband insisted on a Latin Mass, also for my sake. Signing the register brought me a sense of happiness I didn't imagine. Sylvia Mancinelli. It's real now. The reception was blessedly uneventful, which isn't a given when that many syndicates drink in the same room. Salvatore introduced me to Maksim Kutsenko, Donovan O'Rourke, and Enrique Diaz.

A woman showed up and latched onto Maksim. He was courteous to the woman who was an unexcepted addition—to us and to Maksim. It's obvious they're arranged too, but unlike Salvatore and me, they won't last another six months. Donovan—the man is—well, not long for this life. Salvatore, Enrique, or Maksim are going to kill him one of these days. I don't know how long it will take, but it will happen. Men like him can't last. Enrique is a bit more of a mystery to me. He's older, like Salvatore, so he's shrewder. He laughs a lot, and I think that lulls his enemies and his friends into a false sense of security with him. He is the type to tell you a joke just before he guts you.

Watching these men with their families proved they're no different from the men in mine. They're fiercely loyal and will always put their family first. In our world, our morals are

absolute. They show integrity when they're like this. It put me at ease.

As Salvatore and I step off the elevator, and our guard leads us to the best suite in the hotel, they're the last people I want to think about. The guard gives the rooms a cursory sweep, looking at corners more than anything else. Then my husband and I are alone. He leads me to the bedroom, and I halt when I see what's laid out upon the bed. No wonder the guard didn't linger. I suspect Salvatore told him to do his job and get out. It's obvious Salvatore came up here before the wedding. I turn toward him as he pulls his bowtie loose. His cuff links are next, then he sheds his tuxedo jacket.

“Turn around, *piccolina*.”

His voice is sultry and makes my pussy ache. I look forward to him undressing me for the first time as his wife. But, practically speaking, I can't get out of the dress alone because of all the buttons. He's patient as he undoes them, but I think, if it were anything but my wedding dress, he would have ripped it off me by now. It pools around my feet, and he helps me step out of it. I bend to pick it up, and a smack lands across my ass. It's not enough to knock me off balance, but I wasn't expecting it. I pick up my dress, shoot what I hope is a sexy smirk over my shoulder, and lay it across the armchair.

He's behind me, pressing his cock against my ass, which isn't covered by the lacy thong I'm wearing. He unfastens the corset I'm wearing. It's a creamy lace bustier that matches the thong. It lands on the chair, on top of the gown.

“Why are you wearing these?”

He pulls at the thong's material over my hip and lets it snap before yanking it down my legs.

“Daddy, I didn't get dressed alone. I couldn't not wear panties when I had people helping me into my dress. I couldn't slip them off somewhere because I had nowhere to put them.”

“I'll forgive you. Just this one.”

His grin makes me clench my core and abs. He's seduction in a suit.

“You're overdressed.”

I want him out of that suit.

I unbutton his shirt and help slide it down his arms. Then I unbutton his pants. When I see his boxer briefs, I smirk and cock an eyebrow.

“And you can see how fucking hard I am. I've been that way since you took your first step down the aisle. Do you know how painful it's been to have an erection that lasts more than four hours? In America, they tell Viagra patients to seek medical help if that happens.”

I cover his cock with my hand and squeeze gently before rubbing it. He groans as I lean in to kiss him. I ease the elastic band over it before pushing the offending underwear down his legs. Now that we're both bare, I place my hands behind my back, crossing my wrists.

“Not tonight, *cuore*. Tonight, you lead. One night. You decide it all. You command me.”

I don't know what to make of that. It's too surprising. I saw the crop, whip, and paddle on the bed. I saw the blindfold. I saw the restraints. I assumed they were for me. I want them to be for me. I step away and walk over to the bed. I cannot for the life of me imagine using a single one of these to spank Salvatore. Then I understand.

I pick up the paddle and run my palm over it.

"Will you spank me, Daddy?"

"I don't know. Will I?"

He takes it from me, but he does nothing. We stare at each other. My excitement grows as I turn toward the bed and lean forward.

"You will paddle my ass ten times, Salvatore."

Immediately, the broad side of the velvet covered paddle lands across my ass.

"Count them, *caro*."

I must not sound as in control as I did a moment ago.

"Don't make it sound like I have a choice. Command me, *piccolina*."

"Count them, *caro*."

This time the determination in my voice adds a bite to my words.

"One... Two... Three... Four... Five..."

"Finger me in between the rest."

I clutch the sheets as his fingers slide into me, and he finds my g spot. Fucking hell. The fingering and spanking push me onto my toes as I fight the need to come. I'm denying my own orgasm. There's something I didn't think I would do. But I know he won't let me come until I tell him to make me. Even under my control, he can still dominate me. Us. This.

I look at the other items on the bed. I extend the spreader to see how long it will reach. It'll easily make my legs open as far as they can without doing the splits. I climb onto the bed, handing the bar back to Salvatore. I hand him the handcuffs, too. Then I grab two pillows and pile them before lying on top of them. I place my hands at my lower back.

“Cuff me, spread my legs, and eat my cunt.”

“You don't sound very convincing, *piccolina*. Is that what you really want? It sounds like just a suggestion.”

He's not wrong. I kneel and turn around. He's unprepared for me to fist his hair and tug backwards.

“It doesn't matter how I sound. Do as I say, Salvatore. I don't intend to spank you, but I will.”

I offer him my right breast.

“Suck.”

God. It feels amazing as he swirls his tongue before biting the nipple. He knows I love that. He's taking it upon himself to do that. When I can tell he's really into it and wants more, I push at his shoulders.

“I told you to cuff me, spread my legs, and eat my cunt. I've said it twice. Make me say it a third time, and I will edge

you, Salvatore. I'll make you make me come. I'll make myself come. But you will wait if you make me say it again."

The power is intoxicating. He obeys, but the moment he's ready, he yanks my hips toward him, and I almost slip off the pillows that raise my hips. He attacks my pussy as though we didn't just have a feast at our wedding breakfast. His tongue plunges into me before he sucks my clit. The things his tongue is doing from my asshole to my clit make me writhe.

"Finger me too."

It's a breathy command, but he obeys. It takes next to nothing to make me come. Around and around we go until I've had three mind blowing orgasms.

"Unfasten everything and get on the bed."

He's quick to comply, and I love it. I slip off the bed, and it's his turn to wear the spreader. I quickly fasten it to his ankles before I find the crop. I couldn't spank his ass, but I can tease him a little.

"Stroke yourself. Make yourself come anywhere besides my pussy, and I'll restraint you, sit on your face, and make you make me come. Then I'll ride your cock, but stop before you can come. I'll leave you like that and get myself off. Do you understand me, *caro*?"

"Yes, *piccolina*."

Do I sound that needy when our roles are reversed?

He wraps his hand around his cock and strokes. I trail the crop from his groin up his belly. Then I swat his right nipple. He jerks, unprepared. I do the same to his left. I land three

spanks to his belly before alternating between his nipples, three on each side. He's unprepared for me to slap his balls. Not hard, mind you. Just enough to make him groan again. I watch his hand speed up as he strokes, and I can see the precum on his tip. I step back.

“Stop.”

I take both of his hands and raise them over his head. I'd spotted a second spreader, so I use that to restrain his arms too. I press my tits together and make him suck. When his eyes drift closed, I take the crop to the underside of his balls again. Never hard. I don't want to hurt him. But he bites my nipple each time it lands. I toss the crop to the other side of the bed and pull away. When I climb onto the bed, I straddle him.

“You are going to fuck me and make me come. Do not come until I say you can, *caro*.”

“Yes, *piccolina*.”

Little one. Even like this, he reminds me he's allowing this. I stroke his cock twice before I sink onto it. Fuck. Dear God, this feels amazing. I'm slow as I rise and fall, taking him so deep it makes me ache more than it eases my need. I'm tormenting myself until I come. I lean forward and capture his mouth in a kiss that makes me fist his hair and bite his lip.

“You're mine, Salvatore. I'll never share. I'll kill anyone—man or woman—who tries to take you from me. Don't think I'm just saying this because we're making love and roleplaying. Do not doubt what I'm capable of. There is nothing I won't do to protect you and our family. I love you.”

“I love you, Sylvie. I believe it. It’s one of a thousand reasons I’m already in love with you. You are my everything.”

I move faster as I sit up, my head thrown back as I rock and grind.

“I’m close again, Daddy. Are you?”

I’m still in control, but I can’t help calling him that.

“Very.”

My eyes close as I revel in the sensations. My hands press against his chest. I feel his muscles flex, but I’m unprepared for the sound of metal snapping shut. My eyes fly open as Salvatore rolls us.

“You didn’t make sure the bar locked into place. Now you’re mine. Raise your hands over your head.”

I obey. He entwines our fingers together before he thrusts. He might still have the restraints on his wrists and ankles, but this is a man who will always be in control. He’s a man who will make sure I always know I’m loved. This is a man who will do anything to make me happy. He knows this is what I need now. I need to feel all these things as we start our life together.

“Daddy, I need to come.”

“Me too, *piccolina*.”

“Together?”

“Always.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabine Barclay, a nom de plume also writing Historical Romance as Celeste Barclay, lives near the Southern California coast with her husband and sons. She loves her days at the beach soaking up way too much sun, a good Netflix binge, and a strong hot chai. Her heroines are independent women who can defend themselves but love their Alpha heroes who want nothing more than to protect their soulmates in her Mafia Romances. She's Gen Y/Oregon Trail and loves creating engrossing contemporary romances that will make your toes curl and your granny blush.

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MAMA AND POPS
MARTEEKA KARLAND

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MAMA AND POPS

Bones MC is because of Mama. She's the fierce one, afraid of nothing—except losing her heart.

Somerset, Kentucky. My home. Only one I ever really had. Coming back from Nam is a fuckin' shock. No one wants us here. They judge us on the actions of a few and on hearsay. In their eyes, we're all guilty. Guess I feel the same way about them.

Except Mama. I was attracted to her at first sight. Fell in love in the first three minutes I spoke with her. Knew she'd be mine after our first kiss. Of course, she wasn't convinced at the time. It's because of Mama I have a home and people I care about now. I may be a badass soldier, but she's the hardest, coldest warrior I ever met. Yet she has more compassion in her than any ten people I know.

This is the story of how Bones MC was born, and why Mama and me keep to the shadows. No one knows our full story, not even those closest to us. Since we met, we've always had each other's backs.

Other people have come and gone in our lives, but it's always been me and Mama. This is *our* story.

CHAPTER 1

Sgt. Michael (Mike) Wilbanks

Louisville, Kentucky, 1968

“This right here is some happy horse shit.”

I glanced at the woman beside me, who spoke in a low, wistful tone. She'd been on the same plane as I had coming from San Francisco. Though the bag she carried had an Army medical insignia, she'd dressed in street clothes. There was a hard look about her that I'd seen many times during my tours in Vietnam. We hadn't spoken during the flight, but she was hard not to notice.

She looked to be in her mid to late twenties, carrying herself with the confidence of a warrior. My eye had been drawn her way automatically from the moment she'd stepped on the plane. I'd pegged her as the most dangerous person on the plane—other than myself. Looking at her now, I was reevaluating that notion. The woman might be even more dangerous than I was.

“One'd think those people had jobs to go to.” I wasn't sure if that was the “happy horse shit” she was referring to, but I chose to make it about the protesters. I'd encountered groups like this in every fucking airport I'd stopped in on my way back. To say I was spoiling for a fight was the understatement of the fucking century.

“One would think.” The woman didn't look my way or seem interested in conversation. Instead, she was scanning the crowd. Not like she was looking for someone in particular,

though. I'd seen that look many times. She was looking for a threat. *VC on the trail!*

I shook my head, shaking away the memory. The war wasn't over yet, but it was for me. "You expecting trouble?" Her vigilance—and my own demons—had my radar pinging.

"Always."

I had travel plans, but there was something about the woman that made me walk beside her through the Louisville terminal instead of making my way to my own gate. She was tall, maybe five-ten, with shoulder length strawberry blond hair. She wore a sleeveless shirt that showed off lean, muscular arms. Everything about her screamed confidence, strength, and control. I'd met a few Army nurses who had similar looks about them, but this woman was different. She carried herself with purpose, her duffle slung over her shoulder like my own. Like she was on a mission and no one was going to stop her, even if she had to kill to get them out of her way. She didn't speak again or acknowledge me, but she didn't tell me to back off, either.

The terminal wasn't particularly crowded, though there might have been a hundred people in the area. All I wanted to do was secure the bike I'd procured the second I'd gotten back to the States and fucking *ride*. I'd been offered a chance to join an MC called Iron Tzars, but I wasn't sure they were really my thing. Their causes were noble and any killing they did wasn't indiscriminate, but I'd had my fill of death in country. Even for those who needed killing.

Boom!

A shot rang out and all around us people screamed, ducking for cover.

Boom!

A nearby window shattered as the round hit, sending glass shattering to the floor and the concrete outside. I scanned the crowd for the shooter before glancing where I knew the woman had stood. She crouched next to me. Same as me, she was looking around for the shooter. I saw the exact moment she spotted him. Her features hardened and she looked angry as fuck as she squatted behind the nearby counter. “Fucker’s military.”

“Can’t say I blame him given the reception we got when we landed. Wouldn’t be my first choice of things to do though.”

Her gaze went to mine. “You any good in a fight?”

I shrugged. “Good as any, I guess. Ain’t armed.”

She shook her head. “Me neither.”

“Got a plan?” If she didn’t, I’d come up with one, but this woman looked like she’d been expecting trouble and knew how to deal with it. If she knew the soldier in question or had known this was going to happen, she’d have a plan. I’d follow her lead until she proved she didn’t know what she was doing. One thing I’d learned in Nam was that oftentimes it wasn’t the most educated man or the highest ranking officer who could get you out alive.

“He’s not aiming at anyone in particular. I’ll talk to him. See if I can get him to surrender peacefully. You position

yourself behind him and be ready.” She gave me a pointed look. “I’ll be counting on you to take him down before he shoots me.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Maybe I better try to talk to him.”

She gave me an exasperated huff. “Do you honestly think I can take him down myself? I’m strong, but he’s easily twice my size.”

“You ain’t makin’ this easy, woman.”

“What’s so fuckin’ difficult about it?”

Her scowl was hard enough to trigger my well trained instincts. I wanted to snap a salute and bark out, *Yes, Sir!*

“Be ready. Take him down if he looks like he’s gonna shoot me or anyone else.” She tilted her head, giving me a puzzled stare. “You ain’t got battle fatigue do you? You don’t act like you’ve had all you can take.”

“No. I’m good.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Just don’t like puttin’ a woman out front to use as bait. I should be the one takin’ the risks.”

“Well, I mean, if you want to risk your life when he’ll probably be able to shake me off the second I go for him, fine by me. But I trust you in that regard more than you should trust me. The odds of you gettin’ killed are way higher than me.”

I stared at her until another *boom* went off followed almost immediately by another window shattering. “You’re gonna give me all kinds of fuckin’ trouble, ain’t you?”

She grinned. “Trouble’s my middle name. Get in position. I’ll wait until you’re behind him.” She pointed at the barrier next to the stairs and I saw where she meant.

“Yeah, that’s where I thought I’d wait. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

We stared at each other hard for a moment before she spoke. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“Sgt. Michael Wilbanks. At least, that was my rank when I was discharged.”

“Honorable?” She raised an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes and pointed at my Army issue fatigues. “Of course. Still wearing’ the uniform ain’t I? Re-upped after my initial tour. Not this time, though. Had enough of the killin’.”

She nodded. “Dr. Josephine Payton, Captain, US Army. Or I was. You can call me Jo. I got a four-six-one discharge for ‘inadequate personality’ cause I told a general touring our field hospital to suck my dick when he said the men in my ward were sacrificed for the greater good, then couldn’t tell me what the fucking greater good was.”

I couldn’t contain my bark of laughter. “Promise me, when this is over, you’ll let me take you out on a date.”

Josephine smirked. “Well, I guess that depends on whether you’re able to take this guy down or not. I won’t go out with a pussy.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

She shrugged. “If it gets this guy to stop shootin’ the place up, take it however you like.”

Another *boom* broke the moment. People screamed all around us, but the only person I saw was Jo and her pale blue eyes. Before I could think too much about it, I leaned in and wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her in for a hard kiss.

At first she stiffened, then seemed to melt into my touch. We crouched there behind a fucking planter. When she gave a soft gasp I thrust my tongue inside her mouth. I tasted the sweetest woman I’d ever had the pleasure of meeting. She smelled like wild honeysuckle and citrus, and I knew I’d never live through another spring without remembering this scent. My cock shot hard and I growled when she whimpered under my touch. Josephine didn’t seem like the kind of woman to whimper much so I hoped I was doing something right. I wasn’t sure I’d ever wanted a woman more than I did at that moment. I knew nothing about her other than she had a smart mouth and a keen mind. She’d said she was a doctor, but I knew she was much more. She was a warrior through and through. And I wanted her for my own.

The kiss lasted only a few seconds before I broke it off. She looked adorably dazed, a soft look of pleasure on her face. When she opened her eyes it took her a brief moment to focus and she almost smiled... Then she scowled again. Seemed to be her default setting. “Do that again without permission and I will fuckin’ bury you.”

I tried my best not to smirk at her. Not sure I succeeded. Then, with one hard look into her eyes, a promise as well as a warning to be safe, I ran for my cover at the top of the stairs.

Once I was in place, I made eye contact with Jo. She gave me a crisp nod, then moved closer to where the shooter had taken his stance at the top of the stairs. It was eerie how he calmly fired his gun. Round after round. He didn't shout or scream or demand anything, but the report of his shotgun echoed in the vast terminal, speaking volumes for him.

"Hey, soldier!" Jo called to the guy from her cover at the bottom of the stairs. "Hold your fire."

"Ain't takin' orders from no one no more!" the guy screamed in Jo's general direction. He didn't appear to be looking for her so much as he was looking for the next target. A pillar in the middle of the room caught his eye and he fired. Dust and shrapnel exploded around the area, sending the few people hiding behind it screaming and scurrying off to find better cover.

Jo had to yell to be heard over the shouts of people running for their lives. "I know you don't wanna kill no one here. If you've been to Nam, I know you've had enough killin'. I sure as fuck have. Come on. I just wanna go home, man. Have a beer. Maybe get laid."

"Ain't been to Nam yet, but I ain't goin' back to base neither."

"No one said you were." He'd stopped firing momentarily, likely to reload. Jo took that opportunity to talk to the guy. "Where you stationed?"

“Fort Knox.” The guy’s voice was quiet now. I wondered if he was scared to go back or if he was thinking about his buddies. I could see now he was black. Light skinned, but black just the same.

“Gettin’ picked on by white boys who think they’re better’n you?”

I hadn’t expected Jo to go there, but I’d seen it more times than I cared to admit. Especially with younger soldiers who had no idea what they were getting into when they signed up. We were all warriors, brothers on the battlefield, but in the barracks, prejudice was alive and well. She must have hit the mark because he was silent a long while before speaking again. He didn’t start shooting though.

“Ain’t all I thought it was gonna be. My dad was in France during World War II. When the draft started, he said I should join the Navy. Said I wasn’t smart enough to go to college so I should go ahead and join the Navy before I got drafted to the Army. Only, the Navy didn’t want me on account a didn’t get no high school diploma. When the Navy and the Air Force wouldn’t take me neither, I was gonna go on back home, but the guy at the office took me next door and the Army signed me. I didn’t want to sign up, but they said I’d have a better chance of gettin’ to stay home if I volunteered. I think they tricked me.”

“They sendin’ your brigade to Nam?”

“Yeah. Dad says I ain’t smart enough to not get my head shot off.” There was a loud sob as the kid broke down. “I don’t wanna get my head shot off, lady!”

“I know. How old’er you, honey?”

“Eighteen.”

“Joined the second you left school?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t want to be in the Army.” He sniffed once and I thought the kid was probably crying.

“You don’t wanna hurt these people.” Jo’s voice was calm. She spoke to him like a mother. Firm but loving, like she truly felt sorry for the kid. “Put your gun down and let me take you to the police. You might not have to go to Nam, because they’ll probably put you in jail, but you’ll survive. And if you do it now, voluntarily, you won’t hurt anyone and maybe you can get a service lawyer to negotiate a less than honorable discharge so you can go home after you serve your time.”

That was promising a little much, but it was possible the military had more important things to worry about than one scared teenager in over his head. The kid stood there with his head down. I could see him where I crouched behind the barrier to the stairs, maybe twenty-five feet away. He had the shotgun in one hand at his side, not like he was ready to start shooting again.

“No. I don’t wanna really hurt nobody. Was kinda hopin’ what you said’d happen. They’d just kick me out. Maybe put me in jail for a while, then I could go home.”

“Put your gun down, honey. Lay it at the top of the stairs and put your hands behind your head. Can you do that?”

It was hard to reconcile the Jo who’d threatened to bury me if I kissed her again without permission to this soft spoken,

motherly woman trying to talk down an airport gunman. My hackles rose when she came out from her hiding spot, her hands up in a non threatening gesture. I didn't like her being away from cover so I slowly stepped out into the open, keeping my hands palm up and out to my side.

“I got a buddy behind you to your left, kid. He's ain't gonna hurt you, but he's gonna get your weapon and stay at your side. If you've got any other weapons or ammo, we'd appreciate it if you'd lay them next to your shotgun and back away. Do it slowly so everyone knows you ain't gonna hurt no one.”

“Ain't got nothin' else,” he said. “Just this one. Ammo's in the bag beside it.”

“That's good. Very good. Now, can you put your hands behind your head and take five steps straight backward? My friend Mike's gonna be right with you.”

“You ain't gonna shoot me are you?”

“No, honey,” Jo said. “We've both had enough shootin' to last a lifetime.”

“I'm right here, buddy,” I said, letting the kid know where I was so I didn't startle him. “What's your name?”

He sighed, putting his hands behind his head. “Alex.”

“I'm Mike. I ain't gonna hurt you, but I need to come to you and pat you down. That way when the police get up here, they'll know you're not a threat anymore. Will you let me do that?”

The kid looked so defeated I felt sorry for him. I'd seen that look in every new soldier who set foot in my battalion. Fear. Resignation. Everyone knew your life expectancy plummeted the second you got your draft notice. Sounded like this kid was just like all the others.

He didn't give us any trouble after that. Jo climbed the stairs and secured his weapon before approaching us. "Thank you, Alex. It was very brave of you to trust us. Do you want me to call your dad?"

Alex shrugged, shaking his head. "He'll just box my ears. I ain't supposed to do nothin' to get sent up to Nam. He said once the war ended, I might have a future if I kept my nose clean. Course he don't know we got ordered to ship out."

"Right now, I think he'll tell you the most important thing is that you're alive." Jo smiled at him. Again, it was a kind smile, so at odds with how I'd first pegged her. She said she was a doctor. Maybe this was her bedside manner.

Alex met Jo's gaze with a frightened but grateful one of his own. "I ain't smart, but I know what you done, ma'am. You saved my life."

"I've seen more than enough death to last me a lifetime, honey. Just remember this. Take your punishment like a man, then go home to your family and take care of them."

"I will. Thank you, ma'am." He glanced in my direction before lowering his eyes again. "Sir."

I cringed inwardly, trying not to let Alex see. Last thing I wanted was for him to feel like he'd done something else

wrong. I'd feel like I was kicking a fucking puppy.

We waited with Alex until the police had him cuffed. Every time one of them would get a little rougher than Jo thought strictly necessary, she'd calmly say, "That's enough. He's going peacefully." When one of them called Alex a yellow-bellied nigger, Jo stepped up to him and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and got right up in his face. "You say one more word to that kid tryin' to provoke him, and I'll cut off your nuts. Then I'll take my jail time with a fuckin' smile. I may be in prison for a while, but you'll be minus your balls. *Forever*. Get me?"

Surprisingly, the officer backed down. Probably because this was a completely different Jo than the woman who'd been so kind with Alex. She also looked scary as fuck. Even more so than when I first pegged her on the plane.

For his part, the boy looked startled, like he hadn't expected anyone to take up for him. As the police led him down the stairs, Alex turned his head over his shoulder to look at us.

"Kid's gonna be lucky to survive the next few days. If his CO will get him back to Fort Knox to await trial, he might have a chance." She spoke absently. I could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

"What'er we gonna do?" I asked. Because I just knew Jo wouldn't let this go.

"Nothin'. Ain't my fuckin' problem." Her words were too snarled a little too harshly to be believed.

“Nope. It ain’t.” I had to bite back a smile. I had the feeling the next few days were going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 2

Dr. Josephine (Jo) Payton

Captain, US Army (Mama Jo)

The kid—Alex—did indeed get taken back to Fort Knox. Two days later. There were a whole slew of charges against him. I had no doubt he'd end up in Leavenworth before it was all over. The only question was how much time he'd get. There wasn't much I could do about it, but it was obvious the kid wasn't all that bright. He wouldn't have survived a tour in country. I was surprised he'd managed to last in any form of armed services as long as he had. Something about the kid had me needing to help as much as I could, though.

Though Mike and I had just met, I was reluctant to leave his company. For one, we *fit*. There was a fierce sexual attraction but we both chose to let it simmer a while. Mike had expressed his intention of going South to a little town in Kentucky called Somerset which I'd never even heard of. That was fine by me. I wasn't fit for the big city anymore. I wanted to make a home somewhere peaceful and quiet.

We stayed in Louisville. I tried to be nice. Go through the proper channels without stepping on toes or anything. After two days of waiting with minimal to no response from Fort Knox, I'd had enough. I was done being nice.

“Well?”

Mike was right beside me. I almost jumped because I hadn't heard him approach. I scowled. Not paying attention to my surroundings could get me killed. Except this wasn't Nam.

And Mike had my back the way I'd never completely trusted anyone else to. There was something different about that man and it wasn't just my attraction to him—which was something I'd definitely have to analyze. I filed it away for later.

“You ready to get the fuck outta this place?”

“And leave that kid alone?” I answered him with more irritation than I should have. This whole situation was a shit deal for Alex, even if it was one of his own making. I knew I would do something. I had no idea what, but I could make sure the kid got an adequate defense and that his CO didn't cut corners and trick him into a plea deal or something that would put him away for the rest of his natural life. He'd have a better chance of having a life after this if he were tried in a military court than he would a civilian court, especially in Louisville after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated. At least, I hoped so.

“Well, if we leave that's what we'll be doin'. You finally ready to shake things up a bit?”

When I glanced over at Mike, a smile tugged at his lips. How could the man have my number so early in this game? I could tell he knew I wouldn't let this go. And he was going to go along with anything I decided.

“We don't know each other, Mike. So don't pretend you can read my mind.” I was trying to push him away. Had been trying for two days. I'd kicked him out of our hotel room three times yesterday alone. I worked better by myself anyway.

“We went through something together.” He grinned. “I think that warrants a little commiseration. We can talk about

our feelings and shit. And you can tell me what's goin' on inside that pretty head of yours." He winked at me.

I scowled at him. "What's going on is I'm trying to decide if I'd have a better chance of successfully killing you if I slit your throat while you sleep or shove you in front of a fucking bus."

"If I were you, I'd go with slittin' my throat in my sleep. But only if I get to play with you a bit before I go to the Here After. Hell, you let me show you a good time, and if you still want to kill me, I'll furnish a fuckin' rusty, dullass knife and let you saw as long as you need to for me to die."

"Wow. Been a long time there, soldier?"

He shrugged. "Didn't say *that*. Just that fuckin' you would be worth any punishment."

No one talked to me that way and got away with it. I tried to scowl at him again. Except I felt my lips twitching, trying to grin at his audacity. "Keep it up, man. We'll find out who's the better fighter."

Mike chuckled as he put his hand on the small of my back and led me from the motel. It was time to swing by Fort Knox. If I was right, it was the 138th who were stationed there and getting ready to deploy. I just happened to know the commander and he owed me a huge favor. Official channels weren't working. It was time to use the backdoor. No pun intended.

"Come on, Mama Tiger. You got a ride?"

I shrugged. "Figured I'd get a taxi. Ain't no biggie."

“Ride with me. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I suppose I could do that.”

He grinned and took my hand and led me out of the little motel we’d been crashing in. I was surprised when he led me to a Harley Davidson Electric Glide. Black with silver accents. Subtle, but beautiful. We hadn’t gone anywhere that required more than walking a short distance since we’d been here so the bike was a pleasant surprise. I couldn’t help the slow smile that spread my lips. “Where the fuck did you get this? And how did you get it *here*?”

He shrugged. “A friend from Nam. Dropped it off for me last night. He’ll be meetin’ us in Somerset.”

“So sure I’m coming with you? I don’t even know where that place is.”

“Good. When I get you home, you won’t be able to find your way out.”

I gave him a hard look, hoping to bend him to my will. When he smirked at me, I knew he was on to what I was going to demand next. So I decided to sweeten the pot. “How about *you* ride with *me*. I’ll give you all the sexual favors you want.”

That got a deep, amused chuckle from Mike. “Baby, I’ll charm you into the sexual favors. I don’t need to bribe you.”

I bristled a little. Not because I was upset with him, but because I knew he was likely right. Mike was tall and broad shouldered. His nut brown hair was still regulation, but more than a little scruffy around the edges. He didn’t have a full on beard, but he sported a few days growth on his face. For Mike,

he was letting his hair go just because he could. For me, I refused to take orders from anyone I didn't trust and respect, or I thought was a dumbass. Mike didn't fall into any of those categories.

If he gave an order, I would bank on him knowing exactly what he was doing. It was easy to tell in the short conversation we'd had and the input he gave which meant he was definitely not a dumbass. The way he'd followed my lead without question earned my respect. Not many battle hardened men I knew would willingly take orders from a woman. Instead of arguing, however, Mike had offered his own opinions, building on mine and making it possible for us to get Alex out of here in one piece. He worked *with* me and hadn't tried to dominate the operation.

"So sure that's a foregone conclusion?" Inwardly I sighed. Because he *might* be right.

"Yep. I knew it when I kissed you. You want me nearly as bad as I want you." He threw his thick thigh over the seat of the Harley. "Climb on, Mama Tiger. You ride with me this one time. After this, if you want to ride up front, I'll let you." He handed me a helmet. "Told my buddy I might have a passenger. He packed accordingly."

I snorted. "Will not." But I climbed on behind him. Instead of wrapping my arms around his waist, I placed them on my thighs. I could grab on to him if I needed to, but I wasn't about to let Mike know how drawn to him I was. And it wasn't only physical. Sure, I wanted him with an ache I'd never experienced before—felt like I might die if I didn't get to have

him soon. He ticked every box I had in my mind of what a man should be. And that wasn't something I wanted to think about. I didn't need a man. Least of all one I hardly knew.

Mike started up the bike and revved the engine a couple times. Before he took off, he reached for my hand and tugged me to him, holding my hand against his rigid stomach.

“Hold on, Mama Tiger.” That deep chuckle of his was going to get me in trouble.

He took off and I slid my other arm around his waist. I could still fight this attraction. Just, maybe not right this second.

The warm breeze felt good on my face and Mike's clean, warm scent teased my nose where I was close against him. Occasionally, he'd pat my hand with his big one.

Then I remembered I wanted to go to Fort Knox. I'd gotten so wrapped up in the experience of riding behind him with his scent blowing all around me that I forgot where I wanted him to take me.

When he stopped at the next light I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned his head to look at me over his shoulder. “We need to go to Fort Knox.”

Mike gave me a crisp nod, revving the engine a couple of times while we waited for the light to change. When it did, we took off quick enough I had to hurry and wrap my arms around his waist once more. I might have let out a girly squeak but I'll never admit to anything of the sort. He chuckled

lightly, letting me know he'd been teasing me even as he effectively refused to let me back off touching him.

What surprised me the most was the fact that Mike didn't demand to know why I wanted him to take me an hour away. Just like before, he was willing to follow my lead. I knew he'd want to know the plan when we got somewhere we could talk, but for now he was giving me what I wanted without arguing.

Once we got on the open road, it was all I could do to keep from squealing in delight. I wasn't a novice. I'd been riding motorcycles since the first time I stole one. But this experience wasn't something I was prepared for.

“Wooooo!” With the sun on my face, the wind in my hair, and my thighs cradling Mike's delectable ass, I raised my hands in the air and whooped my excitement. When he chuckled, my whole body heated. He reached back and ran one hand down my leg to squeeze my knee before putting that hand back on the handle bar.

For the better part of my life, I was the adult. The grown up. My pa disappeared before I was born and my ma couldn't have told you who he was to begin with. She had seven other children, some of them older than me, some younger. I was the one everyone went to, though. From the time I was old enough to stand on a kitchen chair and cook a meal, it was me taking care of my family.

Now? For the first time since I could ever remember, I was living in the moment and not worrying about the next move. *Joy. Pure bliss.* It would be so easy to wave him off the exit and just keep going South. This wasn't my fight anyway. I'd

done what I could to keep the kid alive. He was back at his barracks until they'd finished the fucking paperwork, then he'd be shipped off to a disciplinary barracks. Likely Leavenworth, as I'd thought earlier. I could... just keep riding. Let Mike take me away somewhere we could spend some time seeing how attracted to each other we really were, or realizing we hated each other and have a fight to the death. I had to grin at that. For the first time in my life, I thought I might have found a man who could take me in a fair fight.

As we neared the exit, I was about to say fuck it all and tell Mike to keep going. But he squeezed my knee, harder this time. He didn't look back at me, but kept going until he'd pulled off the interstate and onto the exit ramp. He didn't say anything even when we stopped at a light just before we got to the base. Instead of pulling to the visitor entrance, he pulled into a gas station to top off the tank.

"What are you thinking?" I asked as Mike handed the service guy a five dollar bill. It wouldn't take that much, but I imagine Mike wanted the guy gone so we could talk.

"Just wondering what your plan is. If we're gonna get shot at, I'd like to know now." He grinned as he spoke but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"No plans on getting shot at. I know a colonel there. He owes me a favor and I'm gonna to try to collect."

"What are you hoping for with the kid, Jo? You know he's gonna do time. If nothing else, they'll put him in a mental institution."

“I know that, Mike,” I bit out a little harsher than I should have. “I just want the kid to get a fair shake, OK? Yeah, he has to do time. And he’ll get a dishonorable discharge. I’d just like to make sure he gets what he needs while he’s there, especially the means to contact any family who need to know where he is. Maybe some psychiatric help.”

“OK. Fair enough.” Mike finished fueling the bike before securing the pump and climbing back on in front of me. “Let’s see what we can do for the kid.” A few minutes later he pulled up to the visitors entrance. The gate was manned by several guards who looked no nonsense. I’d have trouble getting in if Colonel Gill decided to renege on our agreement.

“Military ID please.” One guard approached us while three more kept watch.

“We’re both recently discharged.” I pulled an envelope from my jacket pocket with my paperwork inside it and handed it to the guard. Mike raised an eyebrow but did the same. “I’m here to see Colonel Gill. He’s not expecting me, but you tell him it’s Dr. Josephine Peyton.”

“Pull over by the guard tower while I look into this.” The guard gave me a disgruntled frown. Doubtless the man didn’t like a change in routine. Most men who took their responsibilities seriously when on guard duty weren’t fans of the unexpected.

Mike took us to the area the guard indicated. There were several parking spots for people to pull over and wait, though none were taken. It gave us another few moments to discuss our next move. Which, I admit, might have been smarter to

have done at the gas station. Or in the parking lot at the airport before we left. Or any number of places other than outside the guard tower at Fort *fucking* Knox.

“I hope you know what you’re doin’, Jo. You on good terms with Colonel Gill?”

“Not at all. In fact, he hates my guts. Only problem is, I saved his life more than once in Laos, *and* he may be an insufferable, know-it-all, condescending bastard, but he always repays his debts. And, he’s not a bad man. Just tends to be a rule follower, even when he knows he needs to make his own rules.” I was betting this kid’s life with my belief on the straight-laced bastard, but someone needed to look out for the youngster.

It took far longer than I expected. That was understandable given the importance of Gill’s job as CO of one of the most secure buildings in the world, *and* the fact that the last time I saw him I’d called him a coward. I was betting the delay was more because of the latter than the former. An hour and a half later, I was fuming, but one of the guards came over to us.

“Sorry, Ma’am.” The young man was tall, blond, and skinny. He looked like a stiff breeze would blow him over. Not to mention he didn’t look comfortable at all with having to deliver the news. “The Colonel says he’s busy and can’t receive visitors.”

I opened my mouth to give the guy what for—even though I knew it wasn’t his fault—when Mike lay a hand on my thigh—a clear signal to shut up if I ever saw one.

“Can you please tell the Colonel it’s a personnel matter? Dr. Peyton and I have information on a soldier named Alex. Not sure of his last name but he said he was stationed here. We were the ones who got him to the police.”

The young man’s eyes widened and his lips parted in an “O” of surprise. “Oh, man. Give me a minute.” The kid turned and ran back to the guard post.

Mike commented on their animated conversation. “They probably don’t want to bother the Colonel again.” Mike brushed his hand over my knee casually as he gave me the rundown. Even if it was through my jeans, I still soaked up his touch. He had to know I could see what was going on just fine, but was using his voice as a distraction so he could touch me. I’d have called him out on it but I was afraid he’d stop so I let it go.

As a general rule, men and I didn’t get along. Not because I wasn’t attracted to them, but because men in the military tended to be too Alpha to tolerate a woman who outranked them. Though it was against the rules for officers to date enlisted personnel, I’d have chucked that out the window if I’d found a man I was even remotely interested in fucking. There had been a few men who were comfortable with my rank, but those guys usually weren’t Alpha enough for me. I wanted my man to be strong with a take-charge kind of personality, but not so much he resented me for my education. Mike... Yeah. He was that Alpha. But he also took in stride the fact that I was a woman and still knew my shit. He seemed willing to follow my lead instead of trying to bulldoze his way to the front.

“If they don’t let us in, I’ll call Gill myself. And if I have to do that, I’ll be fuckin’ somebody up.” My irritation was coming through in spades but I didn’t care. I was going to do my best for Alex and make sure he had everything he needed. Normally, I’d have said good riddance and just killed someone shooting up an airport. I guess I’d seen too many young soldiers dead, dying, and with battle fatigue so profound, they’d gone mad. I had no idea what the kid’s story was—other than he seemed a little slow. That could be his mental capacity, or it could be as a result of knowing he was going to be deployed to Nam. Whatever was going on inside that kid’s head, he needed help coping. Not to spend the next couple of decades in a prison cell.

“You know, your vicious side turns me the fuck on, Josephine.” Mike’s lips quirked up at one corner. He didn’t look at me or take his eyes off the two men talking. “When we get this settled, you and I are gonna have a nice long chat about what happens when you get all blood thirsty around me.”

“You’re on dangerous ground. Keep walking and you might find you’re in way the fuck over your head.” I tried to sound menacing, but I’m pretty sure it all came out all breathless and shit. Like I wanted him the way he claimed to want me. Which wasn’t true. Not at all. It wasn’t.

His warm chuckle was his response. Also, that hand on my knee squeezed once before he moved it. Probably thought I’d bite or something. Or he could be freeing up his hands because the first guard was now approaching our vehicle and he didn’t look happy.

“No fighting,” I muttered. I couldn’t help it. It just slipped out.

Mike glanced at me sharply. “Really?” He raised an eyebrow. I shrugged.

“We’ve told you. The Colonel is not taking visitors.” The guard looked supremely pissed off. It was obvious he had no intention of checking with anyone else or relaying the message Mike just issued.

“I’d get your name, rank, and serial number, but reporting dumbasses ain’t my thing,” Mike told him. “You tell Colonel Gill that Dr. Josephine Peyton is here to see him. You tell him she ain’t forgot about Laos and has come to collect a debt. You tell him that word for word, then come back and tell us he won’t see us.”

The guy looked wary now. Like he knew he’d just sprung a trap but couldn’t see it or figure out a way out of it before it closed in on him. “If you’re wasting my time, I’ll arrest you both.”

“I’ll waste your fuckin’ time,” I muttered before I could stop myself. Mike clapped a hand back on my knee. “What?” I tried to look all innocent but neither man was buying it. “He’s being stupid.”

“Jo...” Mike gave me a warning glance. Which just made my chin go up.

“Bitch,” the guard muttered.

To my surprise, Mike climbed off the bike in one smooth move, reaching the guy’s retreating form in two long strides.

He grabbed the guard's shoulder and spun him around, catching him with a right hook.

“You don't talk to a lady that way, soldier. I don't care what the fuck she says or does. Do it again and you won't have to worry about getting called to Nam. I'll beat the fuckin' shit outta you right here in the good ol' U. S. of A. so bad you'll be lucky to walk again.”

Several other guards in the vicinity ran toward us. The guard in question rubbed his jaw, but had only staggered back before regaining his balance. He gave Mike a withering look, but backed off.

“There a problem, Sarge?” one of the other men asked. He didn't look at all ready to take on Mike. I mean, Mike's a big guy. Tall and thickly built. But there were a total of four guys surrounding him. None of them looked like they were eager to take him on. Which meant I needed to get a look at my new friend because I had a feeling whatever I saw on his face might just be panty melting.

“No. I was just going to give the Colonel's secretary a message.” He waved a hand toward us. “Let them wait here until I get off the phone.”

The guards each took a few steps backwards, not turning around, not standing down a single bit. Mike waited a couple of heartbeats before reaching out to rub my upper thigh in a soothing gesture. Wasn't sure if it meant to soothe me or him. Then he crossed his arms over that mouthwateringly thick chest. He planted his feet shoulder width apart and stood there, staring at the group of soldiers. Finally he turned his head to

look at me, and the fierce expression on his face made my breath catch.

Mike nodded at me slowly. “You like seeing me all riled up on your behalf?” The man obviously saw way more than I wanted him to. Which made him doubly dangerous.

“I ain’t your problem. You didn’t have to do that.” I knew I sounded breathless. Hell, I was breathless. The man’s swift defense of me with such passion that he looked like he was ready to kill a motherfucker went straight to my clit and *throbbed*.

“You’re my woman. That most definitely makes you my problem.”

I shook my head. “I never agreed to that.”

“Yes, you did. When you didn’t castrate me after I kissed you.”

CHAPTER 3

Mike

It didn't take long before Colonel Gill instructed the dumbasses at the gate to escort us in. OK, so I wasn't being fair. Those guys weren't dumbasses. They were doing their job. Besides, I wasn't too high and mighty to admit that, had I been in the sergeant's position, I wouldn't have bothered a colonel either. What I took exception to was the disrespect to Josephine. I wasn't above killing a woman if necessary. Lord knew I'd done it more than once in Nam. But even if a woman needed killing, I did it quick and as painless as I could. A simple bullet to the head. The sergeant wasn't impressed with Jo's credentials and probably thought he could get away with disrespecting her because she was a woman. Not on my watch.

Once inside the reception area of the colonel's office, Josephine sat stiffly on the edge of her chair. She'd worked herself up to a good pissed off and I found myself looking forward to the confrontation that would soon follow. While I hoped she didn't get us landed in jail, I'd enjoy the shit out of seeing her spar.

"This way, please, Dr. Peyton." A tall, thin man with perfectly pressed service greens approached us. He was perfectly groomed, not a hair out of place. The poor guy had a shave so close it had to have hurt. He didn't smile but was completely professional. I pushed off from the wall where I leaned, watching from the background. "Not you, sir. Only Dr. Peyton."

"Where I go, he goes," Jo barked out.

The guy stiffened, but nodded his head once. He gestured to the massive wooden door that led to Colonel Gill's office. He opened the door and we stepped inside.

Colonel Rylan "Ry" Gill was a huge man with a permanent scowl on his face. At least, that's what it looked like. He shot Josephine a look when she entered. The cursory glance he gave me might have been insulting if he hadn't looked at Jo with a wary expression. Like he'd sized us both up and knew Jo was more of a threat than me. He'd be partially right. Under normal circumstances, Jo was definitely the one to worry about. But not at the moment. I was pissed. If this guy gave Jo the slightest bit of lip, I was ready to throw him a beating like he'd never had.

"Sorry for the way the guards were at the gate with you, Dr. Peyton." Gill's expression was still one of vast disapproval, but his tone and words were respectful so, for the moment, he got to live. "They were only doing their duty. I'd left orders I wasn't be disturbed."

OK. No self respecting Colonel explained himself to just anyone. Yet, this guy was treating Josephine like she was his superior. Either he owed her a really big debt, or he knew exactly how dangerous the woman was. This guy went up a few notches in my estimation.

"We need to talk about Alex. The kid who got arrested a few days ago."

With a sigh, Gill reached for a file on his desk and opened it. He flipped through the pages like he was reviewing it. I

could tell it was more something to do with his hands while he gathered his thoughts.

“Alex Brown. The kid shot up an airport. What do you expect us to do with him?”

“Just give him a fair shake. He’s not cut out for this and if you’re the same man I knew a few years ago, you know every man under your immediate command and what they’re capable of.”

“Alex Brown. Born and raised in Sparta, Mississippi. Left high school when he turned eighteen without graduating. Got duped into joining the Army but Uncle Sam needs recruits so they wouldn’t let him out of his enlistment.” He looked up at Josephine. “Kid couldn’t kill a bug much less a person, even if they were shooting at him.” He sighed and dug his fingers into his eyes. “When they told me he shot up the Standiford Field terminal, I couldn’t believe it. He’s as gentle as they come. Simple, maybe, but the only trouble he’s ever been in was a direct result of his lack of intelligence.”

“Kid doesn’t need to be in the Army, colonel.” Jo leaned over and placed her palms on his desk, looking straight at the man. “I realize he’ll have to do some time for what he did, but make it minimal jail time and an other than honorable discharge. Let him go back home to his family.”

“Believe me, I’d love to do nothing more. Unfortunately, the JAG prosecutor is out for blood with this.”

“Because he shot up an airport filled with civilians? That would make sense.”

“With all the racial tension happening all over the country, JAG’s taking a hard line with anything that even remotely smacks of racial violence.”

“This wasn’t about anything to do with that.” I knew there was no way Josephine was going to let this go easily. We both knew the kid would have to do time, but she wanted to give him a fair chance. “Kid’s scared and, like you said, a little on the simple side. Surely you have some sway. Get them to sentence him to a couple years. No one was hurt or killed. He surrendered peacefully. That has to count for something.”

“I’ll try, Dr. Peyton. I’ve got a buddy willing to take his case. He’s really good at what he does. If anyone can get him a fair shake, That’s all I can promise.”

“Ian McGregor,” she said.

The colonel tilted his head at her. “Yes. You know him?”

“He’s my half brother. I’ll talk to him when we get done here. Can we talk to Alex? I want to make sure he has a way to contact his family. If he doesn’t, then I’ll get them a message.”

“You know you can’t have contact with a prisoner, Jo.” It was the first time the colonel had used anything other than a formal address when speaking to Josephine.

“Today I can, Ry. Ten minutes. That’s all I’m asking for right now. The kid needs a way to let his family know where he is and what’s going on.”

With a sigh, he nodded. “Ten minutes. Not a minute more. I’ll even give you another ten minutes when you get his family

here. But Jo?” When she raised an eyebrow at him he continued. “This evens us out.”

“No it doesn’t,” she said, with a lift of her chin. “Not by a fuckin’ long shot.” She stood to leave without another look at the colonel. He sighed but followed her to the door.

As Jo marched out of the office and started down the hall, Gill spoke to the aid who’d shown us to his office. “See to it Dr. Peyton and her escort are shown to a holding area. Have Private Brown brought to them. Tell the guard’s they have ten minutes with the prisoner.”

“Yes, sir.” The aid rose and headed off after Josephine and I followed at a discrete distance. I liked to blend in and I didn’t like being outnumbered, even if this was a US base on US soil. I wasn’t sure what Josephine had in mind, but it was my job to make sure she got what she wanted.

The aid placed us in a room with a steel table and two chairs. I moved to the far corner and did my best to become part of the wall. As much as I was itching to take charge of the situation, this was Jo’s deal. I was there for moral support and backup. Jo sat quietly in one of the chairs provided, lacing her fingers together and placing her hands on the table. She was perfectly still. Like she was lying in wait for the enemy when I knew she didn’t see Alex that way. Likely, she was getting ready to lay into some dipshit dumbass for abusing the boy, cause that was Jo. A mother hen. Or, rather, a mama tiger.

A few minutes later, two guards escorted Alex to the holding cell in handcuffs where they fastened him to the table.

Poor kid looked terrified as hell. Also looked like he'd taken several blows to the face.

“What happened?” Jo asked without preamble.

Alex shrugged. “Same thing always happens. My face got in the way of some guy's fist.” He didn't seem like he was upset, just stating a fact. “It's better here, though. That was the folks in the city jail.”

Jo took a breath and let the silence linger for a moment before she reached out and covered Alex's bound hands with one of her own. “Have you called your pa?”

Alex shook his head. “They said I could later, but ain't never let me yet.”

“What's the number? I'll get in touch with him so he knows where you are and what's happening.”

Alex gave her the number, but Jo didn't write it down. The kid noticed and gave her a disappointed look. “You ain't gonna call my daddy,” he muttered.

“What makes you say that?” Jo didn't move and her facial expression didn't change.

“You didn't write it down. You ain't gonna call him.”

“Oh?” Then she repeated the number back to Alex. “I have a photographic memory. I remember everything I read and most of what I hear. I won't forget, Alex. Now. Is there anyone else you want me to get a hold of?”

He studied her for a long moment, then nodded. “My girl. Her name's Gracie. Last time I talked to her, she got thrown

out the house cause she was my girl. Her pap's pissed."

"Tell me where I can find her. An address. A phone number."

He gave her an address and phone number. Again, Jo didn't write anything down. Fortunately, my memory was as good as she said hers was so I was pretty sure between the two of us we'd remember.

"You promise you'll let her know what happened?"

"I will, Alex. Assuming you get a military trial, I don't know that she can be there, but I'll make sure she gets to see you at some point if she wants to." Jo squeezed his hand. "She love you, Alex?"

He shrugged. "Said she did. She didn't back down when her daddy said he'd throw her out. I give her my pay so she can have a place to live. I don't know what she'll do now." The big kid sniffled once, his lower lip trembling. "I wanted to be a good man to her. I know I could be. She's got a little one on the way too." He met Jo's eyes and I knew I was fucked. "How'm I gonna take care of her and my kid from prison?"

Jo shook her head once like she was arguing with herself. I had to grin, though I put my hand up to hide it. If she saw me smile right now, she'd castrate me on the spot.

"I'll figure something out, Alex. Whatever happens, I'll make sure to get word to you. Might take a while. In the meantime, the colonel is trying to get you a good lawyer to help you out. Someone I know. I'll put in a good word for you."

“Why you helpin’ me?” Alex looked equal parts hopeful and wary.

“Someone needs to, kid. Just so happens that someone’s gonna be me.” She stood just as the guard opened the door.

“Time’s up,” the guard said. “The colonel’s aid will escort you out.”

“Hang in there, Alex. I can’t tell you everything will be all right, but I can promise to look after your girl and to get a message to your pa.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Ain’t worried ‘bout me. It’s Gracie who’s gonna suffer the most.”

“You have my word I’ll do everything I can for the girl.”

With a nod, Alex let the guard lead him out of the holding cell and down the corridor.

I kept silent, watching Jo like a hawk. I didn’t want to miss even one facial expression. It was easy to see how determined she was. I just wasn’t sure what she’d do next. God knew I was looking forward to finding out.

CHAPTER 4

Mama Jo

Mike and I spent the better part of the day traveling to the Eastern part of the state. Not the most common place for a black man to live in Kentucky, but not unheard of either. Also, it couldn't have been easy. Alex's father owned a garage with an impeccable reputation. The person we talked to when trying to find the place had told us, "Don't hold it against the garage for having a colored owner. He does top notch work."

We got a hotel room. I wanted to get two, but Mike insisted we only needed one. I was pretty sure he intended to make some kind of move on me and couldn't say I was too broken up about it. Still, I put up what I thought was an appropriate protest. He just grinned and got one room.

The next day, we found Alex's father. Job Brown had been distressed but resigned to learn what had happened to his son. And no, the Army hadn't notified him in any way. A transplant from Jackson, Mississippi, Job was a hard working man just looking to make a living. He and his wife had nine kids with Alex being the oldest. "I was afraid somethin' like this'd happen. He OK?" Job gave me a concerned, anguished look.

"Got a little roughed up in the city jail, but he's back at the barracks now. Fort Knox. Colonel Gill is getting him a good lawyer. I know both men personally. They'll do everything they can for your son, but you have to understand there's gonna be no way for him to avoid prison time and a dishonorable discharge."

“Yeah. Figured.” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “Least they ain’t sendin’ him off to Nam. Alex has a good heart, but he’s not real good at followin’ orders. Not cause he don’t want to. Just gets mixed up sometimes if it’s more than something real easy. Gets nervous. Bit... simple.”

“He’s a good kid, Mr. Brown. Just scared. I think learning he was getting deployed pushed him past his breaking point. From talking to him, it sounded like he had a lot on his plate even before that.”

“Yeah.” He frowned. “I told him not to get mixed up with no white girl. Her daddy had it in for him from the first day he found out. Now he done went and knocked her up.”

“I take it you’re not happy about it either?” Mike stepped in, probably figuring I was getting ready to give the guy a piece of my mind. But I got it. It couldn’t be easy for any of them to have a son involved with a white girl whose parents didn’t approve. Not in the current environment.

“Of course I ain’t happy,” Job barked. “You think I want to see my son havin’ to fight every single day to defend his wife’s honor? It ain’t as bad in Kentucky as it was in Mississippi, but they still get harassed. And now they got a baby they brinin’ into it? No. I ain’t happy. I just tryin’ to look out for my son’s all.”

I sighed. “Ain’t we all. Look. Alex has been giving Gracie his pay to keep a roof over her head and food in the house. He’s not gonna have that much longer. I ain’t talked to the girl yet, but Alex said she can’t go back to her parents.” I had a habit of falling back into my southern accent when I was

agitated or talking to someone with a similar accent. I inwardly cringed, but decided to just roll with it. Besides, Job Brown would be more inclined to cooperate fully if he didn't think of me as a white woman with a silver spoon up her ass.

“Na. She got throwed out the house. The whole town was talkin' 'bout it. Said he don't want no nigger baby runnin' 'round his house. Called her white trash and said she could damned well get her stud to take care of her. He was done. Girl's mama tried to talk sense to him, but the man's as mean as they come. Next time anyone saw his wife, Luellen was havin' to explain how she'd run into a door that got her face all bruised up.”

A woman stepped out of the little house. Her sundress had roses crawling over it with green leaves and a white background. She smiled but had a concerned look on her face. “Job don't mean anything by that. But that Danny Braxton's a mean man. He hits on his wife all the time and I'm pretty sure Gracie wasn't spared. I'd take her in, but I ain't got room for my eight other kids as it is. Gracie's a good girl. Works hard and she loves my Alex.” The woman—obviously Alex's mother—smiled sadly. “We'll help where we can, but her situation could be trouble for my other kids.”

“I understand,” I said. “We're headed to find Gracie now. If you see her, tell her Josephine Peyton and Michael Wilbanks are looking for her on behalf of Alex. We're staying across town. I promised him we'd talk to her. We intend to do our best to see she's taken care of.”

“Do you know when Alex will get to come home?” His mother looked hopeful, but resigned.

“No, Mrs. Brown. I’m afraid it might not be for a while. I’ll do my best to keep you informed, but I want you to have this.” I handed her an envelope. It had Ian McGregor’s office phone number and address along with my full name. “This has his lawyer’s contact information. When you get in touch with him, you tell him Josephine Peyton is your friend. My name’s in there too. Don’t have a phone yet, but I’ll let you know when I do. Until then, you get in touch with Ian.” I pointed to the envelope I’d given her. “Do exactly what he says. Once he’s gotten better acquainted with the case, he’ll tell you what you can expect. He’s a good man. He’ll do right by your son, I promise.”

We said our goodbyes and left. Once we climbed back on Mike’s bike, he started it and took off but didn’t go far. He stopped at a little diner in the middle of town. We sat there for a long time, not saying anything. He was likely as deep in thought as I was.

The delicious smell coming from the diner finally got my attention. “I’m hungry.”

“Figured.” Mike turned to look at me over his shoulder. I gripped his arm as I climbed off, bracing myself so I didn’t fall. The man had some serious muscle going on. Made me wonder what he’d look like naked. Feel like, his skin pressed against mine. I shook my head. Now wasn’t the time to go there.

How long had it been since I'd been seriously attracted to a man? In the past, any man I'd thought about getting with had ruined any attraction I had the first time he opened his big fucking mouth to tell me I was a woman and needed to know my place. Mike hadn't done that. In fact, the man had followed me all on his own. Until we'd actually talked in the airport, I'd never seen the man before.

Shaking myself mentally to focus on the problem at hand, I approached the diner. Before I could open the door, Mike reached for the handle and pulled, stepping aside to let me enter. I swallowed as I looked up at him. At five feet ten inches tall, there weren't many men I couldn't look in the eyes without craning my neck. Mike was a good six-six at least. He met my gaze with a steady one of his own. Yeah. I was in trouble.

I put my shoulders back and did my best to blank my expression. The smirk on Mike's face told me I hadn't done it fast enough. The bastard knew the effect he was having on me and was biding his time.

Once we were seated, I scanned the menu, ordering a burger, fries, and sweet tea before handing the menu back to the waitress. Mike ordered the same, never taking his eyes off me. I was sorely afraid the man saw more than I wanted him to. He certainly had my number so far.

"If we're gonna go find that girl, we're gonna need more than a bike." He watched me carefully. "Unless you plan on leavin' her here?"

“She ain’t got no future here,” I found myself saying softly. Shit. I’d let my hillbilly out again. I seemed to do that a lot around Mike. “Not if she wants to make a life for herself.”

“What do you want to do, Jo?”

“Don’t know. First we find Gracie, then we’ll figure out what to do next.”

The waitress brought our drinks. Mike took a sip of his tea. “Good. If she’s willin’, you think we should take her back to Somerset with us? It’s in a better part of the state. Still ain’t great for a white girl raisin’ a black baby, but with us there to help...”

“Yeah. If she’s willing, that’s the best choice.” I raised my head and frowned. “Not sure I agreed to stay in Somerset with you.”

He grinned. “Not sure you didn’t either.”

“Asshole.” I took a sip of my tea.

The food was wonderful. Or maybe I was just hungry. I ate everything on my plate and another two glasses of tea. By the time we were finished, I was feeling every hour we’d spent on Mike’s bike.

“We gonna try to find Gracie tonight?” Mike wiped his mouth and snagged the check before I could. I frowned at him.

“No. I need rest before we face this. Got a feeling it ain’t gonna be pretty.”

Mike shrugged. “Not sure why. Girl’s dad kicked her out. She has no idea she’s not gonna have income from Alex so

she'll have trouble keeping a place to stay.”

“I need to think,” I muttered. “To do that I need rest.”

“I know exactly what you need, Josephine.” Mike stood and slapped a few bills on the table before snagging my hand and pulling me to my feet. “Come on.”

I wanted to argue with him just because he was trying to take charge. Thing was, I found I was OK with that. I was exhausted. Mentally and physically. And more than a little heartsick. For some reason, Alex Brown had wormed his way inside my heart and I couldn't let this go until I was certain I'd taken care of the kid as much as I could.

Once we got back to the hotel, Mike shut the door and hung the security chain. When he turned around, there was hunger in his gaze. Hunger, and a knowing so deep I was sure he could read my mind.

“While we're in here, in this room, you're gonna let me worry about everything. You're gonna rest and recharge, and I'm gonna take over. You're also gonna let me comfort you.”

“You've lost your Goddamned mind.” He was delusional. “Don't think you know me or what I need,” I spat, though I had the feeling my outrage stemmed from the fact that he *did* seem to know me. “Comfort is for the weak and I'm not weak.”

He raised his eyebrows. “For the weak, eh? You think you don't need someone to comfort you?”

“Absolutely not.” I scowled at him as I backed across the room. He moved toward me like a predator stalking his prey.

“Why would I need comfort? These people are nothing to me.”

“Right. That’s why you went toe to toe with a colonel in his own territory. That’s why you threatened to cut out that cop’s balls. That’s why we’re on our way to find a white girl pregnant with a colored boy’s baby. Because these people are nothing to you.” He looked more angry than I’d seen him, even out front of Fort Knox. “You, Josephine, are a Mama Tiger. You see this kid as someone who needs your help and you’re takin’ him in the only way you can. I got no problem with that. Admit it. Own it. But do *not* lie to me, Josephine. Ever.”

I’d backed up until I was against the opposite wall. Mike caged me in with his superior height and muscle. I placed my hand on his chest, unable to drag my gaze back to his face. His T-shirt molded that wide, muscular chest to perfection. I’d never felt threatened by Mike, no matter his size. Not even now. Oh no. Definitely not now. What I did feel was an intense lust threatening to swamp me and have me throwing myself into Mike’s strong arms to see what he could offer me.

“Oh yeah, Jo. Mama Tiger. I see you. You’re a hair’s breadth from takin’ what you want from me.”

“You sayin’ I couldn’t?”

“I’m sayin’ all you have to do is tell me what you want.”

“Ain’t beggin’, bastard. Not for any reason.”

“Did I say you needed to beg? No, Jo. I said to *tell me what you want*. Tell me. I’ll give you the fuckin’ *moon*.”

Before I could stop myself, I nodded. “Kiss me then. Kiss me like you mean it.”

Mike covered my mouth with his almost before I got the last word out. The first kiss we’d shared was spontaneous. I think it shocked us both. But this one... Mike completely dominated me. His body pressed me close against the wall, mashing me against his chest in the most dangerous and delicious way. Tongue sweeping inside my mouth, he invaded my senses, consuming me. And I didn’t put up a fucking fight.

His hand came around my throat, holding me steady while he continued to kiss me. I arched my neck, giving him better access. Why, I have no idea. I wasn’t the submissive type.

“That’s it, Mama Tiger. Let yourself go.”

The embarrassing whimper that escaped barely registered as I did exactly what he told me to do. I surrendered myself to him. Let him take control. Mike grunted his approval before squatting and lifting me into his arms, urging my legs around his waist.

Next thing I knew, Mike was laying me on the bed and following me down. He covered my body with his bigger one and the weight of him was... *sublime!*

Moaning and rubbing myself against him wasn’t even something I tried to prevent. At this point, there was no use denying either of us. He wanted me and I Goddamned sure wanted him.

With a resigned sigh, I pulled his shirt from his pants and found his skin with my finger tips. The hollows and valleys

that played over his skin were sexy as fuck. I wasn't certain I'd ever seen a man as muscular and strong as Mike. He moved with fluid grace but had raw strength and power in his body that was ambrosia to a woman like me. He was powerful without smothering me. I could quickly tell this was going to be a relationship where I might control things in the real world, but in the bedroom, Mike would be firmly in charge. The surprising thing was, I found not only didn't mind, I might even prefer it.

It wasn't long before we'd managed to rid each other of our shirts. My bra followed and Mike cupped one breast in his hand, his thumb feathering over my nipple in maddening caresses.

“You're beautiful, Mama Tiger. So fucking beautiful and responsive.” As if to punctuate his statement, he twisted my nipple in a teasing caress and I cried out. Not in pain, but the most exquisite pleasure. “Let me have you.” His growl sent shivers through my body. As I clung to him, I panted, trying to get my mind straight when his scent muddled any coherent thought I might have tried to hang on to. All I wanted was what Mike was doing to me. Giving me pleasure like I'd never imagined existed.

When he kissed his way down my neck to my chest and took a nipple between his lips, I was gone. With a sharp cry, I wrapped my legs around his waist and ground my pussy over his very hard cock. Our jeans might have separated us, but I took what I wanted just the same.

“That’s it, Mama Tiger. Take what you need. Take it from me and come.” He hissed the command as he looked up at me from my breasts. His dark eyes and intense gaze pushed me over the edge from reality to some place I’d never been. It felt like a detonation inside me. A bomb searing me from the inside out in immeasurable pleasure. And still, I needed more.

“Mike!” I screamed his name as he unwound my legs from his waist and quickly moved down my body. He sat back and unfastened my pants before tugging them down my hips and thighs in snapish movements until he flung them and my panties to the floor.

“You want to take me inside you?” He lifted an eyebrow as he shoved his pants over his own hips and fisted his cock. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes! Oh, God! Please Mike! Please!”

With a grunt and a shove of his hips, Mike sank inside me in one smooth stroke. Again, I screamed, another orgasm overtaking me almost immediately. He was thick and pulsing inside me and I thought he cried out with me.

It took several seconds to realize he was holding himself deep inside me but not moving. I shook my head, trying to think. Shouldn’t he be moving? I was pretty sure...

“Mike?”

“Hush, Mama Tiger. Hush...” He kissed my lips. It was then I realized he was sweating, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs in a ragged pant. “Just hold still a moment, honey.”

Hold still? What the fuck was he talking about? I didn't want to hold still. "Fuck me!" My demand was like steel. I met his gaze with my own, hoping he could see the determination and need to have him give me what I wanted.

"Is that what you need?"

"Yes!"

The next instant, he rode me hard, looking straight into my eyes as he took me ruthlessly. Breath exploded out of my lungs with each surge forward. I hung on tightly, gasping with each time his cock slammed home.

"Come, Josephine." His hoarse whisper was a harsh command I was helpless to resist. The second the words were out of his mouth, I obeyed. My screams were as loud as his shouts. As I clamped down around him, I felt his hot seed shooting inside me and something settled in my chest. My breathing was fast and deep, like I'd run a race, but I felt at peace. Like the interlude we'd just shared was an integral part of my life. I felt... complete.

"You good, Mama Tiger?"

"Why do you call me that?" I was good, but I wasn't ready to admit it to him yet.

"Because that's what you are. A mama tiger protecting the cubs she sees as hers."

"Cubs?"

"Yeah. Alex. His girl. Their child."

“No one said I was protecting them. And I’ve not met the girl yet.”

He smirked at me. “But we’ll be taking her to Somerset with us to our new home.”

“You’ve lost your mind.” I scowled and shoved him off me. Immediately I felt the loss of his warmth and had to fight myself to keep from whimpering and pulling him back. The smirk on his face said he noticed though. “I’ve not got any intention of keeping Gracie with me. God knows I’ve got enough on my plate just adjusting back to civilian life. And who says I’m going to make Somerset my home? *Our* home? You’ve lost your mind.”

Mike rolled over on his back with a groan. His cock was still high and proud, ready for another round.

“That thing ever go down?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

He smirked. “Only when there’s not a desirable woman in the vicinity.”

“Guess you’re up all the time then, huh.” I gave him a disgusted look. It wasn’t that I wanted to think I was special or anything, but it still hurt to know I was just one in a long line of women this guy had had. I likely wouldn’t be the last.

“Nope. Ain’t been this hard this long in my life. Not even sure I was this horny even as a fuckin’ teenager. Not to mention the fact I just came a flood for you.”

That surprised me. On many levels. But I wasn’t about to say so. Of course, Mike glanced my way and smirked as he winked at me.

“Look,” I said as I snagged my clothes and started dressing with jerky movements. I needed to clean myself up but didn’t want to look like I was running away. Also didn’t want to stand there naked while he looked his fill. “I don’t care if we’re fuck buddies. We can both scratch an itch when necessary. But you demanded I not lie to you, so I want the same. I don’t need your flattery or pretty words. Just your dick.”

Instantly, his gaze grew hard. “I never say anything I don’t mean, Josephine. Not for you. Not for anyone.” With that, Mike sat up slowly before retrieving his own clothes.

Yeah. I might have overreacted. But, Goddamnit, the man appealed to me on more levels than I could count. He ticked every single motherfucking box I had and it scared the hell outta me. Michael Wilbanks was not only my match in every way, he complimented me like no partner I’d ever had. Who was I kidding? I’d never really had a partner. Not like I thought of Mike. He got me. And that scared the fuck outta me.

CHAPTER 5

Mike

Backing off and giving Josephine space was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. If I was going to keep her, I had to do it though.

She avoided looking at me or talking to me the rest of the evening. I lay down and pretended to sleep so she'd relax a fraction. Either I fooled her or she was so exhausted she couldn't help herself, because ten minutes after she lay down, Josephine was out cold. I couldn't help but smirk. She might not want to feel secure in my presence, but she did.

I dozed on and off throughout the night. When I woke, I'd glance at Jo to find her sleeping contentedly. She looked so fucking young when she was asleep it was hard to reconcile the seasoned warrior I knew her to be. Which was odd, considering she was medical. She'd be in the middle of a combat zone, but not in an active combat role. I'd bet my life that woman had seen more than her fair share of fighting and that wasn't something that happened in the U.S Army. I wondered if that was what Col. Gill owed her.

Just before daylight, I roused myself. She was on her side, facing me on the second bed in the room. Her hand rested under her cheek on top of her pillow. Strawberry blond hair fanned out around her like a fiery halo. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life. And she was all mine. She just wouldn't admit it to herself. Yet.

Careful not to rouse her, I dressed and slipped out of the room. I wanted to give her something to think about. Let her wake up without me. See what she did. If I was right, she'd be cranky as fuck the rest of the day. I grinned. It'd make the night even better.

Sure enough, an hour later, I watched from the car I'd had a friend drop off as she stomped out of the room and looked around. "Michael, you motherfucker!"

I barked out a laugh. She immediately zeroed in on me and scowled, flipping me off as she marched to the car, opened the door and plopped inside before slamming the door.

"Motherfucker," she muttered. "You coulda told me you were gonna go get a fuckin' car."

"Just givin' you time to yourself. Seemed to be what you wanted."

"I did!" she yelled. "But you should tell me when you fuckin' leave! I thought you'd fuckin' left."

"I ain't leavin' you, Jo. Not ever. Might as well get used to it now." I started the car and we took off. Finding where Gracie lived wasn't that hard. Everyone knew her and her family. While a couple of her neighbors tried to help her out occasionally, most of them didn't want anything to do with her. She was the white girl pregnant with the colored boy's child. *Persona non grata*.

We sat outside the tiny shack for a full minute before Josephine shook her head. Opening the door, she stepped out and slammed it shut, not looking to see if I followed her. She

rapped on the door three times before stepping back to give the girl room to open the door if she answered.

It wasn't long before the slender brunette opened the door a crack. She looked terrified. "What do you want?" Her voice was strong, if a bit shaky. She had a black eye and I noticed finger shaped bruises on her upper arm.

"My name's Jo. I'm here on Alex's behalf."

"Oh no." Her whispered response was an anguish plea. "I know his unit got called up, but..."

"He's all right, honey." Jo tried her best to reassure the girl, but really. What could she say? Alex wasn't dead, was no telling when he'd get out of prison, or if Gracie would ever see him again. "Can we come in?"

Gracie shook her head. "I'll come out. If you're gonna hurt me, you'll have to do it in front of God and everyone." She lifted her chin as she exited the house and stepped onto the porch.

"Christ." I shook my head as I took her in. Bruises on her face and arms were likely just the tip of the iceberg. I noticed she had one hand holding her side. Probably had hurt ribs.

"We're not gonna hurt you, honey. We'll back off further if it makes you comfortable." Jo moved her hands to the side, palms up so the girl could see she was unarmed.

Gracie wore a yellow maternity sundress that should have looked pretty on her, but the material was dirty and threadbare, and every inch of skin that showed had bruises on it somewhere. The girl clutched her belly tightly, as if protecting

the baby she carried inside her. I saw Jo clench her teeth. The muscle in her jaw ticked like a son of a bitch. I knew the feeling. Mine was doing the same thing.

“Who did this to you?” I couldn’t stop the growl in my voice. It made the girl flinch and I had my answer before she gave it.

“My father. My brothers.” She gave us the information in a quiet voice, then shrugged. “I learned not to answer the door when they come by.”

“Go pack a bag,” Jo ordered. “You’re comin’ with us.”

Gracie lifted her chin as she shook her head. “I don’t know you.”

“No, you don’t,” Jo bit out. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, obviously trying to rein it in. The mama tiger in her was surging to the fore. “But I guarn-damn-te you we won’t be as harsh as this.” She waved her hand to indicate Gracie from head to toe.

“I’m not giving up my baby.” The girl’s hands clutched her gently rounded abdomen, her slender arms circling her belly even tighter than before. “People don’t understand, but I love Alex. He’s kind of simple, but he’s been good to me since the day I met him. He works hard and has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met.” She looked off. “Much better than my own family.”

“Ain’t askin’ you to give up your child, Gracie.” Josephine softened her tone, stepping closer to the girl. “We’re here to make sure you and your baby get a decent start. Come with us.

You can stay until you're back on your feet. Longer if you want. But Alex wouldn't want you livin' in a place like this if he could help it."

"He gives me his Army pay but I don't spend it. We're not married. And I might need it for the baby. I won't spend his money on myself, but I'll do whatever I have to to protect our child."

"I know you will." Jo took the opening Gracie had just given her. "He'd want that too. Which is why you're going to come with us to Somerset. This is for your child."

That made the girl blink. Obviously, she was carefully considering her decision. "How do I know you're not trying to trick me?"

"Honey, I promised Alex I'd find you. I'll tell you everything that happened on the way. I've got you ten minutes of privacy to talk with him. Well, as private as I can get. You discuss it with Alex. After that, I'll do whatever you want. But I promise you, Alex is gonna want you to come with us."

She gently rubbed her rounded belly again, as if soothing her child. Likely, it was to soothe herself just as much. The sheen of tears in her eyes made me wince. This woman was just a terrified kid. Same as Alex. Two kids together battling a world of hate. I thought Jo was about to force the issue when Gracie put her chin up. Her lower lip quivered but she stood her ground.

"OK. I'll go with you. But I want to know what's going on and what you intend to do with me."

“We’re going to bring you with us to South Central Kentucky. It’s still Kentucky, but the area is a little more... friendly.” I could tell Jo was trying to be careful about her wording. She even winced slightly. Neither of us wanted to insult the woman or make her uncomfortable. Just the opposite. Josephine had a mothering instinct inside her she couldn’t seem to fight. I knew the feeling, only my instinct was protective. I wanted the right to protect Josephine and anyone else she brought into her family.

“Fine. I want to go see Alex now, please.”

Jo nodded once before showing Gracie to the car. When we were all in the car, I started it and took off. Jo explained what happened and about Alex’s legal issues. Silent tears flowed down Gracie’s cheeks, but she said nothing. Only clutched at her belly and rubbed small circles over it.

When Jo finished, Gracie silently wept but kept her head up. “Do you think I’ll ever see him again after today?”

Jo smiled but shook her head. “I don’t know, honey. But I promise you I will do everything in my power to help him. I’ve already got a good lawyer willing to take his case. He’ll have to do some time and he’ll get a dishonorable discharge, but hopefully he’ll be out in a few years.”

She shook her head slightly, denying what she was hearing but wanting with everything in her to believe my mama tiger. The hope on her face was plain for anyone to see. “I’ll figure it out.”

“We’ll be here to help you.” I added my support to Jo. “I’ve got a place where you can stay and be safe. Me and some

of my buddies have a place we're turning into clubhouse. It's an old hotel and we're hoping to make it into several rooms where we can have a place to crash. Jo and me are gonna live there until we decide what we want to do from there."

"You mean, I could live there?"

"Yes. Absolutely." I gave her a slight smile. "Jo and me'll stay with you as long as you need. You can count on us."

CHAPTER 6

Mama Jo

I managed to bully Colonel Gill into giving Gracie and Alex as much time as they needed. He scowled at me and bitched and moaned the whole entire time, but he didn't try to break it up. The couple discussed everything for over an hour. Most of it was Gracie feeling out Alex's trust of me and Mike. Some of it was Alex making sure Gracie knew she was to use the money he'd given her to take care of both herself and the baby.

Once they'd finally made their decisions and Gracie felt comfortable with Alex's instructions, they held each other. Gracie cried and promised to keep in touch with him so he knew where she was and how to find her. I gave the colonel the information Mike had given me about where we were going.

"Yeah. I know that bunch of guys." He grinned, chuckling to himself. "Good bunch." He looked to Mike. "How close are you with them?"

Mike shrugged. "Close as any. Served with some of 'em. Worked with others."

"Good," I interrupted. "Then you know how to find us if anything at all changes with Alex."

"Relax, Jo. I'll make sure the kid is treated fairly and is able to communicate with you and his woman. I've got all three of you listed as his next of kin. That satisfy you?"

I gave a crisp nod. "Perfectly."

Gracie gave Alex a tearful goodbye but left with us willingly. Once we were all in the car, I turned to her. “Is there anything you need us to get before we get the hell outta Dodge? Anything from your place or your father’s house?”

“No. And I don’t want them to know where I’m going either.”

“I can respect that.” I reached back and squeezed Gracie’s hand. “I swear to you, everything will be all right. We’ll protect you and your child. You’re family now.”

The second I uttered the words, I realized two things. First, fucking Mike was right. I couldn’t help myself. I’d claimed those two kids and their unborn child as my own. Second, I knew they were absolutely true. As I figured he would, Mike chuckled.

“Mama Tiger. Told you.”

“Bastard,” I muttered. Gracie didn’t comment, staring out the window, oblivious to our little tiff.

A little over two hours later, we pulled up to a chain linked fence with a gate. A man approached us, much as the men at Fort Knox had, holding up a hand for us to stop.

“Private property, brother. Sorry.”

Mike had on an Army jacket with his rank and company so the guy knew he was military. This guy had long, shaggy hair with an equally shaggy beard. Muscular arms had a smattering of service tattoos beneath the sleeveless shirt and vest he wore. Three motorcycles were parked by the gate where he and two other men stood guard.

“I’m here at Taz’s invite. Check with him.”

The guy gave a crisp nod before going back to the other two. He picked up a CB radio and called the man in question.

“Who’s Taz?”

“Knew him in Nam. Wasn’t in my unit, but was a good man. Tried to take care of all of us when our commanders went nuts. Name’s Rodrigues. Never knew his first name. Just Rodrigues.”

“Taz... Rodrigues?” I sat up straighter. “Theodore Rodrigues. Taz.”

Mike shrugged. “Dunno. Only ever knew him as Taz Rodrigues. He pushed me to apply for the Rangers. Said I had a good head for war.”

“Sounds like the man I knew.”

We waited until the guy came back to us as the other two opened the gate. He waved us in. “Hey, Pops. Welcome. These your women?”

Pops? What the fuck?

“This one is.” He jerked his head at me. “Name’s Mama. The other one’s Gracie. She’s under our protection.”

The guy gave Gracie a quick look before nodding. “Taz says he’ll meet you at the clubhouse. Says to tell you he has your bike in the garage.”

“Good. Thanks.”

“Straight ahead, over the rise. It’s not far.”

Mike took off down the gravel road. I gave him a sidelong look. “Mama? Really?”

He shrugged. I could see his lips twitch and didn’t appreciate it. At fucking all. “Seemed to fit. I’m Pops. You’re Mama.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’ve been leadin’ up to this for a while. That was your play all along. Mama and Pops. Like we’re a couple already.”

“Seemed better to avoid any motherfucker makin’ a pass at you once we got here.”

“I coulda not gone with you.”

“But you did. Now, everyone here knows you’re with me and not to be fucked with.” I grinned.

“Oh, they’d’a found out on their own I ain’t to be fucked with if they had. I don’t need to be linked with you to protect myself.”

“I know that. Unless you want some horny motherfucker gettin’ killed when he makes a play for you, you needed to be linked with me.”

I sighed, needing to change the subject before I lost my Goddamned mind. “How’d you get the name Pops?”

“Cause I don’t sweat the small things, but I protect the people in my life who are important. That included my unit and the kids we were stationed with.”

“Good to know.” I had no idea what to do with that because I could see that protective streak in spades since I’d

met Mike. It made me feel claustrophobic... and maybe... cared for? I'd never had that in my life and I could feel it with Mike since the first moment I met him. Knowing that was his default setting took a little of the wind out of my sails, though. That was when I finally admitted to myself that I wanted this man. But on my terms. I wouldn't take a backseat to anyone. Not ever again.

Once we reached what I assumed was the clubhouse, since it looked like the old hotel Mike had described, Mike parked the car but didn't get out. He seemed to study the building for several moments before turning to me. "Stay here. I'll feel this out then come back for you."

"You're kidding. Right? Surely the fuck you're kidding."

"Mama Tiger..."

"No, Mike. We're both coming with you. Me because you need backup. Gracie because I'm not leaving her by herself in this place until I know more about what's going on."

"Taz was always congenial. He invited us here. He provided me with a bike, then the car. I trust him, but I don't like taking the two of you inside until I know what's in there. Taz is a good man, but he's ultimately out for himself."

"You said he tried to protect the men in your unit. When things went to shit."

"He did. But there was always a reason he did everything." Then Mike gave me the side eye. "How exactly do you know him?"

“I pulled his ass out of an ambush when we first got to Nam.”

Mike’s gaze snapped to mine. “That was you?”

I raised an eyebrow. “So, he told you about that.”

“Told me his platoon was saved by the most vicious killer he’d ever seen.” Mike tilted his head, studying me but not surprised. Which was... puzzling.

“He must not have told you everything.”

“Why?” Mike grinned at me. “Because I’m not afraid of you?” When I shrugged, he gave me a cocky smile that threatened to melt my panties. “Make no mistake, Mama. I know exactly what you’re capable of. The first time I saw you, I pegged you as the most dangerous person in the room. Even more than me. As to being a vicious killer? I’m sure you are. Aren’t all mama tigers?”

I gave him a disgusted snort. “You have no idea what I really am, *Pops*.” I spat out the name he’d used, meaning it as an insult. “You should be afraid of me. Very fuckin’ afraid. “

If anything, his grin got wider. “You’re not gonna hurt me. Not because we’ve fucked either. You’re not gonna hurt me because I’ve not broken your code. And I’m pretty sure you know I never will.”

“You’re so fuckin’ frustrating.” I muttered my complaint as I opened the door and got out of the car. Poor Gracie sat there, not saying a word. She hadn’t spoken since the beginning of the trip. Even now, she looked like she was in her own world. Likely deep in thought about what she was going

to do with her life in the foreseeable future. I opened the back door and jerked my head for her to get out. “You don’t need to stay by yourself until I’m sure of everyone in this place, Gracie. Come with me.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“You won’t.” Mike and I spoke at the same time. I scowled. He smirked.

“Fucker.”

Mike just chuckled. “Come on, Mama. Let’s get this over with so we can all have a rest.” He made me crazy, but I kind of had to admire him. I knew the man saw me for what I was. It was why he’d willingly followed my lead in the airport and at Fort Knox. He knew I was capable and more than a little ruthless. Yet he stayed with me. Supported me when I’d never asked him to. He was an enigma and a refreshing change all at the same time.

Gracie followed me, her arms wrapped around herself protectively. The clubhouse looked like some old hotel they were fixing up. Men were everywhere working. There were at last fifteen or twenty. None of them paid us any attention. Well, except one guy. And he was most definitely the Taz I knew.

“Jo?”

I lifted my chin. “Taz.”

He turned his attention back to Mike. “You didn’t tell me you knew Dr. Peyton.” Taz’s slight English accent always threw me. He was a first generation U.S. citizen, but had

somehow managed to have an accent. It wasn't pronounced, but there all the same.

Mike shrugged. "Just met her when we landed in Louisville. You hear about what happened?"

Taz nodded. "Yes. You there when it happened?"

"Yep." Mike nodded in my direction. "Mama here talked the kid down."

"Where's he now?"

"Holding cell at Fort Knox, where he was stationed," I offered. "He'll be moved at some point, but Ry and Ian are going to try to keep him there until his trial is over."

"Rylan Gill and Ian McGregor?" When I nodded he snorted. "If it can be done, those two will do it." Taz turned his gaze to Gracie. "And who's the girl?"

"She's the soldier in question's woman. She's pregnant with his child."

"I see. She got any place to go?"

I took a threatening step toward Taz. "She stays with us."

Taz chuckled. "Pops give you the name Mama?"

"He did. Don't mean I accepted it."

"Well, he named you well."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Just because you guys think you have me figured out doesn't mean you do."

"Oh, I think we do, Mama." Taz sobered then. "You're the most ruthless warrior I've ever met, but only when someone

you love is threatened. In my case, it was my whole company.”

I sighed. “They were just kids.”

“They weren’t any younger than we were.”

“They weren’t as prepared as we were, Taz.” This was fucking exasperating. “I had a demon for a stepfather and you grew up on the streets. We were at least a decade older than those kids in life experiences.”

“Whatever. You took them all under your wing and when they were threatened, you did what you could to protect us all. Myself included.”

“Then my temper got me a dishonorable discharge.”

Taz just grunted. “Controlled yourself better’n me.”

“I heard you killed that fucking general.”

“Maybe.”

“Then you disappeared off the face of the fuckin’ planet. Until now.”

“It’s amazing what you can do when you’re willing to lay low.” He tried to give me a superior smirk, but I could see the underlying tension in the set of his jaw.

“I heard you had some help.” That wasn’t all I’d heard. If the rumors were to be believed, Taz was in deep shit. “An organization older than the fuckin’ country is what I heard.”

“Not a discussion I can have, Jo. If you’ve heard anything accurate, then you know I can’t talk about it.”

I nodded. That was exactly what I'd heard. "What are you gonna do?"

"Not much I can do. But there's more than just me to think about."

"Oh?"

Taz turned his gaze to the back of the room, to the shadows the sunlight couldn't quite reach. "Liam. Come meet my friends."

A skinny kid of about four or five moved into the room. His gaze was fixed on us, like he was studying us, even though he was just a kid. His gaze moved from me to Mike, then to Gracie. When he finished, his gaze returned to me and he narrowed his eyes. He said nothing, but stayed at Taz's side.

"My son."

That shocked me. "Your son?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, his mother was killed in Laos."

As I'm sure Taz knew, my heart ached for the child. The kid tilted his head at me, like he knew I was the person he had to win over. Not Mike.

"Yes." Taz grinned. "Liam has you figured out."

The kid took a step forward. Then another. Then he walked straight toward me. When he stood in front of me, he looked up. There was weariness in his eyes. "You know my dad?"

"Yeah, kid. I do."

"You gonna take me when my dad leaves?"

I glanced up sharply at Taz. “Leaves?”

He nodded. “I can’t take Liam with me where I’m going.”

“You can’t abandon your son, Taz.”

“And I can’t take him with me.”

“Then don’t fuckin’ go. This is crazy.”

“I don’t have a choice, Jo.” Taz raised his voice in proportion to my own. “I took their help so I could find my wife. But I was too late. A group in her village executed her because she’d given herself to a man not her husband and had his child. Probably woulda killed Liam too except he was a boy.”

“She was killed because of me,” Liam said. Hearing the kid say that so casually sent chills down my spine.

“Not because of *you*, Liam.” Taz’s voice was firm, his features hard. “Because of me. If I hadn’t left her, if I’d brought her back with me...”

“And how would you have done that, huh, Taz?” I was losing patience with this whole conversation. It was also hurting my heart. Just a little bit. “You couldn’t just waltz out of the country and hop a plane back to the States with her.”

“I should have tried to figure out a way. If I’d known she was pregnant, I might have managed it.”

Mike remained silent. These were men he’d agreed to meet, the men who’d invited him into their club. He hadn’t been in their unit, but he’d obviously made an impression on them if they wanted him to be part of something this close

knit. I only knew Taz. But once more Mike had my back, and let me take the lead.

Liam moved to stand beside Gracie. The boy smiled up at her. “Hi. I’m Liam.” Just like his father, the kid had a slight British accent, though his coloring looked like it might have come more from his mother than father.

“I’m Gracie.”

“Are you with Mama and Pops too?”

I gave Taz an exasperated look. “Really? You told everyone to call us that?”

He shrugged. “What would you prefer to be called? Figured with you guys being here, you wanted to disappear.”

“Not a bad idea, Mama.” Mike spoke for the first time in a while. “We could just lay low here. Forget our past and everything in it.”

“My past made me who I am. Besides, I don’t think you really want that.”

“Maybe not for myself, but I get the feeling there’s more to your story. I also get the feeling that the two of you would be much better off disappearing. For a multitude of reasons.”

“He’s right, Mama.” Taz handed me a manila envelope. It had my name on it. “I ran into a couple of guys after I made it back from Nam. Word got out. What you did.”

I opened the envelope and my jaw tightened. “CIA? What the fuck?”

“If my sources are right, they want to recruit you for special ops inside Vietnam for the remainder of the war. They need a woman and think you’ve got most of the training you need already.”

“Well, with my less than honorable discharge, I’m sure they’ve rethought that position.”

“Or they could have been the reason you got that discharge.”

“As opposed to the general I told to suck my dick? I don’t think so.”

Taz barked out a laugh while Gracie gasped before letting out a small giggle. “Yeah, I guess it could have been that.” He sobered, his smile fading slowly. “But I think you know it wasn’t.”

“Yeah.”

“I had no idea I was hookin’ up with a real badass.” Mike grinned, even as he stepped closer to me. I didn’t miss that he put his body slightly in front of me and between me and Taz.

“You stayin’ with her, Pops?”

Mike nodded. “Yeah. Thought I might.”

“She’s the real deal. Skilled surgeon and one of the deadliest people I’ve ever met. Don’t fuck with her.”

The grin Mike gave Taz set my teeth on edge. Like this was all a big joke to him. “Fuckin’ with her’s half the fun. I like living dangerously.”

“Just have her back.”

Instantly, Mike sobered. “Always.”

“Will you take my son? Keep him safe?”

“Taz—” I started to tell him to fuck off, but the bastard interrupted me.

“Just until I come back. Once I figure out exactly what this group wants from me, I’ll be better able to protect him. I don’t want to take my only son into a situation I can’t control or predict.”

I wanted to punch the bastard in the taint. But I got it. What he was asking wasn’t unreasonable. “Fine. We’ll take care of him. But you can’t abandon that kid. You have to swear on your life you’ll come back for him.”

“Give me three years, Jo. Hopefully it won’t take that long, but I have a feeling it will.”

“Who are those people?” It wasn’t like I’d know them, but if I could find out, maybe I could help Taz.

“Not here.” He jerked his head to his office. “Gracie, why don’t you let Liam show you around. Son, take her to the room I had the boys get ready. Either one.”

“Yes, sir.” The kid took Gracie’s hand. “Come on, Gracie. This place is really cool.”

I looked at Mike and he nodded, indicating he thought it was safe. I agreed, but wanted his input. *Why* I wanted his input was a pain in my ass. I trusted Mike—Pops—with my life. Maybe it was the airport confrontation, but I didn’t think so. He was the first man to ever treat me like he knew my worth. Sure, he tried to protect me when I was perfectly

capable of taking care of myself, but I kind of found that endearing.

We both followed Taz to his office where he shut and locked the door. When he turned to us, I could see the strain on his face I'd missed earlier.

“They call themselves the Brotherhood. When they told me what they wanted in exchange for getting me to Jazeera and Liam, I promised them anything they wanted if they'd help me. Now I'm rethinking that promise.”

“The Brotherhood.” I thought back. The name tickled something in my brain, but it was elusive, gone before I could nail it down.

“They go back a long fucking way. Longer than the U.S. has been a country. I don't know everything—that won't come until I'm fully committed. They're vigilantes, but more. On a global scale.”

And then it hit me where I'd heard of them. “That Viet Cong general said something about them. The one I killed.”

“The Brotherhood is the reason we won't win that conflict. They've got people deep in both governments pulling the strings and guiding everyone else where they want them to go. They want control over that region. Therefore, the U.S. can't push the communists out and take over, even with a puppet president. The communists like to keep secrets. The U.S. has a very savvy and efficient press corp that hates secrets as much as the communists like to keep them.”

“So they need Vietnam united, but under the Communist control.” Mike stroked the scruffy whiskers at his chin as he voiced his thoughts.

“Yes. While money paves the way for every government, the Brotherhood feels Vietnam being under the control of a non democratic country would better serve their interests. Also, the money trail is less likely to be followed.”

“That’s why the CIA wants me in Nam, isn’t it?” My gut was tightening. While I had the feeling something might come back to bite me in the ass, I wasn’t expecting this. I mean, one didn’t fuck with a general and get away with only a less than honorable discharge. No. Taz was right. I’d given them the excuse they needed to kick me out of the Army and be ripe for the picking for the CIA.

“That’s my guess. Understand me, Jo. Under no circumstances can you let them recruit you. It’d be a death sentence, even for someone as skilled and deadly as you are. You do not want to take on these guys. Not for something like this. That country is going to be what it is. The Brotherhood might nudge it in the direction they want it to go for a while, but it’s not something they can sustain. Eventually, the people of Vietnam will govern themselves again. That’s the way it works.”

“I’ll think about it. But I think you’re right on this. Besides, I have no desire to get caught up with the spooks.”

Taz let out a sigh. Relief? “Thanks, Jo.”

“You act like I’m doing you a huge favor. What’s going on?”

“This goes with you to the grave, Jo. I’m telling you because I need you to know what I’m up against so you can protect Liam if need be.” He glanced up at Mike. “You too. To the grave.”

I widened my stance and crossed my arms over my chest, lifting my chin. “Give it to us.”

“They want me to be an assassin for them.”

“Jesus, Taz.” Pops stepped forward again, putting himself between me and Taz one more time. “What the fuck?”

“If I can’t get out of this and you’re actively working against them, they will set their sights on you next. I don’t want to go up against you, Jo. No matter if I was able to get the best of you or not, I’d still lose. And that’s a mighty big if and I’m not too proud to admit it. But these guys would never stop, even if I failed. They have one assassin over a very small group. He controls everything. And he never misses. They call him El Diablo, but I think with them it’s more a title than a name. It’s passed down from one assassin to the next.”

“Fine.” I tried to ignore Pops, but it was hard. He was head and shoulders taller than me and probably out weighted me by a hundred pounds. All of it muscle. Kind of hard to ignore when he didn’t want to be. “But you have to keep your promise. No longer than three years. Not because I don’t want the responsibility or anything. Because that boy needs his father.”

“I swear. Give me three years. I’ll come back for him, no matter what it costs me.”

“And back to your brothers,” Pops said firmly. “Liam’s not the only one who needs you. What about the boys here? I saw several who looked like they’re barely more than kids.”

“All of them served in one way or another. All in Nam. Most in my unit. I promised I’d give them a home and I’m trying. But I could use some help.” He looked from Pops to me and back again. “Please. I want to make this a club with its own set of rules. Its own code. We make money, support each other, and stick to our code. If that means we have to skirt the law, we do it. If someone in our territory needs killin’, we do that too. As long as it doesn’t go against our moral code—which means we don’t hurt innocents and we always protect women and children. It’s not about making a living so much as it’s to give these guys a sense of freedom and control over their own lives. A sense of purpose. Anything else is an added bonus and will go into a club fund.”

“Fair enough,” Pops said. “We never harm women or children.” I thought Pops repeated that last to reinforce there was a hard line there. I agreed with him about the children and mostly about the women, though I was a firm believer that some of the worst people who needed to die were women.

“Absolutely not. There’s a budding drug highway coming through this way. Coming in mostly through military channels, but it’s spreading. They’re taking it in this direction because it’s rural most places. Most of these guys have problems with heroin. I’d like to keep that stuff out of our territory. And bury any motherfucker who doesn’t take the fuckin’ hint so no one will find even their bones.”

“First thing we need to do is finish building the clubhouse,” Pops offered. “After that, we’ll work on what we’re gonna do with the club. You got a name for it yet?”

“Yeah.” Taz grinned. “I’m gonna call it Bones.”

CHAPTER 7

Mike/Pops

A week later, I was still trying to come to terms with everything Taz had dumped on us. I knew about the Brotherhood. Or, at least, knew of them. That last was the worst part. The fact that I knew about the Brotherhood made me a marked man. No one outside the Brotherhood was supposed to know they existed. And I most decidedly wasn't part of them. With Taz being with them now, I worried about his son. Liam. Then there was Gracie and her baby.

At any other time in my life, I might have scoffed at the idea of a family. After my first tour in Nam, I decided I never wanted to have to go through what my mother was going through. I could have a woman and companionship, but I didn't have to bring children into the world. And, honestly, this was the first time I ever realized I could actually have people in my life closer than blood. Not having kids didn't help me at fucking all. Alex and Gracie were definitely tugging at my heart strings as much as they did my mama tiger's.

Looking at Liam as he made his bond with Gracie warmed my heart. The pair had both seemed more than a little lost, but they were helping each other. Along with Mama's gentle insistence they be together, the pair seemed to genuinely like each other. Mama said it helped Gracie learn what she'd need to do after her baby was born, and Liam needed a mother figure. I suspected it was a way to help both our young charges feel normal again.

In the week since I brought Mama and Gracie to the compound, I could already see signs Gracie was relaxing. She'd stopped jumping every time one of the men barked out a laugh, or spoke to her, or approached her in any way really. A couple had tried to make a move on her, but she'd shut them down. Then Mama reinforced the shut down. That always made me smile. They were a good lot, but a little lackadaisical in discipline.

“What the fuck are we gonna do with this bunch?” Mama muttered under her breath as she stomped inside the common room, which was supposed to be under construction. Currently, me and Mama were the only ones working on it. It would be a perfect place for the guys to hang out together and drink beer. Maybe watch a ball game or play pool. Or, as evidenced by the women who seemed to have descended on the place, fuck to their hearts content. Assuming we ever got the fucking room finished. Currently, they were doing everything ass backwards. Pretty sure they'd done it on purpose too. Just because they could.

“I'd say whip 'em into shape like a batch of new recruits, but I'm not sure these guys'd appreciate it.” I shrugged. “They just got outta the service. I doubt they want reminders this soon.”

She stared at me hard, her gaze contemplative. “Or maybe that's exactly what they need. Lord knows if they don't start working on the clubhouse again, we're never gonna get the rooms done.”

I shrugged. “We can try. Taz is leaving today. I’ll run it by him.”

Instantly, her gaze hardened and she glared at me. “He don’t like it, he needs to keep his ass here. He’s left us in charge for the time being, he’ll have to live with any changes we make.”

“God, that tone of voice makes me hard.”

She jerked her head up where she’d been scrubbing on a freshly installed counter—which should have been done last on this job—to get the gummy glue off of it. No sense wasting the work already done. I thought she might lay into me, but, to my great and utter delight, she stalked toward me, gripped my face and pulled me down for a heated kiss.

I tunneled my fingers through her hair fisting the silky strands in a tight grip. The strawberry blonde curls sifted through my fingers as I adjusted my grip. Mama clawed at me, trying to get my shirt off. Her little grunts of demand were music to my ears.

When she finally did get my shirt off, I pulled her to me, looping my arm tightly around her back while I found the crook of her neck with my mouth and sucked. She cried out, leaning her neck back to let me have better access while she clawed my skin with her nails.

“Guessin’ I ain’t the only one horny as a motherfucker.”

She grunted, her hand going to the front of my jeans where she squeezed and kneaded my cock. I found her breast with my hand under her T-shirt and gave it my own rough squeeze.

This was the woman I knew was inside her. She was aggressive. Dominant. And I'd let her be because she needed to be.

Until it was time for me to be even more dominant than she was.

I shoved her bra over her tits to grip soft, warm flesh in my palm. I squeezed roughly, a grip that might well bruise. It was a test. To see how hard she needed this to be. I wanted to give this woman everything I was, and I needed her to know I could take charge when she needed me to.

Mama's hands went to the fastener of my jeans, undoing them and shoving them down my hips. "Get inside me, Pops." Her voice was a husky groan. There was still that demanding bite that made my cock ache, but there was also a helpless lust she didn't even try to hide.

My hand shot to her neck and she tilted her head back, baring more of her skin to me. My gaze bore into hers. "You're not in charge, woman."

"I said fuck me, you bastard!"

"Oh, I'll fuck you all right. I'll fuck you hard and messy. That what you want?"

"Just give it to me!"

I spun her around and bent her over the counter she'd been cleaning, holding her shoulders down when she would have pushed up. "Stay." I bit out my command at the same time I swatted her ass.

With one hand I unfastened her jeans before pushing them past her ass. Once I got them down far enough to swipe my fingers through her pussy lips to test her wetness, I made my cock follow the path my fingers had taken, slowly shoving myself inside her hard and deep.

Mama screamed, pushing back against me as she gripped the counter top. I supposed this moment made it worth the fact that the guys had built it before they should have. I gripped her shoulder in one hand, her hip in the other, and fucked her. Hard. Letting loose all the pent up lust and longing and joy and gratefulness I had inside me. How the fuck had I done enough right in my fucking life to be given such a woman as this?

I continued fucking her, both of us grunting with each jarring, staccato smack of flesh on flesh. She screamed again. This time her pussy clamped down on me, squeezing and squeezing until my cock exploded with cum inside the haven of Jo's body.

Mama.

I knew the names we'd taken would stick. I also had the feeling Jo and Mike would cease to exist and it would be Mama and Pops in this world we were being dragged into. Surprisingly, I found I was looking forward to that.

When we both finally came to our senses, it was to catcalls and whistles from a few of the men who'd finally shown up. Likely not to work.

With a vicious snarl, I bared my teeth to all of them. "Get the fuck out. Line up outside the garage in five minutes.

Things are gettin' ready to fuckin' change 'round here."

"You don't get to tell us what to do, Pops." One of the younger, smaller men smirked. "You might be all badass and shit, but we're younger and stronger."

I tucked my cock away and stalked toward the kid with every intention of throttling the little bastard. Thankfully, the kid and a couple of his buddies around him weren't complete dumb shits. They all backed up several steps. I still got in the punk's face, shouting at him like any drill sergeant at a new recruit.

"You wanna stay in this outfit, boy? Do you? Because I got no problem sendin' your fuckin' smart ass out the fuckin' gate."

"You're not our leader."

"Yeah? You might wanna tell Taz that. He's leavin' for a while. Puttin' me and Mama in charge o' you fuckin' dumb shits until he gets back. That fuckin' makes me the fuckin' leader of this fuckin' heap of maggot shit." The kid looked surprised and wary, but didn't push back. Probably because I could be a scary motherfucker when I wanted to be.

"Right. Yeah. We'll get everyone together at the garage."

"You'll fuckin' line up in two Goddamned lines at attention. Then you will wait for Taz and me and Mama. You will not say a fuckin' word and you will not fuckin' move. If you do, I'll take it as a sign you don't wanna fuckin' be here."

"Yes, sir." The youngster snapped to attention before spinning around and marching double time out the door.

Everyone followed him without question.

“Well. That was... surprising.” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to laugh or shake my head in amazement. “Don’t let anyone ever say you can’t read people, Mama. You knew what these kids needed.”

“They didn’t realize it when they were in the service because everything went to shit over there. In Nam. I suppose some people know what we were fighting for, but I just wanted to get out alive. Guessin’ these guys felt the same way.”

“What did you do over there, Jo?” I reached out to stroke her wild hair away from her cheek. “Why does the CIA want you? And why do I get the feelin’ you were more than a doctor?”

“Because you’re smart.” She sighed, straightening her clothing. I expected her to be embarrassed to have been caught by the kids fucking. And, let’s face it, that’s exactly what this group of hooligans was gonna be to us. Our kids. Yeah. For someone who never thought he’d have a family, I was acquiring family by the gaggle. “Rest assured, I did nothing through official channels. When the orders coming in for the unit I was with ceased to make sense and men were being thrown up a hill for nothing, slaughtered for nothing, I took matters into my own hands. We rescued more than one unit from ambushes when intel was bogus and they walked into an area that was supposed to be cleared, only for the VC to start a killing field. A bunch of ‘em in Colonial Gill’s outfit. Can’t say we saved more than we lost, but we managed to get a few

out who might not otherwise have come home. That was why the general was *really* at my field hospital. Taz is right. I'm sure that fuckin' general baited me. I was never quiet about my opinions and my opinion of leadership was that they were fuckin' shit. Now? I guess I know why."

"You think people in the government know about the Brotherhood?"

"Not sure. My gut says no, but there's always that possibility. At least, I anyone who knows of them doesn't know the full extent of what they do and how much power they really have. If we're aware of them, there have to be more who know. How *much* they know is anyone's guess. I'm guessing anyone in the government knows just enough to think they can control the Brotherhood. They can't."

"Which, again, might be the whole point. The Brotherhood wants to recruit you. Get you to go back. Then you either join them or disappear."

She shook her head immediately. "No. If they know me at all, the Brotherhood knows I'm not the kind of person they want in their ranks. I think too freely and I'm not too great at taking orders. Especially if I don't agree with them. If they're trying to get me there, it's to take me out."

"You think Taz will tell them about you?"

Mama gave me a hard stare. Yeah. She would make sure Taz never said a word.

"Understood." I grinned at her. I might have been mistaken, but I was pretty sure I saw her lips twitch before she

finished straightening her clothing then stormed outside to face the “recruits.”

Yeah. I was looking forward to this.

CHAPTER 8

Mama

I'll admit, I didn't expect the club to be lined up outside the garage like Pops had told them to be. And when the fuck had I embraced these stupid names everyone had started calling us? I wasn't anyone's mama. Wasn't ever gonna be.

Heavy sigh... Except I was. Started with Alex. Then Gracie and her unborn child. Now this whole fucking club. I was getting soft. Which pissed me off to no end. Sure enough, when I got out to the garage, there they were. Every single one of them was at attention like it was the second day of basic training and they were determined not to give the sergeant any reason to get all up in their shit.

Pops stalked past me, his game face firmly in place. "Gonna be some fuckin' changes around here. Startin' this very fuckin' second." A couple of them glanced at each other and Pops jumped all over that shit.

He moved quickly, like he was expecting this very thing and was ready to shut it down. Getting in the faces of the two in question, he yelled as effectively as anyone I'd ever met in the Army.

"You two got a fuckin' problem?" When one of them opened his mouth, Pops continued, his voice carrying all over the compound. Almost made me wince. Almost made me smile, too. "No one cares if you've got a fuckin' problem! It's my way or the highway. Hell. Ain't even no highway option.

You will do what the fuck I say and you'll fuckin' like it! You clear?"

"Sir, loud and clear, sir," he yelled back, staring straight ahead.

"Don't fuckin' call me *sir*."

The guy faltered, looking up at Pops instead of staring straight ahead. "Uh... Pops?"

Pops was silent for a long while, staring both those fuckers down like they really were back in the service. These two were Marines. Most of the others were Army, but there were a smattering of Navy and Air Force. And why the fuck had I made it my business to know that shit? Christ.

"Good. Listen up because I'm only gonna go over this once."

Taz chose that moment to enter the yard. He stood beside me and nudged my shoulder. When I looked up at him, he appeared to be struggling to keep an amused smirk off his face. Which made me scowl all the harder at him.

Pops continued. "Taz has a situation he has to deal with. He'll be gone for a while. Ain't sure how long. He's leavin' me and Mama in charge." Surprisingly, no one gave any side looks or showed any surprise, their training kicking in as I'd hoped it would. This was, after all, basic stuff. "He let you be laid back and adjust for a while, but I'm done with that. We got shit to do around here to make this place livable and we're gonna get it done. Anyone who ain't on board, get the fuck out."

No one moved. Taz cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Not sure how long I’ll be gone, but there is no negotiation. You do what Mama and Pops say or you’re out. I don’t care why, or how unfair you think it is, if they say you’re gone, you’re gone. Even if I don’t agree with them, they’re still in charge. I will not override their decisions.” He glared at each of them for a long moment before continuing. “A word of advice to all of you, and I suggest you pass it on to anyone and everyone who comes to this place looking for a home. Of the two of ‘em y’all might think Pops is the bigger threat. He’s not. Mama will have your balls sliced clean from your body before you even know she’s near you. Don’t fuck with either of them, but especially don’t fuck with Mama.”

“Now you’re just taking away all my fuckin’ fun,” I muttered. I was secretly pleased he’d done it, but I also knew there would be a couple who’d test me. There always were.”

As I glanced around, I found two, possibly three, who would test me. I could see it in the way their gazes slid to me. They were all young—none of them over twenty-three or twenty-four—but they had been on their own long enough to not take kindly to a woman giving them orders.

I walked up to the biggest of them. He was a good three or four inches taller than me, but I managed to get in his face. “I see you got a problem with me bein’ in charge.” My voice was quiet, as deadly as I could make it. “You gonna test me, do it now. I won’t have anyone claimin’ I snuck up on ‘em before I nuttet ‘em.” I stepped back a couple of steps and held out my hands to my sides, raising an eyebrow. “Take your best shot, motherfucker.”

As I expected, the guy lunged for me, going for his arms around my waist, probably to take me down in a football tackle. Amateur. I went down to one knee and uppercut his crotch with as much force as I could. The guy let out a startled yelp then went down to his knees, clutching his privates.

I spun out of the way so he couldn't reach me if he tried. Immediately, the other two charged. One of them I punted on the side of the knee. The other one wrapped two brawny arms around me from behind. I snapped my head back twice, my height letting me catch him in the nose. He staggered back and I nailed him with a spinning kick so my heel connected with his jaw.

“Who's next?” I glared at the three men on the ground before staring down the rest of them. Mike, bless his heart, stood with his arms crossed over his chest, a big ass shit eating grin on his face.

He looked at Taz. “That's my woman.”

The men on the ground groaned, looking to Taz for... something. I had no idea what, but this would define our relationship with this club. If it wasn't to my satisfaction, I'd take Gracie and Liam and we'd get the fuck out. Start our own fucking club.

Taz shook his head. “Don't look at me. I tried to fuckin' warn ya.”

I waited until the guy who's knee I'd taken out attempted to stand. He looked up at me, pain on his face. “Sorry, ma'am.”

“Mama. My name is Mama.”

I reached down to offer him a hand up. The kid nodded as he took my hand and stood. “Mitch Bohannon. They call me Brutal.”

The one I’d kicked in the face was already on his feet, holding out a hand to me. “Mason Gray.” He shrugged. “Gray.”

The poor guy I’d nailed in the balls had made it to one knee but he didn’t look like he was ready to go further. “Gerald Ferguson, Ma’am.”

“Mama.” I grinned, holding out a hand to him. “Got a road name?”

He gasped for air. Though he took my hand, he couldn’t seem to get to his feet. Kid shook his head before dropping my hand, one arm braced on his knee, the other went back to his balls. “Na.”

“How about Squid?” Someone called out. The guy on the ground threw a scowl over his shoulder. Or tried to. He ended up groaning, but finally managed to get to his feet. He still bent over, sucking air.

“How about you shut the fuck up.” Pops took charge, angry scowl firmly in place. “He needed a demonstration. He got one.” He tilted his head at Gerald. “How about we call you Mo.” Pops shrugged. “Seems fitting.”

“Mo?” One of the other guys barked out a laugh. “What does that even mean?”

Pops looked at me, grinning before shrugging his shoulders. I rolled my eyes but couldn't help the twitch to my lips. "The Mighty Mo."

"What does the USS Missouri have to do with Ferguson?"

"Jesus, man." Brutal gave the guy an irritated look. "Missouri is the fuckin' *Show Me* state. Maybe you're the fuckin' dumbass."

"Oh." The other guy looked a little deflated but didn't protest. "Yeah. That's pretty good."

"Mo it is then." I clapped the guy on the shoulder. He grunted, but actually attempted to chuckle. Straightening slowly, he extended his hand to me. I took it in a firm grip. "Mama."

I grinned. "Good." Looking around the rest of the group I raised an eyebrow. "Anyone else need a demonstration?"

When no one answered, Pops took over again. "You all are gonna get to work. We've got a place to clean up and remodel. And build. We can't have a proper home until we get it finished."

"We've been working."

I winced, almost feeling sorry for the guy. Pops growled and stomped toward the guy in question. Immediately, the guy backed off. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"You got a problem with working harder?" Pops was back to yelling again, right up in the guys face. "Do you? 'Cause I won't allow no deadbeat pussies in this fuckin' outfit!"

“No problem. No problem at all, Pops.”

Taz got a kick outta that. “Yeah. Things’er gonna be just fine while I’m gone.”

* * *

Taz left the next morning. He spent the whole evening with Liam, preparing his son for his absence. The boy was resistant, but agreed he’d stay behind if he could stay with Gracie. Kid might have thought he was negotiating, but it was exactly what Taz wanted.

Gracie was more than agreeable. The girl seemed to have latched onto Liam the same as he had her. I knew they needed each other. I got the impression Taz thought so too.

CHAPTER 9

Pops

Weeks turned into months. Months to a couple of years. Gracie had her baby and took in Liam as a second son. Liam took the role of big brother to little Abraham very seriously. Colonel Gill and the lawyer, Mama's half-brother, Ian McGregor, had gotten Alex a sweet deal. I had no idea how they'd managed it, but I'm sure bullying and threatening were involved. Alex got sixteen months plus four years' probation for shooting up the airport. Well, that and community service. Which, surprisingly, he took to with gusto. Kid thrived on helping people. He'd joined us the week before and was still trying to adjust to his new life, but he was good for the boy, too. Everyone in Bones had starting growing into themselves. The guys had needed direction and a lot of structure so Mama and I provided it.

Then Taz showed back up. Changed in ways I didn't want to think about. He was harder. Colder. It felt like death followed him. When he met us, we did so on neutral ground. Just me and Mama.

"Back just like you promised." Mama might have smiled at Taz, but it didn't reach her eyes and she didn't move to shake his hand.

"I am. You kept my son safe?"

"You know we did, and I'm trying not to take offense at the implication we might not have." Mama's expression never wavered. Her tone was congenial but I could feel the

underlying tension and a healthy dose of anger radiating from her.

“I meant no offense, Mama. I think you know that.” Taz spoke slowly, using the name everyone had given Jo, not addressing her in a way that might seem familiar. He was dancing around us, being very careful about what he said. We were the ones who suggested a place away from the compound, but Taz hadn’t balked or even tried to get in to see the men he’d taken in as family. Which sent up all kinds of red flags. I also noticed that, since the very first message when he contacted us to let us know he was back, he’d always used our club names, but hadn’t thought anything of it. I was thinking about it now.

“What’s going on?” I moved slightly in front of Mama. If she minded, she didn’t let on. Which told me all I needed to know about what Jo thought of the situation. She would never go against anything I said or did in the presence of an enemy or someone who was questionable, no matter if she didn’t like that I was taking the lead. Or protecting her when she was perfectly capable of protecting herself. Taz realized it too.

“Good.” He nodded to both of us, a silent acknowledgement he knew we saw him as a threat. “I’ve come to take Liam with me.”

“Not sure that’s the best idea.” Mama spoke but didn’t try to move around me.

“I know. I’m still going to.”

“You’re not staying?”

“No, Mama. You and Pops have done exactly what I’d hoped you’d do. Made Bones a family.”

“Keepin’ tabs on us?” I wanted Taz’s focus back on me. If he was here to take out either of us, I wanted to give Mama her best chance to take him out first. While I was a warrior through and through, she was just as skilled and even more cunning than I was.

“Always. Bones is family.”

“Then come home,” Mama said softly. “Liam’s made a home here with Gracie, Alex, and their son. He’s a bright child. Strong and skilled. He’ll make a fine warrior one day.”

“I know.” Taz leveled a look on Jo and I had to stop myself from stepping completely in front of her again. “That’s why I need to take him with me.”

“Where are you taking him?” This time, Jo wasn’t playing nice. I could almost feel her protective instincts kicking in as she prepared to fight for the little boy in our care.

“I don’t have to answer to you, Mama. Liam is my son. You’ll give him to me willingly or I’ll take him from you.”

The two must have faced off or something. I wasn’t about to take my attention from Taz and couldn’t see Jo, but the tension was so thick I could have cut it with a knife.

“He’s a good kid, Taz. If you can’t give him a loving home you need to leave him here.”

“I can. I will.” Taz’s expression didn’t change but I trusted what he was saying.

“I have no doubt you’ll keep him safe, but I’m having trouble believing the loving home part is something you’re capable of now. You’ve changed.”

Taz nodded slowly. “I have. But not so much I can’t show my son how much I love him. I swear to you, he’ll know.”

“What have you gotten into, Taz?” Mama’s voice was so soft it was nearly a whisper.

Taz shook his head before stepping closer. When he spoke next, it was so low I had to strain to hear him. “What I’m doing is for the greater good. I’ll teach Liam to handle himself, how to fight and protect those weaker than him. But he has to sever all ties with you. It’s for everyone’s safety. His included.”

“This has to do with *them*, doesn’t it?” Jo kept her voice as low as Taz did. There was no doubt who she was referring to, but if she wasn’t going to say anything more, I wasn’t about to.

“It is. Trust me when I say, they’ll need both myself and Liam to balance them out. I’ll build that foundation and it will be up to Liam to continue it. He’ll take my place when I no longer can. Until then, he’ll train. Study. Go out into the world and prepare himself once he’s reached an age he can do so on his own.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to put on a kid, Taz. Do you honestly think you can get the upper hand with them? Really, Taz?”

“No.” There was no hesitation in his answer. “But the cost if I don’t at least try is too great.”

“That’s fine for you, but what about Liam? He doesn’t deserve that life.”

“No,” Taz agreed. “He doesn’t. Doesn’t change the fact he’s going to have it, though.”

“I’ll fight you for that child.” Now the mama tiger I knew and loved was bearing her fangs and claws.

“I know you will, Mama. It’s how you got your name. Fighting for those who need help. But I’m asking you not to. Trust me to know what’s best for my son.”

“If they’re holding his safety over you—”

“They’re not. I’ve looked at the situation and all the possibilities I can imagine. This is the best solution for him.”

“For him? Or for you?” Yeah. Mama wasn’t pulling any punches. If Taz was going to do this, he’d answer to Mama first.

“For both of us.”

There was a long pause. I wanted to look back at Mama, but didn’t dare take my eyes off Taz. He was always dangerous. Now, I got the feeling he was even more so. And, let’s be honest, if he had formed any kind of tie with the Brotherhood, he was one of the most lethal men on the planet.

“Fine.” Whatever Mama saw when they studied each other must have satisfied her. If not completely, enough to let Taz

have his son. “But if you hurt that boy in any way, Taz, I will make you beg for death before I fuckin’ kill you.”

“I’d expect nothing less. Bring Liam back here. Don’t tell anyone I’m here. Again, for everyone’s safety.”

“This is horseshit, Taz.” Finally, Mama pushed past me. If I thought she was angry, I’d have been dead wrong. Mama was fucking *furios*. “You know it as well as I do.”

“I do. Doesn’t change my decision.”

Without another word, Mama spun on her heel and went back to her bike. I backed away from Taz, not wanting to turn my back on the other man until Mama was safely away.

I took a tentative step toward Taz, looking at him hard and holding his gaze. I needed to know if we were being observed. If the conversation was private.

Taz nodded his head slowly before muttering softly. “Ask. Keep it down and don’t move your mouth much.”

So, observed, but not with a listening device. “They want Mama?”

“Yep.”

“They know where she is?”

“No.”

Fuck. I needed more, but how to ask without giving anything away...

Taz shook his head. “I have them looking for her in Nam. They think she’s with an MC called Iron Tzars. Not a club that’s off limits to them but one they leave alone.”

“Tzars reached out to me when I first got out of the service, but I declined.”

Taz nodded. “You’d be the kind of person they’d want.”

“Were Mama and I on the plane together intentionally?”

He shrugged. “Might have thrown you together to see what happened, but I didn’t set up the airport thing. That was a happy coincidence.”

“Don’t believe in them.” The hair in the back of my neck was standing up now. “Don’t like being manipulated either.”

“You weren’t. At least, not wholly. I wanted you with her, but I never dreamed she wouldn’t kill you.”

“You didn’t know where I was going.”

“Knew you were headed in the same general direction as Mama. Knew enough to know you were the only person who could pull off this job.”

“What fuckin’ job?” I was growing angrier by the second. In the years I’d been with Jo, I’d grown to love the woman, prickly personality and all. I wasn’t sure I could take it if this was all some kind of set up. I thought she loved me too, but she wasn’t a very demonstrative person.

“The job of keepin’ her safe and away from... *them*.”

“Why me?”

“Because I knew you’d be protective without reining her in. You can’t force her to your will and you’d never try. Knew you’d let her make the decision then deal with the fall out.”

“Why does she need a protecting?”

“They want her, Pops.” Taz dropped his voice even lower, almost to a whisper. “She’ll never be their puppet and they’d kill her. She’s one of the very few people they believe can achieve their goal, whatever it is. Not only is she smart and cunning, she can get into places others can’t. You’ve seen the connections she has. The people she knows. By themselves, those people might not be much, but each of them has skills and credentials that make them dangerous to someone willing to put them all together. *They* want those connections.”

Again, we stared each other down. I got that he couldn’t elaborate. Had probably said more than he should as it was.

I gave him a slow nod. “What do I need to do?” Because there was no way I was *not* going to protect Mama, no matter what.

“Disappear. Stay with the club if you want, but stay under the radar. Disappear Jo and Mike and become Mama and Pops.”

I thought about that until I heard the rumble of Mama’s bike in the distance. She was back with the boy. “OK.” I’d figure it out. It would be tricky, but I had an idea. Now, if only the man I needed would meet up with me.

The boy rode behind Mama. He had a backpack on his shoulders, his arms wound tightly around her middle, and a big smile on his face. The second Mama stopped the bike, the kid was off and running to his father. “Dad!”

“Hey, sport.” Taz smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Liam, already the most observant and intelligent kid I’d ever met, noticed.

He slowed just before he was close enough for Taz to reach out and grab him, actually taking a couple steps backward. “Dad?”

“It’s OK, Liam. Remember I told you I’d be back and what would happen?”

“Yeah?” The kid looked wary.

“It’s time.”

Father and son seemed to communicate silently before Liam finally nodded, putting his shoulders back proudly. “All right. I’m ready.”

“You don’t have to go if you really don’t want to,” Mama said before Taz could reach for the boy. “You can stay with me and Pops.”

Liam gave her a look so adult it gave me a pang in my chest. No kid his age should have that look. Like he was preparing for battle and had no doubt in his mind he was up for the task. And he knew it was to the death. “Yes I do, Mama. I have to go.”

“Liam—”

“Let it go, Mama,” Taz said gently. “I will protect him with my life. I swear it.”

“You fuckin’ better, you son of a bitch,” she bit out.

“Taz, are you sure?” I asked. “Really fuckin’ sure?”

“I am, Pops. And I’m no longer Taz. You can call me El Diablo.”

CHAPTER 10

Pops

Once back at the clubhouse, I hurried her back to our room where I locked us in. Then I explained what I'd learned from Taz. El Diablo. Whatever. She was understandably furious.

“If I found out you had anything whatsoever to do with this, Pops, I'll fuckin' kill the fuckin' fuck outta you.” She was trembling with rage. Which was what she wanted me to see. What she likely wanted to keep to herself was the sheen of tears glistening in her eyes and on her eyelashes.

“I swear to you, Jo. I got played as much as you did. More even.”

“How could you possibly have gotten played more?” The look she gave me said she was not only calling bullshit, but she might carve out my liver, cover it in said bullshit, then shove it back inside me just to watch me die from gangrene, then celebrate my death with a gleeful smile. It made me want to grin at her. Which would have probably set her off. So I did the only thing I knew to do. It might not be the best decision, but it was the only thing I could think of. Probably because it was the thing that was foremost on my mind.

“Because the meddling in our lives put me in a position to meet you. Then you made me fall in love with you. So no matter what happens to either of us from this moment forward, I'm never gonna be the fuckin' same.”

Mama opened her mouth, probably to give me a piece of her mind, then blinked. “I... what?”

“You heard me.”

For the first time since I'd met her, Jo looked like a young, vulnerable woman. It didn't hold with the confident, powerful woman I knew her to be, but it endeared her to me all the more. Because, I knew without a doubt, I was the only person in her world who'd ever seen that particular look. She gave that trust to me. No way in hell I was gonna let her take it back.

“You can't love me.”

“No?” I stepped closer to her, reaching out to pull her into my arms. She didn't resist, but braced her hands on my chest so I couldn't get as close as I really wanted. “Why not?”

“I'm not a woman a man like you looks for, Mike. I'll never be the obedient wife who defers to her husband. I take charge of my own life and, occasionally, those around me.”

“Fully aware of all that, Jo. I can be a take charge kinda guy, but I'm more than willin' to let you be you. If that means I follow your lead, I got no problem doin' that. I think I've proven that over the last couple of years. I ain't gonna hold you back. I'm just gonna follow where you go and protect you with my fuckin' life.”

There must have been a God somewhere smiling down on me because that must have been the exact right thing to say. Mama threw herself into my arms, tightening her arms around my neck and clung to me, sobbing like I'd never known the woman was capable of. Again, I'd be willing to bet my life she'd never let anyone see this side of her. In fact, I had to wonder if the woman had ever let herself cry like this.

I held her as tight as I could. She seemed to need the support and I was only too glad to be whatever she needed. I kind of expected her to get herself under control quickly then brush me off, but she didn't. Jo let out everything she needed to right there in my arms. I felt fucking ten feet tall. No one else in the world could ever be in this position because Jo would never let anyone else this close to her. Which meant, even if she didn't acknowledge it out loud, she loved me.

When she was finally more under control, she pulled back only to pull me down by my beard to kiss her. I would gladly provide her with as many kisses as she wanted. Or anything else. She was my woman. I'd always be her man.

It didn't take long for us to be naked and for me to have Mama on her back with her legs spread and my mouth buried between them. I took her up as high as I could. Over and over, she screamed my name.

I had to grin because she no longer called my first name during sex. It was always Pops. I rarely called her Jo and only when we were alone and it was important she listen to what I had to say. While she always took me seriously, I found that pulling her out of the persona she'd become since taking this club under our wing had become our signal for her to focus solely on me. In those times, she knew it was important for her to let me in and for us to make those decisions together. The longer we were together, the less and less it happened.

“Oh, God! Pops!”

“That's my name, baby.” I chuckled. “Tell me what you want. I'll make it happen no matter what.”

“You. I want you.”

Instead of talking, I took action. I guided my cock inside her and moved in a hard driving rhythm. Mama wrapped her legs around my waist and dug her heels into my ass. Urging me to move harder and faster, she took what she wanted. She gave me much, much more than she took. I'd had several women in my life. Usually only for a night or two. Never with any expectation either of us would be around in the morning. It was the way I liked my life. I didn't want a woman I had to worry about leaving when I went off to war or anywhere else. I took my pleasures, tried to give her as much as I took, and didn't worry about her beyond the moment.

Not so with Mama.

When she clawed at me, I bared my teeth. I didn't stop fucking her, but I snagged her wrists—first one then the other—holding them in one hand above her head.

“You don't get to dictate the pace, Jo. I'm in charge.”

“Bastard,” she hissed, showing her own teeth. “You said you'd give me what I wanted!”

I had to chuckle. She was just so darn cute when she got all demanding. Mainly because I knew the real her. Jo didn't beg. She took what she wanted. I loved that I could hold her off and she trusted me enough to know I'd eventually give her everything instead of exacting her will.

“I will. But I decide when. You get to lay back and enjoy.”

After that, things got worse. By the time I let her come, Josephine Peyton was close to killing me. I think I even had

bite marks on my shoulder where she punished me. A few times. When she came in my arms, with my dick deep inside her hot, wet pussy, I lost my Goddamned mind. She took my cum inside her with a scream and a lot of scratching down my back. I'd be wearing those scratches for a couple of days at least. Which was a good thing because I wanted everyone in the Goddamned place to know who I belonged to. Marked her with more than one hickey to stake my claim, too.

If she had bruises on her hips where I gripped her during our hard ride, well, I caught her admiring them in the mirror with a satisfied smirk before she caught me looking. Her smirk turned into a scowl. Our loving was sometimes rough, but it was always satisfying.

“We need to disappear,” I told her as I stroked her bare shoulder where she cuddled against me with her head on my chest.

“From the Brotherhood?” She rubbed her face over my skin where she rested. “Not sure that’s possible.”

“Taz was careful not to say our real names. He indicated we were probably being observed, but he not that they knew you were the woman they were looking for.”

“I have no desire to be on that bunch’s radar.”

“Me neither.”

We were silent for a while before she spoke again. “What’er we gonna do?” She sounded sleepy. Sated. Made me grin.

“I’ve been thinkin’ on that. I have an idea, but it means giving up everything. Family especially. Family is always the downfall of anyone who tries to hide from these fuckers.”

“You sayin’ we need to die?”

“That’s exactly what I’m sayin’.”

“What’s the plan?”

“I know a man. He’s an asshole but I ain’t ever met anyone as intelligent. I’d like to reach out to him. Meet up and see if he can help.”

“OK. Where is he?”

“Rockwell, Illinois. He has a place in Oklahoma too. I thought it would be better to meet him there. Assuming he’s agreeable.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

I couldn’t help but smile, remembering exactly why Luca Romano was pissed at me. “Because, the last time we were together, I beat him at chess.”

There was silence and Mama was completely still. Then she looked up at me. “You beat him at chess.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yep.”

“I take it he’s a sore loser?”

I chuckled then. “You could say that. He likes to think he’s the smartest man in the room. Usually is. I got lucky, though I’ll never admit it to him. Far as he’s concerned, every move I made was on purpose.”

Mama chuckled too. “Now we’re thinkin’ alike.”

“Honey, I think we always do.”

Her smile was so beautiful if I hadn’t already been in love with her, I was now. “You’re so fuckin’ beautiful, woman.”

“I am not.” She shoved back to sit up, a fierce scowl on her face. “Take it back.” And, God help me, that little bite in her voice made me hard as a motherfucker when I’d already come my brains out.

I barked out a laugh. “I absolutely will not, Mama. You’re beautiful like a hurricane. Breathtaking and destructive. A fuckin’ force of nature. And all fuckin’ *mine*.”

She looked appropriately put out, but didn’t deny she was mine. I called it a win. “You’re mine,” she said with a huff. “Don’t you dare deny it.”

“Never, honey. No matter what, I’ll never deny I’m yours.”

“Good. Because this is all your fault.”

I shook my head, still chuckling. “Not saying it is, not saying it isn’t, but what exactly are you referring to?”

“You knocked me up, Mike.” There was that vulnerability again. For such a strong woman, she hid what she thought of as weakness very well. She must have been afraid I’d leave if I found out. Or that I wouldn’t want her or the child. She couldn’t be further off the mark.

“So, another hellion to add to a whole slew of them. Only this one’s mine.” I grinned. “I hope it’s a girl who looks just like her beautiful mama.”

I think I kind of expected Mama to frown at me or pretend to be angry at me for implying any child of hers would be beautiful. Or say she was having a boy just to be ornery. Instead, she gave me a soft smile. “She’ll be a beautiful girl, and courageous like her father.”

“I’ll be spoilin’ her terribly. And she’s never dating.”

“I’ll teach her how to get around you. She’ll give you a world of trouble.”

I grinned. “Same as her mother.”

“God, Pops. I love you so Goddamned much.”

“I love you too, Mama. With all my heart.”

EPILOGUE

Mama

Turned out, Rylan Gill was forced into retirement after he helped Alex Brown get a lenient sentence. He'd been right that JAG had wanted to make an example of the kid. Ry proved the kind of man he was by sticking to his guns, no matter the cost to him. Worked out well for me and Pops because he reached out to us after his discharge was complete.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this, Mama." Pops and I hadn't told Ry the particulars, but he knew enough to know not to use our real names. Nothing was complete yet to make us dead, and we weren't taking any chances.

"Why? You got a bunch of kids dependin' on you just like you did back at Fort Knox. I'd say these kids need you more than the other set did."

"You do realize that most of these boys ain't much younger than you, right?" Ry always was a smartass.

"Not in life experiences." Pops was always backing me up. Even among friends. It was just one more reason I loved him. "They've shaped up a lot since we gave them structure and goals. Some of them have started businesses in town. All of them live here and they've built every single building on this place. The clubhouse was remodeled from what had once been a fancy ass hotel. It was in such disrepair they had to all but tear it down and start over. They did so without complaint. The ones who didn't know anything about carpentry learned. A few of them were hopeless at it, but never stopped trying."

“They’re good kids, Ry.” I wrapped my arms around Pops. It wasn’t something I’d usually do, but I needed Rylan to understand how much this group meant to us. Once he understood, he’d throw himself into it and maybe find he could mentor these young men. Same as he did the men under his command.

He sucked in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “Fine. I’ll give it my best shot. But if they piss me off, I’m outta here.”

“Right,” I said, grinning at my friend. “We’ll see how well that works for you.”

“How long you guys gonna be gone?”

I looked up at Pops, hoping he’d answer.

“Honestly?” Pops raised an eyebrow at Rylan. “I don’t know. Hopefully not more than a few months. We want to get Alex, Gracie, and Abraham settled. Alex says his uncle won’t mind takin’ ‘em in, but I won’t feel comfortable leaving them until I see how he interacts with Gracie and their son.”

“Good plan.” Rylan curled a finger over his upper lip, obviously wanting to say something but not sure how to word it.

“What’er you thinkin’?”

“I want to bring in Ian McGregor.”

“I thought he was still with JAG?” That was puzzling. Ian loved his work with military law. I couldn’t imagine him leaving voluntarily. Not while there was still a war going on.

“Nope. Got drummed out same as me. Same reason.”

“Them motherfuckers.” I turned and marched across the room, folding my arms over my chest. “They’d rather lose good men than see justice served. Lockin’ away Alex and throwin’ away the key wouldn’t have been fuckin’ justice.”

“No, but they figured they could make an example of him and deter others. Even if what he did wasn’t motivated by race, if they could’ve spun it that way, they’d have sent a message to other soldiers unhappy with shit back home.”

“They’re that desperate then.”

“You know as well as I do, Mama. War’s not goin’ our way. Last thing they want are kids gettin’ the idea they can act out in protest and get a slap on the wrist and sent home.”

“Fuckin’ bureaucrats.”

“So, you good with me bringin’ him on board?”

“Yeah. Mac’ll be a welcome addition.” I smiled, wondering how my half brother would handle this situation. “He wasn’t always a suit and tie kinda guy, you know. Might take him a while to ease up.”

Ry snorted. “Don’t want him to ease up. The more disciplined these men are kept, the easier it will be to make sure they find a strong moral code and stick to it.”

“Good.” Pops nodded crisply. “We’ve got a plan in place.”

“When do you leave?” Ry looked from me back to Pops.

“Tomorrow,” he answered. “We’ve put it off long enough.”

“We’ll keep the place in order while you’re gone.” Ry stuck out his hand to Pops. “Sorry I was a hardass the first time we met.”

Pops grinned, taking his hand in a firm grip. “No hard feelin’s.”

The ride to Oklahoma was long. We took a round about route in case we were being followed. If we were, neither me nor Pops could spot the tail. Alex’s aunt and uncle turned out to be two of the sweetest, most gentle people I’d ever met. He greeted Gracie like she was a long lost daughter. Alex’s aunt made fast friends with Abraham in the first ten minutes of their stay. Any doubts I’d had about leaving Alex and Gracie here were erased.

We still stayed for several weeks. Just watching everyone. No problems whatsoever. If a person from the small town near their farm spoke ill of them, three more would chastise them. It was an unusual little town to say the least, but everyone there respected everyone else. They kept to themselves but welcomed new comers with warmth and kindness for the most part. One thing we learned quickly was that intolerance in any form didn’t last long. It seemed Alex’s family had found a veritable utopia to raise their son in.

It was in this little town of two hundred and fifty-two that we met the man who might be able to help us die.

“I could do that. No problem.” Luca Romano was as red headed as they came. Like *orange* red hair. And so fucking curly there was no way it was going to be tamed.

Pops sighed. “But...”

Luca leaned forward to put his forearms on the table where we all sat in a local diner eating lunch. “I want to know how you fucking beat me in that chess game.”

“Not again.” Pops muttered. “Fuckin’ ridiculous.”

“Is not,” Luck stuck his chin up. “How’d you do it? It wasn’t a move I recognized and it came out of nowhere.”

“Luca—”

“No. I want to know, Goddamnit!” The man practically pounded his fist on the table. He just caught himself, not wanting to draw attention. “Tell me or you can rot in hell.”

“Talk about a sore loser.” I snorted and muttered, not caring if I hurt his fragile ego. “You sound like a cranky toddler.”

“You want to be declared dead? You get that bastard to tell me how he did it.”

“I got lucky, all right?” Pops practically growled at the stubborn man. “I didn’t plan anything. I didn’t use any ancient Kung Fu mojo. I just moved the fuckin’ bishop. That’s it. I didn’t even fuckin’ know it was fuckin’ check mate when I made the fuckin’ move.”

Luca Romano stared at Pops for a long time. “You’re telling the truth.” His voice was equal parts disbelieving and stunned. “You really didn’t have any idea what you were doing.”

“No, you bastard. I didn’t. You got beat by luck.”

“Fuck me,” the man muttered. “Blind luck.”

“Completely. Now. Will you help us?”

The man sighed. “Fine. But I want a rematch.”

“Whatever it takes. Just make us legally dead.”

“Piece of cake.”

Took a couple of months, but Luca Romano was absolutely right. It was a piece of cake. There was a paper trail and everything. According to all that paperwork, Josephine Peyton and Michael Wilbanks died on the way to their honeymoon on a lonely stretch of highway in the Midwest when their car ran off the road and hit a rock wall. There was no money from insurance or inheritance to go anywhere. Just two hippies wandering the country in their car. The resulting fire from the wreck burned everything, including the newlyweds.

Jo and Mike were dead. In their place were Mama and Pops.

Just to be safe, Pops and I traveled the country for a few more months. Just... riding our bikes from one coast to the other. I had our baby in a barn in West Texas. With my expert guidance, Pops was a pro at delivering babies. I was a cranky bitch who might have kicked him when he told me to push. Pops just laughed. Which made me kick him again.

Our son, Kurt, was born at three in the morning on Christmas Eve. Child was close to ten pounds of screaming, demanding, baby boy. I loved him from the moment I first held him. Hardest thing I ever had to do in my life was watch the man that baby had grown into disappear much the same

way Pops and I had. He severed all ties with us. It wasn't until decades later we were reunited with a part of my son. Celeste Pleasant and her daughter—our granddaughter and great granddaughter—would come back into our lives. Thanks to some old friends.

And another devil.

Yeah. Life has funny ways of sneaking up on you.

So what did the future hold for us? We helped build a motorcycle club from a bunch of ragtag veterans to a force to be reckoned with.

But it wasn't just us.

Rylan "Ry" Gill would become president of Bones MC. He and his woman had one son, Joe Gill, who eventually took the name Cain and made a great MC president in his own right. He also started the company ExFil, a paramilitary organization who specialized in protection and extraction. That company, along with a bar called the Boneyard, kept the club financed well.

Ian "Mac" McGregor became vice president of Bones for a while. When drugs started moving steadily from Florida to Kentucky and Ohio, Mac took a few members of Bones to Palm Beach, Florida to start his own club. Mac was going to make it a second chapter of Bones MC but thought they'd be too far away to make that relationship work. So he started a new club and named it Salvation's Bane. Most members of Bane worked for ExFil, including Mac's son, Colin, who took the name Thorn. Thorn would go on to become president of Salvation's Bane.

Alex and Gracie's son, Abraham, had a son named Derrick. He took the name Shadow and became a patched member of Bones. Along the way, in Oklahoma, he would befriend a scruffy kid named Stunner. Stunner would catch the attention of a young El Diablo. Liam, took over for his father as El Diablo, The Devil, for the Brotherhood. I have no proof, but I'm pretty sure Liam intended for Stunner to replace him since he had no male children. At least, not at the time. Stunner married Cain's daughter, Suzie and later became sergeant at arms of Bones after Bohannon left at Cain's suggestion to start a sister club.

Liam Rodrigues did indeed follow in his father's footsteps, becoming the most feared assassin in the world. He held the title of El Diablo longer than anyone in the history of the Brotherhood. Liam was also the man to put a crack in the mystique of the Brotherhood. As of the present day, the organization that once ruled the world from the shadows was splintering and warring with itself. Which suits El Diablo fine. They leave him and his city alone. They leave all those El Diablo claims as his alone.

Mitch Bohannon had a son, Gage Bohannon. Bohannon became Sergeant at Arms for Bones after Cain took over as president.

Gerald "Mo" Ferguson's son, Gavin "Torpedo" Ferguson, became vice president of Bones under Cain.

Mason Gray, or Gray, was a loyal member of Bones until his death. His son, Lars Sword Gray, became an enforcer in Bones.

Luca Romano eventually helped to found a company called Argent Tech with two of his closest friends and colleagues. They became some of the richest men in the world as well as vigilantes in their home city of Rockwell, Illinois. His son became one of the leading tech geniuses in the world. Giovanni Romano, along with Alexi Petrov and Azriel Ivanovich would become known as the Shadow Demons.

Me and Pops? Well, we went home to Bones. We try to keep a close watch on all our children. They span over several clubs now. Iron Tzars MC might not have been able to recruit Pops back in the day, but they managed to work their way into our lives a few decades later. Shadow Demons, Salvation's Bane, Black Reign, and Grim Road round out our family, though Grim Road is one of those children who keeps to themselves for the most part. They're loners, every one of their members Black Ops. Some of them were buried in their cover so deep the government forgot about them, making integrating back into society nearly impossible. Most of them would be killed for what they know. A few would get everyone they'd ever met killed if the wrong people found out who they were, that they were still alive, and what they'd done that classified them as Black Ops.

Pops and I are getting old. One day, we'll leave this earth. When that happens, I hope we're side by side on our bikes, speeding down a long, lonely stretch of interstate. I hope the wind will be forever in my hair and that Pops still looks at me with love in his eyes.

I hope our story inspires all our children to do what's right, no matter how much it hurts. I hope we've left our mark on

each and every member of every club we nurtured.

I hope... we were loved as much as we loved.

* * *

Continue the Bones saga in *Cain*, Bones series book one.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Marteeke Karland leads a double life as an erotic romance writer by evening and a semi-domesticated housewife by day. Known for her down and dirty MC romances, Marteeke takes pleasure in spinning tales of tenacious, protective heroes and spirited, vulnerable heroines. She staunchly advocates that every character deserves a blissful ending, even, sometimes, the villains in her narratives. Her writings are speckled with intense, raw elements resulting in page-turning delight entwined with seductive escapades leading up to gratifying conclusions that elicit a sigh from her readers.

Away from the pen, Marteeke finds joy in baking and supporting her husband with their gardening activities. The late summer season is set aside for preserving the delightful harvest that springs from their combined efforts (which is mostly his efforts, but you can count it). To stay updated with Marteeke's latest adventures and forthcoming books, make sure to visit her website. Don't forget to register for her newsletter which will pepper you with a potpourri of Teeka's beloved recipes, book suggestions, autograph events, and a plethora of interesting tidbits.

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**HIS PASSEROTTA
NICOLE CYPHER**

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HIS PASSEROTTA

When Bailey gets caught spying on a mob meeting, her crush becomes her captor.

I didn't know my boss was a criminal.

Well, not for certain. I've been crushing on Anthony Gruco for months, but the idealized version of him I'd conjured in my mind doesn't even resemble the Italian mafia capo I meet the night I break into his restaurant.

I'm only there to retrieve the phone I left in my locker, but I hear voices in the next room and am stupid enough to listen. By the time I realize it's a mob meeting, it's too late. They catch me, and despite all my newfound knowledge, I still beg Anthony for help.

Now I'm in the trunk of his car, wondering one thing...

What do you do when the man of your dreams might be the villain of your nightmares?

CHAPTER 1

Bailey

There's a buzz in my fingertips as I slide bills from one hand to the other, a telltale sign of my blood sugar being low.

It has been for the last half hour, and normally I would pause right away to inhale a granola bar, but it's my first day waitressing at La Divina, and there's no way I was going to fuck up by asking for a snack break in the middle of a lunch rush.

And, judging by the stack of cash in my hand, it's a good thing I didn't. My shift ended a minute ago, and I raced into the backroom where the lockers are to count the wad of tips I'd stashed in my apron.

Two-twenty... Two-thirty... Two-sixty... Two-eighty...

Three hundred dollars all for four hours serving overpriced food to business executives on their lunch breaks.

Hell. Yes.

"Good first day?" the busgirl, Rainey, asks inches from my ear.

I startle at her voice and turn my head to face her hovering by my shoulder. Her sunken cheeks become even more pronounced as she sucks on the lollipop she holds between two fingers like it's a cigarette she's puffing on.

She tucks a piece of greasy blonde hair behind her ear while flicking her beady eyes between me and the cash.

“Uh, yeah.” I pluck two twenties and a ten from the stack before handing them to her. “This job is a lifesaver,” I say, my voice low enough it makes me wonder if I’m talking to myself.

An image of an apartment on the South side of Las Vegas, or even just anywhere that isn’t Naked City, enters my mind, and I have to put the thought away before I get my hopes up too high. It’s only my first day. I have plenty of time to screw all this up before I can afford a nicer place.

I’m so caught up in my fantasy that I almost miss how wide Rainey’s eyes go when she takes the money.

Was fifty too much?

Not enough?

I don’t know; I’ve never waitressed before. I’ll have to remember to Google the proper share for a busser when I get home.

She clears her throat and shoves the bills into her back pocket. “Thanks,” she murmurs. She turns to her open locker while I dig my phone from my purse. There’s a text from my brother, Corey, asking how my first day went.

I send a thumbs up emoji back while my lips twitch with a smile.

“Tanner won’t let me wait tables,” Rainey mumbles, pulling the sucker from her mouth and tucking it neatly into a sandwich bag, which is ... weird.

I frown for the sake of solidarity but can’t help but see the problem. She needs to chill out on the dark eyeshadow, and

her overall somber mood could be improved upon. It's surprising a stuffy place like this lets her on the floor at all.

But she seems nice, and I've only known her a day. So maybe I shouldn't judge, even if it's only in my head.

"That sucks," I say, my voice low and full of sympathy.

She shrugs just as my cell dings.

I pick it up to read Corey's message telling me he can't make it to dinner tonight. We were going to celebrate my new job with burgers at a joint down the street from our apartment complex. We live one floor from each other.

This time, my lips sink with no help needed from my willpower, and I type out a reply asking what came up. I shouldn't ask. I probably *don't want to know*. My brother and his friends aren't exactly model citizens.

Still, I'm disappointed and secretly want to know if it's something I can ask him to back out of. I really want to tell him in person how my first day went.

He's the one who encouraged me to apply for this job, and I couldn't love him more right now. I resisted it. Literally waiting on rich people hand and foot? No thanks. I'm more of the sit back and observe type. The *only* reason I applied for this gig is because he convinced me that this was the first step to getting behind the bar, which is my ultimate goal.

Before last month, I was a bartender for six years, and I loved it more than most people would understand. There's a beauty to it that goes beyond pouring tequila into shot glasses for bachelorette parties. It's mixing flavors, creating your own

concoctions that deliver just the right blend of tangy paradise. It's ... art.

And this artist needs a new studio.

"You should tell him that," Rainey says, dragging my attention to her. My vision blurs from the movement, so I set my phone in the locker and close my eyes.

I need food. Now.

"Seriously," she says. "Maybe if he heard from someone else, he'd consider it. I've been here two years and am still taking scraps from the servers. It's degrading. If you could just tell him—"

"He doesn't know me," I say, my tone a little too sharp. One more symptom of the ever-annoying hypoglycemia: bitchiness.

"Sorry, my blood sugar's low." I pause a moment to give Rainey an apologetic tilt of my lips before digging into my purse for a granola bar. I always keep one in case I need it... I needed it yesterday.

Fuck, I already ate it.

I groan and look over at Rainey who's staring at me with what I'm hoping is a case of resting bitch face.

"Hey, do you by any chance have another sucker? Or anything, really?"

I half consider asking for the one in the sandwich bag. Gross, I know.

I'm ninety percent sure she's going to give me the finger, but she digs into her pocket and pulls out a red Tootsie Pop. I glance down at her pockets to see two more bulges in each.

Huh.

When she holds it out to me, I take it and nonchalantly pick off a piece of lint. "Thanks, I appreciate this."

I tear the wrapper away and shove the cherry-flavored ball into my mouth. It's not ideal, but it'll do until I get home ... which isn't until tonight.

My eyes pop at the thought, and I snap my gaze to the clock on the wall.

"Shit." I slam the locker and rush to the exit. "Sorry, I just remembered I'm late for something. By Rainey!"

She gives me an emotionless wave before I burst through the door and hightail it to my car, which is not at all easy to do right now when I can't see straight. This sucker isn't doing shit.

I yank my keys from my purse and jam the unlock button on the key fob four times before the damn beep sounds, then I hurry behind the wheel of my Impala. Not a bad car, but twenty-five years is a lot of life for this baby, so she has her problems.

I'm crossing my fingers that Rose behaves today. This morning, I got lucky with her.

Saying a brief prayer, I turn the key in the ignition. Rose makes her usual jajaja noise that has my heart skipping before

she finally starts. Tires squeal as I speed out of the parking garage, heading south.

Remember how I was a bartender until a month ago?

Well, I didn't put aside six months' worth of expenses like the finance gods recommend. I've been working four side gigs while I look for something permanent.

Walking dogs.

Selling sunglasses from a kiosk at a mall.

Data collecting for a company I'm almost certain is bogus.

And ... doing makeup for special occasions. Like weddings.

Like today. In thirty minutes. Across town. While I'm at risk of passing out from low blood sugar.

Oh my god, I'm terrible. If I'd forgotten to walk someone's dog it's one thing, but this is someone's wedding. The happiest day of her life, supposedly.

I suck. I suck suck suck.

My knee guides the steering wheel as I pull off my apron and toss it onto the passenger seat. My mandatory button-down is next, leaving my white tank top and a pair of black slacks I picked up from Goodwill yesterday. Not exactly the outfit that sparks faith in beauty knowledge.

The lipstick in my cup holder catches my attention, and I grab it to color my lips pastel pink, hoping that helps. A quick look in the rearview mirror says not so much.

I yank my hair tie to let caramel locks frame my face, and the world spins for a moment at the forceful movement, so I grasp the wheel and wait for it to pass. Beads of sweat form on my hairline.

This is bad.

This is *so* bad.

I have zero time, but I have to stop. If I don't, I'm going to pass out and give Rose bigger problems than a bad battery and questionable head gasket.

A convenience store on my right catches my attention, and I whip into the parking lot, cutting off a silver Porsche in the process. When a horn blares, I cringe and wave.

“Sorry,” I say as if the driver can hear me.

I owe a lot of apologies today.

* * *

Anthony

“I'm getting fuel, then I'll be there,” I tell my brother, Settimo, via Bluetooth.

Settimo grunts. “Why the fuck are you out of gas?”

Flicking my eyes down to my gauge, I consider whether I can make it.

No. I'm thirteen miles away, and my fuel light has been on for seven. I can't chance it.

“Anthony!”

“That’s how cars work,” I mutter, willing the slow ass Hyundai in front of me to pick up the pace. There’s a gas station just up ahead. “I’m like two miles away. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

I already did the math. I’ll be lucky to be there in twenty. Fifteen if I break enough laws.

“Jesus Christ, you are such a child,” Settimo says, his sharp tone cutting to the bone.

A child. I’m a thirty-year-old capo in the Gruco Crime Family. I’m on my way to meet my brother and the two top-ranking Bratva men to discuss an airstrip investment that would make millions... Even so, to my brother, I’m a child.

At this moment in time, I can’t quite blame him for the retort, but it still gets under my skin.

“I’ll be there. Just calm down.”

“Calm down?!”

I can see the vein popping from his neck even being across town from him. If it isn’t a bullet that kills him one day, it’ll be his heart.

“What the hell are you even doing, Anthony? You knew about this meeting for a week.”

“I was securing a new investment,” I lie. Well, sort of. I was interviewing a chef for a new restaurant I’m opening as a legitimate Gruco business. So, in a way, it’s important. I may have gotten a little carried away with the dish I had him prepare. I could’ve picked something simpler.

Something tells me Settimo wouldn't understand.

Settimo scoffs, and I hang up before he can say his next snide remark. He calls back right away, just as I'm pulling into the gas station, and I look down to hit ignore on my phone.

When I look up, I'm inches away from crashing into a red blur that cuts in front of me, speeding like a teenage boy with something to prove.

My breaks squeal as I blare my horn.

"Fucking prick," I mutter before pulling up to a pump.

* * *

Bailey

So. Good.

Every taste bud I have lights up at the sugary, sloshy goodness in my mouth.

Someone clears their throat, and I pull back the cup filled with green apple deliciousness to blink at the glaring stranger next to me. The way her maroon-painted lips purse with disgust makes it seem like I was drinking straight from the slushy machine. Damn, lady.

"Are you going to pay for that?" she asks. I check for a name tag or uniform or something to show that she works here but find a pearl necklace and leopard print blouse instead.

Not a Quick Trip employee. Just a crime catching detective here to make a citizen's arrest.

I swallow slushy, along with the snotty reply on my tongue, and nod instead. I've learned to avoid confrontation.

Especially with people who scream, ‘I’d like to file a report.’

“Yeah, sorry.”

I fill the cup up, stopping when it’s three-quarters of the way full in case it somehow matters to the good Samaritan.

I sip slushy through a straw while heading to the counter, plucking a Twix bar and a bag of chips from racks as I go. There are two people in front of me, and I stand behind them, sipping liquid ecstasy and damn near forgetting I’m ruining some poor bride’s hour when the bell chimes.

My head turns that way, and the instant hazel eyes lock onto mine, my sugar high flattens. They belong to a man I recognize immediately.

I know this guy...

Sort of.

I know who he *is*, and I’ve spoken to him about ten times. All of them being a quick “here you go” after handing him his chosen drink.

He’s Anthony Gruco. Somewhat frequent customer of the dive bar I was fired from a month ago and owner of La Divina. And the man who occupies my shower thoughts.

Okay, so maybe there was more than one reason I applied for the waitressing gig at that particular restaurant.

I face forward as my cheeks heat and step closer to the guy wearing a windbreaker in front of me.

Goosebumps spread over my shoulders when Anthony stops behind me, his presence suffocating. This is the same

charged discomfort I've felt every other time I've laid eyes on the man, which is a big reason I've said few words to him.

He's... Well, he's intimidating. For one thing, he's the owner of dozens of establishments throughout Las Vegas, one of which is the hotel La Divina is situated in. For another, I think he might be part of the Italian mob. At the very least, he's a member of a *very* shady family, and with the one-on-one hushed conversations I've seen him have at what one could call an 'under the radar' establishment, I'm leaning toward mob.

And this is proof of the horrible taste I have in men because despite the obvious reasons to stay away, I've had a teeny-weeny crush on him since the first time his silky voice ordered a mint julep (*not* a common order).

"Goddamn it," he mutters under his breath.

I peek at him over my shoulder to see his powerful jaw hardened, lips thinned as his intense stare penetrates the glass door. His right hand pats the outer side of his thigh in what looks like an anxious tic.

I only mean to glimpse him, but when his eyes find me, I realize I'm staring. I whip my head around and step up when the line moves.

Every second that ticks by reminds me of how late I am, and I glance around me for a clock but don't see one.

Again, I peek over my shoulder, my heart skipping when Anthony pins me with an annoyed glare.

"Do you need something?" he snaps.

My body tenses at his voice, like I somehow wasn't expecting it. Like he was just going to stand there while I rudely gaped at him.

"Umm, yeah." I clear my throat and try to keep my voice even. "Do you know what time it is?"

His face relaxes a hair as he glances down at his watch. "Three-thirty... Sorry, I didn't mean to be short."

I mean to give him an 'oh, it's fine' smile, but I can tell just by the way my face feels that it's awkward. A squeak comes from my mouth, and I lift a shoulder.

He rears his head back slightly, clearly picking up on the awkwardness, and gestures behind me. "Your turn."

I spin around and take a long step up to the counter, dumping my sugary treasures in front of the clerk. I reach into my pocket while he rings me up but halt when I feel nothing but fabric.

Shit.

I search my other pockets even though I'm positive my money is still in my apron, which is in my car.

"Seven sixty-eight," the zombie-eyed clerk says.

"Right, umm." I turn to glance at Anthony then back to the clerk. "I left my money in my car, just one second."

A grumble sounds from behind me, and I run into Anthony's rock-hard chest as I turn to head for the door.

"I've got it," he says to the clerk, tossing a credit card onto the counter. "The machine keeps declining my card. I need

forty on pump three.”

“That pump isn’t working today. You’ll need to move to four.”

The subtle rage Anthony puts off has my shoulders hunching but sparks no reaction from the clerk. He doesn’t even blink. “That’ll be forty-seven dollars and sixty-eight cents.”

Anthony stabs a finger at the card before the clerk slowly picks it up, taking his time probably to antagonize Anthony. If only he knew the bear he was poking...

Wait, what the fuck am I waiting for?

“Thank you so much,” I say to Anthony, swiping my food up before speed walking toward the door. I run to my car and use one hand to twist my key in the ignition and the other to hold my slushy while I slurp through a straw.

I’m actually not *that* late. Maybe twenty minutes or so, but it isn’t like she booked me seconds before the ceremony starts, and if she was stressing, she would call.

It’s fine. It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine.

The mantra helps for like a second before Rose ruins it.

The engine tries to turn over, but the jajaja doesn’t stop.

“*Fuck*,” I whisper, pausing a second before turning the key again.

Jajajajajaja.

“Come on, Rosey,” I plead, trying again, and then again.

The fucking battery is dead.

“Damn it.” I ball my hands into fists and beat the steering wheel three times before growling and grabbing my purse.

Corey will come give me a jump. If he’s available.

Please be available.

My face is pinched with frustration, but it loosens when a sense of dread drains the blood from my extremities.

Oh no.

Rifling through my purse, I think back to the conversation I had with Rainey. I put my phone down in the locker to look through my purse for the granola bar.

Then I picked it back up... Right?

Please be right.

“Nooo,” I draw out, turning my purse over and dumping out the contents. I grab my apron next and shake the money and plastic straws from the pockets.

I chuck the apron to the floorboard before slamming my back against my seat, a low groan pushing through my clenched teeth.

Okay, I can fix this. I just need a jump. Or even a phone to call my brother. I could probably talk the clerk into letting me use the store phone, or...

I lean toward my window and look over at the gas pumps. Anthony is standing outside the silver Porsche I cut off earlier, his hand eagerly on the pump handle as he stares at the numbers racing on the screen.

I wonder if he remembers me.

If maybe, *maybe* he'd be willing to help me out... Again.

What better option do I have?

I throw open my door and rush over to the pumps, making it to him just as he jerks the nozzle from his tank.

“Hey,” I say, pulling his attention to me. “Could you by chance give me a jump? My car won't start.”

He doesn't spend even a millisecond thinking about it.

“I'm late for something.” He puts the handle in its spot and yanks open his door while I glance around the parking lot, searching for a better option.

What time does the wedding start again?

How much time exactly do I have?

I don't know, but I'm going to be safe and say not enough.

When Anthony goes to shut his door, I grab it and earn a confused scowl.

“Sorry.” I let go of the door and take a step back. “I know this sucks of me to ask because you obviously have somewhere to be, but, the thing is, I'm a makeup artist and am supposed to be at a wedding right now at St. Francis. It's really, really important to the bride that I get there in time for her wedding because... Because you know, most important day of her life and all that.” I let out a nervous chuckle while Anthony just stares at me.

Okay, let's try another tactic.

“I—I could pay you.” I glance at my car, remembering the money scattered in the passenger seat. “I have like two-hundred bucks I could give you for ten minutes of your time.”

Two hundred bucks... To the millionaire driving a Porsche... That’s even worse than the pity strategy.

“St. Francis...” Anthony ponders. “That’s the Catholic church downtown?”

I bob my head feverishly. “Yeah.”

His jaw shifts side to side while he thinks. It’s several seconds before he throws his hands up in what looks like defeat. “Fuck it, why not? Get in.”

“Get in?” I glance at the passenger seat, suddenly remembering who I’m talking to.

I want a *jump* from the mobster. Not a *lift*.

“It’s on my way,” he says. “If you want a ride, get in. Either way, I have to go.”

He shuts his door before I have a second longer to consider the offer, starting his car up a moment later. It pulls up several feet before I sprint for the passenger door.

“Wait!” I yell, earning myself a tap of his brakes.

I hop into the car and barely have the door closed when he floors it.

“Thank you,” I huff. How I’m out of breath from a ten-foot sprint, I don’t know... Maybe it isn’t the run that has my heart racing.

“Don’t mention it.” His eyes pin to the road with an intensity that makes me wonder if he’s really focused on driving or if he’s lost in thought. He doesn’t even flinch when his phone goes off.

“Uh, someone’s calling.” I point to the dash where the name Settimo flashes along with a phone icon. Settimo, as in Settimo Gruco. *Definitely* a mob guy. Maybe even the leader.

What’s that called? A Pakhan?

No, that’s Russian.

Anthony doesn’t answer me, nor does he answer his phone. It stops ringing a few moments later, only to start back up again.

This time, he reaches over to hit ignore.

My heart slows, letting my senses take hold, and the second they do, I’m overwhelmed.

I can smell him. His car has that fresh smell that makes you think he just drove it off a lot, but his cologne is what my brain focuses on. Pine, I think. I don’t go around sniffing trees, but it’s definitely a woody smell. Along with something else, something carnal, something Anthony.

Is this real? Am I seriously in Anthony Gruco’s car?

My core comes to life, and I press my thighs together as if that’ll stop it. It doesn’t.

I tell myself to keep my sights on the dash, the road, anywhere but Anthony, but my eyes betray me and wander over to him.

He's so ... *intense*. And yet, there's a gentleness to him. His chiseled jaw is the first thing I see when I look at him, but those hazel eyes soften his hard features. So does his clean-shaven face and the way he lets his honey brown hair hang over his forehead instead of slicking it back.

He's handsome, and at the same time kind of beautiful.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asks, never taking his eyes off the road.

Oops. I guess he wasn't lost in thought.

I clear my throat and glance around as if I was studying his car all along and not him. A pathetic attempt to save face.

Should I answer him?

No. What the hell would I even say? '*Cause I think you're cute?*

A few hard plastic folders tucked between my seat and the console catch my attention, and I peek at the contents of one. A resume.

With a sly shuffle of my fingers, I can see the other two are resumes as well.

"Are you hiring or applying?" I ask.

Hiring. Duh.

Is he aware that I know who he is?

He looks at the folders before swiping them up and tossing them on the back seat.

It seems like a clear message that I'm invading his privacy, so I sit back with no expectation of a reply. So, of course, I'm surprised when I get one.

“Hiring.”

I turn my head toward him, my back straightening with interest.

“I'm opening a restaurant soon and am looking for a chef.”

“Oh,” I say in a high-pitched voice. “That's cool.”

Maybe consider hiring a new one for La Divina while you're at it. Not because of the chef's abilities. Fifty dollars for beef tips seems a bit much, but his cooking smells good. He's just also an arrogant prick. I think. It's mostly gossip Rainey felt compelled to tell me.

“Have you found a bartender yet?” I ask, my hope rising prematurely. I'm the girl fucking up his day. At some point, I've got to stop asking for favors.

But would it be a favor? I'm damn good at my job. Hiring me would be a favor to *him*.

“That's not my concern,” he says dispassionately. “If you know someone who's looking, feel free to tell them to apply. Management handles that position.”

My neck and shoulders stiffen, and I feel my lips tighten. I'm sure he doesn't realize it, because no one else seems to, but the devaluing of my work is insulting. And frustrating.

“You don't think the quality of drinks equates to the quality of food?”

“Of course. An impressive selection of wine is essential for a menu... It doesn't take talent to pour liquid into a glass, though, does it?”

Did he just...?

What the fuck?

“Do you serve cocktails?”

He shrugs. “Sure.”

“Well, there you go. Bartenders have individual preferences using different measurements of chosen ingredients, just like chefs.”

He chuckles. “Okay.”

I turn to him with my eyes narrowed. This, coming from the guy who ordered a different drink every time I served him. I thought he understood in a way most people don't. Obviously not.

This just knocked him down several rungs on the hotness ladder.

He tilts his head from side to side, considering something. “You're right in a way, I guess.”

My narrowed eyes soften, and I'm able to sit comfortably again. His choice of words flutters into my mind... *If you know someone who's looking, feel free to tell them to apply.*

He doesn't realize *I'm* the bartender looking for the job.

Which means he doesn't remember me. Not surprising, but there's still a little sting in my chest.

“I was a bartender,” I say to prod his memory.

“Mmm,” is all he replies.

“At a place in Naked City called Freddy’s. It’s kind of a shit hole, so I finally quit last month.”

Okay, I was fired. But for stupid reasons. Reasons I’m sure as hell not going to admit to my new boss.

Oh wait, I’m *beneath* Anthony’s level of attentiveness, so I guess that makes him not my boss... Asshole.

“Never heard of it,” he says.

I stare ahead to hide my confusion. I don’t want him to *know* I know him. Not before he realizes he knows me.

He doesn’t. There isn’t a trace of me in his memory, otherwise he wouldn’t be lying about never being there. If I was truly a complete stranger, I would understand his denial because the business he was doing there looked shady. But I’m not a complete stranger. I *saw* the dealings. There would be no point in lying if he remembered me.

Damn... That hurts.

“Are you good?” he asks me.

I swallow and sit up straighter. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

His expression turns quizzical. “I’m referring to your bartending capabilities. You seem to have a firm opinion on differing quality, so I’m assuming that means you think highly of yourself?”

I open my mouth to speak but am not sure what to say. I can’t tell if he’s mocking me or asking me a genuine question.

I go with the truth. “Yes, I’m good. I’m not sure that I’m *memorable*, but I’m good.”

The car slows, and I turn my head to the church just as he pulls into the lot.

When he unlocks the door, I grip the handle and glance at him with a quick ‘goodbye’ on my tongue, but I pause. The way he looks at me with interest lighting up his eyes makes my breath catch.

“I didn’t catch your name,” he says, giving me a kind smile that literally makes me forget my own name.

I blink to snap myself out of it. “I’m uh, I’m Bailey.”

“Bailey...?”

“Fisher.”

He nods as if deeming that an acceptable answer.

“The name of the restaurant is Au Revoir. I’ll let the manager know to expect your application, Bailey Fisher.”

“Really?” I ask with way too much hope in my voice. I steady myself. “That’s... That’s great. Thank you.”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “If and when you get an interview, try not to be late.” He glances out the window as if reminding me of my *current* gig.

My current gig that I’m definitely getting a bad review for.

A *very* bad review.

But I won’t be taking on any more side jobs. I made enough in tips at the dive bar to pay for a ‘thrifty’ life in

Naked City. A bar in a fancy restaurant on a better side of town...

I'll be making *bank*.

This was the goal for La Divina, and one chance encounter with the guy from my naughty fantasies put that dream into overdrive.

Maybe... He didn't technically give me the job.

Still, I'm floored. Fucking floored.

So much so that when I plunge toward Anthony, my lips connecting with his cheek, I tell myself the kiss is involuntary. Full of gratitude. Totally out of my control.

If I'm lying, I'll never admit it.

My neck warms, and I pull the door handle before he can respond to the overt lack of respect for boundaries. "Thank you," I blurt before hurrying out of the car and into the church without looking back.

I can feel my skin burning as I walk, but nothing burns as much as my lips.

It's not a bad feeling.

CHAPTER 2

Anthony

My car lurches as I hit the speed bump outside the abandoned warehouse too fast, and I cringe at the sound of metal scraping.

That'll have to be repaired.

There aren't any cars in sight when I park beside the building, but that isn't unusual. We use this spot as neutral territory for meetings with rival organizations, and both sides typically park a decent distance away. The point of this place is discretion, so all our vehicles in plain sight would make it a little too obvious for law enforcement.

Today, I'm breaking that silent agreement because I have—I glance down at my watch—negative thirty-four minutes before the meeting is supposed to start and am not wasting another second on a farther walk.

There's a good chance I missed negotiations entirely, which is not ideal. There are few people Nikita Petrov, Pahkan of the Bratva, can stand, and I happen to be one of them. Neither of my brothers make the cut.

My heart races as I hurry into the building, my hands tucked into my slacks to shield the agitation that has my fingers tapping.

I try to focus my thoughts on the pitch I've prepared for Nikita, but they keep veering to the gray-eyed girl who left her sweet, vanilla scent soaking my nostrils.

The spot where she kissed me feels different from the rest of my face. Like she branded me with her lips, leaving behind a bright red mark that would explain the burning. I touch the spot absently then shove my hand back into my pocket and shake off the sensation.

I make my way to the underground tunnel beneath the building but halt when Settimo's head appears, coming up the ladder.

Even before I see his hardened face, I can tell he's angry. Can *feel* it. Settimo's energy is a powerful thing; he can't walk into a room without being noticed.

When his eyes find mine, he curls his lip with so much disgust, I can feel that too. My other brother, Lorenzo, appears next, his typically expressionless face not giving anything away if he's pissed at me as well.

"You're a fucking child," Settimo growls, coming at me. He bumps me with his shoulder and continues the way I came.

My teeth grind, but I don't retaliate. Don't even open my mouth. If this was Sunday dinner, I'd clock him, but this is work. And at work, Settimo is my boss.

I turn to watch him kick an old desk chair over before storming out of sight. Only then do I turn to Lorenzo.

"That bad?" I ask, mildly surprised. Like I said, Nikita isn't easy to deal with, but the joint investment we're proposing will reap benefits for both our organizations.

"They didn't show up."

My eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

Lorenzo's eyes move to study something on my face, as if he can see the invisible mark I feel. Coming from anyone else, that would seem absurd, but nothing seems to ever get past him. Not even the imaginary.

“What the hell is Nikita thinking?” I ponder, partly because I'm astonished and partly because I want to get the attention off myself. “The airstrip would benefit us both. The one the Russians currently use is forty miles farther—”

“Yes, Anthony. I'm aware.”

There's a chill in his voice that hints at irritation.

Ah, so he *is* pissed.

“Someone set fire to one of the Bratva's grocery stores last night, after they'd refilled their supplies,” he continues.

Supplies means drugs. They're big into using deli counters to deal.

“We think Nikita believes we had something to do with it.”

“That's ridiculous.” I scoff and shake my head, although it really isn't surprising. Nikita's temper is even worse than Settimo's. I'm sure we aren't the only ones he's questioning. Which means things could get messy if mature adults who don't walk around kicking old desks or standing up potential associates don't work this out.

“Mmm,” Lorenzo agrees.

My eyes roam as I consider what to do. The real question is who is best to work with? Nikita Petrov is a loose cannon

when he feels challenged, so while speaking to him is most direct, it isn't necessarily most productive.

Maksim. He's a lieutenant for the Bratva, and from what I can tell, the only one who isn't psychotic. He'll do.

"I'll call Maksim and set up a meeting to smooth this out."

Lorenzo rears back. "The Russians disrespected us today. Shouldn't they be the ones making things right with *us*?"

"Sure, if this is a game of pride."

Lorenzo doesn't respond. I may as well have spoken a foreign language.

I pull my hands from my pockets and cross my arms over my chest. "I think if our move is to sit by the phone waiting for an apology, we might as well gear up for war. The Bratva will take our silence as an admittance of guilt, and they'll retaliate with a stupid amount of force."

"And the alternative?" Lorenzo asks.

"We set up a meeting to assure them we weren't involved in the arson and to offer our assistance in any way they need, making it clear that the perpetrator is a *mutual* enemy. That a threat to the Russians is a threat to us. We use this as an opportunity to strengthen our relationship, *not* strain it."

"Settimo will call that weak."

"Settimo will be wrong."

"Will he be?" Lorenzo asks.

I don't answer right away, giving myself a few moments to center myself while he studies me, most likely assessing my

irritation. My advice being considered ‘weak’ is not new for us. It infuriates me to constantly be challenged, constantly proving myself to be as vicious as deemed fit by my family.

To be merciful is to be weak. To be cooperative is to be weak. To be *smart* is to be weak. There is nothing worth more than a man’s pride among the Grucos. All will bow or all will die. There is no compromise.

“Yes,” I finally say. “He will be. And as his advisor, it’s your job to make him see that. Unless, of course, you too believe I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t believe you’re an idiot.”

“Right, just weak,” I spit, instantly regretting it.

I’m not the underboss. I’m not the don.

I’m a capo. Capos don’t make the final call. Capos don’t whine when they don’t get their way.

Lorenzo’s head tilts, his eyes metaphorical magnifying glasses. “No, not weak. No one thinks you’re weak. You’re just ... a little soft.”

Soft.

Now I feel *much* better.

My eyes roll on their own accord.

“It can be a good thing. It provides a unique input to the familia that levels out the more aggressive approaches. Sometimes, your suggestions require serious contemplation. Other times, they should be ignored.”

“This time,” he goes on, “I think you’re right.”

The tightness in my face releases as his words register.

“Settimo will too, once he’s through being pissed at you.” Lorenzo’s eyes move back to the invisible burn on my face. “I’m sure he’s eager to hear the excuse for his own capo’s absence.” He gestures to his cheek. “You might want to wipe the lipstick off your face first.”

Lipstick?

I run my hand over the patch before looking down at the pink smudge across my palm.

Shit.

More smears onto the back of my hand when I rub what I’m hoping is the rest of the lipstick off. “It isn’t what it looks like.”

He raises a brow.

I lower my hand to tuck it into my pocket. Lorenzo’s gaze follows it. “I gave some girl a ride earlier, and when I dropped her off, she kissed me to express her gratitude. Pussy isn’t what made me late.”

Lorenzo just stares.

“I had a follow up on an investment opportunity that I couldn’t pull myself away from. It was across town, and traffic was—”

“When you say follow up,” Lorenzo cuts in. “Do you mean, ‘second interview’ for a chef you’re considering for Au Revoir?”

My chest tightens, but I keep my spine straight so he can't read into my posture.

How the fuck does he know what I was doing?

"No," I lie. "It was—"

"Anthony." Lorenzo frowns. "Your secretary has your agenda. Please don't insult my intelligence and embarrass yourself in the process."

Goddamn it, Tiffany.

A sigh rushes past my lips as I rake my hand through my hair. "Does Settimo know?"

Lorenzo shakes his head.

The coiled tension in my chest releases, my shoulders finally relaxing. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I have no intention of backing you up when the fireworks go off... But it should be a nice show." His lips tilt upward, and more tension releases. The smile is intentional, for my benefit. Lorenzo gives nothing away involuntarily.

"So?" he asks.

My brows pinch. "So what?"

"Did you fill the position?"

Oh, the interview.

I shrug, and Lorenzo gives another tiny smile. "Don't be too picky, little brother. It opens in a month."

“It’s my restaurant with my name and reputation attached.” I wave whatever’s left of my justification away. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I understand,” he says, surprising me. He must sense my confusion because he continues. “I have things that are important to me, as well.”

Right. His ... animals. Lorenzo has a weird obsession with animals, especially the lion he keeps as a pet. It isn’t something the rest of our family understands, so in a way I guess we relate. I never considered myself on the same wavelength as Tiger King over here, but I’m not the only one with interests that don’t involve our family.

He takes a step forward, spreading a palm toward the exit. “Come on. We keep the big guy waiting much longer and he’ll balloon up like Violet Beauregarde.”

I pause for a second. “Was that a Willie Wonka reference?”

It seems impossible for Lorenzo to have watched that movie. Or really any movie.

“Love requires sacrifice, little brother. Don’t ever forget it.”

Oh, right... I somehow always forget my brother isn’t single. How the hell he managed to find a wife before me is beyond my comprehension.

He smirks before heading for the exit while I follow behind. The girl from today pops into my mind, despite my efforts to push her to the side while there are still pressing matters to attend to.

I shouldn't have given her a ride. It took maybe one extra minute of my time, but even that was too much. She was a mess. An even bigger one than me, and there were several other people at that gas station who could've helped her out.

But she was ... cute. And pitiful. Kind of like a kitten in a box on the side of the road. You shouldn't take one. They piss and shit and shed all over the place, and you'll constantly spend your time rewashing clothes clinging with hair. But in the moment you're staring at them in that box, you can't help yourself.

Seeing Bailey was kind of like that, but she also had a nice set of tits and a tank top that hung a little low.

My cock comes to life, and I glance down while chastising myself. Now is not the time for a hard-on. For obvious reasons, but also because I don't know who she is. She might just be some girl, but with her connection to Freddy's... It's best to be cautious, even if that means just checking her out.

And there is absolutely no one better for that job than the human lie detector walking next to me.

"Could you look into someone for me?" I ask Lorenzo.

He slows, and I adjust my pace to match his.

"Who?"

"Bailey Fisher. She's the girl I gave a ride to. She claimed to bartend at Freddy's, but I've never seen her. It's likely she worked different shifts than the times I've been, but I think it's best to look into her anyway, see if she's lying."

"Do you think she could be law enforcement?" he asks.

I shake my head. “Definitely not.”

I like to think I have enough sense to sniff out a cop. Even one coated in vanilla.

“What makes you so sure you’ve never seen her?”

Her image enters my mind, zeroing in on those pouty pink lips she smudged my face with. Blood pours into my dick.

“I would remember.”

“You sure?” he asks.

I nod, Settimo coming into my sight. He’s leaned against a wall staring off at the street, probably contemplating murder.

“Not a doubt in my mind.”

CHAPTER 3

Bailey

My head bobs in sync with Yung Gravy's new mix as I pull into the parking garage next to La Divina, my lips moving fast with the lyrics I haven't quite learned. I'm fumbling but having fun with it. It worked out to be a damn good day.

Well, not for everyone...

Turns out, I wasn't the only one late to the sunflower lady's wedding (she earned the nickname the moment I walked into the brown and yellow cloaked sanctuary). So was she. When I got to the church, people inside were chucking sunflowers into trash bags, a thick fog of gloom cast over the room. The bride had stood up the groom, and as bad as I felt for the man, he's better off. We all are.

Love is overrated. You fall for someone only to get burned, whether that means a quick dump through a text or not showing up to the wedding you invited everyone you know to.

You try meeting someone in a bar, they end up married.

You try online dating, you end up being let down by the person who bears no resemblance to who their profile says they are. I once went out with a 'Bon Jovi lover' who only knew one of his songs. He did indeed give love a bad name.

You try and try and try, but the fact of the matter is, it takes blood to love unconditionally. My brother has my whole heart and soul, delinquent or not, but if I notice a guy doesn't brush his teeth before bed, I'm gone.

Shallow, right? That's because the love between family is the only kind that's real. Romance can be fun, *lots* of fun. Sex is not only imperative to our mental health, it's necessary to our survival as a human race. But when your mother has three children with three different fathers, and *every last one of them* promised to love and take care of her, you take off the blinders.

So... At least the groom got let loose earlier than when he's dying of cancer or loses a leg or job or faces any other hardship and needs someone the most. At least he's been wounded at his highest moment instead of shattered at his lowest.

Okay, I'm done with the cynicism.

I shut off the car, the sudden silence sharpening my senses, and pull up my hood before grabbing my lock pick from my purse.

The sound of my door creaking echoes in the empty space, momentarily drowning out the buzzing overhead lights I use to guide my steps.

When I reach the back alleyway, I duck my head in case there's a camera pointed at the back door. I doubt there is, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious. If I hadn't noticed the chosen lock for the place and recognized how easy it would be to pick, I might not be here at all.

I like to think I can go one night without my phone, but I have work due for that stupid data collection job, and this is a simple in and out mission. Even if I'm caught on a camera or

something, I can claim the door was unlocked. That's how quick this will be.

And quick it is.

I insert the lock pick, giving it a two-second finesse before it clicks and I twist the knob.

I leave the door open so the moonlight can give me just enough sight to get to the lockers. After three tries, I find the one I left my phone in.

My phone screen illuminates, flooding the tiny room with light, and shows I have five missed calls from Corey and six texts asking where the hell I am. He must not have been too concerned because he wasn't at either of our apartments when I stopped by. Or worse, he was out looking for me.

Sorry, forgot my phone at the restaurant, I send.

Before I can put the phone in my pocket, his smiling image I captured on my last birthday appears on the screen.

I answer and put the phone to my ear. "Hey, are you okay?" I ask. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Where are you?"

"La Divina. I put my phone down in a locker and forgot to grab it before I left today."

"You're there now?"

"Yeah. About to leave."

"Oh... Was someone there to let you in?" he asks, no condemnation in his voice. He doesn't sound disapproving,

just curious. He isn't the only one with a history of being a heathen.

“Nope. It was an easy pick.”

“Really?” he asks, still curious. “No cameras either?”

I glance around, confident the darkness coupled with my oversized sweatshirt shields me enough even if they're there. If there's audio—which there never is—it's still easy for me to explain why I'm here. I've found people only get *real* worked up if you steal shit. Go figure.

“Nah, I don't think so. Not at the back, at least.”

“Hmm.”

“Yeah, hey, are you home? I'm thinking about stopping for late night pancakes. We could have a little celebratory food, after all, if you're free?” I shut the locker and lean my back against it.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. I'm going to be gone for a few days.”

“What?” My lips pull down. “Where are you going?”

“Just ... gone. Don't worry about it.”

Don't worry about it.

He's hiding from someone.

“Corey,” I sigh. “What did you—”

“I'm gonna ditch this phone, but I'll call you in a few days. I just wanted to let you know I'll be out of touch so you don't go filing a missing person report.”

“That was *once*. Two years ago when you were still a minor and my responsibility.”

“You put the cops on my radar,” he complains. He’s never going to let that go.

My frown deepens, but I refrain from pulling out my big sister lecture, reminding myself Corey is an adult. As if he’d ever let me forget.

I’ll never not worry about him.

“All right, well thanks for letting me know.”

“Love you, B.”

My heart pangs. “Love you too. Be safe.”

The line disconnects, and my posture falls while I put my phone in my pocket. I’m one foot toward the exit when a voice draws my attention to the door leading into the restaurant. Now that I look closely, it’s cracked.

Someone else is here.

I take a couple quick steps toward the exit before pausing again.

It’s midnight. The restaurant closed at nine.

Who would still be here?

Manager?

Hmmm... No, probably not.

Robbery?

That would be wild. And a crazy coincidence that I’m breaking in at the same time, all the more reason to get out

now.

More voices sound, one booming like he's angry or excited.

My lips twist to one side while I stare at the cracked door.

I'm a little too curious not to take a peek.

I tiptoe that way, opening the door only enough to see into the hallway. No light filters from beneath the closed office door like I expect, but the dining area is illuminated in the same low lighting as this afternoon. The voices are coming from there.

Is it a private, late-night dinner? Can people arrange that?

What am I thinking, rich people can do whatever they want.

I carefully plant one foot into the hall and slink through the door, my back pressed against the wall. It only takes a few feet before the booming voice becomes comprehensible.

"I've never trusted the Polish."

Muffled response.

I slink a few more feet.

"...no sign of organized foul play."

"The outside back of the building was targeted, exactly at the spot the deli is. They knew what they were doing. It's an organized attack, we're certain of it," the loud voice proclaims.

Attack?

I inch closer, all the way until I'm at the end of the wall where one extend of my neck would let me see the source of the voices. I resist, the conversation sounding a little too serious to be friendly, late-night dinner banter.

"Well, it wasn't us," someone says.

"But it was *someone*." My blood cools at the silky, masculine voice. This one, I know. I heard it just earlier today. "And our three families should take it seriously. It could be us next, Finn."

"What do you suggest we do about it?" Finn, I'm assuming, answers.

"We find the threat and eliminate it. I already have my resources asking around. They'll be able to get more information inconspicuously than the Bratva with their aggressive approach. I recommend the Irish do the same."

Bratva.

Oh my god.

This is not a rich guy business meeting.

This is a mob sesh.

As carefully as I can, I back away, adrenaline commanding me to run but logic telling me to creep.

My spine erects when I bump into something hard, only a millisecond passing before my brain can guess that it's a gun.

I raise my hands without a word and swallow the fear that threatens to close up my throat.

I thought I knew what the fear that comes with being caught felt like. I've been caught places I wasn't supposed to be before.

But this isn't the police.

This isn't the law determining my punishment.

This is the mob. Multiple of them, it sounds.

They're much less forgiving.

My breath shakes as whoever's behind me prods me with the gun. "Walk."

Without hesitation, I do as I'm told, my feet inching closer to the voices slower than when it was my own will pushing me there. The guy behind me doesn't say a word until we come into sight, and the loud man pacing the deep red carpet quiets mid-sentence, his steps halting as he stares at me.

A dark-haired man sitting with his feet propped on a table follows his peer's line of sight, and Anthony turns a moment later, our eyes locking.

The first thing that crosses his expression is surprise, but it's quickly swallowed up by an intense hardness I've never seen on his face.

I shudder.

"We have a visitor," the man behind me announces as he pulls my hood down, his voice coming from so high up, it speaks to how tall he must be.

He taps my back with the gun, and I leap forward a step, a gasp sputtering from my Sahara Desert of a mouth.

The loud one, a blond man with well-defined muscles bulging from his tight blue shirt, aims his eyes above me to address the gun-toter. “Who is she?”

I look at Anthony, my lip quivering with fear I hope he takes as a silent, pleading apology.

I’m sorry.

I’m so, so sorry.

Please don’t let these monsters kill me.

“She was spying from the hallway,” the giant explains.

Silence falls over the room while they all look to me for an explanation, which is really just a brief opportunity for me to plead my case before they kill me. Not even that. In their minds, I’m probably already dead.

They’re just curious. The tables have turned.

“I’m sorry,” I squeak, earning zero pity in any of their eyes. “I—I’m an employee of this restaurant. I just, I—I—I...” I take a shaky breath, my heart feeling like it’s going to burst from my chest. “I left my phone here today and just came back for it. I heard voices...”

“And you decided what? To invade our privacy?”

“Now Maksim...” The dark-haired man, Finn I deduce, drags his black boots off the table and stands, a sinister smile playing on his face as he struts my way. “All you Russians take everything so personally. She’s just a curious little kitten. She can’t help it. Can you, sweetheart?” He pauses centimeters away and lifts a lock of my hair from my shoulder.

I stand perfectly still, my eyes wide as I silently continue my plea with Anthony who gives me nothing in return.

Finn drops the lock then brushes it off my shoulder, the thick hoodie guarding me from his touch.

“I’m a little curious myself,” Finn says, loudly enough so the others can hear. “You’re dressed a little warm for a Las Vegas summer night. Are you cold? Or *sneaky*?”

“Did you lock the back door?” Maksim asks, his eyes above me. The man steps out from behind me, confirming his enormous size. He isn’t just tall, he’s wide, with more muscle than a person could possibly need.

“Yes. She must’ve had a key.”

Maksim’s gaze moves to Anthony.

“No.” Anthony slowly shakes his head, anger igniting his eyes. “She wouldn’t have access to one.”

Finn slides behind me, his hips pressing into my back as he guides his hands from my shoulders to my breasts. I bite my cheek to keep my protest at bay and don’t move a muscle. It would only make things worse. He has me trapped in place between his hardening dick he’s intentionally rubbing me with and his intrusive hands.

He continues to my hoodie’s pocket where he slips the lock pick out with a deft hand and holds it up for the others to see. “Mystery solved, gentlemen.”

“I just needed my phone,” I try to explain, but my voice is so weak, I’m not sure they even hear me.

Finn slips the cell from my back pocket next, taking the time to grope my ass. He tosses it to the big guy who catches it with one hand then drops it on the floor and crushes it with his heel.

“You’re an incredibly poor liar,” Maksim scowls.

My lip quivers as I look to Anthony for help yet again. “*Please.*”

“Who are you?” Finn asks me, his hand slipping beneath my shirt to rest on my hip. “How did you know we’d be here?”

His questions sound serious, but his hands only show his excitement.

He’s not worried. He barely seems to care.

He just wants this over with so he can get to what happens next.

Which is not something I want to think about.

“Anthony, please,” I say, my voice breaking. “I swear to you, I was just here to get my phone. I—I won’t say anything. I’ll just go.”

“*Anthony?*” Maksim parrots, his head turning to him. “You know this girl?”

Anthony allows a few seconds to pass before he shrugs. “Apparently, she works for me. We have no personal connection.”

Maksim huffs before turning to Finn. “You gonna deal with her or should Hugh?”

“It’d be my pleasure,” the big guy, Hugh, says. Finn’s intentions for me seem more clear, more for his enjoyment than anything else. Hugh looks all business. He looks painful.

“Anthony,” I whine, tears blurring my vision.

“Oh no, I’ve got this one,” Finn says, smiling against my ear.

He spins me around and lifts me over his shoulder, making me yelp. His large hand squeezes my ass. “I think we’ve talked enough, don’t you agree?”

He must get his answer because he pats my rear, halting my movement when I squirm and says, “Good. Run along and tell your boss all is well, and I’ll do the same. Gruco, tell the fiery one of you to expect our call.”

Finn turns around, giving me one last look at Anthony, still leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. “Please!” I try one last time in a panic as Finn carries me away. “Please help me! Please!”

“Sure you don’t know her?” I hear Maksim’s fading voice mutter.

Finn pushes out the door into the alleyway, and I quiet, nothing but my ragged breaths to draw attention. I’m smart enough to know doing so would only result in more deaths than my own.

“That’s a good girl,” Finn says, rubbing my ass. “I promise when we get to our destination, you can make all the noise you want.”

I let out a terror-filled cry then slap a hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut and whimpering into my palm.

“Stop!”

My eyes snap open at the voice the same time Finn slows. He turns, so I only get a glimpse of Anthony standing at the back door, but the glimpse is enough to flood my heart with pure, grateful hope.

Save me.

Save me, save me, save me.

Finn stands still as footsteps sound our way, with more sets in the distance.

“She’s mine,” Anthony says as he approaches.

Finn’s grip on my ass tightens. “Oh?”

“My establishment, my employee, my responsibility. Put her down.”

The longest moment of my life passes with crippling anticipation. My body is so rigid, if I move, I might creak.

A heavy sigh penetrates the silence as Finn sets me on my feet. I stumble to Anthony, weaving around his back to use him as a shield, my arms crossing to hug myself.

“I suppose you have a point,” Finn says, surprisingly without any sign of annoyance.

“I don’t care who does it, just get it done,” Maksim grinds as he walks past, Hugh lagging behind him.

Get it done.

Meaning kill me.

Am I still in danger?

The thought seems so ridiculous when I think about it logically—because of course I am—but it occurs nonetheless. Reality slowly takes hold, and I back away from Anthony. He looks over his shoulder and pins me with a threatening look that roots me in place.

“Sure you don’t need help?” Finn asks. “In the spirit of us all working together?” He flashes his teeth at me, and I dart my eyes away.

“Get out of here, Finn,” Anthony replies without a trace of friendly amusement.

Finn’s smile falls, and he gives a slight dip of his chin before turning and walking the way Maksim went. Brake lights shine down the alley from what must be Maksim’s and Hugh’s SUV. It must’ve been hidden in the dark when I got here.

Once Finn is a safe distance away, Anthony turns to me, his face as threatening as before.

“You understand that if you scream, I’ll kill you. Right?”

My arms wrapped around myself squeeze, and I nod.

“Good.” He points down the opposite end of the alley, toward the road. “Walk.”

I start that way, his presence at my back moving me as thoroughly as Hugh’s gun. We make it to the sidewalk and turn

left, passing a couple hanging on each other and then a man talking on his phone.

I'm careful not to make eye contact with any of them. I'm not sure what my future holds, but I know Anthony isn't bluffing. If he so much as suspects I'm reaching out, he'll kill me. If I fuck up enough, the mafia may even kill my brother.

Corey.

My chest tightens, and I get lost in thought of my brother, the idea of him coming home just to find I've abandoned him gut wrenching.

I'm so lost in thought that when Anthony grabs my arm, I gasp.

He presses a button on his key fob that unlatches the trunk of the car we're standing next to. My stomach drops at the insidious click.

It isn't the silver Porsche from earlier. This is a black Buick.

Another one of his cars?

Does it matter?

"Get in," he orders.

I glance up and down the barren sidewalk, knowing we won't be alone for long.

What will happen if someone sees? Will they yell? Call the police? Get themselves killed in the process?

Probably not. This is Las Vegas, after all, and even on the nice side of town, people aren't entirely stupid. Then again ...

tourists.

“Now,” Anthony growls, startling me from my thoughts again.

I carefully open the trunk, fear shooting through me at the possibility of something already being in there, like another body. I’m not sure if it’s rational or not. It occurs to me again that I don’t know Anthony. I’ve acted like I do, but everything I know is speculation, my own idealized version of him I conjured up in my head. Some of it is pure imagination. I have an *idea* of who he is, but it’s no more or less predictable than a dating profile.

Before his impatience can grow, I climb into the trunk and flinch when it slams shut, darkness swallowing me up.

My lungs shrink like the cramped space is suffocating me, but it’s really the unknown that’s making it difficult to breathe.

Will he kill me?

Will he let me go?

Something *worse*? Something more ... Finn-like?

The car starts up, and we pull away, my life hanging in the balance of whatever destination Anthony chooses.

Do I know this man at all?

CHAPTER 4

Anthony

The lion statues outside Lorenzo's hotel come into view, and I glance in the rearview, my eyes finding the trunk. The girl hasn't made a sound since we pulled away from the restaurant.

It's unusual. Kidnapping isn't exactly my area of expertise within the familia, but I've had enough people in the trunk of a car to say that silence isn't the norm. There's almost always kicking, screaming, begging. I took side streets just waiting for it, ready to pull over to shut her up, but it was in vain.

Nothing about this girl is typical. Nothing makes sense.

First of all, how does she know my name?

Today, in the car, I have no memory of introducing myself to Bailey, and yet, she knows my name. She claims to work for me and never mentioned it while we were together. She broke into my restaurant, picked the lock like a pro.

I don't know who she is, but it couldn't be more obvious to me that not all, if any, of these things are coincidences.

Did she follow me to the gas station?

Was she baiting me when she mentioned Freddy's?

If she wanted intel on me, why didn't I pick up on it? I've been going through our conversation bit by bit, searching for *something* that could give me a clue as to what her motives are, but all I can think of is her asking about the resumes tucked beside her seat. That seems hardly suspicious.

If she hadn't picked the lock to get inside, I'd be questioning if there was much more to her at all, despite everything else. The girl seems like a mess.

What harm could she possibly do?

I approach the turn for the casino parking lot but don't slow down, instead driving past with no destination in mind. I think a part of me knew I wouldn't go through with dropping her off, right thing to do or not. If I did, I would have to face Lorenzo's judgment, questioning how I could be so oblivious. If she was a cop or reporter or something and I didn't pick up on that... I'd never be able to live that down.

Besides, I should be able to take care of this myself, prove that I'm capable of everything my brothers think that I'm not. If I can't take care of a clumsy, foolish girl, what good am I?

My stomach twists when I realize what I'll have to do *after* I figure out who she is and what she wants.

I'll have to kill her.

Of course I'll have to kill her.

What else is there to do? Let the witness of a criminal meeting—and now a victim of a kidnapping—go?

That would be soft. Stupid, even.

I'm not either.

Bile rises, burning my esophagus, and I swallow it down.

Shit, maybe I'm both.

My phone rings, and I glance down at it to see Lorenzo's contact flashing. I haven't filled him in on the meeting yet, so

it makes sense that he's calling, but it still feels like an eerie coincidence.

I pick up my phone, deciding not to use the Bluetooth in case the girl can hear. "Hey."

"Everything taken care of?"

I stop at a light and turn on my blinker, arbitrarily picking a street to turn on to. "Yes. The Russians should be satisfied."

"Good. So that woman you gave a ride to... She said she worked at Freddy's?"

"Yeah," I say, absently glancing in the rearview.

"Did she give you the impression that she knew you?"

Not then. She sure as shit has now.

"No, why?"

"Today was her first day at La Divina, and she wasn't lying about Freddy's. She worked there for three years and was canned last month for stealing from the register. She also has a criminal record for grand theft auto, which she served two years for."

My brow knits as I turn down another street. This keeps getting more and more weird.

"That doesn't make sense. My manager does background checks. And I'm certain I've never seen her before today."

"Her record is sealed, so it wouldn't have shown up on a background check."

That doesn't explain why my manager didn't know that she got canned. Is he even calling references?

I blink away the thought, turning onto another street. That's the least of my problems right now.

"She could be no one, but I'm having someone follow her for a few days anyway. I don't think I have to tell you to fire her..."

Fire her.

If he knew she was in my trunk right now, he'd expect much worse... So he can't know. Not until I figure things out for myself.

"Consider it done. Let me know if you find anything else out."

And good luck with your search.

"Sure thing. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, see you then."

The call disconnects, and I toss my cell on the passenger seat. The knots in my stomach loosen but don't fully unravel.

So, she's a criminal. That's ... good. And bad. But mostly good.

It makes her lock-picking abilities make sense, and it eases my mind knowing she isn't law enforcement or a reporter... She's a thief. Hell, maybe that's what she's up to. Maybe she's trying to rob me.

I let out a chuckle and relax into my seat.

She also wasn't lying about working at La Divina. She didn't lie to me about her name or working at Freddy's.

Maybe she didn't lie about any of it.

That thought seems unlikely, but it sobers me some, smoothing out my relieved smile. If she wasn't lying, that makes her partially innocent. Which would mean she doesn't deserve to die.

And I'll have to kill her anyway.

I sit up straighter and stare into the rearview mirror. The memory of her pouty lips, pressed against my cheek, comes into my mind and has my stomach twisting all over again, the brief minute of reprieve over.

I shouldn't think about what I'll need to do later. Only what I need to do now.

And right now, I need answers. Maybe less answers than I thought.

Before I even realize that's where I've been headed, I'm pulling up to my apartment building, the last place I should bring a prisoner.

But she isn't just any prisoner. She's a criminal. She's a criminal who knows who I am. She knows what happens if she screams or tries to run. What will happen to her loved ones.

Her silence suddenly makes sense, even if she doesn't.

I pass the parking garage and pull into the alleyway behind the building before parking my car and walking to the trunk.

Nothing but silence.

What if something's wrong? What if she's dead?

Surely, I'm not that lucky.

I click the button to pop the trunk, trepidation winding my shoulder muscles. I lift the lid and am met with the prettiest gray eyes I've ever seen. They swirl with fear that matches the girl's tense body, her arms wrapped around her chest.

She's... God, she's pretty. The kitten in the box I just can't help but take home.

My shoulders relax, giving away the relief at her liveliness that my mind isn't yet willing to admit to.

“Get out.”

She flinches at my harsh tone and scrambles to obey the command, only slowing once she's out of the trunk and looking around. I slam the lid before locking the car.

“Where are we?” she asks, slowly turning in a circle as if she's trying to figure it out for herself.

Instead of answering, I put my hand on her back and hastily lead her to the back door of my building, pulling out my key card as I walk.

Her stiff muscles and wide eyes tell me she's scared, as any sane person would be, but I'm a little amazed at the stillness of her body. She doesn't shake as we walk to the elevator and take it to my floor. Her breathing is erratic but quiet enough that no one would notice if they weren't studying her the way I am.

She's brave. Either that or she doesn't see me as a threat.

My brother's words enter my mind, calling me soft, and I grind my teeth, taking the girl's arm to harshly lead her to my apartment, as if the slight amount of roughness will prove something to myself.

Who am I kidding? If my brother was wrong, we wouldn't be here. We would be in the middle of the desert where she'd be digging her own grave.

When we're in my foyer, I let go of her arm and lock the door, the insidious click bringing me relief but her obvious anxiety.

"Go to the couch."

Again, she immediately obeys.

Hmm. Maybe she *is* afraid of me.

I follow behind her and sit on the opposite end of the couch, as far from her as I can get. It's done before I realize why I'm doing it. Even my subconscious recognizes how tempting she is.

Her gray eyes curiously dance around while her hands rest carefully in her lap.

"Who are you?" I ask, making her jump.

She shifts on the cushion and fiddles with her hands, seemingly preparing to speak. "Bailey Fisher."

Her voice is strong, *brave*, which must've been what she was preparing for. I like that.

My mouth stays closed while I wait for her to continue. She strikes me as foolish but not stupid. She knows I want

more.

Her eyes dart to me then to her lap. Taking a deep breath, she turns to face me. “I promise you, everything I said was true. I work at La Divina and forgot my phone in one of the lockers this afternoon, so I was only there to get it. I didn’t even hear your conversation, so I know *nothing*.”

My hands clasp, and I rest my forearms on my knees. “You know enough.”

“No.” She shakes her head, a desperate denial of the fate we’re both aware of. “I—I don’t—”

“I never told you my name,” I say, my voice even. “So you must know who I am.”

“Of course I do.” Her hand presses to her chest. “You’re Anthony Gruco, half the people in this city know who you are. People with several multi-million-dollar businesses are well known. It’s a thing.”

Her eyes plead with me, begging me to understand her simple explanation. Her *bullshit* explanation.

“Are you going to lie to me all night?” I ask. “Because if so, I need to make a call. Maybe you’ll be honest with Finn.”

“No.” Her eyes bug, and she scoots closer to me, her breathing noticeably heavier. “No, please, don’t do that.”

I sit up straight, unclasping my hands to rest them on my slacks. “How do you know who I am?”

“I...” She looks up and inhales a shaky breath like she’s once again trying to prepare herself to speak. “I know you

from Freddy's. About seven months ago, a guy you were with called you Gruco, and I found your first name from a quick Google search. There's a news article from when you opened your hotel that has a picture of you."

"Why?" I squint at her, trying to summon Lorenzo's ability to see through someone. "Why would you care so much about who I might be that you felt the need to look me up?"

Color floods her previously pale face, and she looks down.

"Did you overhear something? Did you..." I search my brain for the right way to phrase this without eliciting her to lie. "Was it because you thought I was rich? Or was it because you thought I was a criminal?"

Wheels turn behind her eyes while she thinks through her answer, and I cut to the point before she has time to think up a lie.

"Were you planning on robbing me?"

"What?" Creases shoot between her eyes. "No."

"Then why did you look me up? Why did you decide to apply to my restaurant? Do you really think I'm stupid enough to believe all of this is a coincidence? That you just so *happened* to run into me today when your car just so *happened* to break down?"

Her mouth opens and closes several times before she bites her lip and shrugs.

This was a mistake.

I pull out my phone, not sure if I'm bluffing or not.

“Don’t!” Bailey hops to the cushion beside me, putting her hand on my wrist and carefully guiding my phone to the couch. “Please don’t.”

“Then stop making me ask so many questions.” I pry her hand from my wrist. “You can either make this make sense or you can talk to someone who enjoys this an immense amount more than I do.”

She stares at me, doe-eyed. When her mouth opens and closes again, my patience snaps, and this time I’m not bluffing when I pick up my phone.

“No, wait. Please, just give me a minute. I just... I’m scared. I—I...”

I unlock my phone and pull up Lorenzo’s contact, the fear in her voice slowing my movements but not stopping me.

Something is up with this girl. I can’t just let it go. I can’t let *her* go.

If she requires pain to motivate her to talk ... so be it. But I don’t want to be the one to hurt her. A man? Sure. A baseball bat to the knees, maybe pluck out a few teeth with pliers, and most anyone will talk. When it comes to handling women, however, I almost always pass them off to Lorenzo. I guess I’m ‘soft’ like that.

My thumb hovers over the call button, and I’m milliseconds away from pushing when she speaks.

“I have a crush on you.”

My hand freezes, and I turn my head to her, confusion tightening my face.

She looks away, her cheeks bright red now. “I don’t *know* you, but I’ve seen you multiple times in Freddy’s, and you just seem ... different. You order complicated drinks, never the same thing twice, and it made me think you had an appreciation for what I do. You’re polite and tip big, and you use coasters, which doesn’t sound like much, but most people don’t and you just... You’re different.”

I use coasters.

She has a crush on me because I use coasters.

That might be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard... And, still, I believe her. I don’t know how she could possibly blush this deeply while faking.

“My brother saw a listing for a server position at La Divina, and I applied because I thought there was a chance you might remember me from Freddy’s and let me bartend.”

She inhales through her nostrils, her hands wringing like this is mortifying for her. It’s cute.

My lips twitch.

Okay, I was wrong. This *is* fun.

“Today, when I saw you and you paid for my things, it only added to the idea of you I had in my head. My battery really was dead, and I really did need a jump, but you’re right, it wasn’t a coincidence that I asked you of all people for help... But tonight *was* a coincidence. I had no idea you or anyone else would be there, and I’m so so so sorry I broke in. I...”

She doesn't finish her thought, just wrings her hands and stares at her lap while her humiliation and fear cloud the room.

The urge to comfort her, tell her not to be embarrassed is strong, but I remain silent. It would only be patronizing if I tried.

How could I not remember her? She pegged me too accurately to be lying, so I know she's telling the truth when she says she's met me at Freddy's. That means I've spoken to her. Money has changed hands. I've somehow seen those eyes, those lips, that flowing hair, those perky tits. It doesn't feel possible, but it must be the truth.

My eyes lower to her chest, the bulky sweatshirt hiding what I saw this afternoon.

If I'd only noticed her sooner, I'd have a better picture of what she looks like underneath those clothes.

“Are you going to kill me?”

The lust loosening my senses abruptly shatters, the blood flowing into my dick changing course as reality slaps me in the face.

I forgot. For a solid minute, I forgot the inevitable.

Maybe it isn't inevitable.

Maybe... Maybe no one has to know.

I scoff at my thoughts, and Bailey notices, probably thinking it's directed at her.

“Anthony,” she says, my name buttery soft on her lips.
“Please.”

Anthony.

Please.

The combined words drilled into me at La Divina, and they're even more effective here.

“How am I supposed to trust you?” I ask, hoping she has a convincing answer.

She closes her eyes, her shoulders beginning to tremble. I don't think she's going to answer, so I search for one myself.

Then she surprises me.

“My earliest memory is standing beside my mother while she stuck a knife into her ex-boyfriend's tire. She used to shoplift using my brother's diaper bag and would have my sister and I fight and knock things off the shelves in grocery stores as a diversion so she could slip money from donation jars into her purse.”

My body turns toward her while I listen intently.

“She was murdered, and because she was a criminal, the police didn't care. Didn't even look for her killer, just assumed it was a drug deal gone wrong and closed the case. My sister moved away, and that left me and my brother to follow in her footsteps. After my third offense, I went to prison for theft when I was twenty. I did two years and when I got out, I had to fight to get custody of my brother back. By then, he'd already joined a gang and went so far down a hole that I'll never be able to pull him out of it.”

She opens her eyes and turns to me, a glossy sheen over her irises. “I say this to make it perfectly clear to you that

speaking to the police isn't anything I will ever do. Disgust for snitches runs as deep in my bloodline as it does in yours."

A tear slips from her eye, and I can't help myself. I brush away the drop with my knuckles and lean toward her, holding my lips up to keep them from sinking into a frown.

She's convincing. I fully believe that if I let her go, she'd never go to the police. The issue is, the police aren't the only problem. The *Grucos* aren't the only problem.

She wasn't just spying on me, she was spying on Maksim and Finn, and therefore the Russians and Irish. They'll want her taken care of, if not dead then drugged up and put on the street as one of our whores. She leeches herself to our world the second she chose to listen in on it, and no assurance, no sob story could ever change that.

But it does change things for me.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I say, the intensity in her eyes making me wonder if she can see the uncertainty I feel. "But I can't let you go. Not until I find a way to sort this out."

Her chest, puffed out in anticipation, sags with her sigh, like I'm her savior once again. Guilt settles in, and I have to look away.

She has more faith in me than I have in myself.

CHAPTER 5

Bailey

I don't remember taking in a breath so large, but the one I let out seems to take my soul with it.

I'm okay.

I'm *okay*.

Anthony runs a hand through his honey blond hair before standing from the black leather sofa.

"I need a drink," he says without meeting my eyes. He walks to the kitchen, visible in his open-floored apartment, before rummaging through a cabinet for a glass.

The sweat on my palms suddenly becomes unbearable, so I wipe them on my jeans, my gaze drifting around the room.

I'm still in shock, lingering fear numbing my limbs, but my senses are coming to life by the second.

He isn't going to kill me.

I'm okay.

Sludge feels like it's sliding down my throat, and I swallow to help it down. Anthony returns, two glasses in hand, and carefully sits beside me, his hand outstretched with a tumbler. I swirl the deep, brown liquor, inhaling the scent more out of habit than anything else. I can't tell what it is by smell alone, but if I had to bet, I'd say it's expensive. Anthony Gruco has good taste.

My lips purse at that thought. I'm still acting like I know him. I don't.

I bring the glass to my lips and taste what I think for a moment is tequila but then register the smokey undertone.

"Mezcal," I say, a hint of curiosity in my tone.

Anthony's head tilts my way, but he still doesn't meet my eyes. He downs the rest of his drink then sets it on the table.

"I thought you people liked vodka."

"That's the Russians," he says, his voice flat. "Some of them. We're not all the same."

"Right." I wipe my palms on my lap. "Sorry."

He doesn't answer, just stares at his coffee table with dead eyes, like he's deep in thought.

"I knew that about you anyway. You never order the same thing, and you always manage to surprise me."

"You mentioned that," he murmurs. Finally, he looks at me, not my eyes but my body. My skin heats beneath my oversized, ragged hoodie, and suddenly it's too warm in here. His eyes dance around my chest and thighs before moving to my face. "I don't understand how I could forget you."

I cross my arms when my nipples pebble, although there's no way he could see. It's just uncomfortable feeling things I should *not* be feeling right now. Great, he isn't going to kill me, but he also isn't going to let me go. Not right now, at least, which makes me his prisoner.

Oh my god, I'm getting wet.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I shrug because I'm not sure how else to respond.

He doesn't say anything else, instead taking another quick perusal then standing and sauntering toward the kitchen. I wonder if he knows how obvious the ogling is or if he's even doing it at all. Maybe it's in my head.

I look down at my hoodie, inspecting it for a stain or something that might catch someone's eye.

"You know, you almost got me in trouble today," he says, his voice booming in the vast space. His kitchen is damn near as big as his living room, with way more counter space than a single man should need. He pours himself another glass and walks back to the couch. "I had your lipstick on my face when I went to a meeting that I was *very* late to."

Oh... That's right, I kissed him. Add my lips to the list of things currently burning.

"You said my stop was on your way."

"It was," he agrees, sitting back down beside me. "Dropping you off only took an extra minute or two. But that isn't what it looked like."

My thighs press together while I shift uncomfortably. Even the idea of what he's suggesting makes my spine tingle. It isn't fair. I spent too many nights thinking of this man, hearing this voice, smelling this smell. My body can't keep up with the new information. The *dangerous* information.

Anthony is a criminal. A cold-blooded criminal who very well could change his mind about not hurting me.

And yet... I can't help but notice the bizarre similarity of my current situation with my fantasies. Me and Anthony, alone in his apartment, inches between us, him having full control over me. It's almost exactly as I imagined it, everything except the fear clenching my stomach.

"Sorry," I say, my voice low and a little too heady.

He lifts a shoulder. "My brother gave me a heads up before my boss could notice."

My forehead pinches, and he must notice my confusion because he asks, "What?"

I shake away the thought. "Nothing."

"It's not nothing, and you agreed to be honest with me." There's no sign of a threat in his voice, but I know it's there, lingering beneath the surface.

"I just um... Well, I thought Settimo was the boss."

Anthony's relaxed expression stiffens, but he quickly softens his features and leans against the cushion. "You know a lot more than you pretend to."

Do I?

Settimo Gruco is a *known* criminal. He's... I mean, they could just be rumors, but from my very limited knowledge of the Las Vegas underworld, he's a man you don't want to come in contact with. You would think I'd feel the same about Anthony, but I'm clearly an idiot.

He did save me, though. He could've let the other guy have me...

“I’m sorry,” I say without knowing what I’m apologizing for. “I really don’t know anything, but I’m privy enough about your organization to know *that*. It’s just ... common knowledge.”

He nods slowly, seemingly believing me. “Fair enough. What else do you know?”

What else do I know?

Nothing.

Well, I mean, there’s the obvious.

“Umm, you guys sell drugs. And sex. And guns. And, you know, other organized criminal activity stuff. Did you miss the part about me growing up a heathen? Like I said, this is all common knowledge. I’m not a spy, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

One side of his lips lifts with amusement. “You are not nearly stealthy enough to be a spy, so no, I’m not thinking that.”

My eyes narrow. “It took me, like, two seconds tops to break into your restaurant.”

“And it took you *how long* to get caught?”

Maybe five minutes.

My lips thin when he chuckles.

“It’s a good thing, *passerotta*. You don’t *want* me to think you’re a spy, do you?”

No. No, I do not.

I look away, still a little insulted but seeing his point. For once, being an idiot is working in my favor. He doesn't see me as a threat.

“You're also sloppy enough to have gone to prison. And you got caught stealing what, a month ago?”

I snap my gaze back to him, my hands gripping my jeans to keep them from balling into fists. “Are you *trying* to be a dick?”

He looks like he attempts to school his expression, but his lips still twitch with a smile.

“I got caught hot-wiring a car because my partner ratted me out. That's why I went to prison. And I didn't steal from Freddy's, the manager is full of shit. The register came up short, and they wanted someone to blame.”

I swat a loose strand of hair from my face. “I'm not a criminal anymore. I've been straight since I got out.” I huff with irritation. “I just needed my fucking phone tonight.”

“Okay, *relax*.”

“If you would have chosen a better lock, none of this would've happened.”

“So it's my fault, then?” He chuckles. “*I* caused you to spy on my *very private* conversation?”

I roll my eyes. “Your ‘private conversation.’ Oh no, someone did something to the blond dude and you and Pervert need to help him.” I wave my hands dramatically. “Such *sensitive* information.”

His smile falls as his eyes harden. “You might be cute, *passerotta*, but don’t push it.”

“What is that, the Italian word for idiot? Don’t *fucking* call me that.”

I throw my hands up and stand, no idea what the hell I’m about to do. I can’t just storm out.

My arms cross over my chest while I look between Anthony and the door. He makes no move to stop me, but his eyes bolt my feet to the carpet. They remind me why I’m here, who he really is.

A chill runs down my spine, but I try not to let the wave of anxiety show, instead hugging myself tight and glaring.

He doesn’t let up. Doesn’t so much as blink.

I stand my ground for a solid ten seconds before breaking my stare, unable to meet his eyes anymore.

“Sit down,” he commands, his voice like a hand wrapping around my neck.

Slowly, I sit down next to him, fighting the urge to resist.

A large palm cups my shoulder and squeezes, sending mixed signals of fear and lust to my brain. “*Good girl.*”

I turn to him with narrowed eyes, and he returns it with a wink and a smile. Then he stands.

“Come on.” He holds out his hand. “It’s late. Time for bed.”

After staring at his palm for a few seconds, I gingerly take it and let him help me up. He leads me to a bedroom that looks

way too big and way too Anthony to be the guest room. It reminds me of La Divina, with its low lighting and red accents. Did he use the same designer? Or did he do it himself?

“Would you like something more comfortable to sleep in?” he asks, his breath kissing my ear and making me shiver.

I look down at my clothes. Jeans and a hoodie aren't exactly comfortable, but I don't know what he has in mind, and I don't really want to find out. If I take my bra off, I'm certain he'll see how hard my nipples are right now, and I'll die before he knows the effect he has on me. I'm already picking up on his enjoyment for teasing me.

“No,” I say at last. “I'm good.”

“Suit yourself.” He walks around me, his gait so confident it's intoxicating. He disappears into a closet while I shuffle over to the bed.

Is he going to sleep in here with me? In the bed?

Or is he going to make me sleep on the floor?

So many possibilities.

I pull my hoodie over my head and toss it to the floor before straightening my tank top. I'm taking off my shoes when he struts from the closet in nothing but a pair of boxers, scratching at a day's worth of stubble as he comes to the bed.

He isn't looking at me, seemingly lost in thought again, but when I catch his eye, he lowers his hand from his face, his stare aimed at my chest. My flesh heats immediately, and I cover myself before he has a chance to see it turning red.

He blinks and looks away, clearing his throat before throwing back the comforter.

“There’s a pair of cuffs in the nightstand drawer.” He points at my side. “Get them.”

“What?” I move several steps away from it, as if I’ll be cuffed just by standing too close.

Handcuffs?

No.

Fuck no.

Suddenly, I’m aware of one more scenario, one I can’t believe I didn’t already think of.

He could be like Finn. He could... Oh fuck, he could rape me.

“I said I didn’t think you were a spy. I never said I trusted you.” He motions to the nightstand. “Hurry up. I’m cranky when I don’t get my beauty sleep.”

He sits on the mattress and pulls his legs beneath the sheets before looking at me expectantly. I don’t budge.

“Seriously?” he asks. “You’re gonna make me force you?”

“I’m not letting you cuff me.”

“And I’m not letting you stab me while I sleep, so one of us has to concede. I happen to be a lot stronger than you, so...” He pats the space next to him, his lips twitching with another smile. My fear is amusing to him. Great.

“Why do you want to sleep with me?” I eye the spot beside him. “Why not put me in a guest room or something?”

“Does it seem like I have a lot of relatives crashing at my place while in town? I don’t have a guest room, sweetheart. The other bedroom is a home gym.”

“The couch then.”

He considers this for a second, eyeing me up, then his lips stretch into a devilish grin. “Are you afraid of me, *passerotta*?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You act like you do. And if I remember correctly, you admitted to having a little crush on me. So this must be a dream come true.”

Fuck you.

I don’t say the words out loud. I’m a little too scared, a little too focused on deciding whether he’s just teasing me or taking my earlier words as consent. Or if he’s even thinking of sex.

When I don’t move, his smile falls with a sigh. “Bailey...”

“Are you like Finn?”

He tilts his head like he’s confused. “What?”

“Are you...” I take a deep breath to steady myself. “Are you planning to...”

I don’t need to finish. I see it on his face the moment understanding registers.

“Oh... No, I’m not like Finn.”

I study him for a moment, and if he’s acting, he’s good because all I see is sincerity. And a little bit of pity.

Would he have felt bad if he’d let the pervert take me?
Would he have even cared?

Obviously, since I’m here... I hope.

He doesn’t prod me again, but he isn’t going to stand down. It wouldn’t make sense for him to. I have more reason to trust him than he does me.

My shoulders slump with defeat when I shuffle to the nightstand to pull out the pair of cuffs, trying not to think about why he keeps them right beside his bed. I climb into bed next to him and hold my breath while he lifts my wrists to the headboard. He raises up so the blanket slips to his waist and I’m left with an incredible view of his chest and abs. He’s ... a lot sexier than I even imagined. The home gym makes sense.

He must catch me looking because when my wrists are cuffed to the headboard, he smirks, standing from the bed.

“You know, for someone who’s afraid of sex, you’re being awfully receptive.”

It’s only now that I realize my breathing has turned ragged. I force in slow and steady breaths and stare up at the ceiling, willing his eyes off of me.

“I’m not afraid of sex. I’m afraid of rape.”

“Hmmm,” he replies as if that’s something to contemplate.
“I guess you got lucky then.”

He shuts the light off, bathing us in darkness, before coming back to bed. He pulls the blanket up past my chest, but it isn't necessary. It's impossibly hot with him next to me. His scent is everywhere, making a home inside my nostrils, and I might enjoy it if his words weren't stuck in my mind.

Several minutes go by, maybe even longer while I stare at the dark ceiling. I'm not sure if he's asleep or not when I speak.

"It wasn't luck."

He shifts beside me, and I don't look, but I'm pretty sure he rolled to face me.

"You saved me," I say, my voice soft and low, like I'm afraid to admit it in case it isn't true.

The back of his fingers brush my shoulder and trail down my arm in a caress that has my eyes closing. He follows his trail a few more times before pulling his hand away. The act says more than his words could've.

I'm safe. Right here, in his bed, I'm safe.

"Go to sleep, *passerotta*."

I don't know what the word means, but this time it doesn't feel like an insult. It has my eyes closing and my body relaxing into the mattress.

When I fall asleep, I don't escape the man beside me. He follows me into my dreams.

CHAPTER 6

Anthony

Blood.

It's all that I smell in the underground space just below one of our strip clubs. Settimo and Lorenzo stand to the right of me while I hover over the source of the blood with a drill pressing into the top of his hand.

His swollen face makes him unrecognizable to the man he was when he showed up here hours ago, the red oozing from a gash on his head not helping. Blood stains his teeth and sputters every time he talks. I'm pretty sure I got some on my face, which explains the overpowering smell.

"Listen to me," I say to drag his eyes from the drill to me. His lip quivers as he whimpers, and urine mixes with the smell of his blood. One glance tells me he's pissed himself. He held off a lot longer than the others. Good for him.

"If you don't tell me who you were working with, I'm gonna run this drill through your balls after I'm finished with your hand. Do you understand me?"

He opens his mouth, but I don't give him a chance to respond before I pull the trigger for the drill. His whimpers turn to shrieks, his pitch getting higher with every move of the drill. He thrashes in the chair, scraping it on concrete, but I hold one arm of it to keep it from tipping over.

When I let go of the trigger, I pull the drill away and stand up straight, letting it hang at my side. "Well?"

The street trash, Clyde, gasps and shakes profusely, his gaze aimed at the floor. “It wasn’t me,” he whines, barely comprehensible. “I swear to god, it wasn’t me.”

“Two people saw you in the vicinity around the time the fire started.”

“It wasn’t me!”

Still. Even with the two people who saw him, this thug still claims it wasn’t him. He’s had a hell of a beating, so I’m starting to believe him. Which puts me at square one.

But I’m not finished yet.

I press the drill between his legs and start it up, my jaw clenching as his eyes go wide and he screams again. His ankles and wrists are both tied to the chair, but his thrashing is so intense, it seems like the binds will break.

Blood seeps onto the rope around his wrists, and I shove the drill in farther, making the thrashing worse. I hope this guy wasn’t planning on having kids.

“The Lost Boys!” he screeches. “It was the Lost Boys!”

The Lost Boys?

I take my finger off the trigger but don’t pull the drill away, instead staring him down to gauge if he’s lying. Probably. He’s desperate. But so am I.

“Th-the-they have beef with the Irish.”

“This was a *Bratva* hit.”

He nods frantically, blood dripping from his nose and saliva running down his chin. “The Bratva hate the Irish. They

probably wanted to start another war.”

“*Probably?*” I shove the drill into his crotch, my finger poised on the trigger, and Clyde lets out a horrified cry.

“I don’t know for certain it was them, but they’re pissed, and they’ve been talking about something needing to be done for a long time. I’m telling you, if there’s anyone you should be questioning, it’s them.”

“How convenient for you.”

“Please,” he cries, snot flying. “Please, it wasn’t me.”

“Who are the Lost Boys?” Lorenzo asks.

I turn my head to see him propped against the wall, his arms casually crossed.

Is he buying this?

“The-they’re a gang on the South side. When the Irish left town, they took over some of the territory. Now that the Irish are back, they’re being pushed out.”

“So why not attack the Irish?” Settimo asks, sounding as skeptical as I feel.

Clyde shakes his head, horrified defeat hanging heavily in his cries. “I don’t know.”

Lorenzo nods as if accepting that. “How can we get in contact?”

“I-I don’t know where they’re stationed, but some of them hang out under the bridge, past the old bread factory on the south side... *Please.*” His eyes implore Lorenzo, as if he might help.

I almost laugh.

I drop the drill, and Clyde lets out a grateful wheeze, closing his eyes as if the pain is over. It is. I'm done with him.

After pulling my gun from its holster, I point it at his head. "Anything else?"

Clyde's eyes widen to saucers, and his lips quake as if he'll say something, but I pull the trigger anyway. He's useless. He was useless an hour ago.

His head flies back, sending a drop of blood running into the crease of his opened, dead eye.

Settimo walks over and picks up the drill, lifting it up for me to see. "Overkill, don't you think?"

"I had to be sure he didn't know something."

"You were sure a long time ago." Settimo walks the drill to its spot on a counter. "Now we have to sort through the bullshit he gave us while protecting his sack."

"Has anyone ever heard of the Lost Boys?" Lorenzo asks.

I shake my head while Settimo scoffs. "I doubt they exist."

He snatches a rag off the bench and wipes blood off his hands, then he tosses it to me so I can do the same.

"I'll look into it anyway," Lorenzo says, his eyes moving curiously to Clyde.

"The whole thing's a waste of time," Settimo groans. "Who gives a shit who set fire to the Russians' property? Good for them."

“We’re not going through this again.” Lorenzo comes up to me and takes the rag before laying it over Clyde’s face. “What’s done is done, Settimo. It isn’t any extra work for you.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” He turns to scowl at me. “Speaking of this not being any extra work for me... Cormac called my office and left a message I’m assuming was meant for you. He wants to know if our problem was taken care of after the meeting last night. What the hell is he talking about?”

My throat clogs, and I wipe my face on my shoulder for the sake of breaking eye contact. Blood stains my white shirt, confirming my earlier suspicion. The smell is still potent in my nose.

“It was taken care of,” I answer, caught off guard. I didn’t think they’d actually follow up. Not with Settimo.

“What was the problem?” Settimo asks. “Maksim?”

Yes. The word is on the tip of my tongue, but I’m afraid he’ll make me explain further. Or worse, take action on whatever fake altercation I make up. Or even worse, catch me in a lie.

If he checks into it, he’ll find out. If they push harder for a follow up, he’ll find out.

It’s better just to say the truth.

“No. One of my employees showed up last night at the restaurant and overheard part of our conversation.”

Settimo looks like he couldn’t care less, but Lorenzo perks up. I keep my eyes on Settimo.

“I handled it,” I say before anyone can ask.

“Great.” His hand flicks toward Clyde. “Now handle your mess.” He takes a few steps to the door before pausing to look at Lorenzo. “You coming?”

They rode together. We’re supposed to be having lunch at La Divina after this, so I’ll be behind them shortly.

Finally, I look at Lorenzo, and in an instant, I regret it. His eyes bore into me like he knows something isn’t right.

“In a minute,” Lorenzo says.

Settimo grunts before leaving, letting the door slam on his way out.

“Yes?” I calmly ask, retrieving a knife to cut Clyde’s binds.

“You didn’t tell me there was a problem during the meeting when I called.”

“It was nothing. I handled it.”

Silence. I can feel his eyes penetrating me while I busy myself with the corpse.

“Was the employee male or female?”

“Why?”

Lorenzo shrugs, but I’m not stupid. He isn’t curious, he’s suspicious. He knows. He *always* fucking knows.

Goddamn it, Settimo.

“Female.” I pull the body off the chair and let it slump to the floor.

“You killed her?” he asks.

Wiping my face again, I nod.

“Hmm.”

I huff. “Is that so hard to believe?” I walk to the closet with the body bags and cleaner, all the while hoping he’ll just leave. Just let it go.

I’m not that lucky. He’s still standing there when I return.

“What was her name?”

“Who?” I ask in the most pathetic attempt at playing dumb.

“The employee.”

I roll my eyes like I’m exasperated. “I don’t know, who cares?”

Lorenzo’s head tilts while he openly observes me. I ignore him, going about the process of loading up the body. I won’t actually transport it. Victor, a soldier, will be here to dispose of it, and normally, as the top-ranking capo in the familia, I wouldn’t be doing this. It’s part of Settimo’s punishment for me. Fucking asshole.

“Remember how I told you we’d keep an eye on the girl you gave a ride to? Bailey, I believe is her name?”

“Mmhmm.” My ears throb as my heart beats faster.

“She wasn’t in her apartment early this morning. It didn’t look like she’d come home last night.”

“That sounds hardly strange,” I say, hearing the strain in my voice.

Fuck.

“It’s probably nothing.”

“Then why tell me at all?” I snap.

The corners of his lips tilt up. “To keep you up to date. This is a favor to you, isn’t it? You wanted me to look into this girl?”

The skin of my face is taut, smooth, and I’m certain I look calm, but my skin is crawling. Why? *Why* did I have to ask Lorenzo for help?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Yeah, sorry. I really appreciate it, I’m just annoyed,” I gesture to the corpse.

Lorenzo nods his understanding. “Leave the rest for Victor.” He holds out a hand toward the door. “Let’s go have lunch.”

I force a grateful smile and walk with him while my head swims. Bailey’s image is in my mind, still handcuffed to my bedpost.

Lorenzo *knows* it was her. I’m positive he does. What I’m not sure of is if he knows she isn’t dead. And how much he cares.

What if he looks for her? He could send someone to my apartment.

She could be in danger.

“I need to go home to clean up first,” I announce when the door clangs behind us. We’re left in a dimly lit hall leading to the stairs. There’s a bathroom off to the side that I’ll use to wash the blood off my face before I leave the building.

“This is why we keep extra shirts in the office.” He points to the office door.

I shake my head. “It isn’t just my shirt. The guy’s blood reeks. I think I got some in my nose.”

He just blinks at me, clearly not buying it.

“I’ll feel better after a shower. Just order me a glass of red, will you?”

He stares at me a moment before nodding. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” I turn and head for the bathroom, not breathing until the door is closed behind me.

I need to get Bailey out of my apartment.

Now.

CHAPTER 7

Bailey

Cool water kisses the sore ring of flesh around my wrists from the handcuffs as I hold them under the bathroom faucet.

Anthony didn't clasp the cuffs tightly, but I had to strain when I used my bobby pin to get them off. It took me a half hour, which would be a hell of a long time if they'd been frilly sex cuffs. These are the real deal.

My head turns when the kitchen timer goes off, and I hurry up washing my hands before striding from the bathroom. The aroma of sweet, sweet masala hits me as soon as I step from the bedroom, and I breathe it in with a sigh.

I stir the sauce for the butter chicken while leaned over the pan, letting every bit of the smell envelop me.

I was just going to make a sandwich. Hunger was the big reason I took the cuffs off to begin with. But seeing Anthony's spice rack... This dude spares *no* expense with his food. Even his cookware makes me wet. I'm a cheap date, I know.

I check the rice, then go back to stirring the sauce.

Butter chicken was my mother's favorite food, and every time I have it, it strikes me with a fresh wave of nostalgia. Not all my memories of my mother are good, but being in the kitchen with her, on a step stool next to the stove watching while she explained each step of whatever dish she was preparing are some of my favorites.

And this recipe? This one I've perfected. There's a part of me that wonders if what I'm making has more to do with trying to impress Anthony than it does with hunger.

No. It's the spice rack. The guy has a killer spice rack.

Music plays on a channel Anthony has on his smart TV, and I smile when "Pumped Up Kicks" comes on. I grab the remote off the counter to turn it up.

My hips sway as I sing along while twirling the spatula, and for a moment, I forget where I am. Well, not where I am, but why I'm here. I get this sick fantasy that this is my home, my top-of-the-line cookware, my fancy wine lingering on my tongue.

I'm so lost in the fantasy that I barely recognize the front door shutting, but even when I do, I don't turn around. There's a very good chance Anthony is going to be pissed, and his angry eyes are a little much for me.

I shut off the stove burner when he comes up behind me, his stare sending my back up in flames, and lift the pan before turning to show him.

"Before you say anything, smell—"

A gasp pulls from deep in my lungs when I lock eyes with a man who isn't Anthony, and the pan slips through my fingers. I try to catch it on impulse but only succeed in burning my palm.

"Shit," I screech, letting the pan fall, sending butter chicken sauce splatting all over the floor.

When the stranger comes up to me, I cower backward, bumping into the stove but thankfully not burning myself a second time.

Who is this?

Why is he here?

Did Anthony send him?

The man takes my hand and guides me to the sink before turning on the faucet to cool the burn. The water is nice, and I'd probably be sighing with relief if I wasn't so terrified.

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to scare you."

His *voice* scares me. It's deep and even, nearly monotone and slices through the air. It makes his apology sound sinister. I peek at him, and the first thing that stands out to me is a scar that runs over his eye.

My gaze quickly darts away, and I don't respond to him. I don't know what to say.

Does he know who I am, why I'm here?

Should I play it cool?

He walks to the TV remote to turn the music down while I take the opportunity to search for the knife I used to slice the chicken. It cut clean, like Anthony sharpened it yesterday.

The man turns to face me before I can act.

"How's your hand?"

I turn off the water before inspecting my palm. It's red, but no blisters have formed. "Um, fine."

“I was hoping to find my brother here... I didn’t realize he had a guest.”

“Anthony?”

It’s a stupid question, but he gives a polite nod anyway.

“Oh, he... He isn’t here.”

Again, he nods. My responses are somehow getting even dumber.

When my brain registers that the man isn’t here for me, a big burst of fear leaves my chest, and I’m somewhat able to think.

He isn’t here for me.

I need to play it cool.

“Do you have a key?” I ask, glancing at his hands as if he’d still be holding it. “I thought the door was locked.”

“I do. Normally, I wouldn’t barge in his home like this, but I assumed no one heard my knock over the music.” He gestures to the TV.

He knocked?

No. He’s lying. Even distracted, I would’ve heard knocking.

His head tilts slightly. “What did you say your name was?”

I didn’t. And I’d really rather not.

Should I lie? Give a fake name?

Does he know about last night?

Would my name mean something to him?

“I’m sorry, have I confused you?” he asks, leaping me from my thoughts.

What kind of person takes so long to remember their name? A liar, that’s who. Fuck.

“Ashley,” I finally say.

“Ashley.” He gives me the tiniest smile. I don’t know if he means to come across as evil, but even his attempts at politeness feel like threats. “Pleasure to meet you. I’m Lorenzo.”

“Yeah, you too,” I say with a smile I hope doesn’t appear too forced.

“So... Are you and Anthony an item?”

An item? Who talks like that?

“Yeah,” I say with confidence that has me patting myself on the back. “Yeah, we’ve been seeing each other for about a month. I’m crashing here while my landlord does some work on my apartment.”

“What kind of work?”

“Plumbing,” I say immediately. “A rusted pipe burst. It didn’t create a ton of damage, thankfully, but some of the piping needs replaced so it doesn’t happen again. And then there’s the drywall, you know?”

“Ah, well, I’m glad my brother could give you a place to crash.”

“Yeah, me too. He’s um, he’s been really great.”

Lorenzo smiles again, but this time he looks amused. That doesn't seem like the best sign.

The front door opens and slams, causing both our heads to turn that way as Anthony barrels into the kitchen.

His eyes widen with shock when he sees the two of us, and he stops so abruptly, his shoes squeak on the tile.

“What...?” He blinks at Lorenzo, then clears his throat. “What are you doing here?”

Lorenzo shrugs. “I figured you'd be late, so I cancelled lunch to save Settimo the aneurysm. I thought you might want to grab a bite with me instead? Just the two of us.”

“So you came here?” Anthony asks, exuding a calmness I'm beyond impressed with. “That seems like something that could've been relayed by a text.”

“I don't like to be kept waiting, either.” Lorenzo gestures to me. “Besides, I wouldn't have been able to meet your ... girlfriend, is it? Are you two official?”

Anthony and Lorenzo have what seems to be a stare down for several seconds before Anthony finally responds.

“No. We're friends.” Anthony looks down at the mess on the floor, seemingly just noticing it. “I think I'll have to pass on lunch. I need a shower and...” he gestures to the floor, “this to clean up. There wouldn't be enough time before my meeting at one.”

Lorenzo stares for a moment then nods. “It does seem like you have a lot to take care of.” His eyes flick to me. “Another time then.”

Anthony nods, his posture rigid, and Lorenzo gives me one last creepy smile before stepping toward the door. “Take care, Bailey.”

With that, he leaves, not sticking around long enough to see the blood drain from my face.

Once the front door shuts, Anthony runs his hands over his face. “Goddammit.”

“He—he knows my name,” I say, my voice low. “I gave him a fake one.”

Anthony stares out the window, but his faraway eyes tell me he isn’t seeing anything.

“Does he know about me?” I ask, even though it’s obvious. “Did you tell him?”

A shiver runs across the back of my neck as I take a step toward Anthony.

The men from last night wanted me dead. Would the Italians? Would Anthony let them hurt me?

“No, I didn’t tell him,” Anthony finally responds, still staring out the window. “But he knows.”

I try to search for clues in his voice as to how he feels about that, but all I hear is disappointment. For himself? For Lorenzo? For *me*?

“What does that mean for me?”

He doesn’t answer, which is a horrifying answer in itself. My shoulders fall, along with my heart.

“Anthony...?”

He turns to me with a look on his face that reminds me of a statue. Hard, but not angry. No sign of what he's thinking.

"It means you need to go... It isn't safe for you here."

"Go?" My eyes widen. "Go where?"

"Home," he says automatically. "Or not, I don't really care, but you can't be here. It's unlikely that the men you saw last night will check your apartment, so just ... go home. I'll figure out the rest."

"What about your brother?" I glance at the door like Lorenzo might be there. "He knows my name. He could find where I live."

"He already knows where you live."

My chest tightens as my breathing stops.

"He'll probably have someone keep an eye on you, but you'll be fine. Just don't go to the police or do anything stupid. I can handle my brother, otherwise."

He can handle his brother. The guy who looks like a walking threat. The guy with the nasty scar across his eye.

Anthony's brother. How is that possible?

How can he be so sure?

Anthony must sense my uncertainty because he comes up to me and takes my face in his hands, his gaze lingering on my lips before meeting my eyes. "Trust me, okay? This is better than me hiding you in my apartment."

"If it's better, why didn't you let me go last night?" I ask, not the least bit comforted.

“Because last night, I didn’t know what to do, and no one knew where you were or that you were even alive. Now, someone does, and I look indecisive, or worse, too weak to finish the job. None of this is good for either of us.”

Too weak to finish the job... Meaning too weak to kill me.

“What if...” I swallow. “Won’t they send someone else to *finish the job?*”

“No.”

“But how can you be sure? They could—”

“*Bailey.*”

I close my mouth and try not to protest further as he sighs and slides his hands to my shoulders, taking an unsettling amount of time to speak.

“I have three options... I could kill you. I could hand you over to my brother. Or I could let you go.”

He squeezes my shoulders, as if to remind me to breathe. I hadn’t realized I’d stopped.

“None of these are good for me. If I kill you, I look like I was too indecisive and weak to do it last night. If I hand you over, it’s even worse. If I let you go, I, again, look weak, but I can at least attempt to save face by claiming that I’m getting something out of you being alive... Which of these options is best for *you?*”

Point taken.

“*Go, passerotta.*” He nods to the door.

I turn that way, overtaken by a mixture of fear and gratitude but stop when I'm a few steps away. I look at Anthony who watches me with a face of uncertainty. Like he isn't sure if he's making the right call.

I think he's lying. I think it'd be best for him if he killed me.

But he won't. He can't.

He isn't the stone-cold man I thought he might be. He isn't evil. He's... He's the man I thought he was all along.

I hurry to him, wrapping my arms around his neck before crashing my lips to his. He seems startled for a moment, but then his hands wrap around my hips, and he leans into the kiss.

When I pull away, I see lust brewing in his eyes.

"Thank you," I whisper, slowly unwrapping my arms from his neck.

He gives me a small nod before stepping back, giving me the silent signal to walk away.

I look over my shoulder the entire way home.

CHAPTER 8

Bailey

Two days later...

I'm camped out beneath the covers when the voices sound, followed by my brother's front door slamming.

I've been hiding out in his apartment for two days, barely sleeping, barely eating, staying away from the windows despite being hidden by sheets tacked over them (Corey isn't one for curtains). All the while just waiting for someone to come through that door, gun in hand, ready to kill me.

It isn't that I don't trust Anthony. I do. Even when I shouldn't, my mind can't help but give him the benefit of the doubt, treating him like he's the idealized version I dreamt up.

It's that I don't trust his judgment. I don't trust Maksim or Finn or Lorenzo or literally every other gun-toting criminal in Anthony's world. I know better than to do that. My world isn't all that different from his.

And now, as I shiver beneath my brother's musty comforter, I can say it was a good call not trusting his judgment. But a bad call not leaving the city. If Corey had been here to go with me, I would've.

Corey.

It could be Corey.

Carefully, I lift the comforter off me and creep to the bedroom door, pressing my ear against the wood once I'm there. Several voices boom from the living room, but none

seem angry or determined like they're here on a mission. No footsteps sound this way.

My hand slowly wraps around the knob, and when my breath shakes, I close my eyes.

It's probably Corey and his roommates. He said he'd be back in a few days. It's been a few days.

It's him.

Not Lorenzo. Not Finn. Not Maksim. *Corey.*

Still, my hand doesn't twist the knob.

Quit being a coward.

I grind my teeth at that thought and creek open the door, peering down the hallway toward the kitchen table. Josh, one of Corey's roommates spreads papers out as another guy gingerly pulls two metal contraptions from a box.

A sigh of relief rushes past my lips, and I take off toward the kitchen.

Josh jumps when he sees me and presses his back against the table, shielding whatever the hell they're doing. I couldn't care less. I've never felt so relieved.

"Bailey?"

My head snaps toward my brother's voice where he's leaned against the back of the couch.

"Corey!" I run to him and fling my arms around his chest, squeezing like a snake squeezes a mouse.

He pats my back. "Hey?"

Tears prick my eyes as I pull away, and it hits me just how terrified I've been. How much stress my body has taken on in a few short days.

Without me needing to say anything, Corey turns to his friends. "Give us a minute, will ya?"

All three of them leave, Josh tossing a what-the-fuck look over his shoulder, which Corey ignores.

As soon as the door shuts, his eyes narrow at me. "I'm *fine*. Now will you chill? Jesus Christ, I was gone for three days."

I shake my head. "It's not about you. I..."

Corey's boyish face, marred with a stupid fucking tattoo of a mermaid and anchor on his cheekbone, softens.

"What happened?" he asks, looking worried as he straightens. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm fine." Well, not really. "But I fucked up. *Bad*." I glance at the window, wondering if someone's out there watching, waiting for me to leave, or worse for my loved one to return. "I think we need to go."

"Tell me what happened." The way he says it with such confidence, such authority makes him sound like the big sibling. I'm supposed to be his protector, not the other way around.

"When I was at La Divina, right after we talked, I heard people in the dining area. It was like a mob meeting they were having."

The red in his eyes becomes more noticeable as they widen. “Do they know you were there?”

I nod. “One of them took me, but then let me go. He—he says no one is going to come after me, but I mean... We need to go.”

“How many men were there?”

“*Enough*,” I say with urgency. “And they all have reason to want me dead. So...” I gesture to the door and even step that way, but Corey doesn’t budge.

“What were they talking about?”

My jaw loosens. “Are you hearing me? We need to fucking —”

“I’m not leaving,” Corey says, matter of fact. “You shouldn’t either. They’re all going to be taken care of soon enough anyway.”

My brow furrows while I try to make sense of that statement. “What?”

Instead of answering, Corey steps around me to walk to the fridge. I follow like a puppy and bat his hand away when he tries to hand me a beer.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

He pulls the tab on the can, eliciting the familiar hiss of bubbles spilling onto the surface, before shrugging. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” My jaw hangs to my feet in bewildered frustration.

Oh, sis, don't worry about the fucking army of assassins who may want you dead. It'll be ight.

Has he lost his mind?

His eyes drift to the table, and I turn to follow his gaze. With more urgency than he's had since speaking to me, he slides around me and pushes the papers together then flips the top one over.

"What are you hiding from me?"

"You shouldn't be here," he says instead of answering the question. "I'll have one of my buddies make some space for you at his place for a little while, until things blow over. I think it's a good idea not to go back to your apartment, but mine isn't safe either. It's too close. Plus, I'm your brother. This would be an obvious hideout."

I shake my head. "I was waiting for you so we could go together."

"I can't. I'm sorry, I have a lot of shit to do."

Criminal shit. *Gang* shit.

If this isn't a sure sign of failure as a sister, I don't know what is.

"What did you overhear?" he asks again. He sounds more than curious. More like interrogative.

I blink at him, beyond confused at what the hell is going on in his head. Is he delusional enough to believe his little group of degenerates are any match for centuries-old

organized crime? These families have been around longer than any of his ‘members’ have been alive.

“I don’t know. I pretty much forgot everything once they shoved a gun into my back.”

“Anthony Gruco was leading the meeting, I’m assuming, because it was at his restaurant... Who else was there?”

“A guy named Maksim and one named Finn. And then the one with the gun to my back, Hugh.”

“Finn? The Irish enforcer?”

“I didn’t ask.”

His eyes widen like that information is somehow worrisome. “Did he have like a clover tattoo or anything that made you think he was Irish?”

“What does it matter?” I ask, exasperated. “What are you getting out of this?”

“Just answer the question.”

“No,” I growl, stepping up to him with my chest puffed. “Tell me what the fuck you’re up to first, *then* I’ll tell you.”

Black, dyed hair hangs in his eyes as he stares me down, neither of us relenting. I don’t know what I’m expecting, exactly. I’ve never wanted to know anything about his ‘work life’ before, so it shouldn’t come as a surprise that I have zero clue what he does all day. But now I feel like I need to know.

“Please just tell me you’re not messing around with any of the mobs,” I plead, letting my chest deflate. “They will *kill*

you, Corey. And me. Hell, they'll bring Mom back from the dead just to kill her too."

He huffs. "You're giving them too much credit... They're criminals, Bailey. Just like you and me."

"I'm not a criminal," I protest, although it's irrelevant. "And no, they're not like you and me. Neither of us make a habit out of shoving people into barrels of acid."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," he says, his tone making me back up a step.

Where is my little brother?

Who is *this*?

My eyes move to the table and find the metal devices Josh pulled out of the box. They're junky looking, like an amateur put them together, but one close look at the wires intertwined on the sides, and I know they're bombs.

Corey adjusts to block my view. "Just ... lie low for a little while, okay? I'll text you the address to my buddy's place."

I shake my head. "Don't bother. If you'd called, you'd know my phone is gone. One of the 'harmless' mob guys crushed it." I turn and start toward the door.

"Where are you going then?" he calls to my back.

"To stay with a friend," I lie. I have no friends. Sad, I know.

After flinging open the door, I storm past the gang bangers I hate more each day.

I don't know how stupid it is, but I don't leave the complex. I head straight to my apartment and do a quick sweep, finding nothing missing or broken before walking to the window and drawing the curtains shut. I lift one end only enough to peek into the parking lot, searching for a suspicious vehicle.

Nothing.

Letting out a sigh, I walk to my couch and flop down. My eyes train on the ceiling.

The smartest thing would be to leave, but I can't. I would only wind up coming back to get eyes on those papers my brother clearly didn't want me to see.

For once, I want to know what the hell he's up to.

CHAPTER 9

Anthony

She looks scared.

Bailey's gray eyes stare at me through my computer monitor. The video's timestamp shows it was recorded only an hour ago, so Lorenzo didn't waste any time sending it to me, two words attached to his message: *interesting choice*.

She peeks out her apartment window, searching the parking lot, before letting the curtain flutter back into place.

So, she stayed. Interesting choice, indeed.

I go to click off the video, readying myself to type an email back to Lorenzo, but let the cursor hover over the red 'x.' I rewind to the few moments she's in view then hit pause.

I've tried not thinking about her since she left my apartment. Tried getting those soft lips out of my mind. Tried not worrying about who might be watching her. Last night, an Ambien and a bottle of gin almost helped me succeed.

Now, my brother has managed to ruin the little progress I've made. Now, it isn't only my memory I have to ignore. It's an image.

I click out of the video and exhale a deep breath, rubbing a hand over my forehead.

There's little part of me that thinks my brother would hurt her, at least not without consulting me. My biggest worry isn't what he'll do, it's what Settimo would do if he found out. Or the Irish or Russians.

They shouldn't, though. Lorenzo is loyal to Settimo, but if he was going to say something he would've done so by now. This is the first time he's even mentioned it to *me*.

As for the others... Bailey's smart, she'll stay low. It'll only be about a month before no one would recognize or remember her.

A much more difficult feat will be forgetting her myself. I've already given in and curiously inspected her criminal history Lorenzo emailed me the day after I took her. She was true to her word. The investigation report claimed her partner, Robert Nunge, gave her up in exchange for a lighter sentence involving a different crime. She was suspected to have stolen eleven cars. They only got her for one. For some reason, that turns me the fuck on.

My cock stirs, as it has every night since she left. My work is the only saving grace I've had to distract me, and now even that has been breached.

My teeth clench, and I click on another email to read. After sending a response, I move on to the next and the next, until enough tension builds that I'm starting to sound like an asshole in my replies. This isn't helping.

I glance down at my dick straining against my slacks.

Fuck it.

Pulling up the video, my muscles finally relax as a thank you for giving in. I hit play before loosening my belt enough for me to slip my hand inside my boxers.

The curtain pulls back, revealing Bailey's fearful expression, and I groan with my hand around my cock, sinking into my office chair. When her image disappears, I slap a hand over the mouse and rewind, using my other hand to stroke.

I taste her lips on mine, smell her sweet, vanilla scent, feel her delicate, crafty hands pressed against my chest. My eyes close as my memory of her morphs into a fantasy, her lips lowering down my neck, my chest, abdomen, before she finally falls to her knees.

“*Fuck,*” I growl, gripping myself for a firmer stroke. Her hands replace mine in my head, and those sexy, plump lips spread. She looks up at me with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes before taking my cock into her mouth, swallowing me until I'm at the back of her throat. Her eyes close as she gags...

My eyes snap open when a door bangs.

My receptionist, a bubbly but occasionally stupid post-sorority girl named Tiffany, squeaks a greeting in her usual friendly tone, although it's laced with nervousness.

“Is he here?” a deep, masculine voice asks.

“I'm sorry, do you have an appointment?” She pauses only half a second. “Mr. Gruco is very busy today, I'm afraid, sir. If you'd like, I can take your name and—”

I begrudgingly pull my hand from my pants and adjust myself just before my office door bursts open and Maksim storms inside, Tiffany at his back.

“Sir!” she calls. If there was ever a good time to describe someone as flabbergasted, it would be now.

I click out of the video, then stand, raising a hand up to dismiss my receptionist. “It’s fine. Thanks, Tiffany.”

Her expression turns from agitated to puzzled as I step around my desk toward the door. “Why don’t you take an early lunch?”

Her eyes dart between Maksim and me. Finally, she nods. “Okay... I’ll have my cell if you need me.”

“Thank you, I won’t.”

“How long should I—”

“An hour will be fine.”

“Okay, do you want me to—”

“Nope, all good here,” I say, slowly shutting the door on her. I turn to Maksim and wait until the front office door closes before speaking.

“This is my office for *legitimate* business, Sokolov. If you want to talk, you call to arrange a meet. You don’t just show up here.”

He raises the manilla envelope in his hand, then slams it on my desk. “Did you know?” he growls, his accent coming out heavier than normal.

I glance at the manilla envelope, still closed, and try to contain my anger.

Be the peacekeeper.

The reasonable one.

The one who doesn't shoot people in the head for barging into their office.

It's harder than it should be.

“Did you fucking know?” he shouts, banging his fist on the chair in front of my desk.

“Know *what*, Maksim?”

He stabs a finger at the envelope, his arm shaking like he can't contain himself. Whatever this is, it isn't good.

Bailey?

My abs flex when it feels like a physical force punches my gut.

No.

No, he wouldn't be this unhinged. She's just a girl. A *criminal*.

Before my mind can take the thought much further, I pick up the envelope and pull out several black and white photos of a man walking down a street. I don't recognize the guy in them, nor do I understand the context.

I look up with a brow raised. “Is this supposed to mean something to me?”

“That's an Irish soldier in our neighborhood. Look at the timestamp.”

When I do, I instantly understand. Uh-oh.

“This means nothing.” I toss the photos on my desk, unsure how much I believe my own statement. “Where did you even get this?”

“Someone anonymously addressed it to Petrov’s office.” He scatters the photos until he finds what he’s looking for, then he holds up a stilled image of smoke coming from the Russian store. It’s taken from a block or so away. “The Irish did this.” He flings the picture in the air.

“This doesn’t prove that the Irish did anything. It only proves that the cameraman knows who did, or more likely, is involved.”

“You think Petrov wants *proof*?” He barks out a laugh and spears both hands through his short, blond hair. He has a point. The Pahkan is a loose cannon with plenty of past bad blood with the Irish... And us. Anyone so much as suggesting to have proof will be enough for him.

Maksim continues his assault on his hair while he paces.

“What is Petrov going to do?”

He stops to fling his hands at his sides. “What do you think?”

“I *think* until the Bratva knows for certain who was behind the fire, the best move for you is to pause. Nothing has happened since, and you don’t know that anything else is being planned. You start a war against the Irish, and you have them as your enemy as well as whoever is actually fucking with you.”

“Did you look into that group?” he asks. “Lost Boys or whatever?”

I nod. It isn't good news. “It seems it was a false lead.”

“Goddammit,” he bellows, kicking the chair.

“The hangout point the source told us about hasn't had anyone there in days... That doesn't mean another gang isn't behind this. Plenty of people outside our organizations benefitted the last time we were in a war, so it's plausible there could be outside forces purposefully stirring things up.” I point to the scattered photos. “This is only *more* evidence of that being a possibility. Not less.”

“Yeah, tell that to Petrov.” He snorts.

“That's not my job. It's yours.”

He simmers as he considers this, his violent jerky movements turning to a slow tapping on his crossed arms.

Finally, he shakes his head. “I can't stop the Bratva from attacking. The best I can do is warn you so the Italians can stay out of it.”

After the Irish helped us take care of Petrov the last time he got out of hand? Not likely.

Maksim looks like he'd like to say more, but he doesn't. His hands are tied. He gathers the photos before tucking them back inside the envelope.

“You're making a mistake.”

He tenses at my voice, then finishes up, tucking the envelope under his arm. “Maybe,” he says, strong while

somehow also defeated. “But it isn’t my decision to make. My loyalty is to the Pahkan.”

I open my office door and step to the side. “Good luck with that.”

He sighs and doesn’t meet my eyes as he leaves, this time gently shutting the lobby door on his way out.

As soon as he’s gone, I pull my phone from my pocket, intent on not wasting any more time.

Maksim can give all the assurances he wants, but it’s in vain.

If the Irish are attacked, they’ll come to us for help, and Settimo will choose to join them.

We’re headed for another war, whether we like it or not.

CHAPTER 10

Bailey

It's dark beneath the door.

I press my ear against the wood, listening for any sound coming from inside Corey's apartment, and when I hear nothing, I shove the spare key into the lock and turn.

All the shit my brother has lying around, beer bottles, clothes, trash, junk, casts shadows across the apartment, making it eerie in the dark. I flip the light on when I get to the kitchen, my eyes trained on the table, but the stack of papers are gone, and a pizza box is in its place.

"Shit," I grumble while my gaze dances around the room. I open several junk drawers and quickly sort through the contents but find nothing.

What if they took everything with them?

I do another scan of the room for the box that the bombs were in but don't see it, which is not a great sign.

My chest fills with a frustrated breath, and I press my palms to my temples, tilting my head toward the ceiling.

Something catches my eye on top of the fridge, and I squint that way, slowly lowering my hands.

There's a piece of paper sticking over the top.

I slide a chair to the fridge and climb on to get a view of the top, and when I see the folder, thick with papers, my lungs deflate.

“Yes!” I swipe the folder and hop down off the chair, shoving aside the pizza box before scattering the papers, just as Josh had earlier.

A tiny voice in my head telling me I don’t want to know whatever is in here makes me freeze, my back muscles coiling. I see my brother in my mind, only he isn’t the greasy thug he is today. He’s a thirteen-year-old boy with his face contorted as he desperately screams while the police officer tries to pry him off me. My hands are cuffed behind my back, but if they weren’t, I’d hug him. I’d get on my knees and beg for his forgiveness, but the officer at my back prods for me to go.

Corey’s knuckles are white clasp my shirt like the minute he lets go, I’ll be gone forever, and that’s damn near what happened. I had no money to bail myself out of jail, and he was removed from my custody even if I did. The social worker of course never brought him to the trial.

I didn’t see my little brother again until he was nearly a man, and by then, the tattoos had already started. His lip was pierced. He had scars on his chest he didn’t want to talk about and refused to take showers, screamed the one time I tried to make him.

I thought things couldn’t get worse back then. I thought the wounds—some physical, lots psychological—would heal, but the medicine he chose to use was worse than the symptoms. Violence, meth, more tattoos, more piercings, more thugs for friends, then more violence.

It got to where I was afraid if I looked into his life, I’d stop seeing the thirteen-year-old kid. Stop seeing the brother who

needs me. Stop seeing the one that I failed.

And I *refused* to do that, too terrified I'd turn my back on the man he's become. Terrified I'd be disgusted, or worse, ashamed of who he is.

And now, staring down at his table, that tiny voice is reminding me of this. Reminding me what's at stake.

The problem is, I'm afraid there's even worse at stake than morphing my view of my brother. If he's involving himself with the mobs, he could get himself hurt. He could get himself *killed*.

I blink at that thought when my eyes sting and focus on the papers. My brow furrows as I study the sheets of numbers, then brush them aside. There are designs, like plans for a building, and I lean down on my forearms to study one. It's... My head tilts.

A grocery store?

I pick the paper up and set it aside with the numbers. There's so much here, and so far, I'm not making sense of any of it. Not until I spot a calendar of sorts with one slot circled about ten times. I lift the paper up to inspect it, frowning when I see the words circled. 'La Divina.'

"What?" I mutter, roaming my gaze around the page. It's a schedule. There are like ten things listed, and when I see Settimo's name, my frown deepens. Is this Anthony's?

I search for the time La Divina is listed... Eight. The stove clock says it's eight, but I'm pretty sure it's an hour off, so ... seven.

Why the fuck does Corey have this?

I move on to the other papers, most of them nonsensical, but when I find a set of plans that matches La Divina, my legs get heavy, and I slink into a chair.

My eyes move between the manically circled entry and the plans. Then I remember the bombs.

My hand flies to my mouth as I gasp, and I jump up so forcefully that the chair falls backward, crashing on dirty, chipped tile.

“No.” I look toward the door, wracking my mind for some logical explanation for why Corey needed this information, but all I can think about is him asking me about La Divina’s security the night I broke in.

He was curious... But was he *overly* curious?

Would he...?

He wouldn’t put a fucking *bomb* in a restaurant full of civilians, would he?

No. Not to blow at least, not while people are there. But... I look at the circled word again, specifically marked at eight o’clock on Anthony’s schedule. Does he want it to blow while Anthony is there?

Does he want to kill Anthony?

Is he... Is he seriously capable of that?

No. No, he can’t be.

I look at the stove clock again. Seven fifteen.

I have forty-five minutes before Anthony is scheduled to be at the restaurant. I could just sneak into the office to take a peek, make sure I'm truly losing my mind. If Corey was going to plant a bomb, surely he'd do it in the office where there wouldn't be civilians... And also where his target would most likely be.

I gather up the papers to stuff them on top of the fridge where I found them, then I hurry back to my apartment to change into my server uniform.

Guess I'm going back to work.

Pulling the straps to the biggest purse I have higher on my shoulder, I smile at the cook outside smoking a cigarette. He tips his chin in greeting before looking away from me, clearly wanting to be left alone. Which is fine by me because I can feel my pores collecting with sweat, and if I had to guess, my face is pale.

I've certainly learned to control my nerves when it comes to sneaking into a place, so that isn't the problem. If I'm right, there's a bomb in this building. If I'm *lucky*, I'll be carrying it out without detonating the thing. *That* kind of nervousness, I'm not accustomed to.

I slink in through the back, lowering my head when I hear a couple of women chatting by the lockers. Their conversation pauses but starts back up again when I'm through the backroom door. The office is like ten feet ahead on my left, and I plan on hightailing it straight there, in and out as quickly

as possible, but when I test the knob, I find it locked. It'll only take a second to pick it, but it's still unnerving.

As soon as I fit the pick into the lock, I startle at a voice.

“Bailey?”

My hand jerks from the door like the knob is blazing, and I hide the pick behind my back, not exactly smoothly. Rainey trudges down the hall with her hand digging in her pocket. She pulls out a sucker and pops it in her mouth before talking around it.

“What are you doing here? You missed your last two shifts.”

“Hey.” My lips stretch into a friendly smile. “Yeah, I know. Things didn't really work out for me here, unfortunately, so I'm just getting my last check. Frank said to grab it off his desk.” I crook a thumb toward the office.

Rainey moves her sucker from one side of her mouth to the other, her cheek protruding as she eyes me blankly. There's absolutely zero tell on whether or not she believes me.

I turn toward the door like I'm going to open it, but I can't actually do it with her standing here. I'm hoping she'll take the hint and leave. “Well, I'll see you around.”

“Mmhmm.”

I glance over my shoulder with a nervous smile and still see her face blank.

“Whatever you're doing, do it quick. I'll watch the door.”

My mouth opens with the instant urge to bullshit, but I close it when she lifts her brows and gives me a knowing look.

I let out a sigh. “Thank you.”

“Yup.”

I quickly finesse the lock and disappear inside the office, gently clicking the door shut behind me and frantically looking around.

There isn't much in here. Just a desk with a closed laptop and some loose papers on it, a fake plant in a corner, a mini fridge, file cabinet, and safe in the far corner.

I try the file cabinet first, tugging on the drawers only to find them locked, then searching behind in case it's stashed there. I check the desk next, but again, the drawers are locked.

Dropping to my knees, I duck my head underneath the desk in case it's taped to the bottom, but there's nothing. I go to stand back up, intent on checking behind the safe next, but my shoulder bangs into the chair.

“Ouch,” I groan, rubbing my shoulder and turning that way.

My eyes widen when I see the cylindrical contraption secured with duct tape to the bottom of the chair.

They were looking to kill.

My breathing fizzles out while I stare at the thing, not wanting to believe it. I was here on a mission, but I hoped to be wrong.

I yank my mother's old watch from my purse to check the time.

Seven fifty. Ten minutes left.

With a shaky breath, I go back to the bomb. I don't have much experience with them, but I'm positive there's a detonator. That's why it mattered what time Anthony was supposed to be here.

Right? I'm not going to blow up by touching this thing?

Fuck, am I really going to take a chance?

There's a knock on the door. "Hurry up," Rainey calls. She doesn't sound worried, more like annoyed, so I don't think anyone's coming, but she's right. I need to hurry.

My face pinches, and I brace myself—as if that would do any good against a bomb—while I gently peel back the tape. Beads of sweat form on my forehead moments before the first drop rolls into one brow.

The tape slowly gives, and each time the bomb shifts, my heart flutters. I bring up the mental image of Josh handling it today in an attempt to comfort myself. *It won't explode just by touching it, Bailey.*

Once it's finally free, I let out a loud exhale, like I'd been holding it the entire time, and as gently as one possibly can, set the bomb into my purse. I take another look at my watch. Seven fifty-three. Still okay.

I stand up, slowly bringing the purse with me, and go to the door. My heart beats so fast, I can't hear anything past its thumping, and I have to stop myself from sprinting out of here.

It's okay.

Act normal.

It's okay.

I back out of the room and don't dare take the time to lock the door behind me.

Rainey rocks on her heels with interest. "Get what you need?"

"Yeah." I shuffle toward the backroom with my purse held out at my side. "All good."

"Bailey?"

Not Rainey's voice.

I freeze, my spine stealing and sweaty palms suddenly feeling like they're covered in a layer of ice. If I wasn't grasping the bag so intently, I'd drop it and potentially blow us all to pieces.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Anthony asks, his footsteps nearing.

I bring the purse down to hang at my thigh so it doesn't look as suspicious, then turn to face him. Rainey bails around the corner.

My lips feel like stiff leather as they stretch into an awkward, nervous smile. "H-hey."

His eyes narrow as he takes me in, looking anything but happy to see me.

He glances around before taking my arm to lead me into the empty backroom, shutting the door behind us. My lungs quit working the second his forceful pull bounced my purse off my thigh, but looking down at it now, I try to inhale. The best I manage is a wheeze.

“I thought you were smart enough to realize you don’t work here anymore. Did you really need me to spell that out for you?”

I shake my head but have no idea what better excuse I could give. My mind is too frozen to think straight.

“Sorry,” is all I manage.

“Sorry?” He scoffs. “What if one of my associates was here? Do you want to get yourself killed?”

“N-no, I...” I look toward the door.

I need to go.

“I’ll go,” I say, turning and hurrying for the exit.

“Bailey.”

I push through the door and run toward a nearby dumpster, not even caring if somebody sees me. All I can think about is getting this fucking bomb off my shoulder. I lift the purse over the side and ease it on top of a pile of trash, crinkling my eyes shut as I do.

Once it hits something firm, I let go and jump back, pressing a hand to my heart and backpedaling away.

Nothing. I check my watch.

Seven fifty-nine.

I take off down the alley and wait at the end to warn anyone if they come by. Eight o'clock comes and goes, and twenty minutes go by with no explosion.

My cheeks puff out as a relieved sigh barrels out of me.

He wasn't going to do it. Not while people were in the restaurant.

My little brother isn't a murderer.

With my shoulders ten times lighter, I walk to the parking garage and find Rose, who for once, doesn't give me hell when I start her up.

My lips lift into a tiny, grateful smile, and a laugh follows it. I've been so wound with tension, it feels incredible letting it go. Having my biggest fears put to the side, to face again on another day.

Then I hear the explosion.

CHAPTER 11

Anthony

My knuckles lightly tap Bailey's door.

I take a step back, ignoring the toothless drunk guy staring at me from his post down the hall. He sits slumped with his back against the wall and his legs splayed in a way that makes me wonder if he's too drunk to stand.

"You sure you're at the right place, pretty boy?" he slurs.

I knock harder on the door and sigh as I take another step back.

This day has been a *shit show*. I'm tired. Hungry. Stressed. Pissed. And a hundred other things I can't designate a word to. It's after midnight, and I just spent the last several hours locked into a debate with Settimo on what the best course of action is to deal with the bomb someone planted in a dumpster outside La Divina.

No one was hurt, and no damage was done to the building, so it's obviously a message. I just don't know what the message says or who it's from. Settimo, on the other hand, has ideas. He believes it was the Russians, warning us to stay out of their dealings with the Irish.

I think it's a possibility. A *likely* possibility. But retaliation until it's verified who was responsible seems ... rash. And potentially deadly. Settimo disagrees. He's probably plotting our attack as I stand here, ignoring the drunk's slurs and wondering why the hell I'm here to begin with.

I should go home. Eat something. Take a shower. Go to bed.

But I won't because... Because I don't want to be alone. And I can't get Bailey off my mind. I've tried. Hard.

Finally, the door creaks open, revealing Bailey in sweats and a Nirvana T-shirt with her hair up in a messy bun. Her eyes are puffy and red like she's been crying.

My lips sag with a frown. "Hey... Did I wake you?"

She shakes her head as her arms cross over her chest. The way she looks at me is almost fearful.

She's afraid of me? Even now?

"Go home, pretty boy," the drunk laughs. "You don't belong here."

"Pete, *shut up*," Bailey scowls, her face barely softening when she turns back to me. "What do you want, Anthony?"

Ouch. Not happy to see me.

What did I expect?

I gesture behind her. "Can I come in?"

A few seconds go by before she reluctantly steps to the side.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

"Thanks," I say, walking past her. Vanilla hits my nostrils, and I breathe it in as I wander into her living room.

The place smells like her. *Looks* like her. It's chaotic without technically being messy. There's no trash lying

around, but there's also no order. The couch is covered in mismatched pillows with an old colorful-patterned blanket thrown over the back. She has a box TV I haven't seen in a decade, but no stand. It just sits on the floor with a DVD player next to it. Who knows where the DVDs are. Or why she still has them.

“If you're gonna kill me, just do it.”

My head snaps her way to take in the fearful but stoic way she holds her head high but has a slight shake to her breathing. Kill her? She thinks I'm here to kill her?

“What?” I ask, genuinely perplexed.

Her stone-face cracks, and she shifts her weight from one foot to the other but doesn't speak. Something's weird about her tonight. I wouldn't find it unusual for someone to be so frightened by me, but her? I let her go, and she didn't run. She still showed up to my restaurant. Why be scared now?

“I'm not here to kill you, Bailey. I'm here to apologize.”

She blinks at me, letting the stoicism melt away. “Apologize for what?”

I feel it when my eyes narrow with confusion but quickly correct it. “For being rude to you earlier. I was just ... surprised to see you. And if I'm being honest, a little worried.”

“Worried?” she asks, her face softening. She shifts my way, and I wander the rest of the distance between us as I nod.

“Worried someone would see you. Namely, Maksim. He's making a habit of showing up at my legitimate businesses looking for me.” My pulse jumps at the contact when I run a

finger up her neck, stopping to tip her chin. “I don’t want to kill *anyone*, passerotta. But if I had to, it wouldn’t be you.”

She snorts, but it seems more out of nervousness than derision. “You’d kill Maksim to save me?”

“Yes,” I say without pause. I hadn’t given it much thought, not until seeing Bailey earlier, but when I considered the possibility... Yeah, I’d kill him. Chalk it up to a first round of retaliation.

Her lips part, and she must realize how close we are because she backs up a step, pulling away from my touch. I lay my hand at my side.

“What about your brother?” she asks.

I raise a brow. “Are you asking if I’d kill my own brother?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “But... Would you, you know, stop him? *Did* you stop him? Does he think I’m dead?”

I glimpse her closed curtains, wondering if someone is currently out there watching. Probably.

“He knows you aren’t dead... He isn’t an issue. Don’t worry about him.”

She seems to consider that, her eyes drawing away as she thinks, and I resume studying her apartment.

A rickety shelf with picture frames and a color-changing diffuser—the apparent source of the vanilla aroma—catch my eye, and I wander over to take a look.

“H-how did you find out where I live?” she asks.

“You worked for me. I have your information.” I lift a photo of a little girl, maybe six or seven, wearing ragged clothes with her hair in pigtails. She has a pink circle on each cheek and blue eyeshadow like she did her own makeup. Her smile is big, looking up at the camera with every tooth showing and her eyelids crinkled.

“Is this you?” I raise the frame.

She nods and crosses her arms over her chest, walking over to me.

I go back to the photo. “You were adorable.” Setting the frame down, I move onto the rest. “Still are, if I’m being honest. I don’t know how you could possibly have the rap sheet you do. You’re a terrible criminal, but you *are* cute.” I glance at her and wink.

“I’m *not* a criminal. And you’re supposed to be apologizing, not insulting me.”

I chuckle. “I already apologized.”

My attention moves to a photo of an older Bailey, late teens or so, with a young boy. He looks a little like her in the face. I lift the frame. “Is this your brother?”

She snatches it from me like it’s something private, like I found it in her panty drawer or something instead of out in the open. She hugs it to her chest.

“Okay, you apologized. Now leave.”

“I just got here. You’re kicking me out already?”

“I don’t know if...” Her shoulders shake with a shiver, and she seems to hug the frame tighter. “I don’t know if it’s safe for you to be here.”

Her words tug at something deep in my chest and drag me the few feet to her. “Bailey...”

She swallows down what I’m guessing is even more fear, and I kick myself for snapping at her earlier. I wasn’t actually here to apologize for it. I was here to see her.

But obviously, I left an impression. I scared her.

I run my hand up her arm, resting it on her shoulder, and smooth my thumb over her collarbone. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. You’re *safe*. I promise.”

“Are *you* safe?” she asks, her voice weak. She clears her throat. “I mean from Maksim and Finn and whoever else. You’re being careful, right?”

My nose crinkles slightly, and one side of my lips lifts. “You’re worried about me?”

Her mouth opens, but she pauses a few moments before answering. “I just... I heard about the bomb at La Divina.” She lowers the picture frame to her side. “I was worried.”

Oh. Of course she heard about that. I forgot she knows people at the restaurant. Plus, it’s all over the news.

That’s why she’s scared. Duh.

“Nobody was trying to kill me. They blew up the dumpster outside, that’s all. It was a message.”

“A message?” Her brows bunch like she’s skeptical.

I nod, smoothing my thumb over her carotid. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay, but what if *you’re* the message? There could be more bombs. Have you checked your car?”

“The one I drove here?” I chuckle. “If it was rigged, I wouldn’t have made it.”

“Your apartment then. Have you had it checked out?”

Again I chuckle, shifting closer as I rub Bailey’s tense shoulders. “*Relax*. I told you, nobody is trying to kill me. I’m well aware of who planted the bomb and what it is they want. They need me alive to give it to them.”

“Who?” she asks, squinting.

I run my hand up her neck and tap her nose. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.” With a wink, I grab the picture frame from Bailey’s hand. She gasps and reaches for it, but I bat her away before carefully setting it back in its place on the shelf.

“You’re very private for someone who rifled through my things just days ago,” I tease.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t really feel like lying cuffed to your bed all day.”

“Mmm, but I was quite enjoying picturing it.”

Her smirk falls as her face reddens.

I laugh and shuffle to her couch. “It was a good thing you got the cuffs off. Lorenzo finding you would’ve been even more awkward than it was.” I plop down and pull the pillow

from behind my back, giving it a once over before setting it beside me.

“He made me ruin the best damn butter chicken you would’ve ever had,” she says, following my lead and sitting with only the pillow to separate us.

“Well, you’ll just have to make it for me again.” I show my teeth, but she doesn’t return the smile. She has skepticism etched into every crevice of her face.

“What?” I ask, my tone light with amusement.

“Why are you flirting with me?”

My brain seems to freeze because I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Why am I flirting with her?

Does she not want that?

Shit.

“Umm...”

“I must’ve served you a dozen times at Freddy’s without you having any memory of me, and only a few days ago you considered killing me.”

“You kissed me since then,” I argue, although I see her point. She has no idea how many filthy thoughts I’ve had about her in the days since. No idea what that kiss did to me. “And if you’ll recall, I kissed you back.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I didn’t know what your reasoning was for spying on my meeting when I considered killing you. Once I realized it truly was a misunderstanding, I promised not to hurt you, and I kept that promise.”

“And then you handcuffed me to your bed.”

“And I would love to do it again,” I say, unable to help myself when the imagery comes to mind.

She holds her neutral expression several seconds before a smile sparks. Dropping her gaze, she pulls the pillow between us into her lap, picking at the frayed edge.

“*I like you, passerotta,*” I say, laying my arm over the back of the couch. “Flirting is what people do when they like someone... Same with kissing.”

“People kiss for all kinds of reasons,” she retorts with a smile in her voice. “My adrenaline was through the roof. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“*I did.*”

She looks over at me, her bottom lip stuck between her teeth. I’ve been only teasing about the bedroom stuff, but when my eyes lock onto that lip, my cock hardens.

“This isn’t fair, you know,” she says.

I scoot her way with my brows raised, waiting for her to go on.

“Your white knight syndrome has me feeling like I owe you or something.”

“Oh, you do owe me.” I brush the back of her neck with my hand.

“And how do you suggest I repay you?” she asks. I *think* there’s mischievousness in her tone. Like she wants me to state the obvious, but I play it safe by not responding, just in case she actually thinks I expect sex from her. I don’t expect anything from her. I just want it.

And I think she wants it too.

I cup her jaw as gingerly as I can and lean in to kiss her. She meets me part way, shifting her body to face me.

She tastes like mint, like she already brushed her teeth for bed, and I’m reminded how late I showed up here. She looked like she’d been crying, not sleeping.

Was she crying about me? Should I have asked?

“What?” she asks, pulling away for a second.

I blink. “Huh?”

“You seem distracted.” She chuckles nervously.

She’s nervous? Why?

Is she self-conscious?

I don’t know her at all, do I?

Instead of answering, I wrap my hand around the base of her neck and pull her into me, kissing her a little harder than before, putting away my thoughts.

She’s a little slower to warm up this time, but when she does, I run my hands down her sides and tug her closer. She

climbs onto my lap to straddle me, her full lips never leaving mine as she grinds her hips on my cock. The movement is slight, slight enough I'm not sure it's intentional, but my balls are so sensitive it's almost painful. Two minutes and I've already got a case of blue balls.

Two minutes... Who am I kidding, it's been two days.

Her mouth leaves mine to move to my neck, and I lean my head back, my lips parted with a sigh while Bailey works to undo my tie. Every kiss, every gentle touch of her fingers, sends a flow of desire down south.

Her smell fills my nostrils, but it's still not enough, so I nudge her hair with my nose, inhaling deeply.

She lets my tie drape down my shirt and moves on to work the buttons. Her lips kiss every piece of flesh she exposes, leaving a sweet, wet trail down my chest.

When she slides to her knees on the carpet, she looks up at me with the same mischievousness I heard in her voice. I'm suddenly aware of my heart pounding against my chest like it's trying to escape.

"You know I was kidding when I said you owe me, right?" I ask, my voice heady, out of breath like I just finished a run.

She nods. "Yes."

"Good." I wait only a millisecond before impatiently ripping my shirt off the rest of the way, sending buttons flying every direction. I throw it on the cushion next to me and lift my hips as Bailey takes off my pants with deft hands only an experienced criminal could possess. It reminds me that she's

dangerous, far more dangerous than I give her credit for, but maybe that's what makes her so sexy to me.

Her personality is cute. Her body is sexy. But her past, where she comes from, who she is at her core, the way her mind is because of it... That's what really sets her apart from every other woman I've been with.

She comes from my world. She can handle the blood, the violence, the chaos of it all. I don't have to hide what I do or who I am because she's already seen it. Already seen *me*. Instead of looking at me with fear or disgust, she's looking at me with pure lust, on her knees about to suck my dick. Honestly, how could it get better than that?

"Shit," I groan, closing my eyes as my cock bounces out of my boxers.

Bailey grasps it and slowly runs her hand up and down my length. "Not going to lie, you're bigger than I imagined."

My eyes open as I chuckle. "I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult."

"Compliment," she says, stroking me. "Trust me, I was generous in my imagination."

"Imagination or *fantasy*?" I smile teasingly, but if I'm honest, that does something to me. Picturing her in the same spot I'm sitting in, touching herself while she thinks of me. It seems unlikely, but a guy can dream.

"Fantasy."

My smile slips away, only for hers to grow just before she kisses the head of my cock. She wraps her lips around me, her

cheeks caving in as she sucks, and it's so much stimulation that I rock my hips toward her and groan.

This is way better than *my* fantasies.

She must take that as encouragement because she gives me a naughty look before closing her eyes and taking in more of me, only stopping when I hit the back of her throat.

"Mmm," she hums, pumping what's left of me with her hand.

My thighs clench from the sensation, and I spread my arms out to grip the back of the couch.

My eyes grow heavy, begging to close, but I don't dare miss this view. I watch through half-hooded lids Bailey bob her head, taking turns licking, sucking, and stroking me. Her eyes stay closed most of the time, but occasionally, she looks up at me, desire expanding her pupils. Every time she does, my cock jumps, and my balls pang, begging for release.

"Fuck, that feels good," I say, finally letting my eyes close for a moment when she gently massages my balls while gliding her hand over the half of me she can't fit in her mouth.

I lay my head back and block out the swishing in my ears to listen to Bailey's hums, savoring every sensation. I commit it all to memory so I'll have it later when I'm picturing this exact scenario like I have a dozen times already. I'm already looking forward to it.

My hands grasp the couch, my body stiffening as I get close, and Bailey must pick up on it because she increases her speed.

I lift my hips once more with a groan as all the lust I've been filled with for days pours out into Bailey's mouth, leaving me empty.

I fall back onto the couch, smoothing sweaty hair out of my face and breathing heavy as Bailey crawls onto the couch beside me. My head lazily swings to face her, and I can feel the stupid grin stretch across my face.

"Where the hell did you learn to do that?" I ask, wrapping my arm around her to bring her closer to me.

"Prison."

My smile falls as I feel my brow furrow.

She laughs and lightly slaps my chest. "I'm *kidding*."

A breath whooshes out of me, relieved I don't have to go kill a bunch of prison guards, and I pull up my pants. Temporarily. I need a break, but I'm nowhere near done.

"What was it like?" I ask, suddenly curious.

She opens and closes her mouth, searching her mind like she's confused. "What was blowing you like?"

"What was *prison* like?"

Her face falls as she sinks into the back cushion. "It was ... shitty."

"Of course it was," I say, regretting the question. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that."

She shakes her head. "No, it's fine. Honestly, you get used to the people and the routines. After about a year, the actual

prison part didn't seem so bad. It was um..." Her eyes take on a glassy look, like she's reliving it.

"It was what?" I ask.

She shrugs like it isn't a big deal, but it clearly is. "The worst part was not knowing where my little brother was or what was happening to him. I have an older sister I thought may have taken him in but had no way of knowing. They didn't umm..." She crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, needless to say, I lost my rights as his guardian."

I nod as if I understand, but I don't. I can't. Family is everything to me. It's been that way my entire life. It's difficult to even imagine her situation.

"*After* I was released, I found out he had been in foster care that whole time and no one could even get ahold of my sister. So, yeah. My worst fears came true."

I frown, and this time I do understand. I wasn't raised in foster care, but I know people who were. Not an ideal situation for a scared, lonely kid. "I'm sorry," I say, my voice soft.

She waves it away and blinks moisture from her eyes. "*Geez*, we need to stop sitting on couches together. Clearly, my brain thinks it's therapy time." She laughs, but it sounds forced. "Would you uh... I mean, do you need to go?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't. But I'll leave if you want me to."

A couple of seconds pass while I wait for her answer. She seems uncertain of it. Conflicted.

I kiss her lips to make the decision easier for her.

She flinches like I've startled her but leans into me after a moment. It takes a minute, but the spoiled mood seems to dissipate and allows desire to creep back in. I take her shoulders, gently guiding her to her back, and run my hand under her shirt.

"It's my turn to owe you," I whisper into her ear, squeezing her tits trapped in a bra.

"Mmm, I could get on board with that," she whispers back.

My skin heats as my cock comes back to life. Normally, eating pussy feels like a chore, but my mouth waters at the idea of her honey on my tongue. Every reaction my body has to her is abnormal.

She takes my hand, leading me to her pants, and I eagerly work my fingers beneath her panties.

The second I hit gold, somebody knocks on the fucking door.

CHAPTER 12

Anthony

Bailey stiffens beneath me, her nails digging into my arms. She reminds me of a cat jumping from water.

“B?” a distant, muffled voice calls.

“Oh shit,” Bailey whispers, shoving at my chest.

I climb off of her and lift my hands at my sides. “What?”

She jumps off the couch before yanking my arm. “*Hide.*”

“Hide?” I laugh. “What are we, thirteen?”

The lock unlatches.

“*Please.*” Bailey gives me a desperate, pleading look, so similar to when she got caught spying. It’s enough that I grab my shirt and crouch beside the couch, using it as a shield from whoever the fuck is at the door.

Boyfriend?

The thought has my teeth clenching and a coat of red painting over my eyes.

Bailey makes it to the front door just as it opens. I pull back before I see the person.

“Hey, are you okay?” a masculine voice asks just before the front door shuts. “Why didn’t you answer?”

“I was asleep,” she hurriedly says, not the least bit convincingly. “What do you want?”

“Are you pissed at me?” I can hear the frown in his voice.

“No, I... You know what, yes I am, but I have no desire to talk about it right now. It’s one in the morning.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I meant to come by sooner. I just got back from a job.”

“I don’t want to know, okay? Just go. *Please.*”

“No.” Footsteps sound down the hall, and I move to the front of the couch out of view when the guy goes into the kitchen. I’m mostly out of sight, but I can’t help but take a peek.

My nose crinkles as I take in the guy’s baggy jeans and greasy black hair. Two rings curl from his bottom lip, and he has a couple of Great Value-looking face tats.

This is the guy I’m competing with?

No fucking way.

“Corey!”

“Not until you talk to me,” he pushes. A little too hard. Much more, and I won’t be able to help but kick his ass. I’m already fuming.

“Look, I forgive you, okay? I don’t want to talk about your job or whatever you’ve been doing lately. We’re good.”

“You said you wanted to know.”

“I changed my mind.”

The fridge opens and closes a few moments later.

“*Corey.*”

There's a long sigh. "I have to tell you something," he says, regret in his tone. Maybe he cheated on her. That would be ironic.

"No, you don't," Bailey insists. Forcefully. *Too* forcefully.

What the fuck is up with her?

My phone dings, and I'm kind of glad for it. I hope I'm caught.

"What was that?" Corey asks.

"Nothing. Probably just a notification from a news app or something."

"I thought the mobsters crushed your phone."

My entire body tenses.

What?

She told him? *This* fucking guy, whoever he is? She fucking told him what happened?

Is she fucking stupid?

Does she have any idea how many reasons she's given people to kill her?

And she just keeps adding to the list.

"I'm borrowing a friend's phone. Look, I really don't want to talk right now. Please, just go."

Forcing my jaw to unclench, I slide my cell from my pocket. It's a message from Settimo that just says, 'call me.'

I silence the phone then slip it back into my pocket.

Corey sighs loudly. “*Fine*. But call me in the morning, okay? I want to make this right. And here.” Something knocks on the table. “It’s just a temporary burner, but it’s something. Give your friend her phone back.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I wasn’t, I... I’m just trying to help.” My eyes narrow. There’s a whiny characteristic to Corey’s voice that makes me question if he’s a man or a boy.

Pussy.

“I know...” Bailey sighs. “I’m sorry, I’m just tired. Let’s talk tomorrow.”

It’s quiet for several moments, but finally, “Okay... Pancakes?”

“Sounds good.”

Footsteps sound again, but this time, they’re retreating.

“Corey?” Bailey calls from the kitchen. A moment of anticipation passes. I don’t realize how intently I’m listening to their conversation until my ear turns their way.

“I love you.”

Three words. Three knives to the back.

Ouch.

“I love you too.”

Once the door shuts, I stand, shrugging on my shirt. Bailey walks to me with her arms wrapping around her midsection. I

don't meet her eyes. Don't allow whatever pleading expression she's wearing to affect me.

"Anthony..."

"You told him," I grit, sticking my hands in my pockets when my fingers tap my thigh.

"Not really, I..." She walks the rest of the way to me. "I didn't say what I heard or anything like that."

I huff. "Oh, well, I guess it's okay then."

"It's not." Emotion clogs her voice, and it pulls my eyes to her, despite my best efforts to keep them anywhere else. "I know it's not okay. I know that was stupid of me."

"And yet, here we are."

She bites her lip when it begins to tremble. "I was scared."

"You were scared?" I laugh dryly. "You were scared, so you decided to endanger the life of your boyfriend as well as yourself. Smart."

"He isn't my boyfriend."

"No? Sounded pretty serious to me." I shake my head in disgust. "Real looker you got there, by the way. Love the face tats."

Her eyes narrow. "Shut the *fuck* up. Now."

"Do you suck his cock as good as you did mine?"

Her eyes widen only a split-second before she slaps her hand across my face. Somehow, I don't see it coming, so my

head jerks to the side. The sting doesn't burn nearly as much as the lava running through my veins.

"He's my *brother*, you asshole."

My mouth is already open, ready to throw back another insult, but it hangs when her words register.

Brother?

I turn to look at the photo of the young boy with her. He's blond. And... No, there's no fucking way.

But I guess that makes more sense than him being her boyfriend. I don't know what her usual type is, but I hope it isn't that.

"I was scared," she reiterates, her anger waning. "I didn't tell him many details, but at the time, I didn't see a better way to explain why I was hiding in his apartment. Or why I no longer had a phone. So I told him I walked in on what sounded like a mob meeting, and that one of the men smashed my phone. And that I was let go but still afraid someone would come after me. That's what happened... I'm sorry."

I rub my cheek, turning back to her.

"Forgive me," she says, unwrapping her arms and coming closer, stopping mere inches from me. "*Please.*"

I say nothing. I don't know what I *can* say. I don't know what I feel.

She puts her hand on my arm, the touch so gentle, so comforting. It's hard to be angry at her like this, when she looks so breakable. Frightened.

I would never hurt her. I don't even think I'm capable of it.

She knows that, right?

Then again, she *should* be cautious. Just not of me.

“I can't protect you from *everything*, Bailey. I would never hurt you, but please, don't make me push the authority I have to keep you safe.”

She shakes her head. “I won't. I can assure you, I'm done sharing anything with my brother. He barely even cared, just ran off with his friends,” she says, talking a little fast. “That's what that was about.” She gestures to the kitchen. It takes a second to register that she's referring to their conversation. I already forgot what else was said.

She pushes onto her toes to kiss my lips while weaving her hands around my neck. I gently take her hips and kiss her back, but I don't allow myself to get worked up like before. This thing with Bailey's brother might blow over, but Settimo's message is still at the forefront of my mind.

I pull away, resting my forehead against hers.

“You have to go, huh?” she asks, a little sad. I wish I could tell her no. Wish I could let her lead me to her bed.

I guess *both* of our brothers are cock blocks.

“Yeah... But I'll call you.”

“On what phone? I don't even know the number for the burner.”

“I'll figure something out.”

She nods, but I can tell she's unconvinced. Taking a step back, she absently scratches her arm. The ice shield she puts up is palpable. "Well, it was nice to see you."

"I'm not blowing you off, Bailey. You know that, right?" Her expression slips some, and she shifts her weight but doesn't say anything.

My phone vibrates, and I put my hand against my pocket. With a sigh, I walk past Bailey toward the door. She follows to show me out.

Once I'm in the hall, she puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"Anthony?"

I turn and flinch when she crashes her lips to mine, taking me by surprise. Slowly, my hands thread through her hair, and I melt against her lips.

When she pulls away, she takes a step back, taking hold of the edge of the door. "For the record, I like you too."

I smile and am about to make a sarcastic remark when she gently clicks the door shut. Which is for the best. She's hard to say goodbye to.

Walking out of the building, I pull out my phone to call Settimo.

"What the hell took you so long?" he growls after the first ring.

I roll my eyes. "It's one in the morning. What do you need?"

“The bomb was planted by the Irish.”

I stop in my tracks, my shoes scuffing on pavement. “Why do you think that?”

“Our guy took a look at the remains of the bomb. It was one of theirs. It had their calling card, so I’m guessing they wanted us to know.”

I try to make sense of that, but can’t. What the hell are they thinking?

Are *they* sending a message? Be on our side or else...?

That is ridiculously stupid. I could *maybe* see Nikita Petrov doing something like that, but not the Irish boss, Cormac.

“Why would they do that? They *need* us.” I shake my head. “Something isn’t right.”

“I don’t know why, and I don’t care. I’m meeting with Petrov tomorrow and ending this bullshit.”

“You’re going to attack?” I ask, not the least bit surprised. “Just like that?”

“I have all the evidence I need, Anthony,” he says, his tone condescending. “Put away your peace pipe and come over. We have work to do.”

The line goes dead, and I shove my phone in my pocket. I try to mentally prepare myself for the long night ahead.

I was already braced for a war against the Russians. *Them*, I understand. But the Irish?

I don’t like this. Something feels off. *Wrong*.

I'm missing something, but I don't know what.

And I'm out of time to find out.

CHAPTER 13

Bailey

The last pancake sizzles when I pour it into the pan, and I stare mindlessly at the bubbles forming in the batter.

Corey should be here any minute. Any minute, I'll have to somehow keep myself together when all I really want is to break into tears.

He almost murdered Anthony. He could've murdered even more people, *innocent* people. There's no telling the damage that bomb could've done.

And there's one more, the second one I saw Josh with. Which means they aren't done causing damage. Aren't done *killing*.

My little brother is a killer.

How could I have done this shitty of a job as a big sister? I was supposed to protect him. Now I'm protecting other people *from* him. And I have to pretend that isn't the case. I have to look him in his eye and tell him everything is okay because if I open up, I'll never get anything out of him.

Whatever he's doing has to be stopped.

Charred batter wafts into my nostrils, pulling me away from my thoughts to register the burning pancake beneath me. I give my head a shake before turning off the burner and scraping scorched pancake into the trash.

A knock on my door makes my pulse jump, and I look that way as Corey walks in, gift bag in hand.

I stare at the small, aqua bag with tissue paper sticking out before meeting Corey's eyes. He's a strictly birthday gift kind of guy. What's this for?

"Hey."

"Good morning." He holds the bag out for me. "This was in front of your door."

Oh... Who...?

Anthony?

I take the bag and set it on the counter. "Thanks. Hungry?"

Corey's eyes penetrate my back as I plate a couple of pancakes and pour syrup over them.

"Are you seeing someone?" he asks.

"Huh?"

"The present." I spin as he gestures to the bag. "Is it from a guy?"

"Is that your business?"

His face falls like he's genuinely hurt by that, and he takes a seat at the table. I put his plate in front of him then grab a pancake and sit, picking at little bites even as my stomach lurches.

This is so fucking uncomfortable.

"You're still pissed at me," he observes like the clever detective he is.

"Nope. Just think it makes little sense for me to share the private parts of my life with someone who shares nothing

about their own.”

A long sigh blows from his parted lips as his eyes close. “I was going to tell you last night. You didn’t want to know.”

“Well, I do now.” I lean toward him, bracing myself for whatever he says.

“It’s really nothing, B.” He sounds so nonchalant, I can’t tell if it’s an act. *Surely* it is. *Surely* he isn’t stupid enough to fuck with mobsters with so little care. “We’re poking the beasts of Las Vegas a little bit, but they have no idea it’s us.”

“By *beasts*, you mean the mobs.”

He nods.

“Corey...” I press my thumb and forefinger to my temples and bow my head while I try to contain the frustration building.

I lose the battle.

“Are you fucking stupid?” I spit, my hand flying to slap the table. “They will *kill* you.”

“No, they won’t. They don’t know it’s us. I promise, B, I’m being safe.”

“No, you aren’t!” I push from the table and brace myself on the edge. “They will figure it out. You *know* they will.”

He sighs again like it’s me who doesn’t get it. “They’ll be way too busy killing each other to do that.”

I think back to last night when Anthony told me he was “fully aware” of who planted the bomb and what their

intention was. I knew right then that he had no clue what he was talking about.

Who does Anthony think did it? And what exactly is he going to do?

“Why would you want that?” I slink back into my seat as energy drains from me. I’m passing anger and on a steep slope to defeat. Why? Why is my brother this reckless? “They’re people just like you and me. Why would you want them to kill each other?”

His nose scrunches like he’s just smelled something foul. “They’re *mobsters*, B. Trust me, they do way more fucked-up shit than you’d be able to comprehend.”

I scoff. “You’re one to talk.”

“I am *not* a mobster.” He narrows his eyes like I’ve genuinely offended him. He was trying to murder Anthony in cold blood just yesterday. Anthony let me live even when his best move was to kill me.

And Corey thinks he’s the better one... It doesn’t look that way from where I’m standing.

“Regardless, what the hell do you get out of having them dead?” I ask, leveling myself.

He pushes his plate back to rest his forearms on the table. “We don’t really care about the Russians and Italians, but when the Irish came back to Vegas, they took our turf. If we can get the other two to push the Irish out of town, we can take it back.”

My brows pinch, but it isn't because what he said doesn't make sense. It actually does. If it wasn't so fucking dangerous, I'd think it was a smart plan. In all honesty, I'm not a fan of the mobs and never have been. They eat up all the jobs for everyone else, leaving us low-level degenerates with nothing but scraps. But not me. Not anymore.

No, my brows are pinching because I don't know what to say to get my brother to back down. As far as I'm aware, his plan is working.

"So last night ... was that you?" I ask.

"You mean the bomb at La Divina?"

I nod, and he does the same.

"It must've been found because we put it in the office. It wound up in the dumpster."

"Thank God it did. You could've killed someone, Corey."

"Yeah, well, that was the idea."

My mouth drops open. I can't believe he just admitted to that.

How normal is this to him?

How many people has he killed?

He sits up straight when I put a hand over my mouth, sympathy softening his face when he notices what the admittance does to me. "We weren't targeting civilians, B, *Jesus*. We were targeting Anthony Gruco."

"Why?" I ask, my heart sinking. I thought it was bad before, but hearing him say it makes the disappointment I feel

so much worse.

“Because the Grucos are the ones who run the Italian mob. And he’s like, the smart one. We think he might fuck things up, but if he’s dead, he can’t influence the don or anyone else. *And* the don will want to avenge him.” His lips tilt up slightly like he’s proud of himself for this. “It’s perfect.”

“It isn’t *perfect*,” I grit, my hands balling into fists. “It’s *sick*. You don’t even know this guy. You don’t know if he deserves to die.”

“He’s a capo for the Italian mafia...” Corey says like I’m an idiot for needing him to spell it out for me.

“He’s...”

He’s what? A good person?

Of course not. But he isn’t evil. He’s different. He’s... I don’t know. But I can’t let him die.

“What?” Corey presses.

“He’s the one who let me go the other night, when I got caught at La Divina. He could’ve killed me, but he didn’t.”

Corey frowns, but he doesn’t look surprised. “Okay... Do you feel like you owe him or something? Because you’re not a part of this, so you have nothing to feel guilty for.”

“I’m not fucking *guilty*, but I’m telling you, he isn’t a bad person. You shouldn’t hurt him.”

Corey rubs his jaw, his eyes roaming while he thinks. Several seconds pass before he speaks. “You said there were

multiple mob guys there, one named Finn who I'm pretty sure is an Irish enforcer. Were any of the others Russian?"

I think for a second, trying to see where he's going with this before I answer. I don't know. "Yes."

"See?" Corey exclaims, his hands flying. "The meeting was at La Divina, which means Gruco called it. He must've been trying to sort it out when I *know* the Russians would've just acted, especially after the photos we sent them. He's a problem."

"What? He—"

"If they figure us out, I'm dead."

My mouth closes as an icy embrace wraps around me and squeezes, pushing the air from my lungs.

"Not only that, but they'll assume you were spying for me that night, and they'll kill you too." He leans over to put his hand over mine, and if I wasn't frozen, I'd pull away. "*Trust me*, with this guy out of the way, we're fine. But as long as he's breathing, he's a problem."

Corey's phone chirps, and he pulls it from his pocket for a brief moment before standing. "I gotta go. Thanks for breakfast." He steps toward the exit but stops to put a hand on my shoulder. "Trust me, it's gonna be okay."

With that, he leaves, and I'm left alone with a ball of lead in my throat.

Anthony seemed clueless to me last night. He shouldn't have to die...

But what if Corey's right? What if he figures out who planted the bomb or whatever else Corey's stupid fucking gang has done?

Corey's dead. No question. And I most likely am too.

So Anthony can't know ... but that doesn't mean he has to die. It just means he needs to have someone watch him, make sure his attention is on the other mobs. Or even better, distracted entirely.

My eyes move to the gift bag on the counter, and I get up to retrieve it. I toss the tissue paper into the trash can then pull out a box covered in a thin plastic wrapping. It's an iPhone. One five generations newer than the one Hugh crushed.

I pull out a card and breathe through the lead in my throat when I read the sloppy handwriting.

Told you I'd figure something out. I'll call you tonight.

PS Sorry about the last one.

— A

My eyes water as I hug the note to my chest.

This is the man my brother wants to kill. The man I've had a crush on for months. The one man in my life I've allowed myself to develop feelings for. The same man who, just last night, kissed me in a way I've barely been able to stop thinking about.

I can't let that happen.

The track phone alarm goes off, telling me it's time to go to my kiosk job at the mall. I set the note down, rub my eyes,

and get ready to leave. Normally, I dread this job. It's boring, and customer service gigs suck in general.

But today, I don't dread it. Who knows, maybe I'll finally have something to distract me from this shitfest.

Leaving the new phone on the counter, I head out the door.

CHAPTER 14

Bailey

One hour.

One more hour of this hell, and I can go home. It's been dead today at the kiosk, but worse than that, a guy about a half hour ago asked if I was a hooker. Not *exactly*, more like suggested I take him up on a not-that-generous offer, but it feels the same.

That's happened several times in my life—none of which I took the proposal—especially when I was a teenager, but at least those times I was slumming it looking for easy work on the street. But this time? A fucking mall kiosk? Do I *scream* desperate, for fucks sake?

Fuck that guy. Honestly, right now, fuck all men. I'm too tired for this shit. It hasn't been a good day.

I pick up the smoothie a friend working the food court hooked me up with, but it still isn't enough. I need *food*. Real food that doesn't spike my blood sugar just to make me crash again. It was low earlier, but now, I think I'm just cranky. And hungry. And tired. And stressed, *so* stressed.

The phone Anthony gave me has been on my mind all day, and I regret not activating it before I left the house. I keep telling myself he's okay, that the Lost Boys—or whatever my brother's gang is called—wouldn't just randomly attack him. They'd want to make sure it looked like the Irish did it, and that would take time to plan... Right?

Right. That has to be right.

The empty straw makes a gurgling protest when I run out of smoothie to suck, so I set the cup down at my little post. I pull out the track phone to check the time, and when I see it's only been a couple of minutes, a long, angry sigh puffs my cheeks.

“Would you take forty for these?”

My spine snaps straight as I startle at the feminine voice and fling around to face a young teenage girl. “Shit.” I press my hand to my chest. “Sorry, you scared me.”

She nibbles on a piece of gum between her teeth, still holding the sunglasses. They're a pair of Ray-Ban rip-offs, but they're cute and would look good with her long blonde, wavy hair to frame them. Still not worth fifty bucks, though. The bright red frame doesn't match enough clothing for me to justify that kind of expense.

“Umm, sorry. We don't really bargain,” I say, wondering if the girl thinks I own this place. Eyeing her up, I'd say she's probably fourteen, maybe fifteen.

She sucks the gum back behind her teeth and shrugs. “It's cool. My brother makes me ask anyway. Says these places always try to fuck people.”

I rear back, surprised at the language. She looks like a princess with her perfect teeth and pearl necklace.

Her eyes flit around my face. “Dang, your makeup looks *good*. What do you use?”

A variation of drug store bullshit.

“Oh, a few brands. Nothing fancy.”

She squints and leans forward until I can smell the fruity bubblegum. “Gah, your eyes look awesome. Anytime I try smokey eyes, I look like Dracula’s whore.” She laughs, and I try to return it but only manage a bashful chuckle. I wish kids would just be kids. Whatever happened to pig tails and Dr. Pepper lip smackers?

I don’t know, though, she’s kind of cute. And funny.

“Thanks. I do makeup as a side gig so try to look the part when I work customer service. If I see an engagement ring, I start talking myself up.”

“Ha. Smart. Does it work?”

I shrug. “Sometimes.”

“Hey!” Her eyes get wide, and the gum nearly falls out of her mouth when she opens it. “You should do my makeup for the back-to-school dance!”

I smile politely while thinking through a way to turn her down. She’s a kid who wanted to haggle with me over a pair of sunglasses. There’s no way I’m negotiating prices while hanging out in her messy bedroom with teenage girl posters all over the wall.

“Oh, I don’t do it much anymore,” I say. “I’ve been busy lately.”

“You have to!” She bounces on her toes, propping the sunglasses on her blonde head so she can interlace her fingers as a dramatic beg, her bottom lip poking out for effect. “I’m a freshman, and this is the first dance of the year. First

impressions mean sooo much, and you could make me look fucking *fire*.”

“You’re beautiful *right now*. Trust me, you don’t need a bunch of gunk to cake on to look pretty. You’re young. Your skin is flawless.”

“Come on, please? I can pay whatever you charge. Just name the price.”

You mean Daddy can pay me.

Hm. Not a bad idea.

“One hundred is what I usually charge,” I sheepishly say, but all of a sudden I’m hoping this works out. A hundred bucks to make flawless skin look flawless? Hell yeah.

“Done!” She whips out her phone, tapping the screen several times before handing it over to me to put my contact in.

“I’m Anya, by the way.”

I smile while inputting my information. “Bailey. It’s nice to meet you.”

I hold out the phone, and she snatches it before sliding it into her back pocket. “Gah, I’m so excited! There’s this guy a grade above me, Mack, who is soo fucking fine, and I’ve been too chicken shit to talk to him even though we hang out in the same group. It’s kind of weird because he has the same name as my brother, but other than that, he is *perfect*. My friend Lyla made a bet with me that I won’t ask him to the dance, but now? I don’t know, maybe I will.” She bites her lip and lifts her shoulders like her excitement is literally pulling her up.

“Well, I think you’ll have an *awesome* time, regardless of if you go with a date. If you ask me, guys are overrated.”

“The only people who say that are people who can’t get dates.” She snorts. “Don’t bullshit me. You’ve probably had a million boyfriends.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, that’s kind of the point.”

“*Hey.*”

Both our heads turn toward the angry, deep voice at the same time, and when I see who it belongs to, I feel the blood drain from my face.

No.

Oh my God.

Maksim glares as his heavy footsteps sound our way, and I bump into the stand, knocking a pair of glasses off the rack. Anya notices and bends to swipe them up before putting them back, not at all concerned about the walking hurricane headed our way.

He wouldn’t do anything, would he? It isn’t busy in the mall, but it’s still a mall. There are people around, this girl included. Panicked, I turn to Anya, ready to tell her to go before Maksim can do ... whatever he’s going to do. Hell, he’s mob. Maybe he’ll just throw me over his shoulder and storm me out of here.

“You were supposed to meet me in the food court *twenty minutes ago*. What the fuck?” he asks, his Russian accent somehow making him sound more pissed than he probably is.

I turn back to him, paralyzing fear thawing with confusion.

“You’re the one who wanted to split up. If you were more confident in yourself as a man, you would’ve just gone into Victoria Secret with me.”

“I wasn’t taking my baby sister to buy whore underwear.”

“I mean, you drove me here, soo...”

Anya snickers, making Maksim’s face red. I’m too stuck on their conversation to move, even though I clearly should.

Baby sister?

Really?

He flicks his gaze my way, only long enough to register my presence, and again I startle, this time with enough sense to turn around and walk away. If he’s here for her, he isn’t interested in me. He didn’t even notice me until now.

“Let’s go,” Maksim growls.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because shoplifting is for degenerates. Remember?”

I peek over my shoulder to see her take off the sunglasses and wave them at him. He snatches them from her hand and stomps over to the register.

My eyes move to the hallway that leads to an exit. Rose is parked at the end of the lot, but if I just walked away, what reason would he have to come after me? Even if it looked

suspicious, what would it matter when he doesn't even know who I am?

Except, he would because I put my number in his sister's phone. *Fuck.*

"Excuse me," he calls to me impatiently. I swallow a lump that descends slowly into my belly before turning around and walking to the register.

My face is covered in makeup. I probably look like a completely different person than I did with my face bare, my hair up and a baggy hood over my head.

He doesn't recognize me. He won't recognize me if I just play it cool. Act natural. Don't be an idiot.

"How much?" he asks me, his wallet already out.

I open my mouth to answer, but Anya does it for me. "One hundred dollars," she lies.

I look at her with my brow scrunched, and she winks.

"What?" he asks like he's appalled. "For a pair of flimsy sunglasses?"

"I know, right? Crazy."

"No." He shakes his head and folds his wallet. "Not happening."

"Oh my god, don't be such a cheap asshole. You act like we're broke."

"*We* aren't anything. If I remember correctly, you couldn't even make babysitting work. And it's the principle of it anyway." He gestures to the glasses. "This is junk."

“That’s offensive. This is Bailey’s livelihood, you dick.”

He looks at me, and now I *really* have to fight the urge to run. Goddammit, Anya.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

I shrug, afraid if I open my mouth, he’ll recognize my voice.

He turns to Anya and points behind her. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Seriously?”

“*Seriously.*” He storms that way, but Anya doesn’t move.

“Mack, *please.*” There’s emotion in her voice that I question right away, but Maksim halts in his steps. Anya’s face has fallen, but it couldn’t be more obvious to me that this is a manipulation tactic. And by the look on his troubled face when he turns around, I’d say he’s fallen for it.

He pulls out his wallet as he approaches and plucks out a hundred-dollar bill. “Money must be *earned*, Anya. You’re on dish duty for a month.”

He goes to hand me the bill, but he tenses when we lock eyes, and he doesn’t extend his arm out the rest of the way.

I drop my gaze to the register, pulling my hand away.

He knows.

Oh fuck, he knows.

From my periphery, I see the bill flutter to the counter, and I catch Maksim’s back as he walks away. If my face has paled,

Anya doesn't notice because she leans in with a wicked grin on her face, clearly proud of herself, and whispers, "Keep the change."

She turns and strolls after her brother, not concerned about keeping up, meanwhile I stare with so much panic beating my heart that my chest hurts.

He might not have known it was me. He hesitated what, a second? That's nothing. That could be an 'woah her face is pale' reaction or anything else. It doesn't mean he recognized me. If he did, he didn't voice it in any subtle way.

He doesn't know. He doesn't. It's okay. *I'm* okay.

I'm quitting today. *Now*. No more public work like this. This was stupid and reckless and not even close to worth the barely-above minimum wage.

I put the money in the drawer, feeling no satisfaction when I pocket the fifty dollars. Just touching the guy's money makes me queasy.

For the rest of my shift, I can't stop looking around, searching for anyone who might be out of place. Anyone watching me. I'm being paranoid, and I know it. Maksim didn't leave then circle back for me. I'll be gone before he ever has a chance to, if that's even his plan. Which it isn't. Because I'm fine.

When the mall has emptied and I leave the little sunglass stand, I dig through my purse in search of my can of pepper spray, so small you wouldn't notice it in my palm unless you

were looking. I hover my finger over the trigger and dart my eyes around nervously as I walk the hall to the exit.

With a deep breath, I push through the doors, wind blowing in my face and whipping my hair wildly. It looks like it might storm, which makes the walk that much more terrifying. My eyes find my car in the nearly vacant lot, and I stride that way with my heart thumping in my ears.

He didn't recognize me. I'm fine. I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine. Get home, get the phone, tell Anthony. He said he would be willing to kill Maksim if that's what it took, so I'll be fine.

The thought of Maksim dying makes my stomach twist. I don't actually want that, do I?

No. No, I don't. I was a guardian long enough to recognize one. The way Maksim seized at the pain in Anya's voice... He's definitely raising her. And he feels guilty as hell for it. I recognize the feeling too well, and I could never take him away from her like I was taken from my brother.

So what then? It's him or me?

I walk faster to my car, hoping it's neither. I'm almost there. *So* close, and my legs instinctively break out in a run, like they know the danger lurking better than I do. I convince myself it's imagined, convince myself it's paranoia, but when I stride by a blue van, I register the giant in the shadows, and I know who it is even before he steps out.

I stop in my tracks, letting the pepper spray slip through my fingers and raising my hands up before he even gives the command, the same reaction I had the first time we met.

Drops of rain dampen my hair, but it isn't what causes my shoulders to shake with a shiver. My fingers tingle with fear as the familiar gun presses into my back, and Hugh's large palm cups my shoulder.

“We meet again, princess.”

CHAPTER 15

Anthony

Looking at my watch, I huff out a sigh and crack my neck.

“Patience, little brother,” Lorenzo says over the rain.

We’re standing underneath a gazebo outside a ritzy venue where the wedding reception of a made man is happening. It’s a full hour outside Vegas, so for Maksim to want to drive all the way out here, whatever he’s wanting to discuss must be important. Which makes it worrisome.

“He said nine o’clock. It’s nine fifteen.”

“Wow. How frustrating it must be for you to have to wait on someone. I wonder what that’s like.”

My hardened eyes meet his, no trace of humor showing on my face if it’s any mirroring of how I feel. “I don’t understand how you can be so calm. You hate tardiness much more than I do.”

“*You* have absolutely no room to talk in regards to tardiness,” he scolds. “But you’re right, there are few things that irritate me more. Dancing is one of those things.” He gestures to the building behind us where the reception is taking place. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

When I don’t respond, one side of Lorenzo’s lips tilt. “Don’t be so serious.”

“Maksim wouldn’t be driving out here if it *wasn’t* something serious. It would be unfitting to be relaxed.”

“If it was something that would be harmful to us, he would’ve made you go to him.”

I turn to face the road, searching for headlights. Lorenzo is right, Maksim probably needs some kind of favor, but it’s impossible to know for sure. The whole thing is strange.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Lorenzo says. “After today, our alliance should be solid. So don’t worry.”

I blow out another breath and check my watch. Only two minutes have passed since I last checked.

Lorenzo is right again. The Irish suffered two attacks today that they didn’t seem to see coming with how unprepared their guards were when our men arrived at one of their warehouses. They’ll be retaliating full force soon enough, but with our alliance with the Russians, they stand no chance. They’ll be out of Vegas or all dead within a few weeks. The Russians will benefit more than anyone when that happens, so they need us.

Finally, headlights shine in the distance. I tuck my hands inside my pockets, my fingers tapping erratically and watch as a blue van pulls into the parking lot.

Hugh gets out first, opening an umbrella before going around to the back door. Maksim throws open his door and storms toward us with unmistakable rage, soaking his white T-shirt in the rain.

He says nothing as he takes the steps to join us on the pavilion, just stares with a pissed off look on his face. Hugh hurries toward us with something, no *someone*, thrown over his shoulder.

He places a woman on her knees in front of us, and I have a feeling I know who it is before he ever takes the bag off her head. Once he does, Bailey's scared eyes, surrounded by dark, smudged makeup, find me.

Goddammit.

"What the fuck is this, Gruco?" He flings his hand to gesture at Bailey, meanwhile my eyes scan her for injury. She looks okay. Scared, but okay.

I share none of her fear. I was afraid this would happen, but now that it has, I'm more annoyed than I am worried. If he wanted to kill her, he wouldn't have brought her to me. In a way, it's good that she won't need to lie low anymore.

"A woman, Maksim," I answer, calmer than I was a few minutes ago. "I understand you might not be familiar with the opposite sex up close, but surely you've seen one in pictures."

"She's supposed to be dead," he grinds out.

"No, she isn't."

"What?" His eyes go wide as his fists clench at his sides. "You said you would take care of her."

"There's nothing to take care of," I say. "She isn't your concern."

"She spied on *my* meeting. Saw *my* face. Of course she's my fucking concern! Who knows what she may have heard."

"She heard all of it," I say, glancing at Bailey with my expression relaxed in an attempt to calm her. She breathes

heavily past the black cloth gag. “She was there before the meeting even started.”

“What?” he repeats with even more frustration. “How do you—”

“Because I told her to be.”

His eyes narrow while he waits for me to continue.

I roll my eyes like he’s an idiot for not already knowing my fake story. “I was using her as a spy. Or, at least I planned to. The idea was for Finn to take her and run his mouth enough for her to find out what really happened with the grocery store fire and if they were behind it. I’d also hoped he’d take her to Cormac so I could find out the security detail he has on their grounds.”

Skepticism drains from Maksim’s face as he glances from me to Bailey. He’s buying it. Which is good for him because if he pushes this much further, I’ll have to follow through on killing him.

His hands unclench before he crosses his arms over his chest. “So you *did* suspect they were behind it.”

“I thought it was a possibility, sure. We’ve had good relations with the Irish and weren’t clued in on their attack against the Bratva, so they weren’t my first guess. But we wanted to make sure so we’d be ready for what they may have planned next if they had been behind it.”

“How did you know Finn wouldn’t just kill her?” Maksim asks.

I frown at him as if he's even dumber than I thought then splay my palm toward Bailey. "Look at her. Only you would be careless enough to waste that beauty."

His lips purse as he studies Bailey. She's gorgeous even with her current resemblance to a raccoon, but Maksim doesn't seem as easily persuaded as the rest of us mere mortals. Still, I think he gets it.

"Worst case scenario, he kills her. More likely, he spends some time with her, opening his big fucking mouth like Finn does, then puts her on the street. I would've been back to claim her in a few days."

He nods slowly, carefully contemplating it. "It's a good plan. Why would you not go through with it?"

"Because I have a heart of gold," I sarcastically say. "And because, like I said, she's too pretty to waste. I've become a bit territorial over this one, so for your sake, I hope you didn't harm her."

He shakes his head, not the least bit concerned. "No one hurt the girl... We're *allies*. In the future, I'd appreciate it if you could be more generous with your secret agendas."

"Then they wouldn't be secret," Lorenzo chimes in for the first time. I've been ignoring his presence, but I'll have to face him soon enough. He's kept quiet about Bailey up to this point, but everyone has their limits. It's only a matter of time before this reaches his.

Maksim is quiet for several seconds while he appears to think, but finally, he looks at Hugh and nods to the van.

Hugh pulls out a cell phone, the burner Bailey got last night, and tosses it to me. I catch it with one hand as he starts for the van, and Maksim lags only long enough to give us a dismissive dip of his chin.

As soon as they're driving away, Lorenzo looks at me with a smirk. "Your spy, huh?"

I hold out my hand, knowing he has a knife on him. "Go fuck yourself."

"Clever lie, really. That one could've fooled Settimo." He tucks his hand inside his suit jacket to retrieve the blade. "Then again, that doesn't say much."

"Just give me the fucking knife."

He snickers before handing it to me so I can crouch behind Bailey. She's tense, and her breathing is still erratic, reminding me that this is serious for her. I run my hand gently up her arm while using the other to slice the zip tie around her wrists.

As soon as she's free, she jerks her hands in front of her while I pull the gag from her mouth and cut the cloth.

She spins on her knees to face me, immediately wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling herself against my chest. She doesn't whimper, so I don't think she's crying, but her chest puffs with each breath.

"Thank you," she whispers like she doesn't want Lorenzo to hear.

I pull back, caressing her jaw. Still no tears. She's just shaken.

“Are you okay?” I ask, flicking my eyes over her face.
“Did they hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “Hugh just tied me up and put me in the van. It felt like a long drive. I thought...”

I don’t need her to finish the thought. She thought they were going to kill her.

“You’re safe.” I move one hand to her shoulder to squeeze, then I lean in to kiss her. I don’t know if I’m trying to comfort her or if it’s an impulse from thinking about it so often, but either way, her tense muscles loosen beneath my touch.

Then I remember Lorenzo.

I break the kiss, glancing at his curious expression before standing and helping Bailey up.

“I’m taking her home,” I say with my back to my brother.

“No.”

My muscles coil at his voice, and I slowly turn to face him. I expect Bailey to hide behind me, but she hovers at my side instead.

He tries to smile to soften the command, but he’s horrible at forcing it. It comes off awkward. To Bailey, probably even frightening since she doesn’t know him.

“I mean, you both should stay. You’ve barely made an appearance at the reception.”

“She’s *terrified*,” I say, amazed at the uncharacteristic cluelessness coming from him. He isn’t good with empathy, but he knows how to read body language better than anyone I

know. “Not everyone finds kidnapping to be a normal occurrence.”

“Well, this is *twice* in a week for you, isn’t it?” he asks her.

She nods.

“Lorenzo,” I scold. “She doesn’t want to go to a party right now.”

His face falls like he’s trying to look apologetic. “I’m sure that’s true. Bailey, I’m very sorry if those barbarians frightened you, but as Anthony said, you’re safe. *However,*” his eyes move to me, “Now that we have an apparent spy, it’s likely Settimo will wonder why he doesn’t know about her. Perhaps it’d be a good idea to jump in front of this?”

Oh... Shit, he’s right. I forgot about Settimo.

How understanding would he be if he knew about this?

Not very.

He’s no danger to Bailey. He wouldn’t hurt a woman I care about, but he *would* make me hear about this for the rest of my life. I can already hear the word *weak* in his voice.

Or, I could just lie. Do as Lorenzo is suggesting. Introduce her like I’ve known her all along instead of happening across her while she was intruding on a meeting he never wanted me to have. And then, like the softy I am, falling for her.

Have I fallen for her? Is that accurate?

The thought gives me pause, but I push it out while I try to decide what to do.

I like the lying option.

Turning to Bailey, I take her arms. “You do *not* have to do this... But it would be nice to show you off a little. If you’re up for it.”

Her eyes widen like she can’t believe I’m seriously asking this of her. Fair enough.

She looks down at her casual dress with a cardigan hanging loose around it. “Reception, like a wedding reception? I’m not dressed for that.”

“You look beautiful,” I say, lifting her chin up to stop her from studying herself. “It’s a nice reception, but the crowd is mixed with a lot of casual people. You’re not that underdressed.”

“My face is probably a mess.”

“So take the makeup off.”

“I...” Her mouth hangs open as she considers it.

“It would be so nice if you could join us, Bailey,” Lorenzo says. “I would love the opportunity to get to know you better, and I know my older brother would too.”

Her face flushes as she glances at me. “The don?”

“Does it matter?” I ask with a shrug.

From the look on her face, I’d say it does. Still, she doesn’t shoot it down. Her throat moves as she swallows, and when she looks at me, she gives a strained, nervous smile. “Sure, why not?”

CHAPTER 16

Bailey

Music filters into the hall outside the reception. I don't recognize the song, but it has a nice beat to it, and it isn't very formal. Let's hope that carries over into the rest of the setup because I'm not even close to dressed for a wedding reception. I'm not even wearing makeup anymore.

But honestly, of all the reasons I shouldn't be here, one of the last is my appearance. I don't know why that's what's on my mind.

I was just *kidnapped*. Again. By a guy who very clearly wanted me dead.

How can I be so calm? How can I be thinking about *makeup*?

"This'll be fun," Anthony assures me, hugging my hip as we approach the entrance, our steps slowing. Lorenzo goes on ahead.

I know he's probably lying to me, but the honey-coated reassurance in his voice and touch has a calming effect. Maybe that's why I'm not shaking over what just occurred. Before Hugh ripped the bag over my head, revealing Anthony, I'd been ready to fight for my life, my body fueled by pure adrenaline and dangerously low levels of glucose. I thought for sure they were going to kill me.

One look exchanged with Anthony extinguished all of it. I felt ... safe. Even in impossibly dangerous situations, I feel safe with him.

“Do you like to dance?” he asks as we walk inside the vast space.

The live band plays directly in front of us across the room while people pair up in front of it. Some are couples, others handfuls of women, a few kids. An actual disco ball hangs over their heads, and in the low lighting of the room, I’m much less conscious about my appearance.

“Umm,” I say, preoccupied with searching out the tables for plates of food. There are a few abandoned pieces of cake, but other than that, there’s no food that I can tell. It’s already nine, so it shouldn’t be surprising that they already ate and cut the cake, but even darting my eyes around is making me dizzy. I should’ve eaten hours ago.

“Do you think there’s any food left?” I ask him, my eyelids heavy.

Before he has a chance to answer, a man comes up behind him. He reminds me of Maksim with his broad shoulders and bulky chest, as well as the slightly irritated look on his face. The biggest difference is the dark hair, but the similar aura of power is heavy even before he says anything.

“Well?” he asks Anthony, tucking his hands in his slacks as his steps halt.

Anthony turns to face the man, his hand on my back to guide me forward. “Bailey, this is my brother, Settimo.” He extends his hand to the man I now know is the fucking don of the Italian mafia.

My heart palpitates.

“Hi,” I squeak, giving a small awkward wave.

The irritation on Settimo’s face vanishes as he seems to register my presence. His lips lift into a smile so charming it makes him twice less scary than he was moments ago. He holds out his hand, and I carefully take it.

“Pleasure to meet you... Bailey?”

I nod, grateful not to have to speak. If I did, I’m almost positive I’d stutter.

He lets go of my hand, letting the smile ease from charming to polite. “Would you mind if Anthony and I spoke in private for a minute?”

Again, I nod, this time with a nervous smile attached. I go to turn, but Anthony’s hand on my back stops me.

“That isn’t necessary,” he says. “Bailey is well aware of what the meeting outside was about. Maksim was bringing her to me.”

Settimo’s eyes narrow slightly like he’s confused and waiting for further explanation.

“We’ll be leaving soon, but I thought it’d be nice if you two finally met.”

The confusion etched into Settimo’s brow deepens. “Finally met?” His eyes move to me. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Bailey Fisher,” Anthony answers for me. “The woman I know from Freddy’s.”

Settimo doesn’t respond past a blank expression.

“Jesus, Settimo, the woman puts her life on the line for the familia, and you can’t even remember her name?” Anthony sighs before looking at me. I have no idea what he’s doing, and I’m sure my face shows that. “I apologize for my brother. He’s been very busy lately, so you’ll have to forgive him.”

He turns back to Settimo. “She’s the woman I’ve been using to get intel on the Russian arson situation.”

“Oh,” Settimo says, no recollection showing on his face.

“Maksim found out I didn’t kill her the night of our meeting and was pissed, but I filled him in on everything. We’re good.”

Settimo squints. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Anthony sighs again, frustration showing through. Faked frustration, though, right? What is he doing?

Lorenzo said he should “jump in front of” Settimo not knowing about me. Is he lying about who I am? About what happened?

Obviously. And I need to go with it.

I do my best to smooth the confused wrinkles in my skin and have zero clue how well I do. Luckily, Settimo isn’t looking at me.

“At the meeting I set up with Finn and Maksim to discuss joint efforts to find the arsonist, I had Bailey there pretending to listen in on everything. Once she ‘got caught’, I planned to let Finn take her, just in case the Irish actually were behind everything. I figured if anyone would run their mouth to a woman, it’d be him. I was going to wait a day or two before

going to Cormac to reclaim her but ended up not going through with letting Finn take her. Soft, I know.”

“Didn’t...?” Settimo gets a faraway look as he thinks. “Cormac called my office asking about this, and you told me an employee overheard everything. You never said anything about that being intentional.”

“I was rehashing the story I told the others, not saying what actually happened. We talked about this.”

“I don’t...”

“Bailey,” a voice calls at my back. I jump and turn that way. It’s Lorenzo with a gorgeous, curly-haired woman hanging on his arm. “I want to introduce you to my wife, Amelia.” He looks at her in an affectionate way I never would’ve guessed was possible coming from him. Everything about him seems cold.

“It’s a pleasure,” Amelia says, round cheeks pinkening as she extends her hand. “Lorenzo’s told me a lot about you.”

What does Lorenzo know about me?

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say with a smile. Settimo’s gaze penetrates me, but I try to ignore it, pretending this is as natural as everyone else seems to think.

“You two know each other?” Settimo asks, his question directed at Lorenzo.

Lorenzo nods. “Of course.” He looks at me. “Amelia and I were just discussing how we’d love to have you and Anthony over for dinner soon, if you’d be up for it?”

My head swims at the mere mention of food, but I push through the fog and smile. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

He’s not serious, though, right? This is an act? I don’t actually have to go to the sharp-toothed guy’s lair?

His wife is non-threatening, at least. I can tell she’s a sweet person just by looking at her, which seems like an unusual match for a mobster. They have a cute Beauty and the Beast thing going on.

“Okay, hold on.” Settimo raises a hand, his face twisted with frustration as he addresses Lorenzo. “Did you know about that meeting Anthony arranged and Bailey’s apparent part in it?”

Lorenzo exchanges a brief look with his wife, and she pulls away. “See you soon, I hope,” she says to me before walking toward a table where a blonde woman sits staring at us.

“You mean having her act as a spy? Yes. I thought it was a clever idea.”

“Why was I not clued in on it?”

Lorenzo tilts his head like he’s curious about Settimo’s confusion. “You said you wanted nothing to do with the peace agreement.”

“Sure, but—”

“You were standing right there when Anthony...” Lorenzo’s eyes gloss over for a second. “Actually, you know what, you left. You were pissed that he was late for our meeting, so you stormed off before he proposed the idea.” He

blinks and stands up straighter. “I’m sorry. That was an oversight on my part. I should’ve filled you in.”

Everyone is quiet for a few moments, the loud reception booming around us becoming more noticeable.

“Right, um... Anyway.” Settimo rubs the back of his neck as he looks at me. “I’m happy Anthony finally introduced us.”

I nod a few times too many. “Yeah, me too.”

“I better get back.” He points to the table where the blonde is.

The way he fidgets makes me think he’s more uncomfortable than I am, as impossible as that seems. When he leaves us, Anthony lets out a sigh, turning to Lorenzo. “Thank you.”

Lorenzo gives a slight nod before taking a step toward the table. “You two should join us.”

“Be right there,” Anthony says, placing his hand on my shoulder.

My stomach does a somersault, and I close my eyes when the room spins. I try to fight the sensation, but my knees buckle, gravity feeling heavy as ever. My fingers brush Anthony’s tie in an attempt to grasp, but it easily slips through my fingers.

Anthony catches me before I can hit the floor and hauls me up with his hand around my back. “Whoa, hey, you okay?” he asks, studying me when I regain my footing. I’m definitely going to pass out soon, but for the moment, I’m somewhat steady.

“Food.”

“Huh?” he asks like the command confuses him. Understanding flashes across his face a moment later, and he turns us toward the exit without waiting for a response.

I walk with him from the reception with his arm wrapped around my back, holding me up, but when we get into the hall, his patience must wane because he bends and scoops me up.

Nausea overwhelms me, so I close my eyes while he walks. It takes several minutes, but eventually he finds a kitchen and sits me down on the counter. I slowly open my eyes, taking deep, slow inhaled breaths through my nose to fight the nausea.

Everything in the kitchen seems to be cleaned up, no staff members in sight, so I think I missed the opportunity for proper food, but the wedding cake sits next to me. The urge to tackle it is strong. If Anthony weren't here and this wasn't a made man's cake, I wouldn't bother fighting it.

“Uh,” Anthony says, rifling through a cabinet, probably searching for plates. He swings it shut and turns to the cake. “You know what, fuck it.” He digs into the bottom tier, retrieving a handful.

I take it from his outstretched hand and immediately shove the whole thing in my face. It's embarrassing, and I'm hyperaware of him staring at me, but my body doesn't care about my pride at the moment.

My tastebuds light up at the rich icing, so good I close my eyes with a moan. Before I can even consider savoring it, I've

put away the entire handful and am licking the icing from my fingers.

I chance a glance at Anthony to see him holding a piece, this time plated. He hands it to me while my face reddens, and finally, I'm able to calm down, chewing one bite at a time. I feel a hundred times better already.

“Does this happen often?” he asks with concern.

I don't look at him. If I do, I'll picture what I must look like to him, and I'll want to puke again just thinking about it.

I shrug, chewing and swallowing a bite of the cake. I try to put a name to the type this is, but I've never had it before. Whatever it is, it's good.

“I'm hypoglycemic. I carry something in my purse in case my blood sugar drops, but my kidnappers confiscated my things.”

We sit in silence for several moments, my heart racing imagining what he must be thinking.

“I'm sorry that happened tonight... I'll get your purse back first thing in the morning.”

“Thanks,” I say, picking at white, crystal icing. “I wonder if Maksim will take his fifty bucks back.” I laugh to myself, and Anthony cautiously chuckles in response.

“What?”

Finally, I'm able to look at him. My heart slows when I don't see disgust in his expression. Only curiosity. “We ran

into each other at the mall when his little sister was buying a pair of sunglasses where I work. She tipped me fifty dollars.”

He nods, his lips lifted into a tiny smirk. “Well, that makes up for everything.”

“I was hoping he wouldn’t recognize me, but...” I wave my hand around in a ‘here we are’ gesture and laugh. “At least I get cake.”

“*And* you get to see me.” His smirk grows. “Next time you want to hang out, you can just call.”

“Obviously, I’m not that basic.”

“Obviously,” he parrots, situating himself between my legs. He takes the plate to set it down beside me.

I think he’ll make at least one or two smartass remarks, but he doesn’t. Instead, he threads his fingers through my hair and kisses my icing-dusted lips.

My eyes close as I kiss him back, wrapping my hands around his neck. I’m taken back to last night, before my brother ruined everything, and all the lust rushes back in. That is, until my brother manages to ruin it *again*, our earlier conversation coming into my mind.

Corey wants to kill Anthony.

If Anthony finds out, he’ll want to kill Corey.

Anthony must sense the sudden tension I feel because he pulls back. “Everything okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, I just...” I glance down at the plate. “I’m still a little dizzy.”

His hand lifts to my face, caressing my cheekbone before pushing my hair over my shoulders. A rush of warmth settles in my chest, and immediately, I want him to kiss me again.

I go to lean toward his lips, but he steps away before I can. He hands me the plate, and I busy myself with another bite.

He leans against the counter, his hand caressing my knee, and it takes everything I have not to toss the plate on the floor and throw myself at him.

“So, what was that back there with your brother?” I ask to distract myself.

“Settimo?” He tilts his head while rubbing circles over my knee. Ninety percent of my attention is on that simple action, but I do want to know if I should be worried.

He goes on before I can respond.

“Nothing. It was just better to tell him the story before one of the Russians come to him complaining about it.”

“You lied to him,” I say, my lips dipping. “Would he have been mad if you’d told him the truth?”

Anthony looks up like he’s weighing the possibility.

“I mean, would he have wanted you to kill me?” My voice strains even though I try to say it calmly.

Anthony’s thumb on my knee slows, and he squeezes. “No. He would give me a hard time about it, but nothing beyond that. I only lied because it seemed better to make him look like an asshole than to make me look like a pussy.” He

chuckles, but there's discomfort underneath it. Like he just revealed something to me.

"You'd look like a pussy because you didn't kill me?"

He hesitates for a second, then nods.

"That's dumb."

"That's the familia." His hand glides to my inner thigh. I'm not sure he's conscious about all the ways he touches me, but the trail of warmth invades my every thought. "Mercy has no place in my world."

I frown. The way he says it makes me think he believes it. "Strength without mercy is for nothing."

He gives me a small smile, but I can tell I haven't convinced him. I can't imagine Anthony as anything but strong. Does he not believe that?

"You're not eating," he observes, gesturing to the plate.

I pierce the cake with my fork and take a bite.

"Enough about people killing *me*." I spear another piece. "Are you being careful? You said you know who planted the bomb at your restaurant, but I can't help but think you should be cautious."

"I'm *fine*, passerotta. Stop worrying about me."

"I can't get over this feeling I have in my gut that you're in danger." I watch his face for signs that he's taking me seriously, but he still looks apathetic.

"I'm not in danger. I have enemies, but none that are stupid enough to kill me. That would result in a bloodbath."

Which is exactly what Corey said he wanted.

“Somebody put a bomb outside your restaurant, Anthony. What makes you think they won’t put one inside?”

He raises a brow. “It’s a legitimate business earning a modest profit compared to my other endeavors. Nobody would get anything out of blowing it up.”

“Except your death.” My voice is louder and more insistent than I mean for it to be, and it fades Anthony’s apathy, making room for what looks like annoyance.

I can’t help myself. A cocktail of cortisol and adrenaline flow through my veins, breaking up any sense that I have not to make Anthony’s guard go up. If his guard goes up, then I risk him finding out the truth. That can’t happen. But if it *doesn’t*, if I don’t warn him in some way, I’m terrified I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.

“What if the Irish aren’t content with simply leaving Las Vegas again? They wouldn’t have attacked if they didn’t think they could win a war.”

His eyes narrow as his hand pulls away. “How do you know about this? I’ve told you nothing about the Irish or a war.”

“Why do you keep forgetting I’m not some princess from the ghetto?” I ask like I’m the one who should be annoyed. “The war between the mobs is all over the street, and everyone knows what happened when the Irish were pushed out.”

“Who exactly is telling you this?” he asks. “We only delivered our first attack this morning. There’s no way gossip

is going around quickly enough to reach you when your phone's been disconnected, you've apparently been at work a chunk of the day, and then were with Maksim this evening."

I try to think up a feasible lie, but Anthony figures it out in only a couple seconds.

"Your brother," he says, no question in his tone. "Is he a gangbanger or something? It's hard to imagine this is something he picked up in the gossiping segment of his book club meeting."

"No," I say, firmly. *Too* firmly. "He isn't a gangbanger, he just has access to common knowledge the same as I do. And it is *common*, Anthony. You obviously don't understand how things work outside of your organization, but—"

"Okay," he says, taking me by my shoulders. "Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down."

His lips twitch with an amused grin, like he thinks this is funny.

"What the fuck are you smiling about?"

His smile only grows. "You're cute when you're worked up."

My face heats, but his hands cool me, starting at my knees before creeping up my legs.

"I'm not trying to call you a liar, *passerotta*. I was only confused."

I keep my mouth shut, afraid if I open it, I'll keep being defensive. I'm overcompensating for the lie, I can feel it. I just hope he can't.

He sighs, but it doesn't sound like it comes from disappointment. More like amusement. "Come on," he says, taking my hands and helping me off the counter. "Let's get out of here and get you some real food."

"I'm not cranky," I snap, raising my chin to him with a glare. It's only a moment before I realize the ridiculousness of that statement and let the glare fall, replacing it with a smile matching his.

"Okay, maybe a little," I say with a small laugh.

He takes my hand and kisses me before leading me out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER 17

Bailey

“Did you ever change the lock?” I ask as Anthony inserts his key into La Divina’s back door.

I don’t know why I ask the question. My corrupt eyes could never miss the flimsy piece of metal. I’m wired for seeking out these kinds of things.

“You really should,” I add before he can answer. “Anyone with a twenty-dollar lock pick could get in.”

With his lips stretched in a lopsided grin, he holds the door open for me. “I know this is going to sound strange considering you think I’m a cuddly teddy bear and all, but normal people would think twice before breaking into my building.”

I walk past into the back room and jump when the door slams behind me. We’re locked in total darkness for a moment before Anthony flips on the light.

“Normal people maybe.” I glance over my shoulder at him as his hand plants to my lower back, ushering me forward. “But what about the idiots?”

And the criminals currently wanting him dead.

“Like you?”

I dig my heels into the carpet and glare.

He laughs and pushes against my back. “Trust me, you’re the only person who’s ever been ballsy enough to break into

my establishment and lived to tell about it. There isn't much to steal here anyway. It's just a restaurant."

"With expensive meat."

"You think someone would risk their life over steak?" he asks, incredulous humor in his voice.

"You would be surprised," I say, although I'm lying. He's right, his name is enough to keep the thieves away. He could leave the door unlocked, and it's still unlikely any of them would come in here. Obviously, my brother's crew is an outlier.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll have a locksmith come by tomorrow."

"What about a camera?" My voice goes high-pitch, and I swallow. I probably shouldn't even bring that up. If he were to catch Corey on it...

"No cameras." He guides me into the kitchen and squeezes my hips before going to the walk-in. "There are things I wouldn't want recorded."

I lean against the metal counter and cross my arms over my chest. "Like what?"

He disappears inside the walk-in without answering my question, then returns with a piece of wrapped meat. He rests it by the stove and goes about getting ingredients. My stomach rumbles, but I ignore it.

"You're really not going to answer me, huh?" I ask.

He looks up from the meat he's seasoning and raises a brow.

"Never mind," I say, waving my curiosity away.

He pulls out a pot and fills it with water before setting it on the burner to boil. "I'm tired of talking about me. I want to know more about you."

My skin crawls with unease. We spent a good chunk of the drive with me asking him questions about his life, and him happily telling me stories about his family, always straying from anything work related. It became obvious that he values family as much as I do, which is huge for me. The more he talks, the more he reveals himself to be everything I've hoped for.

But what if he doesn't feel the same about me? What if I'm a letdown?

Once he's sprinkled salt in the water, he starts cooking the chicken.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, trying to hide the apprehension from my voice.

He shrugs. "Was it hard taking care of your brother when you were just a kid yourself?"

My muscles tense at the mention of Corey, and I have to clear my throat before I can speak. "You mean after my mom died?"

He nods.

“No,” I say automatically. “I’d been taking care of him since he was born.”

He goes back to the chicken. “That’s a lot of responsibility.”

“Responsibility I wanted.”

He glances at me over his shoulder while my face reddens. My tone was too sharp. We’re just talking, but every time he brings up Corey, I feel interrogated. Guilt will do that.

“You’re extremely protective of your brother,” Anthony observes, using tongs to flip the chicken. “I like that.”

“Yeah, snapping at you every time he’s brought up... Real sexy.” I chuckle, but my nervousness overpowers the little humor. My nails run up and down my arm.

“Family means everything to me,” he says, starting on the sauce. “It sounds like it means everything to you too.”

“It does.” My chest deflates as I let out a breath. “It’s the only thing that matters. Familial love is the only kind that’s real.”

“What?” He laughs, turning to face me.

My mouth stays shut. He’s looking at me like he thinks I’m crazy, but I’m honestly surprised he doesn’t feel the same. He’s an incredibly handsome, powerful man. He could’ve been married a decade ago if he wanted to be.

Anthony’s head tilts. “Do you really believe that?”

I lift a shoulder.

“You’ve never been in love?” he asks.

I snort. “Have you?”

He looks off while he seems to consider that. “I don’t know,” he says at last. “Maybe. I’ve had a few long-term relationships.”

“Didn’t quite pan out, though, did they?”

He spins to turn off the burner the chicken pan rests on and walks to a rack to grab a plate. “Nope.”

“See?” I splay my hands as if the answer is right in front of him. It is. I don’t know how more people don’t see it. “You thought you loved them, but it wasn’t real. It was lust. Love isn’t just there when it’s convenient for you. It’s supposed to be permanent.”

“It can be permanent,” he says, his amused tone telling me he isn’t taking me seriously. “I believe it’s called marriage.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, and the other fifty percent is either unhappy or hasn’t had enough stress to fracture it yet.”

“*Jesus.*” He plates pasta and chicken, drizzling sauce over the top. “You are so passionately cynical about this.” Carrying the plate to me, he smiles. “Who hurt you, passerotta?”

I hold up a hand. “Think about it for a second. Would you ever even *consider* cutting ties with Settimo or Lorenzo? Can you think of a single thing they could do to make you stop loving them?”

He hands me the plate, sending the delicious scent of the lemon sauce curling into my nostrils. I breathe it in and lick

my lips while looking down at the food. It looks really fucking good.

“No, I can’t.”

“See?” I cut a piece of chicken and twirl pasta around my fork. “*That’s* love.”

“It’s a different *kind* of love. I’d take a bullet for Settimo, but I wouldn’t want to spend more than an afternoon with him. And Lorenzo? Shit, there’s no one I’m more stiff around. I’m constantly trying to think through every word I say or hiding my thoughts from him. Same thing with my mother. I’m always lying or hiding something and always disappointing *someone*.

They’re my family, and I love them with a fierceness that could never be tamed. *But* I like to think there’s someone out there I can finally relax with. Not worry how I’m perceived. I’d know I was truly wanted and bound by something more elegant than blood.”

I look down at my food and focus on it while giving myself time to think through a response. When I put the bite of chicken and pasta in my mouth, my tastebuds nearly explode. He’s an even better cook than I pegged him as based on his spice rack.

“Do you have that with your brother?” he asks.

I meet his eyes as I swallow. “What?”

Anthony leans against the counter, his forearms resting on metal. “Are you capable of being your true, vulnerable self with him? Or are you always having to be the big sister?”

“I...” I blink, unsure of what I want to say.

“Do you cry in front of him?” Anthony asks.

I shift on the table and take another bite of food. Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll shut up.

“Have you *ever* cried in front of him?”

Ever?

I search my memory, not for Anthony, but for myself. Not that I plan on answering him. I don’t think he even wants an answer. He already knows it.

No. I can’t think of a time I cried in front of my little brother. Not when our mother died. Not when I got arrested. Not when I visited him for the first time in the group home. Never. I always waited until I was alone.

I’m starting to see Anthony’s point.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have someone you *could* be vulnerable with? Someone who wanted to hold you while you cried, make you soup when you’re sick, listen to you bitch, whatever else you’re not getting from the supposed one person you’ll ever love?”

“I could get all that from a friend.”

He scoffs, but there’s no derision to it. He thinks I’m kidding myself. He’s right. “Friends can be there for you, sure, but never the same way. At least for me.” He shrugs. “I’m not going to ask my friends to make me soup.”

A memory of the last time I was sick comes into my mind. I just eat the canned chicken noodle soup from the grocery

store next to my building. It's worked for me this long.

I don't need anyone else. It's silly for me even to be listening to this.

"If what you had was so great, why did you break up with the women?" I ask, knowing the answer. It's the same answer for everyone, whether or not they've searched deep down. He got bored.

"I've never had it," Anthony says. "I just want it, one day."

"One day when you're not busy sleeping with your captives."

He laughs, rolling his bottom lip into his mouth and running his tongue over it. "Funny. You're neither my captive nor are we sleeping together." He leans toward me, sucking up all the air to replace it with his scent that has me shifting closer. "*Yet.*"

"You sound pretty sure of yourself."

"It's just a vibe you give off," he sarcastically says. "It started around the time you had my cock in your mouth."

Goosebumps break out on my arms at the silkiness of his voice. I find myself leaning into him, my breath skittering when his hands run up my sides. I half expect him to keep teasing me, so I try not to get lost to his spell, but it's hopeless.

He rests his forehead against mine and closes his eyes while he caresses my sides with the light touch of his fingers.

"That reminds me..." I shiver at his breath tickling my lips. "I owe you."

“Owe me what?” My voice is heady. Warmth starts behind my ears and burns a path down my neck as he brushes my lips with his.

He puts his mouth to my ears while his hands move to my ass. “This.”

A gasp pulls from my lungs when he lifts me up to set me on the counter, but it’s silenced by his lips crashing to mine in a brutal kiss. His hand squeezes the back of my neck, and he pulls me away, breaking our kiss to lower me onto my back.

Cold metal puts out the fire behind my ears, but it does nothing for my core. Not even the cool air can tame the blaze when Anthony pushes up my dress, resting my legs on his shoulders.

Hungry eyes take me in only for a moment before he bends and plants kisses up my inner thighs. He hasn’t even touched my sex, but already I’m writhing at the anticipation.

He peeks at me with a knowing smirk before dipping down again and running his tongue over my panties.

“Ohhh fuck,” I say, squirming in his grasp.

How long has it been since I’ve had this? Months?

Never with Anthony Gruco.

Oh my God.

His tongue presses against the thin fabric right where my clit is, and my hips jolt.

“So *eager*.”

He runs his thumb down the middle of my panties and stops to press on my hole. “Tell me what you want.”

“You,” I say without pause.

I feel his lips spread into a smile against my thigh. “More specifically?”

He rocks his thumb, creating all kinds of crackling fireworks up my spine, all while never quite being enough with my panties in the way.

“Your mouth.”

“Where?” He brushes his fingertips across my thigh. “Here?”

“No.”

“Say it.”

I close my eyes when he grinds the heel of his palm against my clit, again and again. “Say it, *passerotta*.”

“I want your mouth on my pussy,” I practically moan, my back arching.

“Yes ma’am.” He snickers before ripping off my panties, letting the air kiss my exposed sex before his face covers it.

“Ahh,” I groan when his tongue runs up my slit and stops on a bundle of nerves controlling my every thought. Sensation moves from that bundle outward, shooting into the tips of my curled toes and causing half my muscles to tense, the other half to loosen.

He slips a finger inside me, massaging my walls as he slides in and out, and all I can think about is his dick replacing

that finger. What it would feel like. How it would be afterward. I've never felt out of control of myself with a man before, but right now, my body feels more like it belongs to him than it does to me.

He strokes and sucks and licks every piece of sensitive flesh, pulling moans from deep within my chest.

"God, you taste good," he growls before shoving his tongue inside of me. He grinds his palm against my clit while fucking me with his tongue, moaning like a starved animal diving into a feast. Or hell, moaning like I did when I ate cake a while ago.

My palms slap against metal, sending a bang reverberating throughout the kitchen. Tension winds tighter and tighter until it's damn near painful, but in the best way.

I slide my hands up above my head, gripping the edge of the counter while my hips arch. My legs spread wider until my sandals plant on the counter and I'm served up like a meal for Anthony. I can feel the vulnerability enveloping me, and normally, it's an uncomfortable feeling. Too uncomfortable. This is the time when I'd pull the guy away and move on to sex.

But I don't stop him. I can't. It feels so goddamn good, my body would never allow my mind to push him away.

His mouth moves to my clit while two of his fingers take over fucking me. The tension in my core winds so tightly, it pulls my legs together until I'm nearly about to suffocate Anthony.

The release isn't so much a snap as it is a squeeze, draining me of all stress and drowning me in ecstasy. I let out one last loud moan, my lips open wide, before my ass falls to the counter. Anthony keeps licking, his movements slow and deliberate, like he's savoring it. Savoring *me*.

My cheeks heat with embarrassment, but I feel too good to let it take over.

When he's done, he kisses my thigh and slowly lifts, his breaths coming out fast and heavy.

"Fuck, that was good." He wipes his mouth on his shirt, making my cheeks heat even more.

"I'm glad you think so."

His face flickers with disappointment, like he believes I'm serious, but when our eyes meet, he must know I'm teasing because he grins. "Not too bad for you, I hope?"

I brace myself on my elbows and shrug. "It was okay."

He laughs. "Wow, now I regret not killing you."

My jaw drops, and I nudge him with my leg. "Asshole." I sit up straight and close my eyes as he kisses me, more passionately than I expect.

Both my hands move to his face as I match his intensity. When we pull away, I wrap my arms around him and lay my head against his chest.

"Seriously, that was... That was really fucking good."

He kisses my head and hugs me back. "I'm glad you liked it, but I'm not done."

“Hmm?” I pull away to look at him.

He smiles. “Let me take you home with me.”

A shiver slithers across my shoulders when he pushes my hair back, his fingertips grazing sensitive flesh. The mental image of us back in his apartment sends another shiver down my spine, and I think about him fucking me. Giving up my control to him yet again. I like it more than I ever thought I would.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

I nod.

He smiles and kisses my forehead before taking the plate and putting it in the sink. It kills me to waste the few bites left, but I’m too excited to go to his apartment to stop him.

It’s weird to think about how the last time I was in that place, I was terrified.

Anthony takes my hand, but I tug back when he tries to help me off the counter. I’m eager, he’s eager, but there’s something I have to say first before this becomes just about sex. The lust in his eyes softens as he must see the seriousness in mine.

“Just so you know,” I say, my heart racing. “If, gun to my head, there was someone I had to choose to test against my theory, it would be someone like you.”

“Someone *like* me?” His thumb rubs circles over the back of my hand. “Why not me?”

Why not him?

Of course it would be him. But this is hard to admit as it is.

I'm falling for Anthony Gruco. Hard and fast, with no safety net to catch me if he chooses not to.

I'm quiet, too busy sorting out my thoughts to speak, for long enough that he gives up on an answer. He squeezes my hand instead.

"For the record..." He runs his fingertips over my temple, smoothing back my hair, and I lean into the touch. "I really like you too."

He smiles before pulling me off the counter and leading me from the kitchen. I hurry to keep up with his eager steps, opening and closing my mouth several times while I try to say more. Try to be more clear.

I have never believed in romantic love. I think I've made that perfectly clear.

But Anthony makes me a little less cynical. He makes me want to believe. At the very least, he makes putting myself out there feel like maybe it's worth it after all.

My mouth stays closed, and I let the thoughts go for now, saving them for when we're in his bed. That'll tell me more. It'll tell me how much of what I'm feeling is lust and how much is hope.

As the thoughts recede, reality takes its place, and I remember my panties thrown carelessly on the floor.

"Shit." I halt in the backroom doorway.

“What?” he asks.

“Hold on, I’ll be right back.” I pull my hand from his and hurry to the kitchen. If one of the cooks were to find my underwear tomorrow, I’d die of embarrassment.

Once I return to the hallway, Anthony is standing with his hands in his pockets facing me. A smile blooms as our eyes meet, and I stride that way, only for it to fall when I see the back door open.

I slow, watching the person coming through the door, the one Anthony doesn’t register, and as soon as recognition hits, I stop in my tracks.

No.

Oh God, no.

Corey raises his gun before Anthony can even put words to the puzzlement I see cross his face.

“Anthony!” I scream, my finger shooting to point behind him.

He turns and jumps out of the way when Corey pulls the trigger, sending a bullet exploding into the wall.

Anthony lunges at Corey, tackling him to the ground and knocking the gun from his grasp.

“Stop!” I yell, running that way as Anthony pins Corey down and rears back his fist.

“Anthony, stop!”

He’s thrown three punches right to my brother’s face by the time I get there and grab his arm.

“Please, stop it.”

Corey uses the opportunity to hit back and throw Anthony off before crawling for the gun.

“No!” I yell, jumping to it and swiping it up before Corey can. Without thinking, I point it at him, then at Anthony, going back and forth between the two hoping they’ll freeze. “Both of you, stop it, *please*.”

Corey whips his gaze to me. “Shoot him.”

“No,” I say, my voice stern. “No one is shooting anyone.”

“I already fucking told you, Bailey, he deserves to die.”

I point the gun at the wall and squeeze the trigger before he can say more, the bang blasting my ears. Corey’s eyes widen as he jumps away.

Josh appears in the back doorway, gun drawn.

“No!” I scream, shooting just to the right of him. He jerks his gun my way, and Corey shoves him into the frame.

“It’s my sister,” he yells at his best friend. He looks out the back door where two more of his friends are. “Go wait by the car, all of you.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Josh asks.

Corey shakes his head. “I have no idea.”

“I’m not leaving until—”

“She’ll shoot you, you moron. Just fucking go.”

With one last lingering glare at Anthony, Josh turns and leaves. Corey slams the door shut behind him.

“I’d *also* really love to know what’s going on,” Anthony says with thinly-veiled rage.

My ears feel full and throb with my rapid heartbeat.

“You and your friends need to leave,” I say to Corey.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he scoffs. “I’m not leaving you alone with him.” He flings a hand in a gesture to Anthony.

“I’m here willingly,” I say with a little too much desperation. I’m having to choose my words carefully, and everything I want to say seems wrong. “Anthony and I are seeing each other.”

“Bullshit,” he sneers before spitting blood on the ground.

“It’s not bullshit. He...” I flick my gaze to Anthony. His face is like stone, and his eyes blaze. “He *saved* me, Corey. He’s not a bad person, and... And I like him.”

“Please.” I lower the gun and take a step toward Corey. “Please go.”

He stands with an expression matching Anthony’s, but he seems to be considering it.

“How did you know we were here?” Anthony asks him, his voice full of suspicion. Enough to scare the absolute shit out of me.

I can convince Corey to stand down. I *know* I can. He would kill Anthony Gruco, but he wouldn’t kill a man I said I loved. I’ll lie if that’s what it takes. I’m not sure how far from a lie it would be, anyway.

But Anthony... Can I convince him?

What lies will I have to tell him?

Corey glowers at Anthony. “My sister’s phone.”

The burner phone.

He tracked my fucking phone.

Is that why he gave it to me?

Anthony feels his inside jacket pocket, probably remembering Hugh throwing him the phone, as I am now.

“Corey,” I plead, taking another step his way. He whips his gaze to me. An impossibly long minute ticks by while I wait for him to stand down.

Finally, he sighs. “I’ll be right outside. You have two minutes.”

He waits for me to nod before he reluctantly leaves.

I rush to Anthony. “I’m sorry.” When I hold out my arms, he jerks his shoulder back to keep me from touching him. “Anthony, I’m so sorry. He was just worried.”

Yes, just a worried little brother with a gun and multiple friends at his back, ready to kill my apparent boyfriend. Makes total sense.

“He knows you’re a criminal,” I say, my heart falling when he jerks out of my reach again. “He probably thought you kidnapped me.”

Anthony pulls the phone from his pocket, checks the screen, then turns it to show me. “No messages.”

“He must’ve seen I was at La Divina and automatically—”

“Automatically what, Bailey? Automatically decided that I kidnapped you and took you to *the place you used to work*? This isn’t the basement at a drug house, it’s a restaurant. One you’ve been to.”

“I know. I...” My eyes begin to water. “*Please.*”

A couple seconds go by before his hardened face finally cracks. “Your brother just tried to kill me, Bailey.”

“I know.” My head bobs a few times too many. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“When you asked him not to, he said he *already told you I deserve to die*. What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means...” I slam my eyes shut for a moment, trying to think through my words. I’m so scared of fucking up that my hands tremble. “Please try to understand. He was *so* mad that you took me, y-you can’t blame him for thinking you should be dead.”

“Did you *know* he wanted to kill me?” Anthony asks, his anger showing in his voice. “Is that why you keep telling me to be careful? Because you thought your brother might try to fucking kill me?”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath and try to take his arms. He stiffens but doesn’t pull away. “And I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you. I was *terrified* you’d hurt him. I care about you, Anthony, I really do, but...”

“But he’s your brother,” he finishes for me.

I slowly nod.

Anthony lets out a long sigh, relaxing beneath my touch.
“You need to leave, Bailey.”

“No,” I whine, inching closer to him. “Please, don’t—”

“Your brother’s waiting for you.” He takes a step away from my reach. “Just go.” He turns his head like he can’t stand to look at me.

I should be happy. Relieved. Relieved beyond belief that he’s accepting this, that he isn’t pulling out a gun and executing us all right now.

But I’m not. Sadness drowns every other emotion.

I want to say something, but I know there’s nothing left to say. I missed my chance.

So instead, I turn to the door and leave with hunched shoulders and tears in my eyes.

CHAPTER 18

Bailey

Corey stands over me like a king before his peasant. “Aren’t you going to ask if I’m okay?”

I’m sitting at my kitchen table with a glass of water Corey set in front of me. I haven’t said a word to him since we left La Divina. If I open my mouth, I’ll probably cry, and after twenty-two long years, I don’t plan on breaking my streak.

“Your boyfriend might have broken my nose,” he says, steel in his tone.

I glance at Corey’s face. His lip is split, and he’s going to have an impressive shiner tomorrow morning, but his nose doesn’t look crooked enough to be broken. Only bloody.

He dabs at it with a cloth while giving me a death stare. As if he has any right to be angry.

Maybe he does.

“He could’ve killed me,” Corey goes on. “You warning him gave him a chance. If you hadn’t, we’d be in no danger right now.”

“We’re not in danger,” I say, hoping it isn’t a lie. “I talked to him. He thinks you wanted to kill him because he kidnapped me. He doesn’t know the real reason.”

“That’s part of the real reason.”

My eyes narrow at him, and he lifts his hands to back off. He’s lying. I had nothing to do with why he wanted Anthony dead.

“You can’t kill him now.” My voice is low and hard. “He might tell his brothers about you, and if he does, they’ll come after you if something happens to him.”

“Yeah, no shit?” Corey chucks the cloth on my table. “Which are you more worried about, B, him killing me or me killing *him*? I’m your brother.”

I inhale a deep breath through my nose, trying to calm the fire he’s starting. When it doesn’t work, I slam my fist on the table, rattling the glass, and shoot to my feet. “And I’ve been trying to protect *you*.”

I shove at his chest, causing him to stumble backward. “I fucking warned you not to mess with these people, fucking *begged* you to leave Anthony alone, but you wouldn’t. You’re too much of a fucking idiot not to mess with the mobs, so *who* is putting *who* in danger? You seem to understand now what they’d do to you, but do you know what they’d do to *me*?”

I shove him again. “Did you ever once stop to think about that? Do you give a shit about me at all?!” One more shove, and his back hits the counter.

“I *love* you,” he growls, grabbing my wrist when I go to hit his chest. “I had everything under control before you decided to start fucking the enemy.”

“Oh boo hoo, the mobs won’t let you sell enough drugs.” I throw up my hands and let out a dry laugh. “Scratch that, Anthony isn’t even Irish, so what crime did he commit against you exactly? Not killing them off for you fast enough?”

Corey's shoulders straighten as he perks up. "Did he say something's happened?"

"What, is word not moving quickly on the street?" I bark out a laugh as I walk to my freezer to retrieve a tequila bottle. "I don't know the details, but the first attack has happened. Congratulations, your plan is working."

"Holy shit." Corey runs a hand through his hair as a smile tilts his lips.

So much anger settles in my bones that I find my lip curling.

He's happy. People are probably dying right now, dying because of *him*, and he's happy.

"Get out," I grit through my teeth.

He blinks and looks at me with surprise showing in his puzzled eyes.

"Get the fuck out of my apartment!" I take hold of his shirt and yank him toward the door. "Go, now!"

"All right." He lifts his hands and walks to the door without another word. The phone in my pocket, the one he used to track me, suddenly feels obtrusive, so I take it out and follow Corey to the open door. I throw it at his back as he starts down the hall, and it bounces off his dirty hoodie. "And take your tracking device with you."

Ducking back inside, I slam the door and press my back against it, tears running down my face before I'm even able to slide to the floor.

What am I doing?

I should go get Corey. Tell him I'm sorry, that I'm disgusted with myself for ever warning Anthony, thereby putting Corey in danger. That I'll never let anyone hurt him, no matter who has to die to make that happen.

I should clean his wounds. Make him food. Explain myself to him.

I should do all those things, but I don't. I don't want to. Even worse, it'd all be a lie.

I can't look him in the eye and tell him I regret seeing Anthony, that I even regret breaking into La Divina when I did because it just isn't true. I would *never* put Corey in danger, but to sacrifice the life of the man I care about to let my brother kill him? No. I can't.

At least it's all over now.

I hold my face in my hands and try not to think about the way Anthony looked at me. Try not to see the justified anger blazing in his eyes. At least Corey can't kill him now. That should be enough to soak up the resentment, but it isn't.

I allow myself to cry for several minutes before I pick myself up and go for the tequila on the kitchen counter.

If I can't soak up my resentment, maybe I can drown it.

CHAPTER 19

Anthony

My fingers twitch as I stare at Joshua Murphy's mugshot on my computer monitor. There's a sinking feeling in my gut I haven't been able to get rid of since last night when Bailey's brother showed up at my restaurant.

If it had just been him, maybe I wouldn't be feeling this way. Maybe I'd be able to believe Bailey, maybe even let it go. But he wasn't alone.

My eyes find the cobra tattoo on Murphey's neck, the same tattoo my manager told me about. This guy, this *thug* was caught in La Divina one day hanging around the office. He claimed to be searching for the restroom, and my manager forced him to wait in the lobby while he checked the office.

Nothing was missing. The safe didn't look tampered with. The paperwork on the desk looked untouched. As far as he could tell, the lock hadn't been picked.

So, he let Joshua go. He only told me later what had happened when he was poking fun at the poorly done cobra tattoo on the guy's neck. The same one I saw last night.

It begs the question... What the fuck was he doing in my restaurant?

My eyes close while I attempt to let it go, to not allow my mind to go in the direction it's headed. But I fail. I can't get Bailey's voice out of my head, droning on about the bomb in the alley, about me not being safe.

She was trying to warn me. And the bomb she talked about... I don't think it was planted by the Irish. I think someone wanted it to *look* like it was planted by the Irish. And I think that someone is connected to Bailey.

My stomach twists tighter as I run my hand through my hair.

What am I going to do if she's connected? What if she really was at La Divina to spy on me that night?

What if she's been behind *all* of this?

What if she played me?

What if she never even cared?

The pain in my stomach moves to my chest. It's pathetic, I know. A groan man, a *capo* no less, sick to his stomach about a woman playing him. If I was as ruthless as I should be, I would slit her throat and move on before I could begin to process any of this.

But I know myself. I know I can't kill her, no matter what she's done. If she was trying to play me, it worked. I've fallen further for her than I'm able to climb.

I think I might even be falling in love with her. I didn't realize it until now, but it's the only thing I can think of to explain why I haven't called Lorenzo to tell him my suspicions. He'd be able to crack this mystery faster than anyone could.

And yet, I don't *want* him to crack it. I don't want to crack it, myself. There's a part of me that would rather be in a war

against the wrong enemy than put myself on the opposing side of Bailey.

Regardless of what I want, the fog is gradually clearing, and I'm seeing a hell of a lot better than I did a day ago.

The door to my office opens, and I slowly click out of Joshua Murphey's file as Settimo walks in.

"Hey," I say to him when he doesn't start in on his usual rant.

"Hey, little brother." He runs his hand across his jaw while he ambles to the chair in front of my desk. Gripping the top of it, he gives me an awkward smile. "Got a minute?"

I gesture to the chair, and he sits, clearing his throat and crossing one leg over the other. "So... I've kind of been a dick lately, huh?"

Lately?

"You're the don, you're under constant stress. I understand I oftentimes add to that."

"Right, but I mean, with your girl. I shouldn't have talked business in front of her like I did, or I should have at least pretended to remember you mentioning her. I *should have* remembered her, I just didn't uh..." His fingers drum the arms of the chair. "I didn't take you seriously with all your talk about diplomacy with the other organizations. Now that we're in another war, I can see that you were probably right to try to work it out. If I'd followed your lead, maybe I could've talked to Cormac before it was too late and all of this could've been avoided."

“Maybe you could’ve spoken to Cormac, but it’s doubtful you’d have ever been successful talking Nikita down.”

He sighs. “Probably not.”

I glance at my computer monitor, debating on telling him what I know. Or at least part of what I suspect. I need to be careful to keep Bailey safe, but by staying quiet, I put the familia in danger. I’m not so sure I’m ready to choose her over them. Maybe she was right when she insisted that familial love is stronger than romantic love.

“I do think it’s possible that all of this was a mistake.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, leaning back in the chair.

I pause several seconds, thinking through my words.

Bailey or the familia?

Do I really have to choose?

“I don’t think the bombing outside La Divina was the Irish. I think someone was trying to frame them.”

“What?” He huffs. “Why?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, telling the truth. *That’s what I have to find out.*

“Why would you think that?”

I shrug. “It’s a gut feeling I have.”

He nods but looks off like he’s considering it. “Okay... I’ll try to get in touch with Cormac. Was uh, was your girl able to get any helpful information?”

My girl, the *spy*. I can hear the guilt in his voice as he asks the question. He really believes I had a better plan than actual peace with the others.

It almost makes me angry that I lied in the first place. That I felt the need to cover my tracks. It's pathetic how badly I try to prove myself to my brother.

I don't have the energy for that today.

"I lied about that," I say, feeling my shoulders squaring, gearing up for a fight. "She was just a girl who walked in at the wrong time. I knew you would think it was weak to let her live, so I made up some bullshit." I splay my hands on my desk. "There you go, you don't have to feel guilty. I'm as weak as you've always thought."

"Weak?" Settimo rears back like he's genuinely surprised. "You think I believe you're *weak*?"

I don't answer. My jaw stays clenched, and my arms stay flexed.

"Jesus, Anthony." Settimo shakes his head. "No brother of mine is *weak*. You drive me crazy with your patience and thoroughness in your work, but it makes you an asset. You're the voice of *reason* within the familia. Lorenzo and I count on you to balance us out."

My jaw starts to relax, and I bring my hands in front of me, resting my forearms on the desk.

"And you're not the only one capable of mercy," Settimo goes on. "Without it, we'd be nothing but savages. There's nothing wrong with letting a girl make you soft. Once."

Without it, we'd be nothing but savages.

It reminds me of what Bailey said. *Strength without mercy is for nothing.*

That's what I am for the familia, what I've always been. The mercy behind the strength. The reason behind the violence. The soft among the hardened. I've tried my whole life to change it. It's never occurred to me that I'm the only one who wants it changed.

One side of Settimo's lips lift. "You know, I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little hurt that you introduced Bailey to Lorenzo before you did me."

"It wasn't like I hosted game night." I huff out a laugh. "Lorenzo figured out immediately that I didn't kill her. He showed up to my apartment while she was there."

"Of course he did." Settimo looks off then smiles when he meets my eyes. "Well, I get to have the first dinner, then. Tonight, seven o'clock? Don't mention it to Lorenzo. I wanna piss him off after the fact."

"We're not dating, Settimo. We've never even had sex. She was only at Victor's reception because Maksim brought her to me."

He rolls his eyes. "Don't bullshit me, little brother. I saw you with her. Even if Lorenzo hadn't told me she had you by the balls, I could see it on your face."

He could?

"Seven o'clock," he says as he stands.

“Um, yeah, I’m not sure yet. I’ll have to see what she has planned,” I lie. It’s doubtful I’ll ever see Bailey again. If she’s smart, she’ll have already left Vegas.

My shoulders fall thinking about her, but I force them to square. “I’ll let you know.”

“Sounds good.” He smiles, no awkwardness to it this time as he backsteps toward the door. “I’m thinking duck. She’s not a vegan, right?”

I shake my head.

“Good. That food tastes like shit... Don’t tell Lorenzo I said that.”

I chuckle. Lorenzo’s wife is vegan. The first time I had dinner at their place, I ate beforehand, but I found out I actually like her cooking. A lot. She talked me into meatless Mondays.

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

He turns and tosses a wave over his shoulder before leaving. I feel twenty pounds lighter, but as soon as he’s in the elevator, the sinking feeling in my gut returns.

Again, I fight myself over whether or not I should keep digging into Joshua Murphey. In the end, I cave, just like I knew deep down I would. I can’t help it. I’m wired to need to know the truth.

I pull up his police reports, scanning the laundry list of petty crimes before clicking off it and moving on to his documented tattoos. Everything about him screams gang member, and those guys are stupid enough to advertise it on

their skin. If I can figure out what gang he's in, I can go from there.

Except, I don't have to go from there. As soon as I spot the TLB on his bicep, barbed wire wrapped around it, I know who's behind this. I know the motive. And I know how to find them.

TLB.

The Lost Boys.

The gang the street trash told me about, the ones I should've been looking at all along.

I pick up my phone but hesitate once I've made it to my contacts. If I make this call, there's no going back. I could very well be sentencing Bailey's brother to death.

Like he tried to sentence me.

Like he tried to sentence *my family*.

My hand balls into a fist as my jaw clenches. I find Maksim's contact and make the call.

Bailey was right. In the end, family always comes first.

CHAPTER 20

Bailey

Heat spreads over my palms as I stand outside Anthony's door holding a pot of soup. My eyes burn from all the crying mixed with lack of sleep, but my face is dry. I ran out of tears a while ago.

Every nerve ending in my body is at the ready as I knock on the door, then step back to wait.

What if he doesn't answer?

No. I promised myself I wouldn't play the what-if game. I've already spent too much time going through the possibilities of what he might think of me. All it did was take up the brainpower I needed to figure out what *I* think of *him*.

I think he's passionate. Passionate about his work, his family, his dreams. He carries himself in a way that hints at his power, but with it comes a greater sense of safety than I've ever felt. He's smart, smart enough to be a threat for his enemies.

He's compassionate, funny, merciful, an optimist who quells my pessimism. Until him, I never saw the argument for love. I never thought it was possible.

But here I am, standing outside his apartment with a pot full of soup, probably making an idiot of myself. It took so much strength to come here and even more to keep from running away.

The fear of being wrong about how he feels about me, or worse, being loved and then thrown away just as I watched men do to my mother countless times, spreads goosebumps over my flesh and begs me to go. Run before he can open the door.

But I stand still, with my heart on my sleeves and my mind made up.

I love Anthony Gruco.

Every time I say it in my mind, it makes my chest hurt, but I say it anyway.

I don't expect him to want me too, not after last night. I'm not even sure he'll open the door. All I know is I owe it to myself to show my cards. I owe it to myself to take a chance. Because before yesterday, I was content being alone. Now the idea of crying alone, no shoulder at the ready, no arms to wrap around, no lips to kiss me goodnight, sounds unbearable.

My heart leaps up my throat when the door opens and Anthony appears. Immediately, I try to read his expression, searching for anger, or better yet, longing. His brows knit as he glances from the pot to me.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” I say, my tone high-pitched. I clear my throat and hold out the pot. “I made this for you.”

He carefully takes it, looking more puzzled than he did a moment ago. “What is it?”

“Soup,” I squeak. I open my mouth, ready to start in on the speech that's been running through my head for hours, but

Anthony turns and carries the pot into the kitchen.

Not sure if I should follow, I cautiously step inside and shut the door behind me.

“I know you’re not sick, but I figured you might like a sample or something, you know, for the future?” I let out what is supposed to be a chuckle, but it sounds so strangled that I cringe.

“It’s chicken noodle,” I go on, meeting him in the kitchen. He blinks at me, and I continue before he can tell me to get out. “I-I didn’t know what kind you liked, but everybody likes chicken noodle soup when they’re sick, right?” I really should shut up now.

“I...” His eyes glaze while thoughts swirl behind them.

“You don’t have to say anything,” I blurt, taking a step toward him. “Just let me get this out, and I’ll go afterward, okay?”

Instead of answering, he crosses his arms over his chest and waits for me to continue.

“*I fucked up.*” The words nearly stick in my throat, so I gather what little moisture I can and swallow. I blink away the sting in my eyes. “You spared my life, and I didn’t repay the favor. I lied to you, I let you walk around knowing people wanted to hurt you. I...” My stomach recoils thinking about this next part, but I have to say it. I have to trust that everything will be okay. That he’ll make it okay. “I let you start a war that you shouldn’t be fighting.”

He shifts his weight while his eyes widen.

“The Irish didn’t plant the bomb at La Divina. It was a gang. They wanted you to think it was the Irish so you’d run them out of town, and then they could grow their turf to where it was before the Irish came to Vegas.”

My hands start to tremble, and I grip the sides of my pants to steady them. “The gang’s name is The Lost Boys, and Corey is a member. He...” My lip quivers with fear that’s difficult to steady, but I speak through it. “He is not innocent, but he’s my brother, and if you ever cared about me at all, you’ll spare him. I’m telling him tonight that you know everything, and I’m going to talk him into leaving the city. Use this information to help your family, but don’t follow Corey. Please.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asks, his voice gentle. He doesn’t sound angry. He doesn’t even sound surprised.

Why?

“Because,” I say, taking a deep breath. “You are the *only* man I’ve ever wanted to make soup for. You’re the only person I want to see me cry. You’re the... You’re the one person I feel safe with and the only man I’ve ever loved.” I swallow. “And if I let you carry on with this war, knowing it could hurt you and your family, I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

A shaky breath slips past my lips, and I try to gather my next words. I should go. I said what I had to say. I’m prepared to face the consequences, even if that means leaving Las Vegas and never looking back. But his caring face makes it so hard to leave.

“I understand if you never want to see me again. I probably wouldn’t either... But I needed you to know. I—”

“Enough,” he says with one long stride toward me before his hand covers my mouth. I tense but don’t move. “That’s enough talking.”

He replaces his hand with his lips, kissing me in a firm, long kiss that feels never-ending but couldn’t possibly be long enough. His fingers thread through my hair, pulling me onto my toes as I press into him deeper.

Day-old stubble tickles my hand when I touch his face, molding it to the firm divot between his jaw and cheekbone. Every part of him feels so hard, but his warmth wraps me in the softest embrace.

All the tears I’ve shed and the crippling fear I’ve felt over the last twenty-four hours melts away, and again, I feel safe in Anthony’s arms.

He bends to scoop me off my feet and doesn’t stop kissing me as he carries me to his bedroom. As soon as he lays me on the bed, we both hurry taking our clothes off, me ripping the shirt off my head and Anthony frantically tugging at buttons.

My eyes take in his chiseled chest as his white shirt slips away, falling to the floor in a heap with my own. Out of all the times I’ve imagined him shirtless, it still hits me just how handsome he is underneath his suits.

He climbs on top of me, his hands slipping behind my back to work the clasp on my bra while his lips find mine. Heavy breaths pass between us, heating my face while making

my heart pump faster. I can feel his desire. Smell it. Taste it on my tongue, and it sends a delicious shiver down my spine.

My breasts spill from my bra when the clasp snaps free, and Anthony pulls it away to throw it on the floor with the other articles of clothing.

He moves on to my jeans next, kissing a path down the well of my breasts to my stomach. My hips lift for him to tug my pants down my legs, leaving me in only a black, lacy thong I chose because it was at the top of my drawer. Or maybe that isn't why. Maybe I'd hoped this would happen.

What am I thinking? *Of course* I hoped it would. *Of course* I hoped he would forgive me, take me into his open arms to make everything in this rotten fucking world okay, just for a little while. I just couldn't hold on to that hope too tightly because it would've made the rejection that much worse. It would've broken me.

Now, I'm fixed.

Long fingers glide along my hips, tucking beneath my panties. I'm snapped back to the moment, and I suck in a gasp when he pulls the thong down my legs, his once frantic pace suddenly patient.

My thighs part when he pulls them open with his hands cupping my knees, leaving me feeling the most intimate kind of vulnerable. My neck tingles and skin heats as he takes me in, lowering to his forearms.

His eyes close as his lips press to my inner thigh, working their way up until he's reached a part of me that has my head

falling back on the pillow.

His tongue runs up my slit, pausing to press firmly on my bundle of nerves that hold all the tension in my body. Every sensation seems to originate from there. It spreads warmth to my skin, curls my toes, hardens my nipples, and arches my back.

When Anthony's tongue flicks, I tense, digging my fingers in the mattress to grip the comforter. He licks and sucks and kisses for a few agonizing minutes before both of us grow impatient and he drags himself up my body.

He kisses me, putting a hint of my own taste on my tongue. I almost pull away, but he presses into me firmly, and I relent, wrapping my hands around his neck.

Anthony shrugs out of his pants and boxers and lines up at my entrance, kissing me slowly with one hand cupping my face while the other props him up. I gasp as he thrusts into me, breaking our kiss as my head falls back.

His lips nudge my ear as my walls expand, making room for him.

"I love you too," he whispers.

My heart tugs like it's going to be yanked from my chest, and I relax into the mattress, feeling heavier than I ever have. As corny as it sounds, I feel whole.

He rocks his hips, pushing his cock farther inside me with each thrust until his full length fills me. His warm breath hits my ear, and I close my eyes and listen to it like it's my favorite song.

His pace picks up as his breathing does, and I wrap my legs around him when he gives a hard thrust.

“Fuck, Anthony,” I whimper, moving my hips to match his rhythm.

He must take that as encouragement because his pace increases even more until he has to lift to use both hands to brace himself. His eyes open, locking onto mine, and I see more lust than I have in my life, but there’s more there too. There’s a longing I’ve never seen, and I get the sudden sensation that I’ve been missing out all these years.

But then again, I haven’t been. No other man could make me feel this way. I would’ve been waiting for Anthony even if I’d bothered to look.

A deep moan crawls up my throat when he slips his hand between my legs to rub me, sending a wave of ecstasy through my core. I wind tighter the faster he rubs until my nails are digging into his shoulders and my chest is pushing out as I come undone.

“I love you,” I say with a moan, pulling him closer to me while my orgasm tenses my whole body, only to dip into deep relaxation moments later.

His pace slows while I unwind. It picks back up once my back sinks into the mattress, and I’m too spent to move my hips. His hand tucks beneath me so he can lift my ass and fuck me deeper. Harder. Faster.

His shoulders tense beneath my touch, and he stills. A groan vibrates his chest as he spills his cum inside me, and I

close my eyes to the sound.

I try to hold on to this moment, knowing what it could turn to. What it will *inevitably* turn to. But right now, it's just us. It's just perfect.

He rolls off of me and pulls me into his arms while I nuzzle my face against his chest. The smell of him mixes with masculine sweat that's sexier than his cologne.

Neither of us say anything for several minutes as we listen to each other's labored breathing. Gradually, my lungs slow, following my heart's lead, and I close my eyes and press my forehead against his pec.

My scalp tingles when he plants a kiss into my hair, his fingers gliding up and down my back absently. I get the feeling that he's thinking, and I wonder if he's as afraid for this to end as I am.

"What does *passerotta* mean?" I ask, hoping to draw him from his thoughts. I don't really need to ask. I looked it up online days ago, but I still want to. Just in case it means something different to him.

"It means *little sparrow*," he tells me, reciting the definition I found. "It's a term of endearment. It means I think you're cute."

"Cute?" I ask with an amused grin.

"That was my first impression... You reminded me of a kitten in a box on the side of the road. Irresistibly cute in a pathetic kind of way."

“What?” I go to pull my head back to look at him, but he presses me against his chest while he chuckles.

“My mother used to call me *passerotta* when I was a child and she caught me doing something I wasn’t supposed to do. Like sneaking candy or staying up late with the TV muted.”

“Ah, so you see me as a kid with her hand in a cookie jar. Got it.” I laugh.

“No, not anymore. I now see you’re stealthier than that.”

My smile falls, and I pull back. He looks down at me with an expression that holds a touch of sadness to it. Like he’s about to deliver bad news. My shoulders slump, and I rest my head on his arm.

“I know you did what you felt you had to do, Bailey. I don’t know if you were really spying on me that night or how far you went with your lies, but I don’t care. I love you. I get you.”

“But?” I ask, my voice weak.

“*But* my family has been put in danger, and I have to fix it. You know that, right?”

Corey. He’s talking about Corey.

My stomach drops.

“I know how much your brother means to you, and the last thing I want to do is hurt you... If you can talk him into leaving Vegas, do it and do it soon. I can’t protect him if he’s here.”

“You mean you *won't* protect him,” I whisper, my chest filling with dread. Not anger. I can't make myself be angry at Anthony. I would do the same if it was my family being attacked.

“I'm sorry.” His lips tilt into a frown as he pushes hair back over my shoulder. Each second, we get a little farther apart. We've been crossing enemy lines, but that line is getting thicker.

I clear the emotion from my throat and try to be practical. Hard. Stoic. “How much time do we have?”

When seconds pass without him answering, goosebumps rise on my arms. I sit up, pulling the comforter with me to cover myself, suddenly feeling exposed.

“Hours, probably,” he says, sitting up with me.

“What?” My jaw drops. “Can't you wait a day? It could take time to—”

“It's already done.”

What?

How could it...

“You knew,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around my stomach.

He nods. “I figured it out this morning.”

“And you didn't warn me?” My voice cracks and reverberates through my chest.

His phone goes off, and he digs it from the pocket of his slacks before hitting ignore and tossing it onto the bed.

He grabs one of my hands and brings it from my stomach, holding it gently. I can't decide whether or not I should pull away. "I would never let anyone hurt you. *Ever*. You're not in any danger."

"But my brother is." I pull my hand back and scoot to the edge of the bed.

Hours.

Maybe less.

I need to hurry.

"If he leaves, he won't be."

"You weren't planning on telling me that," I say, snatching my panties off the floor and pulling them on. I yank on my pants next, a sense of urgency buzzing in my fingertips.

"I wanted to." There's real pain in his voice that I wish made a difference. "Please believe me, I wanted to."

"Then why didn't you?" I spin to him, my shirt waving at my side.

He's quiet for a few seconds too many before I give up on the answer and pull on my shirt, then dart my eyes around for my shoes.

"I didn't want him to warn his friends. If they were prepared when we came and they shot someone, that death would've been on me. As it stands, his death is on him."

"No," I cry, slipping my feet into my shoes instead of chucking them at his head like I want to. "It's on you."

"Bailey..."

“Stop it!” The back of my throat aches as tears threaten to come. I hold them back while gritting my teeth. “Anthony, I fucking get it, okay? I know. I know you have to do what you have to do, but don’t try to explain it to me. You can’t kill my brother and expect me to understand.”

“But you can kill mine?” He yanks his boxers off the foot of the bed and pulls them on. When he stands, he looks like he’s grown a foot. “You put them in danger by withholding information the same way I have your brother. And yet, I understand. And I will help Corey *if* he stands down.”

I shake my head. Part of me thinks I can talk Corey into it, but part of me is terrified I can’t. Not in this short amount of time. I’ll be lucky to find him. “If you love me—”

“I do love you.” He steps up to me and takes my face in his hands. His eyes blaze with certainty. “I *love* you, Bailey.”

“Right, you just...” My eyes close as reality hits. My heart hardens to glass, and any minute it feels like it might shatter. “You just love them more.”

His phone goes off with impeccable timing, and this time, he lets the ringing run its course.

Familial love. It’s all that matters, in the end.

Never have I wished to be wrong about that... Until now.

He doesn’t respond because there is no good response. There would be no use denying it.

I feel for my keys in my pocket and stride to the door.

“I’m sorry,” his wounded voice calls to my back. I don’t stop to turn around.

If he says anything else, the sound of his phone ringing a third time drowns it out. I don’t have time to go back to find out what the call is about.

I just start running.

CHAPTER 21

Bailey

“Corey!” I pound my fist on the old screen door and don’t stop. “It’s Bailey, open the door!”

I jiggle the knob to find it as locked as it was three seconds ago—shocker—and debate on picking the thing.

But that would be crazy. Screaming for him like I’m doing now is crazy. I don’t even know that he’s here.

He wasn’t at his place or mine when I raced home, and his phone is going straight to voicemail. I drove down shady streets, under the overpass, asked a couple drug dealers if they knew where he was, all to no avail. Now I’m at Josh’s grandmother’s house—really scraping the bottom of the barrel—and that was only when I managed to track down where he lived from one of the dealers. It could be his grandma opening the door for all I know.

“Corey!” I yell, banging both fists now like I’m deranged. If this was the type of neighborhood where people didn’t know better than to be nosy, I’d be pulling unwanted attention.

Tires squeal down the street, but I pay no attention to the shitty old Jeep until it flies onto the lawn, parking hastily on a patch of dead, worn grass. Two guys jump out of the Jeep, looking more frantic than I feel, as impossible as that sounds, and it makes me cross my arms over my chest with anxiety.

None of them seem to even notice me as they open the back hatch to retrieve something, but when Corey spots me, I make myself known when I yell out my relief.

“Corey!”

His eyes widen as he stands with the back door open. “B?”

I run to him, relief flooding my chest, and I throw my arms around him only to get a stiff response.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, sounding anxious.

I pull back, my hands gripping his shoulders. “We have to go. Now. It isn’t safe in Vegas. Anthony, he—he knows everything.”

Corey’s eyes darken, and he pushes my hands away. “I know.”

He knows?

My eyes scan him, searching for answers, and I make out a wet spot on his black shirt that I realize is blood when I see the red liquid smeared on his arm.

I gasp and grab his arm, but he yanks away from me. “I’m fine.”

“Whose—”

I’m cut off by muffled yells coming from the back of the Jeep, and I whip my head to see two of the gangbangers hauling a man with a black pillowcase over his head out of the vehicle. They carry him, his bound feet dragging on the ground to the house while he thrashes and yells past what must be a gag, but it does little good. He’s large and muscles bulge through his shirt, but the blood soaking the thin fabric definitely seems to be his.

My head spins, too confused to figure out if I should be relieved or worried, and I look to Corey for answers. Instead of providing them, he pushes past me, striding into the house.

“We have to go,” I insist, tugging at his shirt when we step through the threshold. “We need to get the hell out of Vegas before—”

“I’m not fucking going anywhere,” he sneers, whirling around and shoving my hands away. His eyes blaze with anger I’ve never seen from him. Not directed at me.

“Corey, please, listen to me—”

“Josh is *dead*,” he growls, his hands balling into fists. “You can thank your boyfriend and his piece of shit friends for that. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“How did that happen?” My face falls, but I’m faking it. I don’t give a shit about Josh or any of the others. All I care about is getting my brother as far away from here as possible. I can’t fail him again.

He doesn’t answer, but if he did, I wouldn’t listen anyway. All my attention turns to the familiar face when someone rips the pillowcase off the prisoner’s head.

Maksim.

He thrashes against the chair they put him in and topples to the floor, falling hard on his side before some asshole with a mohawk shoves their boot into his ribs. His face contorts as he groans in pain, and my eyes move back to the blood soaking his shirt.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask, waiting for Corey to give me an explanation only a second before I storm to Maksim just as he takes a boot to the face that sends blood spraying from his nose. I shove the mohawk guy when he goes to do it again, sending him stumbling sideways.

Falling to my knees, I rip Maksim’s shirt up to inspect the damage.

My glare falls when I see the blood leaking from what can only be a bullet hole. His pale face suddenly becomes more apparent.

They’re killing him.

“Bailey, get away from him,” Corey says, grabbing my shoulder. I shake him off and grab the pillowcase, my mind swimming with what I should do. There’s too much stimulation. Too many problems to solve that all need immediate attention.

What do I do?

What the hell do I do?

I press the pillowcase against Maksim’s wound, holding the pressure as firmly as I can hoping I’m doing more good than harm. I’ve never helped someone who was shot before. I’ve seen it once, right on the street when I was a kid. There was some kind of dispute between two guys that turned deadly, and it was terrifying, but I had no role to play. I was just a kid. Saving the man’s life never even occurred to me.

“When was he shot? What... What the fuck happened?”

“Get your girl in check,” Mohawk sneers at Corey. “Better yet, get her out of here.”

Corey grabs me under my arms and hauls me back with me kicking and flailing. “Stop, you’re killing him! You have to stop the bleeding!”

Corey continues to drag me, but before he makes it to the door, one of his friends stops him. “Dude, she’s right. He’s no good to us dead.”

Silence envelops the room as the cockroaches attempt to use their heads for the first time in their lives.

Mohawk stomps to me and takes me by the hair, shoving Corey back when he tries to stop him. He forces me to Maksim despite Corey’s protest, but I don’t fight. For whatever reason, I can’t let Maksim die. I just ... can’t. Despite him being more than willing to kill me.

Mohawk throws me at Maksim’s feet. “Fix him.”

Fix him. That’s his genius plan.

What if I don’t know how?

Maksim groans, snapping my wide eyes to his face. He groans again, and I take the rag out of his mouth so he can speak.

He coughs and closes his eyes in pain. “Get a knife,” he grinds out.

A knife?

What?

I stare blankly but decide I don't have time to question it. His hands are tied behind his back. What's he going to do, stab me with it between his teeth?

"I need a knife," I say to Mohawk.

He glares. "Hell n—"

"*Now*. If you want him to live, give me a fucking knife."

He sneers at me a few seconds before relenting and pulling a blade from one of many pockets of his cargo shorts. He tosses it beside me, and I scoop it up, looking to Maksim expectantly.

"Go get some alcohol to pour on it. You have to dig the bullet out."

My lips part in shock.

"Just fucking do it," he growls.

Dig the bullet out.

Dig the fucking bullet out.

Oh, Jesus.

I hop to my feet and head for the kitchen, not needing to look far for the liquor. I'm guessing Josh's grandma is dead because the place reeks of bachelor pad.

I slosh liquor onto the knife, as well as my hands, then rush back to Maksim, kneeling beside him with my eyes on the wound.

Dig the bullet out.

I'll kill him.

“Untie me and I’ll do it myself,” he says, pulling my eyes to his face. When I make no move to cut his binds, he nods. “That’s what I thought... Do it.”

With a big swallow, I turn back to the wound. Am I really going to do this?

Yes. If he dies, he dies. At least I tried to save him, which is much more than he can say for me.

Here goes nothing.

I close my eyes and feel his wound with my fingers, trying to pretend it’s the inside of a pumpkin or something instead of a human being I’m digging my fingers inside. Maksim groans and flinches but stays way more still than any normal being ever could.

My stomach lurches, and I gag as I move around, searching for the bullet. When I find it, I realize that was the easy part. I try to pull it out, but it’s hard to get a grip.

That’s what the knife was for. Taking several deep breaths through my nose, I pull it out as much as I can and then pull my hand away, going for the knife next. Maksim’s stoic demeanor shatters when I dig the knife into the hole, and he starts yelling and cursing loud enough to alert the neighbors. Somebody shoves the pillowcase—covered in his own blood—back in his mouth.

I cringe but force my eyes to stay open as I work the bullet with the blade, until finally, I’m able to pinch it with my fingers and yank it out. I fling it from my hand like it’s on fire than pull out the pillowcase and press it to the wound.

He looks like he's about to pass out. His eyes are droopy, and his face looks even paler than before.

“Cauterize it,” he says through labored breaths.

“What?”

“Have to stop the bleeding.” His voice is so weak, I barely hear him, but I understand his meaning.

I jump up again with the knife and bring it to the stove, sloshing more liquor on it before putting it over the flame. Once it's glowing orange, I bring it back to Maksim and clench my teeth, like I'm the one who needs to do the bracing, and put it to the bullet hole.

A howl bellows from his mouth as the smell of burning flesh fills my nostrils. Someone covers Maksim's mouth to muffle the pained scream, but the agony and smell is contagious enough that Mohawk vomits on the already-stained carpet while my ears protest.

But it worked. Pulling the knife away, I don't see any more blood seeping. Maksim's head falls back as the guy removes his hand, and I feel like I might pass out along with him.

“We have to get to the safe house,” Mohawk says, his face red with embarrassment as he wipes puke from his mouth. “They'll find us here.”

They. As in the mobs.

They'll find them anywhere.

I turn to Corey and part my lips to beg him not to go. To stay with me, or better yet, leave with me. We'll go someplace,

anyplace else and leave this shit in the past.

But my mouth closes when I don't see him. He's already gone.

The gang members gather Maksim and leave me like they forgot I'm here, but I follow after them, getting in my car and peeling out seconds after they do.

If Corey's going to the safe house, so am I.

CHAPTER 22

Anthony

“Hurry the fuck up, Glitch,” Nikita growls as he paces a ten-foot stretch of the abandoned warehouse. His cane crashes against the concrete with every step.

Glitch, an absolute genius on our payroll, balances his laptop on a chair while sitting cross-legged on the ground. He doesn't respond to Nikita, doesn't even seem to hear him as his fingers fly over the keyboard, in search of the Lost Boys location.

“None of their phones are on,” he concludes after a long ten minutes of what must've been trying to track each of the known suspects' phones.

Nikita's wobbly steps cease as a dark cloud covers the space. The murderous rage comes off him in waves, hitting everyone nearby, and I look at Settimo to see his reaction. It's only a matter of time before Nikita pushes it with Glitch.

“*Find them,*” Nikita says, putting forth zero energy to hide his contempt.

“He will,” Settimo assures him.

Nikita throws a murderous look his way before pacing again.

I can't blame him for being furious. The Lost Boys showed up at the Irish compound at the same time three of Nikita's men were there to lay out the situation. And by show up, I mean they ambushed the compound, setting off a bomb they

must've already planted then open firing before anyone could get their bearings.

No one predicted they would be so bold. Until today, they seemed content letting us tear each other apart. Something obviously changed, and it cost at least five lives, four Irish soldiers and one Russian soldier. That isn't what has Nikita pissed. In addition to killing his soldier, they took Maksim, one of his best lieutenants.

"He better," Cormac, the Irish boss, says, standing with his arms crossed. His advisor stands beside him, looking equally pissed.

Hey, at least we're all friends again, right?

Lorenzo gives me a look I can't decipher, and I walk the few feet to him, tilting my ear to hear when he speaks low.

"Is there anyone else's phone Glitch should check?" he asks, the meaning clear in his tone.

Bailey.

I shake my head immediately, certain she wouldn't be careless enough to be with the gang, not after our conversation. If she's lucky, she got her brother the hell out of here.

"You're sure?"

Something about the way he says it makes me question myself.

Yes, I'm sure. Of course I'm sure. It isn't as if Bailey is *in* the gang. She wouldn't be with them. The leader wouldn't

allow outsiders to squat with them even if she tried, it'd be too dangerous for him.

But if Corey was there... If she didn't get to him in time, and she tried to go to him...

"I'm sure," I say before stepping back. Beads of sweat break out on my forehead, and my hands start to feel clammy.

I lied. I'm not sure.

When Glitch's fingers stop typing, all eyes point his way. He scans the screen, and when he sees something, he perks up.

"Got it."

Nikita storms to him, and the others gravitate that way. I stay back, using the opportunity to pull out my phone and shoot a quick text to Bailey.

You out of Vegas?

"Six months ago, this guy," Glitch points to the screen and turns it for all to see. It's a photo of Oakland Ryan, the man we've identified as the Lost Boys' leader. He looks more like a generic Captain Hook—mustache and all—than a kingpin. "He got a fine for trespassing at a farmhouse thirty miles outside of Vegas. The owner claimed the guy tried to buy the home with cash, but he wouldn't sell. He felt threatened and called the police when he spotted the guy later that night."

"So what?" Cormac asks, sounding annoyed.

Glitch turns to Cormac, pushing his black-rimmed glasses up his nose. "The owner of the house was shot a month later, and it's been vacant ever since."

“A safe house,” Settimo says, slowly uncrossing his arms.

“Those little shits think they’re prepared.” Nikita laughs, so much evil infused that it grates my ears. “Let’s go.”

He starts toward the door, his cane echoing menacingly off the walls. In thirty years, when gray hair and wrinkled skin have set in, that limp is going to make him look weak, but as it stands in his late-thirties, it only adds to the villainous look.

Everyone follows except me. I look down at my phone and stare at the unanswered text.

If she isn’t answering because her phone is off, that’s smart. Maybe she doesn’t even have it on her. Maybe it’s at the bottom of a lake.

“You okay?”

I jump at Lorenzo’s voice, darting my eyes to see him staring at my leg. My fingers tapping against my thigh come into my consciousness, and I curl my hand into a fist to stop them.

“Of course.”

His lips dip into a frown, and he just stares, waiting.

I glance down at my phone again. “How did you find out?” I ask, ignoring Glitch as he packs his things up.

“Once you identified the culprits to all this shit, it didn’t take much digging to see how she’s connected. Her appearance at La Divina wasn’t a coincidence.”

“She wasn’t there to spy,” I snap, unjustifiably insulted. Because I know what he’s thinking. I know what it looks like.

It looks like she used me. That it worked. That I'm a fucking sucker who couldn't see what was happening. I'm hoping only part of that is true.

Lorenzo says nothing for several long seconds. "Do you love her?"

My lips part, but I'm slow to speak. I know the answer with absolute certainty. I'm just not sure how smart it is to admit.

But this is Lorenzo. If he thought Bailey should be dead, he wouldn't be keeping who she is a secret from the others.

"Yes," I say at last.

He nods knowingly, like he somehow knew it even before I did. "Then I guess it doesn't matter what she was there to do."

"What the fuck are you two doing?" Settimo's voice booms from the exit. Lorenzo and I turn that way. "Let's go." He waves his arms outside in a *hurry up* gesture.

I exchange a quick, grateful look with Lorenzo before following him to the exit. Before we leave, I glance down at my phone again, hoping for a response I know isn't there.

Squaring my shoulders, I put my phone in my pocket and stride toward one of our two SUVs. The Irish and Russians each have their men as well, adding up to at least thirty of us in total.

Part of me hopes Bailey didn't leave the city, that instead she's hiding out somewhere, ready to pop back up at my apartment as soon as this blows over.

But I have to believe that she's gone. It's safest that way, for her brother at least. If he isn't far, *far* away by now there's nothing I can do for him.

Nikita's vicious face is illuminated by the early signs of sunrise as he opens the door to his car. Once we hit the safe house, there will be no stopping him.

CHAPTER 23

Bailey

I show up to the safe house minutes behind Corey.

At first, I followed close, but when whoever was driving sped off, turning sharp corners in a zigzag fashion, I got the hint that they wanted to lose me.

So I slowed down, following far enough behind that all I had were their taillights in the distance to guide me. At one point, I got scared I was letting the wrong car lead me out into the desert, but as I park Rose behind the beat-up Jeep abandoned at a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, I let out a sigh of relief that I made it to the right place.

I hop out of Rose and stride to the front door, not bothering to knock before I walk in. Corey and a guy with bleached hair mess with machine guns on a wooden table while the two other guys rustle around the room, cigarettes hanging from one's mouth clogging the dusty house with smoke.

This is it? Four people against an army of mobsters?

This is insane.

Corey must not have heard me come in over the metal music playing, but when he sees me, he pales.

“B.” He rushes to me, looking around like he’s panicking. Good. He should be. There’s no telling when the mobs will arrive.

“You can’t be here.” He shakes his head like he’s trying to convince himself I’m a figment of his imagination or

something.

“What? Too dangerous?” I sarcastically ask. “No shit, Corey. You can’t be here either, so let’s go.”

His eyes widen like they’re making room for the anger filling his irises. “They killed Josh. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then neither am I.”

He shakes his head again, even more forcefully this time. “No, you don’t understand. Oakland, he...” Something resembling guilt flashes across Corey’s face, and he takes my arms, backing me toward the door. “You have to go.”

I shove him off me, standing tall. “I’m not going to let my brother die.”

“B...”

“No.” Inhaling a deep breath, I step up to him, ignoring the others watching us. I take hold of Corey’s face, and to my disbelief, he lets me. “I failed you.” My voice breaks as my eyes sting, and I blink until the burn fades. “I let you wind up in foster care. I let people hurt you. I let you join this stupid fucking gang.” I wave to the others in disgust, and if they protest, I don’t hear it. “But I will not stand back and let you die. So either you come with me or we die together.”

“Nobody’s dying.” He takes my arms again. For someone who believes he’s safe, he seems frightened. Panicked even.

Am I missing something?

“The mobs have no clue where we are.”

“Then what are the guns for?” I stab a finger at the pieces of metal, way too destructive to be legal.

Corey groans and looks up at the ceiling for a moment before jerking me toward him and throwing me over his shoulders. I shriek, kicking my feet, but it only makes him squeeze to secure me.

“I’ll explain everything another time, but right now you have to leave.”

“Put me the fuck down.” I beat on his back with my fists, and when that doesn’t work, I try digging my elbow into his shoulder blades. He groans but doesn’t put me down.

“They’re here,” someone says, peering out a window.

Corey stops in his tracks. His arm around my legs squeeze tightly enough to be frightening.

They’re here.

I’m too late.

“No.” I cry out loud, whipping my head to the window. The sun peaking over the horizon competes with a string of headlights that light up the house as they approach.

Corey puts me down and pulls at his greasy hair.

We’re dead. Just like that, we’re dead.

My stomach lurches until it feels like it’s in my mouth.

“Put her with the Russian,” the bleached-haired guy says, sounding worried. “Claim she’s a hostage too.”

“No.” Corey shakes his head. He turns to me while speaking to his friend. “She’s going to leave. Oakland will understand.”

Oakland?

Who the hell is that?

I don’t have to wonder for long. Corey jerks me out of the way when the front door bursts open and a flood of gangbangers come through, most carrying guns, a few carrying cardboard boxes filled with who knows what.

A man older than the rest—maybe in his forties—steps through with his stubbled chin held high and his hands behind his back. Long black hair frames his face, and when he whips his head toward us, dandruff falls.

His eyes find mine, and his thick mustache twitches with his curled lip. “Who the fuck is this?” He flicks his hand toward me as even more men squeeze through the door. Now I understand the confidence. It isn’t Corey and a few friends. They have an army.

“Nobody,” Corey says, sounding like a scared child.

My arms cross over my chest instinctively, and I take a step back, letting Corey block me from the man.

This isn’t good.

“Nobody?” Mustache laughs so loudly that I flinch and take another step back. “Did you bring a fucking girlfriend to my house, you stupid motherfucker?”

“She helped keep the Russian alive,” Corey says with much more calm than he had a moment ago. I can see in his tense posture that he’s faking it. He’s scared of this man. “She was just leaving.”

“No one leaves.” Mustache steps up to Corey and shoves him out of the way so we’re face to face. “If you’re stupid enough to bring your girl with you, then you’re going to share.” His eyes dip to my chest, and when he goes to finger a lock of my hair, I swat his hand away.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

His lips stretch into a wide smile, revealing decades worth of neglected dental hygiene. I can smell his breath without him even speaking. I don’t *need* him to speak. I get the message. He wants to rape me. He probably wants my little brother to watch.

Bile rises in my throat before my teeth bare.

“Oakland, man, leave her alone.” Corey tries to fit himself between us, but Oakland shoves him again, throwing him a menacing look before going back to me.

“What’s your name, beautiful?”

“None of your goddamn business.”

His meaty chest shakes this time with his laugh, and I step back. I bump into someone, but he only pays attention to me for a second before carrying on with whatever he’s doing. None of the others seem to be paying attention to us. Only Bleached-hair peeks, but he looks like he’s trying not to draw attention. They’re all just a bunch of good little work ants.

“That’s okay,” Oakland says with a smile. “I don’t really give a shit anyway.”

He takes my arm and hauls me across the kitchen while I try to yank away, digging my heels into the broken tile in the process.

“Stop!” Corey runs in front of us. The noise dampens as several people now stare. “Please, leave her alone. W-we need her to take care of the prisoner.”

“W-we do?” Oakland mocks.

“Yes. His gunshot wound is—”

“Get the fuck out of my way, maggot,” Oakland sneers, no longer sounding amused. “You’re lucky I’m letting you live for this. Don’t push it.”

“Corey, forget it,” I say to shut his mouth when he opens it. I don’t know Oakland, but I can tell by the energy in the room that he’s dangerous. He’s the leader.

Disgust sifts through me, but I’m oddly not afraid of this man hurting me. I’ve dealt with my fair share of psychopaths lately, and he seems the least threatening. Or at least dumber than the others. A few minutes alone with him, and I could probably find something sharp enough to slice that smile off his face.

But I can’t let him hurt Corey.

“Yeah, Corey, forget it,” Oakland mimics.

“Would you shut the fuck up?” I try to jerk from his hold, but his grip tightens. “Do whatever you want to me, but leave

my brother alone.”

Oakland’s smile falls, and his grip on my arm loosens enough that I easily get away. I keep my eyes narrowed, but an uneasy feeling starts in my gut and moves throughout my body, smothering my anger.

“Brother?” Oakland turns to Corey, his stare menacing.

Corey lifts his hands. “I can explain.”

“You brought the Italian’s *whore* to our safe house?!”

My lungs tighten until I can’t get a breath.

He told them about me. He told them about Anthony.

Betrayal slaps me in the chest, but it’s quickly taken over by fear. The look on Oakland’s face is murderous, and suddenly, I question if I was wrong about him being less harmful than the other psychopaths.

Corey is one of them. He’s their people.

I’m not. To them, I’m the enemy.

“It isn’t like that.” Corey backs up when Oakland plants a foot his way. “She would never tell him anything. She helped us learn about La Divina’s security, remember? She’s on our side.”

“On our side?” Oakland scoffs and reaches around himself, pulling a gun from his waistband.

“No, don’t!” Corey holds out his hands while jumping to get in front of me. I’m too frozen with fear to move.

But the worst-case scenario happens. Oakland doesn't point the gun at me. He points it at Corey.

"No!" I scream when the blast sounds and Corey stands still, putting his hand to his bloodied chest. His knees buckle, sending him toppling to the floor, and I catch his head before it hits the tile.

"Corey," I cry out, tears filling my eyes. He doesn't speak. He looks like he's in too much shock to make out a word as he stares down at his chest, his hand shaking as he touches the blood. The bullet struck the upper left side, so not an immediate kill shot. If he dies, he'll die slowly and painfully. "I'm so sorry," I whimper, pushing his hand aside to put pressure on the wound. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"Put the bitch with the Russian," Oakland orders. "Looks like we have another bargaining chip."

"No," I cry when hands tuck beneath my arms.

"Go," Corey says, his voice weak.

I shake my head. "I'm not leaving you."

"Come on, go easy," Bleached-hair whispers in my ear. "Don't make it worse for him."

I scoff, but then realize he isn't talking about Oakland. He's talking about Corey. And he's right.

I kiss Corey on the forehead before forcing myself to allow Bleached-hair to haul me to my feet. My eyes stay trained on Corey as I'm guided from the kitchen down a set of steps leading to a cellar.

“Help him,” I beg when Bleached-hair lets me go.

He nods. “I will. I promise.”

He sounds genuine. Sad, even. He doesn’t sound like a killer. He sounds like a kid who got caught up in this shit the same way my little brother did.

Someone tosses a roll of duct tape down the stairs, and Bleached-hair retrieves it, but stops in front of me, pity sinking his face. He sets the tape on the bottom step before leaving me standing, unbound, at the foot of the stairs.

I let out a loud cry and cover my mouth until the basement door shuts.

Corey can’t die.

I can’t let him die.

When my legs wobble, I sit, pressing my forehead to my knees as my shoulders rack with a sob.

I should’ve left.

He told me to leave, and I didn’t listen. I should’ve known this was bigger than him, so much bigger. I should’ve known.

Why do I always fuck up? Why can I never save him?

“Shut up,” a voice groans. I’m so stunned, my sobs quiet, and I lift my head up.

Maksim sits slumped against a concrete wall, his head lulling like he’s weak.

“Maksim?” I say, as if it could be anyone else. I get up and walk to him before sitting carefully, just out of reach. He’s tied

up and weak, and I still feel like he's a threat.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here?" He laughs, but it's without humor. More like derision.

"They shot my brother." I suck in a deep breath to keep my voice from cracking.

"I heard." He lifts his head, tipping his chin toward the ceiling, and closes his eyes. "He's lucky. When my family shows up, the others will die a hell of a lot more painful death."

"Fuck you," I growl, but there's little heat to it.

The reality of the situation is that Maksim has been shot, and while he's no longer bleeding, he's in desperate need of a doctor. He can't stay down here for days. He won't last that long.

And Corey... If Bleached-hair doesn't stop the bleeding, he only has an hour, maybe less.

So as it turns out, we want the same things. We both need to get the fuck out of here.

Which, I guess, makes us allies.

Who would've thought?

"I have to get him out." I touch my pocket, feeling my keys protruding. "My car is here, I just have to figure out a way to get my brother out of the house."

Maksim's lips tilt up into a smile. "And I suppose you want my help?" *Now*, he sounds amused.

"If you want to live, you need mine."

His smile falls, and he lets out a long, slow sigh. “*Fine*. Find something to cut me free.”

“Promise that you’ll help my brother.”

He rolls his head my way, his lips set in a thin line.

“Promise me,” I say, shifting my legs. Already, I’m mentally casing the place for something sharp, but I need Maksim to say it.

There’s an incredibly low percentage chance that he isn’t going to knock me over the head and take my car keys, but he’s my best shot. I can’t do this on my own. I need him to at least lie to me.

“I promise,” he says, looking me in the eye. “You save my life, I save yours.”

“And my brother’s.”

He nods. “And your brother’s.”

I stare at him for several seconds, trying to read whether or not he’s telling the truth. He looks honest, but he’s a criminal. Criminals know how to lie. Worse than that, he’s more or less my enemy, depending on the day.

But like I said before, I don’t have a choice. I need him. He needs me.

We’ll just have to trust each other.

Finally, I drag my eyes off him to scan the room. There’s a lot of bullshit, but the thing that catches my attention is the tiny window high up above Maksim’s head.

It's too small for either of us to fit through, but a broken piece of glass could cut the rope around his wrists and ankles. The metal music upstairs is probably too loud for anyone to notice the sound of glass shattering... I hope.

I search out something blunt and land on a random metal pipe leaned against a shelf. I go to Maksim and lift the pipe above my head.

"Close your eyes," I order.

"You gonna end my misery, sweetheart?"

I roll my eyes, then close them as I bring the pipe back and throw it as hard as I can toward the window, shattering the glass and showering us with the pieces.

Maksim has a piece before I even blink. He looked weak when I came down here, but now there's life in his movements. He's ready to fight.

And so am I.

CHAPTER 24

Anthony

They have at least as many men as we do.

Before the SUV is even parked, I've counted ten men. Five posted in the yard, standing guard like soldiers on the front line and five on the roof. There's a barn off to the right of the house and a neglected field beyond. If there are this many men out in the open, there must be a lot more hidden.

We park the string of SUVs maybe a hundred yards back and get our guns ready. They haven't started shooting, so that's a good sign. Maybe they want to negotiate. That would mean Maksim is alive.

The soldiers are the first to get out, and when no shots fire, the rest of us step in front of the vehicles, staring the men on the lawn down. There must be thirty guns pointed at their ten, and I'd venture to guess we have more experienced shooters, so as it is, the front-line guys don't stand a chance.

I stand off to the right with Lorenzo, while Settimo and Nikita take a post on my left. Cormac must not feel the need to prove his dick is bigger than the rest because he's tucked behind several soldiers off to the side like a smart boss would do. The bosses will be the prime targets.

A man with a bull ring circling his nose walks up carrying a walkie talkie, and several guns point his way. He stops a few feet from Settimo and Nikita.

"We have your people," Bull Ring says, his face a calm mask. I wonder if he knows he's nothing but his boss's

sacrifice. “We’re giving you a chance to turn around and go back the way you came before we kill them.”

“*Them?*” I ask, unsure who I’m missing.

Bull Ring turns to me. “The whore and the lieutenant.”

The whore.

My throat closes up like it’s slowly turning to ice.

They could be talking about anyone. If Bailey was here, she would be with her brother. She’d be one of them. They wouldn’t have any idea about her involvement with me unless she told them. And even then, she could play it off like she was doing them a favor, getting intel.

She’s okay. It isn’t her.

Then why do I feel sick to my stomach?

“What’s her name?” I manage through the small hole left in my throat.

“Is that for me?” Nikita interrupts, pointing to the walkie talkie.

Bull Ring glances down at the device, then back at Nikita.

“What’s the girl’s name?”

“Anthony,” Settimo warns.

Bull Ring doesn’t answer, and I assume it’s because he doesn’t know the answer. It could be an actual whore no one mentioned was missing. It isn’t Bailey.

Still, I scan the house as if I’ll catch sight of her in a window or something. I don’t see her.

Bull Ring hands Nikita the walkie talkie just as something red catches my eye. Parked among seven other vehicles is a beat-up red Impala.

The gas station I met Bailey at flashes into my mind, and I see that car, sitting in the parking lot with her finger pointed at it.

No.

Nikita clicks the button to talk, but instead of using words, he raises his gun to point it at the man's chest.

“No!” I yell, reaching my hand out on impulse when several shots fire into the guy. His eyes are wide like he did not in fact know he was a sacrifice, and they remain that way even when the life leaves them.

His body slumps on the ground, and Nikita takes a step forward to fire several more shots into his chest, unloading his clip like the unhinged sociopath he is.

All at once, gunfire starts, and a crowd of Russians make a shield in front of Nikita, their guns blasting the last couple of gangbangers standing.

Nikita tosses the walkie talkie on top of Bull Ring's body and turns to his right-hand man who stares at him with the obvious question written in his expression.

Nikita carelessly lets the empty clip slide from the gun to clatter on the dead grass, then he reloads. “Maksim can take care of himself.”

My heart pounds in my ears as I stand, gun in hand, and try to take in the house. The gunfire has stopped temporarily until

more men come into view, but even in the quiet, it's hard to think.

Bailey's in there.

Bailey's in the house.

Hostage.

Hostage.

Hostage.

No.

"What's wrong?" Settimo asks, taking my arm and pulling me to the side, using the SUV as a shield.

"She's in there," I say, my head spinning as I watch the house.

How many men would I have to kill to get to her?

Too many. It'd be impossible.

Can I strike up a deal?

No, too late.

"Who?"

I blink to see Settimo's confused expression.

"Bailey," Lorenzo says for me, stepping up behind us. "It's her, isn't it?"

I nod, almost absentmindedly. My legs feel like they're made of Jell-O as I impulsively start toward the house.

"What are you doing?" Settimo takes my arm to jerk me back.

I point to the house. “I have to get her.”

“What?” His lips part as his jaw slackens. “You can’t go *now*. Wait for us to take the house.”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t have that long.”

She might already be dead.

My stomach bottoms out at that thought, and I step toward the house, but again, Settimo pulls me back. Gunfire is heavy now, and shots have started from inside, their machine guns hanging out the windows. It’s hard to hear my muddled thoughts over the noise, let alone Settimo’s voice.

“You are *not* going in there.”

“Let go of me,” I growl, jerking my hand free.

“Anthony stop!”

I’m several feet away, about to break through the line we have when Settimo grips my shirt and yanks me back.

“Just fucking wait!”

I turn back to him, my heart beating against my chest harder than it ever has. My fingers move past tapping, and instead, my whole hand shakes. I wait for Settimo to give me a better idea, *any* idea other than jump in front of gunfire to maybe make it inside.

I’ll have to go around back. There has to be a back entrance.

My eyes scan the perimeter. There’s very little coverage. I’ll be lucky to make it, but maybe...

“I am *not* letting my little brother die, do you fucking hear me?” Settimo’s loud, authoritative voice brings me back to him. “You go in there, I’ll follow, and we’ll both die. Is that what you want?”

No.

“I have to get Bailey.” Desperation drips from my words. “You and Lorenzo stay here. I’ll be back.”

Settimo shakes his head. “No, fuck that. We wait until the trash is taken out, then we—”

“I don’t have time!” I yell over the gunfire. *She* doesn’t have time.

My legs itch to run at my mind’s command, but Settimo’s words won’t let me budge. I believe him when he says he’d follow me. And I believe him when he says we’d die in the process.

I can’t let him die for me.

Although he doesn’t say the words out loud, I can hear them in my head. *Choose, her or me?*

Familial love or romantic love? Which one’s stronger? Which means more?

Choose, Anthony.

Choose.

My whole body feels like it’s shredding, every cell pulling in a different direction, threatening to rip me apart. My mind spins so fast, all I can hear is a million voices at once, all saying different things, all competing over the other.

And then the voices stop.

My answer becomes clear.

I choose both.

I raise my gun and crash it against Settimo's head, sending him toppling to the ground. Lorenzo flinches toward him but stops when I point the gun at his leg.

"You follow me, and I swear to God, you'll be walking with a limp for the rest of your life."

Lorenzo eyes me for a moment, then takes an AK from a nearby soldier. He nods to the roof where two gangbangers lay in a tight enough spot that they're hard to hit.

"I'll cover you the best I can," he says. "Go get your girl."

I want to tell him thank you. That I love him. That I love Settimo. That family is everything to me.

But I don't have the time.

I turn and take off, trusting that Lorenzo knows everything I haven't said aloud.

I'm barely out of range from the gunfire as I sprint with everything in me toward the back of the house, and I swear I can hear bullets whizzing past my ears. One of the men on the roof aims a gun at me but falls when he's hit. I'll have to thank Lorenzo for that later.

I focus my mind on Bailey and pray she's still alive.

She is. I have to believe she is.

A loud boom sounds in the yard, and I whip my head that way to see what looks like a fucking grenade explosion. My running falters, but I immediately pick it back up, focusing again on Bailey.

Everything else fades away.

CHAPTER 25

Bailey

“*Maksim*,” I hiss to get his attention off the metal cellar door leading outside.

He’s been slamming his shoulder against it for several minutes, and all it’s doing is making noise. I’m kind of glad the door isn’t budging. I have little faith in his ability to keep a promise when salvation is within reach.

He lets out a frustrated groan then stomps to meet me on the stairs. He’s about as subtle as an elephant.

The music shut off several minutes ago, so in comparison, the house feels calm. There are still people milling around in the kitchen, as well as incomprehensible, excited conversation, and I’m hoping they’re distracted enough not to be paying attention to the cellar door. With *Maksim*... We’ll be lucky to make it from the cellar at all without them noticing our escape attempt.

I creep up the stairs with *Maksim*’s heavy feet creaking every step behind me, and when we reach the top, he lifts his foot to kick down the door.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, sliding in front of him and taking his arm.

Maksim waves to the knob. “It’s locked, isn’t it?”

My eyes are wide with astonishment at how unbelievably clueless this guy is.

I pull my keys from my pocket and dangle them, emphasizing the tiny lock pick on my keychain. Fumbling with the pick, I turn to the knob and bend to study the lock up close for a moment. I'm just about to work my magic when the gunfire starts.

My back muscles wind tight, jerking me upright as I gasp and fall back into Maksim.

The gunfire sounds distant, like maybe it's coming from outside, and it's startling enough that we hang tight for a minute. Neither of us move until a rain of gunfire sounds in the next room.

Corey.

I frantically insert the lock pick, but Maksim yanks me back, clasping a hand over my mouth as he drags me halfway down the steps.

"Let go of me!" I try to yell, but my words are muffled by his hand.

He kneels so we're out of range if a bullet flies through the door and lines his mouth up to my ear. "That has to be the Bratva. We're safest if we wait."

Safest if we wait. Sure, maybe me and Maksim. But Corey... The Bratva will kill Corey without a second glance if Oakland hasn't beat them to it.

I throw my elbow back into Maksim's abdomen, hitting just above his wound, and he lets out a pained growl as he releases me.

My feet slam on each board I hit rushing up the stairs, letting anyone who might be listening know I'm coming. I doubt anyone even remembers I'm here, though. Voices shout on the other side of the door, barking orders at one another like they're in a frantic fight for their lives.

My hands tremble as I insert the lock pick, so it takes me longer than normal to hear the click, but once I do, I fling the door open.

A row of men are at the windows, filling them with barrels that spray bullets into the yard, and several others shuffle through boxes and reload clips as soon as they're empty. I don't see Corey. For several seconds, all I can make out is the chaos.

A man at a box whips his head my way, and he scrambles to pick up a gun. My response time sucks, I'll admit that. I don't even think about ducking until he points the gun at me, and by that time, it's too late.

Someone slams into me from behind as the gunman pulls the trigger, and I'm hurled to the tiled floor. The weight lifts, and I roll onto my back in time to see Maksim charge the man with the gun.

He tackles the man to the ground and raises his fist, the glass shard in his grasp. The man lets out a scream as the shard comes down on him, but he's silenced once it punctures his neck.

“B.”

I whirl to the right of me and find Corey sitting up against the wall. Instinctively, I jerk toward him, but I stop myself and instead crawl to the gun that slid from the dead guy's hand.

A man with a tattoo of an eight ball on his arm notices Maksim and points the gun his way, but I'm faster by probably a millisecond as I squeeze the trigger. Maksim snatches the gun when Eight-ball crashes to the floor, and he aims it around, his eyes wide as he seeks out the next threat.

In all the chaos, no one seems to even notice us. Eight-ball and Sliced-neck were at the table, but everyone else faces the windows and outside door, or they're too busy panicking with clips to realize the enemy that's inside.

Maksim aims the gun at the men shooting out the windows, and I jump to him. "No, don't!"

He snaps my way when I grab the barrel of the gun. "You'll draw their attention."

Maksim eyes me carefully then lowers the weapon and slowly backs toward the wall.

I rush to Corey before dropping to my knees and cupping his face, tapping him a few times when his droopy eyelids don't open.

"Come on, we have to get to the cellar."

He groans, his head lulling when I shake him. "Corey!"

I grip his shirt, feeling it soaked beneath my fingertips, and look down at his chest in horror. He's lost a lot of blood.

Lifting his shirt, I can see Bleached-hair bandaged the wound, but whatever he did to close the bullet hole must have ripped because there's no white left on the bandage. It's bright red.

"Maksim," I cry, turning to see him looking toward the exit, ready to run. Several people rush right past us from another room in the house and sprint out the front door, machine guns pointed straight ahead.

Maksim seems reluctant, hesitating for a few moments, but he finally lowers his weapon and crouches next to Corey.

And it's a mistake.

A bullet slices through his arm, and he falls forward, his head crashing against the wall. A man wearing a gray beanie has his gun raised to Maksim, but I yank Maksim by his shirt out of the line of fire just as the gun goes off.

I point my gun at the man and squeeze the trigger, ending yet another person's life. It doesn't gut me. Not yet. But it will.

"Fuck." Maksim turns to press his back against the wall, cradling his arm.

He closes his eyes, his teeth gritting while I try to rouse Corey. "Come on, come on..." I grab his shirt and shake.

"You're gonna have to wake him up," Maksim says as if I wasn't already trying to do that. "I can't carry him."

In a fit of desperation, I rear my palm back and slap it across Corey's face. He cringes and turns his head, finally waking up.

“Hurry it up, princess.”

“I’m fucking trying!”

Corey blinks his eyes open, and I take his face in my hands. “I need you to get up. We have to go.”

“B?”

“Come on!” Another shot goes off when Maksim fires the gun at whoever is at my back, but I don’t even turn around. I take Corey’s wrists and try to lift him up with me as I stand, but he can’t seem to get his balance.

“Maksim,” I whimper, turning his way.

He looks between me and the others in the room then curses under his breath. He takes the gun in his wounded arm, cringing as he does, and holds it at the ready. Using his good arm, he takes Corey’s bicep and hauls him up while I help with the other arm, only to drop him when Maksim has to fire yet again.

He yells out in pain at what I’m guessing is the gun’s recoil, and he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Bailey,” he says, seeming genuine as he meets my eyes.

He faces the exit, and when he takes a step that way, I try to grab at his ankle. “No!”

He easily evades me and heads toward the open doorway behind two gang members, his gun held firm in his good hand. They won’t know what hit them.

Turning back to Corey, I clutch his arm and lift. “Come on, you have to get up!”

Gunfire starts behind us now, at the back of the house it sounds, and I flop to the floor when several gang members rush down the steps to the cellar, only to be met with gunfire.

They're in the cellar.

They're out front.

They're *everywhere*.

I'm too late.

"Shit," I cry, pulling Corey close while darting my eyes around, searching for another exit. If anyone notices me now, they don't care. Not without Maksim here.

"I'm so sorry, B," Corey says, dragging my eyes to him. "I love you so much, I..."

"I love you too," I say, my heart pounding fast, as if there's still hope for a way out. There isn't. It's becoming more and more clear by the second.

Tears blur my vision. "I'm sorry. You're sorry. We're both just a couple of fuckups." I laugh, but it's wet and sad. "All that matters is that we love each other."

He shakes his head. "You didn't fail me, B. You..." Emotion cracks his voice, and a tear slips from his eye. The gangbanger, the murderer, the person I hardly recognize fades away until finally, I see my brother again. "You're the best sister I ever could've asked for."

I bite my lip and lay my head on his shoulder, breathing in the scent of blood and sweat, but still, I savor it.

“It’s an honor to be your sister,” I say, feeling it in my bones.

Funny, I used to think your life flashes before your eyes before you die, but I see Corey’s.

I see him as a baby I fed in the middle of the night.

As a toddler I pushed on a swing.

As a boy I stole food for.

As a teenager I tried to tame.

And as a man I tried to protect.

All different versions of the same person. All the same love.

It’s real. It’s forever. It’s no matter what.

But, still, his face isn’t the only one I see.

I close my eyes at the thought of Anthony and try not to ask myself what if. Try not to see all the possibilities because all it causes is heartache. In the end, I’m glad for the time that we had. I’m glad he opened my eyes, let me experience the thing I’ve been missing all this time.

Love. The kind you don’t get from blood. The kind you choose, the kind that’s safe, the kind that’s vulnerable. The kind I thought was too fragile, too short-lived, too shallow. I was wrong.

It’s real. It’s forever. It’s no matter what.

Corey’s hand takes mine and squeezes like I’m the one who needs the comfort. Maybe he’s right, but even so, I

squeeze back harder, trying to drown out the sound of gunfire and explosions.

But then I hear his voice.

“Where is she?” Anthony yells, snapping my eyes open just as he passes through the cellar door, holding a man by the collar.

He was the source of the gunfire in the cellar.

All around him, bullets fly, but there’s only so much attention the gang members can give. I can see the mobsters through the window, can hear their voices getting closer.

It’s almost over.

Anthony shoots at three men aiming his way, catching one who’s close enough before he falls to the ground. He uses the man as a shield, taking gunfire from just one more guy. I fumble with my gun, but get it in time to shoot, sending a bullet through the man’s chest. He drops to his knees and presses a hand to the wound, but when blood leaks from his mouth, I know he’s as good as dead.

Anthony’s gun swings my way, noticing the shots, but when our eyes lock, it nearly slips from his hand.

“Bailey,” he says with so much relief, my heart skips.

Anthony.

He rushes to me, throwing the human-shield off him, and scans up and down my body. “Are you hurt?” he asks.

I shake my head. “My brother...”

Anthony moves to Corey, lifting his shirt to see the bandage. He turns to the thinned army Oakland had in the kitchen. Oakland himself seems to have disappeared, and I can only guess that he's tried to run.

Anthony lifts his gun, and I try to stop him for the same reason I stopped Maksim, but he shakes me off, and it's only a second before I learn why.

Bleached-hair stands at the window, grenade in hand, and when he pulls the pin, Anthony shoots before he can throw it.

"Get down," he says to me, dragging the body on top of us when I take Corey and pull him to the floor with me.

"Throw it!" I hear someone shout just before the room shakes with an explosion.

All the noise quiets, leaving only a ringing in my ears as I open my eyes and see a cloud of smoke and dust. The smell of gunpowder hangs heavy in the air and mixes with something too gory to want to put a name to.

The weight of the dead body leaves me, and I blink to see a guy with his legs blown off thrashing on the floor.

Anthony's lips move, but I hear no words. He seems to realize this, his eyes squinting as he studies me, so he gives up on talking and grabs my brother's arm. He pulls Corey onto his shoulders, and cringes as he lifts.

When Anthony's hand outstretches for me, I take it, letting him help me up. He urges me down the steps, and I walk, sort of out-of-it, until Anthony nudges me to move faster.

All of the gang members are dead. If there are any living, they're either missing a limb or they weren't in the kitchen. If there are more, they won't be going to where the grenade was fired.

So, we aren't running from the gang...

We're running from the mobs.

Fuck.

I shake my head to snap myself out of this wobbly state, and the sound of yelling enters my consciousness. The ringing in my ears quiets enough to hear the commotion upstairs, the men entering the house.

I run across the cellar and climb the steps for the outside door, one side covered in bullet holes, while the other is opened with morning light bathing the musty place. When I climb out, the gunfire has mostly ceased, only a few shots here and there, and I'm guessing it's from the mob men killing off the wounded.

My chest aches for Bleached-hair, but there isn't enough room to fully mourn him. He helped my brother. Maybe even saved his life. But right now, all my mind can handle is the present and getting Corey out of here.

Lorenzo is outside, appearing to be waiting for us, and when Anthony spots his brother, he sets Corey onto his feet, propping him up with Corey's arm slung over his shoulder. "One bullet wound to the chest. He's lost a lot of blood."

Lorenzo stabilizes Corey's other side, and they help Corey toward the vehicles. I'm thinking they'll stop at mine, but

when they keep going, I get as close as I can to Anthony to speak, for whatever reason not wanting Lorenzo to hear.

“I have my car,” I whisper to him, hoping he’ll stop and turn around.

Anthony looks over at me. “We have a doctor. We’ll get you both taken care of before you go.”

Before you go.

Before *I* go.

I swallow and walk with them to an SUV with the hatch open, passing Oakland’s execution taking place in the yard. There’s a man sitting inside the vehicle with his arm in a sling, but he climbs out when he sees us coming.

Anthony and Lorenzo help Corey into the SUV, and a man with gray hair, the doctor I presume, lays him on his back.

“Single gunshot wound to the chest.” Anthony looks to me to confirm. “That’s it, right?”

“I, um...” My brain is so foggy, it’s hard to think straight. “Yes, I think so.”

The doctor goes about tearing off Corey’s shirt with a pair of scissors, and I watch, leaned that way hoping there’s something I can do. Corey is at least awake, his eyelids clenching shut with every movement the doctor makes.

I jump when Anthony touches my arm.

“Are you okay?” he asks, frowning.

I nod, a few times too many, and let out a shaky breath when he takes me into his arms. My hands dig into his back as

I squeeze him tightly, afraid if I don't he'll be gone.

“Don't leave me,” I whisper.

He pulls back and tucks my hair behind my ears. “I'll be here the whole time.”

Corey screams, and I try to turn that way, but Anthony holds me still. “He's okay,” he says over Corey's cry of agony. “You don't want to watch.”

“What's he doing to him?” I ask, thrashing in Anthony's hold, but then I remember.

The bullet. He has to get the bullet out.

I cringe as screams curdle my blood, but I manage to get away from Anthony to take Corey's hand.

It's several minutes before his screams stop and the doctor hooks him up to pump fresh O-Neg blood into his system. The whole time, Anthony squeezes one of my hands while I hold Corey's with the other.

“Why is he alive?” a low, enraged voice asks.

Anthony and I both turn that way to see a terrifying dark-haired man, cane in hand, and Anthony's brothers.

Anthony goes to climb out, but I don't let go of his hand.

“It's okay,” he whispers. “I'll be right back.” I look into his kind eyes and slowly release my grip, watching while he walks away with the men. Their angry voices reach me, but I turn back to Corey and try to ignore them.

Anthony said it'll be okay.

He'll keep us safe... Again.

The doctor finishes up with Corey and gives him instructions on how to take care of his wound before he leaves us.

When it's just me and Corey, he sits up, looking at me with hardened eyes.

"Do you think they'll kill us?" he asks.

"It'd be pretty fucked up to treat you just to put a bullet in your head." I try to sound funny, but there's too much unease in my tone. I take a deep breath and give a sad smile. "Anthony won't let them hurt us. I promise."

He looks away like he's ashamed. "I would."

"No, you wouldn't." I frown. "You would never let anyone hurt the woman you love, or her family. You're a better man than that."

He looks at me with a face so innocent, I see the little boy in him once again. "You really love him?"

Without hesitation, I nod.

Corey lets out a breath and messes with the bandage on his chest for a minute before scooting down the SUV. "Do you still have the keys to your car?"

I peek around the SUV to look at Anthony and the dark-haired man, still arguing, then I nod.

He nods to the driveway. "Let's go."

"We should—"

“If he’s going to keep us alive, there’s no reason we need to wait. If he isn’t able to, we’re idiots for staying.”

I look at Anthony again, my heart aching even though I know Corey is right. I trust Anthony, but the right thing to do is go. Even if it means I won’t get to say goodbye.

I close my eyes, preparing myself to walk away as Corey hops down from the SUV and takes my hand. He guides me away from the mobsters, too concerned with their wounded to care about us.

Except for one mobster.

A gun cocks, and I freeze.

“You pull that trigger and we go to war,” I hear Settimo say. “Stand down, Nikita.”

I slowly turn, a lump forming in my throat as I stare down the barrel of Nikita’s gun. I’m not his target, though. He’s aiming at Corey, just over my shoulder. When I try to step in front, Corey shoves me out of the way, and I’m too afraid of setting the mobster off to protest.

The man scoffs. “It’s you who minds war, Settimo.” He stares at Corey with so much hatred, I shiver.

“I swear to God, if you don’t put that gun down, I’ll blow your fucking head off,” Anthony sneers next, although he’s being held back by Lorenzo, no gun in sight.

Nikita laughs dryly.

“Cut the drama,” Settimo says. “You’re not going to shoot one of ours when we can take out all of you. You’re down too

many men.”

“If you want to claim the girl, fine. But it doesn’t look like he’s one of yours,” Nikita says.

It’s a bluff.

It *must* be a bluff.

They wouldn’t be as calm as they seem if it wasn’t.

He’s just angry.

Please just be angry.

The large, muscular back of a man blocks my view of Nikita, shielding me from the gun. I step back into Corey, away from the man, and when I see his blond hair and the bandage wrapped around his arm, my heart stops.

Maksim.

“You too, huh?” Nikita asks without nearly as much derision as he spoke to the others with.

“A life for a life,” Maksim says, unmoving.

Several seconds pass while my lungs burn for oxygen.

I don’t see him when he lowers the gun, but I feel the tension in the air unwind, and I watch Nikita as he storms off. Maksim turns, exchanging a look with me that says, ‘we’re even.’ “He leaves Vegas.” Maksim points at Corey before staring down Anthony. “Anyone have a problem with that?”

When silence ensues, it’s decided. It was always going to be that way.

Corey tugs on my arm to get me to move, and I reluctantly start that way, longingly looking at Anthony one last time before facing forward and following Corey to my car.

My eyes sting as I dig the keys from my pocket and go to open the door, but Corey stops me.

My lips purse as we lock eyes. When he holds out his hand, I just stare at it.

“I love you, B,” he says, his voice soft. “I want you to be happy.”

My gaze lifts to his face, and I take in the pain swirling in his irises.

“This is the hell I’ve created,” he says. “I’m not dragging you down with me.”

“Corey...”

“Thank you.” He steps close to me and cups the back of my neck. “Thank you for giving me another chance... Thank Anthony for me too.”

I open my mouth to speak, to argue why he’s wrong, why we should leave together, but the more it settles in my mind, the more I know if I said anything, it’d be a lie.

I don’t want to run. I don’t want to spend my life dodging criminals and looking over my shoulder. More than ever, I crave safety. And more than ever, I know what that is. And where I want to be.

With my eyes filling, I slowly press the keys into his hand. I can’t form words. And for the first time in his twenty-two

years, he sees a tear slip from my eye.

He smiles a sad, goodbye smile, and kisses my cheek. “I love you too.”

With that, he climbs into the car and drives away, my red Impala fading into the distance. To my complete surprise, my heart doesn't drive away with it.

Anthony walks to me, and my legs itch to run to him, but my mind roots me in place. It's been a long, hard twelve hours. Hell, a long hard *life*. I'm ready to rest.

He stops just short of me and frowns. “Are you sure about this?” he asks, gesturing to where my car disappeared.

With a deep breath, I nod. “I don't know that I've ever been more sure of where I want to be.”

His frown eases as his eyes dip to my lips. “Good.”

With one long step, he closes the distance between us and crashes his lips to mine. My hands wrap around his neck as his weave through my hair. I'm acutely aware of my heart pumping, faster and faster by the second, and it feels like it just started back up.

I'm safe.

I'm home.

And there is no better feeling. No better bandage for my wounds. No better way to bring me peace.

When our kiss finally breaks, Anthony presses his forehead to mine, his breaths hitting my lips.

“Are you ready to ride off into the sunset?” I ask, a smile tugging my lips.

He takes my hand and grins in return.

“Ready.”

EPILOGUE

Bailey

“Are you feeling okay?” Anya’s perfectly filled-in eyebrow raises.

The brush stills in my grasp, and I pull it from her eyelid. “Of course.” Studying her eyes closely, I brush over one side that probably only looks slightly heavier in my imagination.

The truth is, I’m just busying myself as a distracter at this point. Anya looks great. Hell, she looked great when she walked into Anthony’s and my apartment. She’s fifteen, she has the skin of a baby’s ass.

But you know who doesn’t look great?

Me.

My stomach recoils again, and I smile through the nausea. It’s been like this almost constantly for a week, but there’s no way I’ll make it one more night locked up inside this apartment. I’m due for a shift at Au Revoir’s bar in an hour, and I’ll be damned if I let Anthony talk me into staying home again.

“So is Mack taking you out to eat first?” I ask, remembering her date for the winter formal. This is my third time doing her makeup for a dance, this time a sort of freshman/sophomore prom. It’s free of charge because I ironically think of Maksim as a friend, but it’s okay because I like her company. She’s got spunk.

“Ew, gross.” She scrunches up her face like she’s just taken a bite out of a rotten egg.

“What?” I laugh. “I thought you liked him.”

“Sure, until he told half the school I’m an easy lay. All because I didn’t want to suck his uncircumcised dick.” When she makes a gagging sound, I have to giggle. I don’t know if I’ll ever be used to her mouth.

“Can you imagine how much lint must’ve been trapped in that thing? The dude only showered every, like, third day.”

“Okay, well then who *is* the date?” I ask, putting away my makeup bag.

“Ashton Ash.”

I purse my lips, puzzled by that one, and she swats her hand dramatically.

“I know, I know, his parents are dicks.”

“Anya Ash doesn’t sound much better.”

“Yeah, well, this is Spring Fling, not my wedding.” She winks then raises from her chair abruptly, turning to my mirror and toying with her freshly-curled, blonde locks.

“Not bad, Bails.”

“Bails? Like Hay bales?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, I’ll work on the nickname.”

“You about ready?” Maksim asks, poking his head in my bathroom door. “You’re going to be late.”

“Part of the plan, bro. I like to make them sweat.”

Maksim makes a face that makes me think he might be the one nauseous now. If I thought Corey was a handful at this age, Maksim feels my pain. I barely contain my laughter.

Anya skips from the bathroom, brushing past her brother and giving me a farewell over her shoulder. Maksim sighs before slapping his hand on the doorframe and standing up straight. “Thanks again, Bailey.”

I smile. “My pleasure.”

“Do you want some—”

“Don’t you dare.”

He smiles appreciatively before pushing off the frame and heading out into the hallway. I slump into the chair Anya occupied, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth. I don’t know where I heard that it helps with nausea or even if it’s just an instinct, but I’ve used that technique quite a bit lately. I don’t think it works.

The front door slams, leaving Anthony and I alone in the apartment. My eyes are drawn to the drawer I shoved the life-changing piece of plastic that’s been on my mind for three days now.

I haven’t spoken to Anthony about it. Not yet. I’ve been telling myself he’s been too stressed with a new hotel opening only a month ago. And that I’m waiting for the right time. But it’s bullshit. I’m just a chicken.

“Babe?” Anthony calls, peeking into the bedroom where I see him through the adjoining bathroom door. “You hungry?”

“Starving,” I lie. I’ve been living on saltine crackers for days. “I’ll be right there.”

He smiles before disappearing. All at once, nausea overtakes me, and I barely make it to the toilet before my stomach empties.

See? Told you the breathing exercise doesn’t work.

Pushing back my hair, I flush the toilet and clean my mouth out. By the time I make it into the kitchen, Anthony’s pouring me a bowl of hot, chicken tortilla soup.

“Hey, babe,” he says to me, handing me the bowl. “How are you feeling?”

“Great.” The spice from the soup hits my nose, and while normally this is my go-to sick food, it turns my stomach. I twirl the spoon in the bowl and set it on the counter.

He glances at it but says nothing, and I love him for it. He never holds anything against me. Never questions my decisions. Never lays down any judgment. We aren’t married, but already he’s a great husband. And I know he’ll be a great father.

“I got you something today,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts. I blink and right myself as he plucks a plastic bag off the counter. I take it from him and pull out the cardboard box containing a pregnancy test. The fifth one I’ve seen in the last few days.

“I know it’s wishful thinking,” he says, his finger tapping on his thigh like it does when he’s nervous. “But your stomach bug is lasting a little long, don’t you think?”

“Wishful thinking?” I inch toward him as my lips twitch with a smile. “You would be happy if I was pregnant?”

“Fuck yeah, I would be happy,” he says like it’s a ridiculous question. “What do you think I’ve been trying to do all this time?”

“Oh *that’s* why you’ve been fucking me.” I snort. “Okay.”

“Seriously.” His smile fades. “If you are, let’s get married.”

“And if I’m not?”

He pulls a box from his pocket, wiping the smirk off my face. I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks as I take it in, and I look at Anthony in disbelief.

He pops it open, revealing a gorgeous teardrop diamond balanced on a silver ring. “Then let’s get married.”

I cover my hands over my mouth and lock my knees when they threaten to buckle. He smiles wide and drops onto one knee.

“I had a speech planned, but honestly, I’m on the edge of my seat here. Say yes so we can find out if you have a stomach bug or a parasite.”

I laugh and kick him, grabbing the ring box from his hand. I take it out and put it on my finger. I’ve never told him my ring size, but it must be meant to be because it’s a perfect fit.

Tears fill my eyes as I hold up my hand, and I hug it to my chest.

“Baby?”

“Yes,” I say, wiping away a tear. “Yes, I’ll marry you, you idiot.”

He grins and stands before grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me in for a kiss. My heart flutters, and although it’s way too soon, I think I feel something in my core flutter too. Like the little one is telling me they approve.

For three days, I’ve thought of this moment. Agonized over what Anthony would think, how he would react, how I should deliver the news. Corny ‘I’m gonna be a dad’ T-shirt or a ‘let’s sit down, we need to talk?’ I’ll have to order the T-shirt tomorrow.

I pull away, running my fingers through his honey brown hair and looking him in his gorgeous hazel eyes. “God, I love you.”

He normally is all jokes, but his smile isn’t humorous this time. It’s genuine. Sweet. Loving.

“I love you too, sweetheart.” He grabs the test and shakes it. “Now, please tell me you aren’t going to make me wait until after your shift.”

I run my hands over his chest and shake my head. “You don’t have to wait another second.” I take the box and toss it into the trash can. “We don’t need that.”

He squints in confusion, but when his eyes relax, they brighten. “What?”

“I’ve taken four tests already.”

“You’re...?”

“Pregnant, Anthony. Yes, I’m pregnant.”

His face lights up, and he lifts me into the air, spinning me around in a circle as he laughs. When he puts me down, his eyes are glossy, and I see something I hadn’t realized I’d never seen. A tear leaks from Anthony’s eye, and I swipe it away before planting my lips on his.

One more milestone.

Hundreds to go.

* * *

And that’s a wrap! Thank you so much for your interest in *His Passerotta*. For more of the Gruco Crime Family series, including *His Promise*, the free series starter, check out <https://nicolecypher.com/his-promise>.

While you’re there, sign up for my [newsletter](#) for a copy of my FREE bully romance, *Vicious Knight*, as well as exclusive bonus chapters and updates on upcoming novels and giveaways.

With love, always,

Nicole

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Cypher is an author and avid reader of dark romance. She began her writing journey in college and hasn't looked back since. In her books you can expect a yummy anti-hero, plenty of action, and a happy ending.

Read More from Nicole Cypher

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**CAUGHT IN BETWEEN
TARA LEE**

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CAUGHT IN BETWEEN

They were the Vitiello brothers,— my new husbands.

My father made a deal, his life for me.

I didn't have a choice, this was my new life, I'm caught in
between them and I won't escape.

I'm afraid of what will happen once I take my vows, the
brothers are ruthless and their name brings fear.

Can I survive? Or will I be brought to my knees.

CHAPTER 1

Valentina

“Daddy, please, no,” I plead with my father as a man grabs me from behind, slowly dragging me out the door.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, tearing his gaze from me, too ashamed to look at me as I’m being hauled away.

Daddy, no, don’t let him take me.

I fight the brute of a man with every ounce of strength I have. Getting my hand free and slapping at his face, I scrape my nails against his skin, just enough to claw at his face as he opens the door to a black Escalade parked in our driveway.

“You little bitch,” he growls. Shoving me inside, his eyes catch mine as I watch blood drip down his cheek.

Tears coat my cheeks as he slams my door shut, locking me inside. Grabbing the handle, I wrap my fingers around it and tug, but nothing, it’s locked. Banging my hands against the windows, I yell for him to let me out.

“Let me out, let me out.”

A throat clears behind me. Turning around, I let out an audible gasp when my gaze meets that of a man sitting across from me. The darkness of his eyes bore into my soul as his eyes slowly take me in. A soft smile appears in the corner of his mouth as he reaches for a tumbler next to him, taking a drink of brown liquid. Whiskey perhaps, my father’s drink of choice.

“Hello, *Malyshka - little girl,*” the man says, his Russian accent strong. His hand darts out reaching for me, and I pull my hands back, clutching them to my chest to avoid his touch, but not before he grabs hold of my jaw. Roughly, his fingers dig into my flesh, pushing my lips together and forcing me closer until our breaths mingle together.

“Don’t ever do that again,” he demands before shoving me into the plush seat behind me.

Letting out a soft whimper, my body sags against the seat as he watches me, his eyes wandering across my body. The car feels small. Too small. *Who is this man?*

“I’m Mr. Vitiello,” he tells me, introducing himself. “Let me get something clear, you belong to me now, you’ll do well to remember I own you,” he simply says, taking another sip of his drink.

He owns me?

Taking a couple of deep breaths, I try to ignore the cold sweat breaking out across my body.

My heart pounds, the feeling of suffocation drowning me.

I watch as his lips close around the glass, suddenly the small space of the car becomes claustrophobic as he moves causing his thigh to touch me.

A frown settles on his forehead as he watches me.

His jawline is sharp with a small beard, he’s wearing a suit with no tie, and his white shirt has the first few buttons left open while his jacket is left undone as well.

Reaching my hand up, I clasp my fingers around my jaw, the pain of his fingers still there and his touch still lingers, but he doesn't say another word. After some time, we pull up to an extravagant home.

The door opens, and he steps out fixing his jacket before he holds a hand out to me and says, "Come." His demand leaves nothing for disobedience.

Slowly, so I don't aggravate him more, I place my hand in his and let him pull me from the car.

He tugs me right into his side. Lifting his other hand, he places it against my face and strokes across my cheek, making my stomach turn.

"So fucking perfect." He breathes.

With tight lips he looks down at me, his expression giving nothing away.

With my hand firmly in his, he tugs me behind him, forcing me to follow. We climb some stairs to double-glass doors that open the moment we step onto the last step.

"Welcome home, sir. Miss," a woman in her late fifties at least greets us.

Mr. Vitiello walks past her without even a hello, dragging me behind him.

Digging my heels in, he turns, glaring at me when I refuse to move. His fingers tighten around my skin, and the burning sensation tightens when his fingers dig in further.

“Come, now,” he commands. When I refuse, he growls then with one swift move, he tosses me over his shoulder and strides up another set of steps all while I kick and scream at him.

“Put me down.” My voice breaks as I scream.

He grunts when my fists pound into his back.

“Argh, let me go,” I yell as I continue pounding my fists into him.

“Please,” I plead with him. As we reach the top, he takes a right and continues across the landing before walking down a hallway and opening a door. I’m thrown down onto something soft and realize he’s brought me to a room.

“Stay,” he growls, turning his back to me.

“Wait, please.” I race after him as he closes the door, sealing me shut inside.

nononono.

Banging my fist against the wood, I plead, “Let me out, please, please.” I know he’s listening, probably finding joy in my cries. Giving in my body slumps in a heap to the floor.

My brain finally registers what’s happened.

My father sold me to this man. It’s the only explanation.

I have no say, this is my new life.

I belong to him just like he said. *Happy birthday to me.*

CHAPTER 2

Lev

I listen as her fists bang against the door, the sound is music to my ears.

My little *Malyshka* - *little girl*, has no clue what's in store for her. Today I collected what was rightfully mine, her father was an idiot who played right into my plan. *She belongs to me.*

The urge to open this door and rip her innocence from her is strong. I have to tamp down the hunger to devour her. *In time, little one.*

Fuck, she felt so good in my arms, it took everything in me not to spank her for pounding her fists into my back.

Leaving her door, I head toward my office. The moment I take a seat at my desk, my door bursts open, and my brother Dante walks in, taking a seat and kicking his feet up on my desk.

Giving me a mischievous smile, he watches, waiting for me to speak.

He's five years younger than me, and together we run the Russian bratva.

After our father passed ten years ago, we took over controlling everything and everyone our father used to. We're based in California but have never forgotten who we are.

We always knew one day we'd take a bride. We never planned on taking Valentina Moretti so soon, but when the

opportunity arose, I didn't pass it up.

"She here?" Dante asks with a smile. His glee as evident as her lack of obedience.

"Yes," I simply tell him.

Tipping his head over his shoulder, he stares at the door like he's imagining her in there, in her new room.

He lets out a soft growl as if picturing her right now. Turning his head back to me, his eyebrows raise.

"Does she know yet?" he asks.

"No," I say again. I'm a man of few words, my brother on the other hand, does enough talking for the both of us.

We look identical but are polar opposites in every other aspect.

"She needs to know, Lev."

"I know that," I snap, my irritation with my brother growing.

Our arrangement wasn't normal, it was far from the standards of what most people consider a relationship being raised in the mafia. We never did normal so we didn't care what people thought.

Banging sounds in the hall and Dante chuckles. "Argh, I see she's vocal."

Eyeing him over my computer, I nod.

"When can I meet her?" he asks, adjusting his cufflinks before glancing up at me.

“Dinner,” I say, going back over the statements I’ve pulled up.

“Oh, she’s going to love you?” Dante jokes, chuckling before he stands and salutes me.

“I look forward to meeting her,” he says, then walks from my office, closing the door behind him.

I know he’s gone to stand outside her door to listen, he can’t help himself.

He’s always been good at that, me on the other hand, I’m not sure I’ll ever be.

Glancing at my clock, I see the time is five-thirty and almost dinner time, so I begin to turn everything off, making sure to check the security camera in her room one last time before I shut my computer down. She’s lying on the bed where she has been for most of the day, except for the occasional trip to the door where she’d bang and scream until she realized no one was coming.

Stepping into the hall, I use my key and unlock her door. My brother and I will be the only ones with keys, even my staff won’t get close to her. I don’t trust her to not try something to escape.

She sits up when she sees me, shooting a hateful glare my way when she does.

“Come,” I bark the order, making her jump. Following my order, she stands coming toward me.

Fuck, maybe she can follow orders.

Her face is free of makeup, her natural beauty enhanced by the tears she cried earlier.

Her plush lips are swollen, begging my teeth to nibble on them. Fighting the urge, I place my hand on the small of her back, ushering her down the hall. With little steps, we make it down the stairs. My staff stand waiting as we enter the dining area, and my brother sits sipping on whiskey, his eyes lighting up as he takes in Valentina.

She stills in front of me. When she sees Dante, goosebumps cascade over her skin, unable to stop myself, I lift my hand tracing a line over them on her skin.

“Sit, *Malyshka* - little girl,” I tell her, pulling a chair out for her to take a seat across from me and Dante.

“W-w-why am I here?” she stammers. Her bottom lip trembles as her eyes flit between me and Dante.

“You belong to us,” I tell her and smile, while her face pales and she goes deathly silent.

It’s time Valentina Moretti understands there’s no escape, no way out, and no way we’ll never find her.

CHAPTER 3

Dante

She's fucking exquisite. The way her long dark hair falls over her shoulders, her plump, kissable lips ready for me to devour, and without even seeing it I know her pussy will own me.

Fuck me.

We are older by far, making a huge age gap between us and our new bride. Valentina had just turned twenty-one and became ours the moment she did.

She had no idea what her future held, but she was about to find out.

"Happy birthday," I say. Valentina glares in my direction, causing a shit-eating grin to plaster across my face.

"Happy birthday, *Malyshka - little girl,*" Lev murmurs.

Valentina stares ahead, her terrified gaze frozen on us.

"I want to go home." She sniffs.

"You are home, *Zaika - bunny,*" I tell her.

Her bottom lip trembles again as tears cascade down her cheeks, fuck I hate women crying, it's my one fucking weakness.

"Please," she whispers softly. Her lips tremble while her entire body shakes with fear. It's understandable, today would have been a lot for her to take. She can plead all she wants, but she's not leaving.

“Enough,” Lev barks, scaring the poor girl and causing her to jump.

“You may beg all you like, but it won’t change the fact your father made an arrangement,” I say.

“I-I don’t understand,” she mutters.

“You now belong to us,” Lev tells her.

She lets out a soft hiccup, then struggles for breath as she comes to terms with her new life. Her entire body is trembling with fear as we sit in front of her.

“You will be ours, Valentina,” I say, watching her closely while Lev eyes her with caution. Just because the girl is scared doesn’t mean she won’t try to escape.

“What does that mean?” she asks us, swallowing roughly.

“You will be our bride.” Her face goes pale again, and he continues, “We’ll share you, and you’ll obey us,” Lev says.

“Share me?” she asks, confusion filtering across her face.

“My brother and I will both have you, Valentina, in every way,” I tell her.

“No,” she cries, lunging in the direction Lev sits. She gives everything she has and throws a punch at him, he moves with ease, and I watch with amusement as he wraps an arm around her waist and hoists her over his shoulder. Her fists connect with his back pounding into him. “Put me down,” she screams. He does as she asks, slamming her onto the table and knocking the wind from her. She gasps as he pins her hands above her head and leans over her. I move to her legs, putting my weight

across her body and holding them down so she doesn't kick her legs up at Lev.

Her chest heaves, and she lets out a growl as she struggles under us.

“You think you can fight us, *Malyshka - little girl.*” Lev hisses through clenched teeth. She spits in his face and turns her head away from him. I hide a smile knowing Lev is close to losing it. *Fuck, this girl has spirit.*

She lets out a frustrated cry as Lev grabs hold of her jaw, turning her head so she'll look at him. He wipes her spit from his face and leans in close, her eyes widen when he smiles down at her, not the reaction she was expecting.

“You can fight us all you want, *Malyshka - little girl.* It'll only make claiming you ten times more satisfying.” Lev hisses.

When she doesn't speak, Lev clenches his teeth.

“Do you understand?” Lev growls.

Staying silent, Valentina turns her head again to look away from us.

“*Zaika - bunny,*” I warn her, but it's too late. Lev yanks her up, clutching her wrists until she sits up right in front of him, holding her hands hostage between their bodies.

“Answer,” he shouts, causing her to flinch and close her eyes.

Her breaths quickly turn shallow until she's practically gasping.

Eyeing her, I watch as she nibbles on her lip, unshed tears fill her eyes and unlike my brother, I'm not entirely a heartless asshole. Okay, maybe I am, but this woman right here may just soften me.

"Do you understand, *Zaika - bunny?*" I ask her calmly.

She nods, understanding finally settling over her features.

"Good girl," I say, watching as her cheeks flush with heat.

"I'm Dante. That brute is Lev," I tell her. Her eyes roam over us and I know she's doing whatever she can to control her emotions.

"Please let me go?" she begs us.

"I'm afraid that isn't an option, little one," I say. Her face falls, the sight causing me to clench my teeth.

This is business, she'll understand one day.

She wants to run, but she won't get far. Besides, Lev and I will enjoy the chase.

Lev moves when I nod for him to let me in.

Moving my body in line with hers, I lean into her and pull her thighs apart so she's facing me directly. Lifting my hand, I place my fingers under her chin forcing her to look at me.

"There is nowhere to run, little one, no stopping this, and no way we'll ever let you go."

Letting out a shallow breath, her gaze follows my fingers as I trail them softly across her cheek, down over her collarbone, and then cup my hand over her breasts, squeezing gently before she gasps out loud.

“Tell me, little one, have you ever been touched?” I ask as my fingers continue their trail down. She has a dress on that stops just above her knees, perfect and easy access.

“Stop, Dante,” Lev growls.

Fuck.

I was so close to ruining her, taking what belongs to us. I could take her right now, on this table.

But we agreed not to touch her until the night of the wedding, only then would she be fully ours.

“Fuck, little one, I can smell you.” I hiss, clenching my jaw. She smells divine like my own little buffet, one I can’t wait to fucking devour. She can’t fake her arousal, my cock twitches knowing she enjoyed my touch, even if it was interrupted.

Standing, adjusting my erection, her head drops, lowering her eyes to the floor in front of her.

“The wedding will take place next week, Valentina, and I trust you to behave,” Lev tells her, raising the glass of whiskey just placed beside him to his lips.

“Do you understand, *Malyshka - little girl?*” Lev questions. Valentina nods rapidly, keeping her eyes downcast.

“Good girl,” I say, moving my finger across her cheek before I take my seat again.

Lev leans forward, gaining her attention.

“Say you understand.” Lev’s voice is a warning.

“I-I understand,” she murmurs softly.

“I will kill you, Valentina, if you disobey my orders,” Lev says. I try to stifle a laugh knowing my brother is serious.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” Valentina breathes.

“Are you afraid of us?” I ask her.

She nods, her lip trembling with every movement.

Lev and I share a look, and he nods.

“You never have to be afraid of us,” I tell her.

“Please let me go,” she pleads.

“You’re safer here than you think, little one,” I tell her.

“I doubt that,” she mutters, dipping her head again when the expression on Lev’s face darkens.

I run my hand across my jaw because just like Lev, I won’t let her attitude slide.

“You’ll do well to remember who we are, *Zaika - bunny*,” I remind her.

Her eyes dart back to my face, they glisten with tears as I drag my thumb across her lip, feeling the plumpness.

“Do you know who we are?” I ask when she frowns, and she shakes her head. It’s a pity she hasn’t heard about us, clearly, her father kept her more in the dark than we thought.

“You’re beautiful, Valentina,” I say, watching her chest rise and fall with every intake of breath.

“It won’t work?” she breathes, her lashes fluttering against her creamy skin.

“What won’t, *Zaika - bunny?*”

“Your compliments.” We don’t break eye contact as she lifts her chin in defiance.

A smile breaks across my face as I lift my hand, brushing my fingers across her chin. Grabbing her jaw, I lean into her until our breaths mingle as one. “I think I like your sass, *Zaika - bunny.*”

Valentina tries to shrug from my hold, her eyes widening in surprise as I grip her chin with a little more force than necessary.

“It’s in your best interest to behave,” I warn her.

“Go to hell,” she snaps.

Growling, I lean into her, my breath fanning across her skin.

“This mouth, fuck you’re going to be so fucking addictive, *Zaika - bunny.*”

“S-stop, please,” she whimpers under me. Her eyes well with tears as my fingers slowly loosen on her jaw.

“Cut the sass, Valentina. It’ll do you no good,” I tell her.

“Why are you going to hurt me? Cut me in tiny pieces?” she asks.

“I think you’ll enjoy whatever we do to you, *Zaika - bunny,*” I reply, biting my lip.

Her fingers clench around the table. “You’re both scary,” she says honestly. This causes a chuckle to slip free.

“Then you’ll do well to remember to do as we say,” I tell her.

“Your father never mentioned why you’re here?” I ask.

She shakes her head, eyeing Lev beside me, he twirls a strand of her hair between his fingers.

He’s as infatuated with her as I am.

“Your father was a coward, Valentina. Instead of killing him we offered him a deal,” I say.

“A deal?” she asks.

“You in exchange for his debt to be cleared,” Lev states.

“His debt?” she questions.

Lev nods. “He owed us, Valentina, and in exchange you were the bargaining tool,” Lev tells her.

“Oh,” she whispers. Like she’s not completely surprised by this news at all.

“I have no say?” she asks us.

“I’m afraid not,” I say.

Wrapping her arms around her body, Valentina gnaws on her bottom lip, clearly disturbed by the fact that to save his ass, her father married her off to complete strangers without so much as an explanation.

Lev pulls a chair out for her, then takes his seat, “Come,” I say, holding my hand out, helping her down from the table once she places her hand in mine she takes a seat. I gently push her in then take mine as well.

Valentina sits quietly, as our staff wait to the side I motion for them to begin to serve dinner. She's contemplative as a plate is placed down in front of her.

"Obedience," Lev says while Valentina quirks an eyebrow in response.

"That's all we ask of you, Valentina."

She begins picking at her meal, her fork pushing between each item but not once lifting to her mouth.

"Anything else?" she says.

"You don't leave the property. Ever," I say.

"Ever?" she murmurs softly.

Shaking my head, I watch as she clenches the fork in her hand, forcing her knuckles to turn white.

"Eat, Valentina," I say. This time she startles when it's me who berates her and not Lev.

"Don't make us force-feed you, *Malyshka - little girl*," Lev warns her.

I see the slight eye roll she gives Lev, and all hell is about to break loose when Lev abruptly stands, causing his chair to slide from under him.

"Mr. Vitiello, a phone call," Gladice says, handing my brother the phone and defusing the current situation with Valentina.

Seeing the anger across Lev's face it doesn't take long to work out my brother is ready for blood, clenching his jaw he looks to me then back at the phone raising it to his ear cursing

“Predatel- traitor.” Then he throws the phone across the hall, causing it to smash against the tiles.

“Motherfucker,” he yells and storms from the room.

Valentina jumps eyeing me as I stand following him, I’m not about to miss out on whatever Lev has planned.

CHAPTER 4

Valentina

Just breathe, I think as they both storm from the room.

I stand up quickly, unsure what to do. They've left me alone. After their news that my father exchanged me for his life, the pit in my stomach grew.

There's more to this story. I just know it. Can I believe what they say about my father?

He just gave me up, just like that.

I can't believe he gave me to these men.

Looking around for a way to escape, I notice a door to the side. Hurrying toward it, I don't stop until my fingers wrap around the handle.

Just as I'm about to swing the door open, arms wrap around me from behind, tugging me back.

"Where do you think you're going, little one?" Dante growls in my ear as he tosses me over his shoulder.

"Put me down," I scream, my lungs burning. He walks away from the door, carrying me up the flight of stairs by passing the staff, each one avoiding eye contact with me. With each step, one of his hands slides further up my leg. His fingers rest just at the edge of my panties while his other hand holds me down over his shoulder.

I focus on my breathing, slowly trying to calm myself. Fighting him is pointless; he outweighs me, and clearly, they knew leaving me alone was a mistake.

“We’re too busy to be playing chasings, little one, and you don’t want to piss Lev off, trust me,” he says as he slides me down his body at the door of the room.

“Then don’t chase me,” I sass back at him, earning a raised eyebrow in my direction.

“Oh, you’re going to be fun.” He smirks, opening the door and nodding for me to enter. “Go.”

His dark hair falls against his forehead, his dark eyes, just like Lev’s, seem soulless, and his jaw is sharp and defined. They look so much alike.

Attractive even, assholes.

“So, I’m a prisoner?” I ask him as he moves toward me, forcing me to take a step back. I stumble slightly but catch myself before I trip and fall.

“No, Valentina, this is your home, but until you can behave,” he cups my cheek with the palm of his hand, “you’ll stay in this room.” Towering over me, his glare is one not to argue with.

“B-but,” I begin to argue. Placing his finger over my lips and cutting me off, Dante shakes his head.

“Please behave, Valentina,” he urges me like he doesn’t want to punish me for misbehaving.

“What do you expect? I was taken from home, brought to a strange place, and I’m expected to marry two men all because of my father,” I state, worrying my lip between my teeth that my outburst will anger him.

“I won’t repeat myself, behave, it’s as simple as that,” he says. A dark frown settles over his forehead as if he’s waiting for me to argue.

“I hate you,” I snap.

Dante’s fingers clamp around my bicep, and I’m yanked against his side.

His eyes narrow on my face.

“You’ll grow to love me.” He smirks. Breaths heave from me as he leans down, his lips ghosting mine before I turn my head, my chin quivers as his hold on me tightens.

“Do I need to spank you, little girl?” he warns me.

“No,” I whisper.

“Because I’d enjoy every damn second.” I rear back at his confession.

“No, you don’t have to.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

Instant anger runs through me and I clench my jaw. I do my best to yank my arm free of his grasp but it’s no use. “I’m not your good girl,” I growl.

Dante just smiles down at me. His tongue darts out wetting his lips, and stupidly, I watch the movement. He nods toward the room, giving me a slight shove backward.

Giving him a scathing glare, I turn on my heel and storm to the bed, plopping myself down and lifting my head just in time to see him close the door behind him as he leaves. I scrunch

my nose up hating that I didn't get a say in this life, and I have to go along with it like my opinion doesn't matter.

I have no hope this will work. I'll never fall for Dante or Lev.

I can't. How can they expect me to?

I lie on the bed with my eyes shut tightly, I don't want to face them again. I can't believe my father did this to me, I can't believe he expects me to—I don't even want to think about what they expect of me.

I hear footsteps come down the hallway and curl to my side into a ball. I listen as the door unlocks and then it bangs open.

“Get up,” Lev orders.

Ignoring him, I lay silent.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Valentina,” he snaps then grabs hold of my arm and yanks me to my feet.

“Downstairs, now.”

“No,” I shout, defying his command. I don't care what he does, I'm not being their puppet.

“You're testing my patience, *Malyshka - little girl*,” he grumbles.

Lifting my chin, determined to stand my ground, I dart forward, slamming my fist into his chest, screaming as I give him everything I have. He places a hand behind my head, curling his fingers through the strands of my hair and gripping it tightly, making me whimper as he pulls me into him. His

other hand lifts, and wrapping his fingers around my throat he crushes them around the column of my neck. I gasp for air as his fingers cut into my skin.

“Don’t ever tell me no,” he growls.

Anger radiates from him, and I expect him to teach me a lesson, but he lets me go, and I collapse at his feet gasping for air, coughing as I do.

“Get ready,” he says, then walks to the door. I lift my eyes to meet his.

“You have ten minutes.” He closes me in, shutting the door behind him.

I just want him to kill me.

CHAPTER 5

Lev

Dante raises an eyebrow at me as I pace the hall outside her room.

“Trouble?” He smirks.

“She infuriates me,” I growl, inhaling deep breaths as we wait.

“She’ll come around,” Dante tells me hopefully.

Shaking my head, I let out a chuckle. “She’d rather kill us than marry us,” I tell him.

“Would you expect anything else from her?” He smiles at me.

She has spirit, that’s for sure. She’s going to be a challenge

I’m about to reply when the door opens and Valentina walks out, wearing a sundress and sandals.

“I wasn’t sure,” she says, fidgeting with the ends of her dress.

“It’s perfect, little one,” Dante tells her, grabbing her hand and ushering her down the stairs while I follow.

Dante leads her into the sitting room where the designer waits. She smiles upon seeing Valentina. Letting her go, Dante ushers her forward into the arms of the designer who looks at her from all angles and then claps her hands for her assistants.

“This is Josephine. She’ll be helping with your wedding dress,” I tell her. Valentina snaps her head in my direction, and

we stare at each other for a moment before I raise an eyebrow challenging her to argue.

She nods, deciding not to argue.

“Come, come,” Josephine urges her to follow as she walks toward the rack of dresses she has waiting.

Valentina glares at me, furious with the situation we’ve put her in.

That’s it, Malyshka - little girl, challenge me.

Valentina hesitantly follows behind Josephine, glancing back at Dante and me as we each take a seat.

Josephine frowns at the both of us. “You can’t see.” She waves us off.

“Excuse me?” I snap.

“It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding,” she says, placing her hand on her hip.

Dante chuckles softly, tipping his head toward the kitchen. “Come on, let’s go.”

Sighing, reluctantly, I follow my brother, unsure about leaving Valentina alone.

“Watch her,” I tell one of the guards who nods his reply.

Dante pours us both a drink, then lets out his own sigh.

“She’s not going to be easy?” he says.

“Wouldn’t be much fun if she was?” I reply.

Dante chuckles knowing I’m right. This lifestyle is never boring so having a woman who defies us at every turn might

be just all the fun we need.

After making Valentina ours, she'll obey us, she'll have no choice.

A few hours pass, Valentina reappears in the kitchen, the guard walking out once she's close enough to us that he's sure she won't run.

Dante and I watch her as she takes a seat at the bench.

"Are you hungry?" Dante asks her.

She looks down at her lap, then raises her eyes but keeps them down enough that she doesn't have to look at either of us.

"Answer please, *Malyshka - little girl.*" I breathe.

"Y-yes," she stutters before she looks up, her gaze catching mine.

"Good girl," I say.

A frown appears on her forehead at my words. Ignoring it, I tip my head at Victor, our chef, and he begins making her a dish as she watches.

When he places the chicken dish in front of her, she eyes it for a moment, then picks up her fork to begin eating.

Victor leaves us alone with her, and for once, we can just appreciate her while her mouth is occupied.

I'd rather it be full of my cock than this chicken, but in time it will be.

Once she's finished, she cautiously looks up at me, then glances over at Dante, who lifts the side of his mouth.

"May I be excused?" she asks softly, pushing the plate into the middle of the bench.

"No," I say. Her face falls at my answer.

"But," she argues.

"You're going to be our wife, Valentina. I want you to get used to being around us." I know all she wants to do is hide away in her room, but that's the last thing she'll be doing.

"I never will," she mutters under her breath.

"There's a lifetime, *Malyshka - little girl*," I tell her.

Valentina lets out an annoyed huff. "You're insufferable."

I chuckle, moving toward her. She grimaces slightly when I turn her and move between her thighs.

Tipping her chin up, my fingers caress the side of her jaw, then down her collarbone.

"I'm going to enjoy claiming you, *Malyshka - little girl*."

CHAPTER 6

Valentina

Lev's fingers trail across my jaw and down my neck, stopping at my collarbone. My breathing quickens and my body chooses that moment to betray me, shivering under his touch.

His body presses into mine. "That sweet mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble, *Malyshka* - little girl. But you're going to be so damn addictive." He growls, and his lips capture mine in an all-consuming kiss. His tongue tangles with mine in an effort to control me. Cupping my jaw, his hand moves me with ease, tilting my head to just where he wants it.

He growls, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth before he pulls back staring at me. Lev lifts his right hand to my cheek, his touch makes tingles explode beneath my skin and at the same time my entire body shivers. The knowing smirk covering his face lets me know he knows exactly what that kiss did to me.

His voice is low and deep, sending another shiver through my body. "So fucking addictive."

Dante lets out a long sigh. "Well damn, brother, don't hog her all for yourself."

Dante moves in behind me, spinning me to face him. Before I can stop him, both his hands cover my face, and he bends down taking my lips in his.

Dante's scent invades my nose, and I fight the urge to moan.

God, what is wrong with me?

His tongue moves, dancing with mine until he groans. Dante pulls back, moving his thumb along my lips before dropping his hand between us.

“Fuck, little one,” he hisses.

Confliction rolls through me because I’m not supposed to feel anything for them, but those kisses, they were everything, and they were my first.

They had to know, right?

My body is wound so tight, and confusion rolls through me, I need to run.

Shoving his chest, I dart to the side and run but don’t make it more than three feet before arms wrap around me from behind and scoop me up. Throwing me over his shoulder, Lev growls.

God, what is with them being all cavemen and throwing me over their shoulders?

“I told you to behave, *Malyshka - little girl.*”

“Never,” I shout.

He pants as he carries me up the stairs, the movement causing my stomach to churn, but again my body betrays me and my pussy clenches.

Lev storms through the door, crashing into the room I’ve been staying in and throwing me down onto the bed, an involuntary gasp leaves me as he does.

His eyebrows draw together, anger clearly raging through his core right now.

“Do you want us to punish you? Is that it, Valentina?”

“Screw you,” I snap.

Lev shakes his head and turns on his heel, looking over his shoulder at me.

“You can spend some time thinking about this attitude, and maybe just maybe, we won’t fuck it out of you.” He glances at me one last time before he closes the door and leaves me in a heap on the bed.

Tears fall down my cheeks, and before long I’m a whimpering mess. I’ll never escape, they’ll never let me.

I cry until I’m a blubbering mess, and my head hurts.

Why did they kiss me?

And why did my body react?

I’m more confused than ever before. I shouldn’t want them, I definitely shouldn’t be letting them kiss me. It’s too intimate.

Too real.

I have to escape, I have to try.

Because I know when the time comes, I don’t want to be caught in between Lev and Dante.

CHAPTER 7

Dante

“*Blyad - fuck,*” I growl. We shouldn’t have kissed her, not yet, it was too damn soon.

“*Ona upadet - She’ll fall,*” Lev says, sure of everything he’s saying.

“She’s ours in seven days.” He smiles, grabbing the back of my neck with his hand, he squeezes before letting go.

We knew this would be a challenge, that Valentina wouldn’t accept the two of us right away, but how much time do we give her?

The wedding is in seven days and in time she’ll be ours, truly ours. We’ve been holding back letting her get accustomed to us, but I won’t hold back the night of the wedding. I plan to savor her, take my fill, and enjoy our little wife.

“Sir. He’s here,” Marco, one of the guards tells me. I nod, making my way to the basement, my footsteps echoing across each step. Lev waits up ahead ready with a vindictive smile across his face.

If I can’t fuck my frustration out, I’ll at least enjoy slaughtering the fucker strapped to the chair in the middle of the room.

Lev picks up a knife, twirling it between his fingers.

“Tell me, Mr. Parisi, did you think it was smart to dishonor us?” he says as he stalks toward Parisi.

“N-no,” the old man stammers, spit flying from his mouth as he wallows in a desperate attempt for our pity.

“You really thought we wouldn’t notice that you stepped foot in our territory?” I say.

“You and your family were banished years ago. You’re lucky we don’t find them and slaughter every last one,” I growl.

“P-please,” Mr. Parisi pleads.

“I’m going to ask you this only once, where is it?” Lev orders.

Mr. Parisi has only one reason to return to the US. Before we banished him and his family, he’d murdered and stolen money from the Mancini family, except he had to hide it before he left the country. He must be desperate if he’s returned for that money.

Money that belongs to us.

“We haven’t got all day, Mr. Parisi,” I murmur, picking up my own weapon. The knife feels powerful in my hand like it’s a part of me. Closing my eyes, I relish the fact that it’s been a while since I got to play.

“I-I don’t know,” he whimpers as Lev pushes the knife into his cheek.

“Come on, you can do better than that,” I taunt.

“I promise I don’t know. It wasn’t where I left it,” he cries.

Lev tsks him then he cries out in pain as Lev slashes his cheek. “Argh, please,” he shouts.

Lev slashes his other cheek, making him cry out and he begins thrashing in his chair.

“I don’t know,” he whimpers.

That money is in our territory so rightfully it’s ours. He can deny it all he wants, but Parisi will give up the location.

“Get the shears.” Lev grunts, grabbing hold of Parisi as he struggles to get free, knowing how we deal with traitors.

Grabbing them from the table, I hand them to Lev. He glances at Parisi one last time while gliding the shears to his left hand above his middle finger.

“P-please,” he begs. Lev snaps them closed, cutting his finger off. He howls in pain, and blood spurts out covering Lev and me when we lean over him while his body violently shakes.

“Rasskazhi nam -*Tell us*,” Lev shouts, using the shears against Parisi’s face. Cutting his skin, blood drips down his face. Lev begins torturing him slowly using every tool on the table until he passes out from the pain.

“Fucker pissed himself.” I groan, seeing the stain on his pants.

“I need a fucking drink,” Lev growls, storming past me and up the stairs covered in Parisi’s blood. I look back at Parisi, unconscious, barely alive, he’ll die slowly choking on his own blood.

When I find Lev, he’s in his office drinking a tumbler of whiskey.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he grumbles. Rubbing his hand across his face, Lev stands at the window facing away from me.

Hearing a noise that sounds a lot like glass, we both bolt from Lev’s office toward Valentina’s room.

Swinging open the door, we find Valentina trying to escape through the broken window.

“Jesus Christ,” I grumble, moving toward her through the wreckage of her room.

Gripping her hips, I pull her back while she fights me. Twisting and turning her body, I lift her with ease. I hold her up while Lev comes to her front, inspecting the cut on her wrist.

“That is a hundred-foot drop, *Malyshka - little girl*, how were you planning on escaping? Can you fly?” Lev raises an eyebrow at Valentina. Turning her head, she huffs while Lev heads to the bathroom to grab a washcloth to clean her arm.

“*Zaika - bunny*, what were you thinking?” I bite the question out.

She sucks in a quivering breath, her composure quickly crumbling.

Placing her on the bed, I inspect her arm, and she squirms and tries to pull away, but my fingers have a vice grip around her wrist. Brushing a kiss against the palm of her hand, Lev hands me a damp cloth and I wash over the blood, cleaning it up as best I can. Luckily, she didn’t cut it too deep.

Lev hands me a dressing, and she watches for a second as I begin placing it over her hand, then her eyes dart upward and I watch Valentina stare off into the distance, her features full of hatred for us.

“We’re not the bad guys here, *Zaika - bunny*,” I inform her.

“You’re monsters,” she hisses. Our eyes burn on each other before she glances above me to where Lev stands.

“We may be monsters, *Malyshka - little girl*, but it won’t change your fate,” Lev tells her.

“I will never love you, either of you.” She scowls.

“Love is overrated, *Malyshka - little girl*. You just have to obey us,” Lev murmurs.

“Never,” she whispers, dropping her gaze to her lap. Letting out a sigh, I stand, using my fingers to brush the hair from her face.

“We won’t allow you to disrespect us, Valentina, but we won’t hurt you,” I say, trying to ease her discomfort.

She releases a soft huff before giving me a death glare.

I take stock of her room. She’s destroyed everything she possibly could, at least she has some fight in her.

“If you continue to damage our property you’ll need to be punished, *Zaika - bunny*,” I murmur softly. Valentina glances at me, giving me a sour look.

My fingers trace the side of her cheek. “Don’t touch me,” she seethes.

Twisting away from my grip, Valentina's entire body vibrates with rage.

I gnash my teeth, my anger getting the better of me. "You will be my wife, Valentina. I'll touch you whenever I like," I remind her.

"Screw you. I'm not your wife. I never will be," she spits, moving away from me.

Gripping her ankle, I yank her back down the bed, forcing her dress to ride up showing us her silk panties underneath.

Fuck me, I wanted to sink deep into her tight heat and claim her, showing her just who she belongs to.

"Let me go?" she begs us, kicking her foot from my grip. Lev sighs, taking her chin between his fingers and lifting it slightly so she's forced to look at him.

"That will never be an option, Valentina. You are ours, end of. We won't tell you again." Lev's voice holds warning. Dropping his hand as we both stand in front of her watching, she scoots back on the bed and crosses her legs at the ankles before placing her hands in her lap.

Christ, we're going to have our work cut out for us. Valentina has claws and she intends to use them.

Stepping close to her, she watches as I take a seat on her bed, her muscles tighten as I move closer.

"*Zaika – bunny.*" Closing her eyes, I watch as she pulls her lip between her teeth. The movement makes something inside me tighten. My fingers flex, the urge to grab hold of her

and bring her lips to mine has me unable to think straight. I get up and move away from her before I do exactly that.

Lev lowers his head toward Valentina. “I don’t want to punish you, *Malyshka - little girl.*”

She scoffs. “I think you’d both enjoy punishing me.”

I can’t help the smile that drifts across my face. She’s not wrong.

“Just behave, Valentina,” Lev tells her.

Turning her head, she purposely looks away from us. I shake my head, knowing it’s going to take some time before she fully trusts us. Lev and I share a look. *If she ever trusts us.*

With one last glance at Valentina, we walked away leaving her alone because we both knew no matter what we said, she’d always hate us. To her, we were the enemy. I just hoped in time she’d see we could make her really happy. If she let us.

CHAPTER 8

Lev

I tap my knuckles against the wood of my desk, knowing Valentina is doing her best to avoid us. I'm almost certain she's doing it to get under my skin, the girl knows how to push all the wrong buttons. Clearly, I've softened toward the woman because I find myself caring what she thinks of me. She's going to be my wife, and I certainly don't want her to hate me, but just when I feel like we're making progress with her, she does a one-eighty and it all turns to shit again.

Tapping sounds on my door. "Yes," I call out as Hector strides in.

"It's ready, boss."

"Excellent." I stand, fixing my jacket as I walk to Valentina's door. She can avoid us all she likes, heck, she can hate me with a divine passion, but nothing will stop this wedding.

"Come, *Malyshka - little girl.*" Valentina eyes me over the book she's reading then drops her eyes again, ignoring me.

"You're acting like a child."

"Excuse me?" she mutters, dropping the book to her lap.

"This sulking attitude and hiding out."

"Screw you, Mr. Vitiello," she snaps.

Anger burns through me and I growl. "Get your ass up now. You're being over dramatic, princess."

“Dramatic.” She gasps. “You’re the one forcing me into a marriage, and if I’m not mistaken, being a complete ass.”

“Say that again.” I hiss.

“You. Are. An. Asshole.” She emphasizes every word.

Fuck me. She makes me hard.

“I enjoy your sass Valentina, but I won’t have any problem punishing you for it.” I remind her.

“I hate you.” she snaps.

“Regardless, you have to deal with me,” I remind her.

“Your sour attitude puts a damper on things, Mr. Vitiello.”

Clenching my jaw. I force my anger down knowing going off on the girl won’t do any good.

Afterall in time she’ll accept this—us.

“Come with me. I have a surprise,” I tell her.

“No thank you,” she says, picking her book back up.

Storming toward her, I snatch the book from her hands and toss it to the side before I grip her wrist, tugging her upward and force her to her feet.

“Let’s get one thing straight, *Malyshka - little girl*. You follow my orders like a good little fucking girl and don’t dare give me that sassy fucking attitude.”

She struggles against me as I pull her along, yanking her arm free from my grasp. “You don’t have to pull me along like some rag doll. Have you heard of using manners?” she snaps.

“My brother doesn’t understand the word manners, *Zaika - bunny*.” Dante chuckles as he greets us in the yard.

“I may not have a choice, but I deserve respect,” Valentina shouts, pushing her hands against my chest, anger coursing through her. As angry as she is, I enjoy her hands on me.

“I was doing something nice, Valentina.” I sneer, but now maybe she deserves nothing.

“Nice.” She scoffs.

“You want me to respect you and be grateful you haven’t killed me, yet you refuse to show me the same. Why should I care if you suddenly want to be nice?” She swallows.

“The gardens?” Dante asks, and I nod. I thought instead of being cooped up in her room, Valentina would enjoy the peacefulness of our gardens.

Yet, she’s being as stubborn as ever and refusing to see my thought for what it is.

“*Zaika - bunny*,” Dante says, drawing her attention to him. “Lev was showing you a part of our house that he clearly thought you’d enjoy. There was no spitefulness behind his actions.”

“What are the gardens?” she asks, looking at me without any anger for once.

“A sanctuary in our house. I thought you’d enjoy the calmness it brings. After all, we’ve brought a lot of tension into your life.”

“Thank you,” she whispers and finally lets me lead her toward the gardens.

Christ, this woman.

“Why are you being nice?” Valentina asks as she takes a seat on the bench that sits in the middle of the gardens.

“Would you rather I go back to being an asshole?” I smile, causing the side of her mouth to lift.

“I’m sure it won’t take you long.” She eyes me from the corner of her eye, and I nod. She’s right.

“What do you think?” I say, gaining her attention and nodding toward the middle of the gardens.

She smiles, eyeing the impressive fountain in the middle. The couple on the top are naked and in the throes of ecstasy, and her cheeks tint a soft pink as she looks at it again.

Is she imagining herself in that position?

“Has my father asked about me?” She looks over her shoulder at me. Shaking my head giving her the answer, she sighs, sinking into the bench seat further.

“You don’t need him anymore, little one, you have us,” Dante says, moving in front of her to kneel at her feet.

“I don’t want to.” she murmurs softly.

“In time you’ll see differently.” Dante tells her.

“How could I ever trust you?” she asks and freezes when Dante reaches his hand up, moving it along her calve then over her thigh.

“We’ve built an empire, *Zaika - bunny*,” Dante murmurs.

“The only thing we were missing was someone to share it with.” His hand continues up her thigh, her thighs parting slowly as his hand moves toward her inner thigh.

“We can take you to incredible highs, Valentina, if you just let us in,” he replies.

“I-I,” she mumbles.

“I can’t trust you.” She stands from his touch, moving away from him, wrapping her arms around her body as she cowers away from us.

“You will be our queen, *Zaika - bunny*,” Dante assures her.

“I don’t want to be,” she admits.

“Don’t want to be our queen, or don’t want to feel anything for us?” I ask her.

“Both,” she whispers honestly.

Her eyes flutter closed as she catches her bottom lip between her teeth.

“May I please go back to my room?” She eyes me cautiously. I nod, and Dante gestures for her to follow him.

Today was progress, but yet again it went sideways. Would Valetina ever learn to trust us?

With a few deep breaths later, I finally composed myself enough to turn and walk from the gardens.

Fuck, this woman would be the death of me.

CHAPTER 9

Valentina

“It will get easier, *Zaika - bunny*,” Dante murmurs before he closes the door.

I doubt it.

I swallow thickly. The thought that Dante and Lev weren't going to give up so easily didn't ease my mind at all.

Could I really become a part of their lives? Why me? Why did they choose me?

Would it truly be so bad being theirs? At least they weren't old and they hadn't forced themselves on me, not yet anyway.

They didn't even know me. Not completely. Did they want to?

Deciding to relax, I head to the bathroom to run myself a bath. Leaning across the tub, I turn the faucet, adjusting it so it's not too hot. I then grab the pink bottle and squirt a measurable amount under the running water. Soapy foam begins to fill the tub, and using my hand, I swirl the water around until the temperature is perfect.

Stripping my clothes off, I climb over the edge and sink into the bubbles, sighing when my bottom hits the bottom of the tub. Stretching my legs out I relax back, closing my eyes.

The door closing in the distance startles me, and I bolt up covering myself just as the bathroom door opens. Lev stops in place when he sees me. Coming toward me, he kneels down and leans his elbows on the side of the bath.

Lifting my eyes, I stare at him as he watches me.

“Please continue, *Malyshka - little girl*,” he murmurs, lifting his hand to twirl his finger around a strand of hair before placing it behind my ear.

“Why do you call me that?” I ask, sinking back into the bath, firmly keeping my arms covering my breasts.

“*Malyshka - little girl?*” he confirms, lifting an eyebrow.

“Yes, what does it mean?”

“Little girl.”

“Is that how you see me?” I swallow.

Sighing, Lev moves his tongue across his lips, and I can't help but do the same. As much as I despise the man, I can accept that he's overly handsome, and his wavy dark hair falls in all the right places, while his dark eyes feel like they bore into my soul.

His jawline is sharp and cut to perfection. He eyes me like he secretly knows I'm enjoying the view.

Rolling up his sleeves, I have to discreetly clench my thighs together at the corded ropes of muscle in his forearm and the way his veins protrude.

“You okay, *Malyshka - little girl?*” He smirks.

Asshole.

“And yes, Valentina, that's how I see you because with our age difference and the way you act, I can't help but see you as a little girl,” he admits.

“You can’t be that much older than me?” He smiles as if he’s finding this entire conversation amusing.

“Oh, I am *Malyshka - little girl.*”

That name again. Why do I like it?

“How much older?” I breathe, almost desperate for the answer.

“I’m thirty-eight, Valentina, and Dante is Thirty-three.”

“Oh,” I say in shock, I was not expecting that. But then I don’t really know what I was expecting.

“Do you often watch women bathe?” I ask him.

The corner of his mouth lifts, and I watch as he twirls his fingers in the water before the tips touch my thigh. His gaze finds mine as he slowly moves them closer, inching toward my pussy. I inhale a deep breath as his fingers touch my clit.

Rubbing softly, they graze over me gently, like he’s almost determined not to touch me but can’t help but do so.

“Are you going to fight us every step of the way, *Malyshka - little girl?*” he asks as his fingers circle my clit, the sudden pressure making me moan.

“Probably.” I nod solemnly.

“Very well then.” Suddenly, his fingers move away, and the pressure is gone.

“I’m the head of the Russian bratva, Valentina. Having my future wife disrespect me time and time again doesn’t look good on me. I will punish you for misbehaving.”

“What if I don’t like it?”

“You’re not supposed to like it, that’s why it’s called a punishment.”

Biting my lip, I hesitate, but before I can open my mouth Lev opens his instead. “Even now I can see you wanting to say something smart. That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble, *Malyshka - little girl*.” He growls.

Standing, he wipes his hand on a towel. Lev’s eyes were fire, his entire body ready for a fight, one he wasn’t going to get.

“Don’t tempt me, little one, because I will spank you.” Staring up at him, I decide to play with fire. Standing, I watch his eyes as the water drips down my exposed body, making him inhale sharply as I lift my leg and tiptoe from the bath.

A shiver runs through me as he takes a step forward, lifting his hand and gripping the back of my neck. He tugs me forward, my breasts touching his shirt, instantly soaking through.

His lips ghost mine ever so slightly before he turns me, shoving me hard against the door, pushing his body into mine. “I won’t stop myself next time, *Malyshka - little girl*. You do that to spite me again, and I’ll rip that virgin pussy of yours until my cum is so deep inside you, I’ll be spilling from you for days.”

His breath fans across my face as he leans in, breathing heavily as his cock pushes into me. Shit, he’s so hard.

“Understand?” I nod quickly.

I can't help the moan that slips free when he pushes his hardness into my pussy.

"Now be a good girl and get dressed," he hisses.

Leaning down, I yelp when his mouth wraps around my nipple and bites down hard, a gush of arousal sweeping through me.

"So fucking defiant," Lev growls as he lets me go and opens the door, taking one last look at me before he walks out.

My chest heaves as I take deep breaths to calm my racing heart. Shit, that was a stupid mistake. Why did I think that would work?

I look down to see his teeth marks around the outside of my nipple. My body reacted to Lev in a way it wasn't supposed to.

Damn it, what was I going to do?

CHAPTER 10

Lev

Valentina has been confined to her room. After the encounter between us in the bathroom, she'd chosen to keep silent. I'd been ready to take her, fuck her into oblivion. I'd somehow controlled myself enough to walk out, even with the sight of her wet, naked body forced into my vision.

Even now my cock hardens at the memory.

I'd kept myself locked away in my office because it took everything in me not to place her over my knee and give her the spanking she so deserved.

Christ, this woman would be the death of me.

"Is she still in there?" Dante me as he comes into my office.

"Refuses to leave," I inform him. Chuckling, my brother takes a seat, staring at me in silence.

"What?" I ask.

"We should tell her the truth."

"The truth would do more harm than good, Dante. She doesn't need to know who her father really is. Trust me." I sigh. "The girl is going to test our patience, Dante. We knew that, we prepared for it."

"She's doing more than that and you know it," he murmurs softly.

Yeah, Valentina was doing everything she could to test our patience, but she'd never outdo our willpower. I wasn't about to let her win. No, I'd enjoy every minute she was going to surrender to us.

“Do you think she'll try to run at the wedding?” he asks. There's a chance she'll try to escape and force us to punish her, but I hope for her sake she agrees.

Valentina would stand between Dante and me in just under a week. The girl could run, she wouldn't get far, but disciplining her after would be pleasurable.

Valentina was safer with us than she realized. Tapping my fingers on the desk, the corner of Dante's mouth lifts with a smirk while he watches me. We had our reasons for keeping the truth from Valentina. If she found out her father wasn't the man she believed he was, her entire world would crumble. Her mother had passed when she was young, leaving just the two of them. Her father had always kept her out of his business, afraid she'd discover who he truly was. When word got out he was looking to marry his daughter off, Dante and I had jumped at the chance. We were one of the ruling families left, in our world power meant everything, and nobody fucked with us. Our name caused fear in our enemies.

Claiming a bride like Valentina would give us control, more than we already had.

We'd kept the part of both of us claiming her to ourselves. But sooner or later, the word would get out.

We could give Valentina the world, she just had to accept us.

The phone begins to ring. “Yes,” I answer, putting it on speaker so Dante can hear as well.

“Mr. Vitiello. Mr. Moretti is on line two,” Gladice says.

“Thank you.” I push line two. “How can I help you, Mr. Moretti?” I question as the old man begins to ramble.

“I never fucking agreed for my daughter to marry you and your brother,” he snaps angrily. Smiling, I do my best to control the chuckle currently working its way up my throat.

“What I decide to do with my wife is no longer your concern, Mr. Moretti,” I bark. Eyeing me, Dante clenches his jaw, and I know he’s not about to sit here and let Marco Moretti dictate what we do. His daughter is no longer his concern.

“This is utter bullshit, Vitiello, and you know it?” he barks down the line.

Dante has become obsessed with Valentina rather quickly, the girl has gotten under his skin. I’d surprised myself at how quickly she was becoming important to me. She wasn’t just a prize to us, no, Valentina was so much more.

“She is my daughter, and you will bring her back to me,” he demands. Chuckling out loud, I make sure he can hear me.

“We had a deal Mr. Moretti, and Valentina is now ours.”

“You have some goddamn nerve using her that way.” I roll my shoulders, the tension becoming unbearable.

“If I were you, Mr. Moretti, I’d choose your next words very carefully,” I say. Clenching my fists on my desks, my

fingers turning white the moment I do. The vein on the side of Dante's neck pulses as Mr. Moretti argues.

"I won't allow you to use my daughter for some sick, twisted game you have planned."

"Enough," I bark.

"Valentina is no longer your concern, Mr. Moretti. You're lucky we didn't execute you after taking her. Now if you don't want us to inform your daughter about who you really are or why you allowed us to take her, I'd keep your goddamn mouth shut. Anything concerning her is now in our hands."

When he doesn't answer, Dante shouts, "Do you understand?"

"Yes," he begrudgingly says.

I hang up. Dante thumps his hands on my desk muttering, "He has some fucking nerve thinking he can speak to us like that."

"Relax, brother. He's as good as dead, remember?" I smile knowing what fate lies ahead for Moretti. Valentina would have suffered the same fate as her father, but by us claiming her, she's now safe from harm, no one will dare touch her.

No one would dare hurt what belongs to us.

Suddenly Dante stands, clapping his hands.

"I think it's time Valentina understands what's expected of her once she's ours.

"I couldn't agree more, brother," I say and follow Dante from my office as we make the short trek to Valentina's room.

Tapping my knuckles against the wood of her door, I don't wait for her reply before I open the door and enter her room.

Valentina sits in the middle of the bed, her knees tight to her chest as she watches Dante and I enter, closing the door behind us. Dante moves into the center of the room, crossing his arms over his chest, while I pick up the chair from the desk and turn it around before taking a seat.

“*Zaika - bunny,*” Dante says, lifting her head. Valentina's gaze collides with first mine then Dante's, letting out a shuddering breath before her bottom lip trembles.

“Christ, *Malyshka - little girl,*” I growl, standing with more force than necessary before I bend to my knees by her bed.

It's taking everything in me not to demand she stop this nonsense and hold her to me.

“These tears have to stop. We've already promised your safety.”

“Your words mean nothing.” She says breathlessly.

“One day you'll see we're not the enemy, *Malyshka - little girl.*”

“I doubt that,” she whispers, keeping her gaze down. Dante sighs heavily and I know, like me, he wants this, but at what price?

Fuck, why couldn't this be easy?

Valentina may just hate us forever. Could she really care about us one day?

See that we're only doing what's best for her, for her safety. For her goddamn life.

CHAPTER 11

Valentina

I've spent four days trying my best to escape, with no luck I've given up, the windows are bolted shut, doors are locked and the only free time I have outside these walls is when Lev or Dante are with me. They keep a close eye on me leaving me with little room to look around for a way out. I've even tried the bathroom window, my body would fit but the fall would kill me.

I've spent the majority of that time cooped up in this room, only coming out when completely necessary, sneaking around doesn't work when you have someone or two someones attached to you, time is slowly ticking away and I know in just a few short days I'll be married, I don't want to be, I want to go home.

My attempts at defying them have been useless. After the moment in the bathroom with Lev, I was sure he was going to lift me and impale me on his cock. Secretly I think I wanted him to.

His stare meant business and it wasn't until he walked out that I could breathe again.

A soft tap draws my attention to the door. Without another second it opens, and Lev walks in tucking his hands into the pockets of his pants. He's wearing a dark blue suit today, with a white shirt, and the way he wears it makes him look powerful, and my stomach churns. I can't let him affect me. Even if he's too attractive for his own good.

Walking into the middle of my room, his fingers play with his cufflinks before his gaze lands on mine. “Stand,” he demands. I’m instantly dizzy. Slowly, I drop my feet to the edge of the bed, my legs tremble and threaten to give way beneath me as I stand.

Lev moves toward me, stopping just inches from me. Lifting his hand, his fingers touch mine, this touch is different to anything he’s done before, he’s gentle. I lose my ability to breathe for a moment as his fingers move up and slowly caress over my collarbone, gently scraping against my neck before he’s cupping my jaw.

“*Malyshka - little girl.*” His voice is rough, sending goosebumps across my skin.

“Y-yes.” I stammer, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Three more days,” he whispers. My throat constricts as I swallow hard because in those few short days, I’ll be his wife, *and Dante’s.*

My gaze takes in every feature, every inch of his body, his strong jaw, full lips, and those eyes. God his eyes are so dark.

“You’re staring, *Malyshka - little girl.*” he murmurs, smiling down at me.

Dropping my eyes to the floor, I take a step back. Lev’s hand grips my waist moving closer until our chests touch, his scent engulfing me.

I swallow hard again, quickly shutting my eyes and turning my head as I feel every movement he makes. His breath skims

over my jaw, and his lips brush against my throat causing a strangled moan to escape me.

“Fuck, *Malyshka - little girl*,” he growls, the sound causing my mouth to go dry.

“I want you so bad.” I hear the strain in his voice as he hisses.

Lev’s hand moves down wrapping around my throat. His fingers tighten slowly, pulling me into him, his lips brush against mine, and I feel his tongue dart out. I know he’s holding back, trying his best to not lose control.

“You smell fucking mouthwatering, Valentina,” he hisses through clenched teeth.

“Please,” I whimper. His eyes burn into mine as I realize it sounds like I’m begging him.

Lev forces his hand between my legs, pushing his thumb against my panties straight onto my clit. Letting out a startled gasp at the contact, he pushes against me again and a desperate groan escapes me.

Moving his hand from my throat he wraps his fingers around the back of my neck, holding me in place, his mouth crashes to mine in absolute desperation. This time taking what he so desperately wants.

“Please,” I beg, my voice trembling.

Lev moves my panties aside and pushes two fingers inside me.

Crying out as the burning sensation envelopes me, he pushes his thigh between my legs, pumping his fingers in and out.

Heat floods between my legs, and the pleasure begins to hit me. A growl rumbles deep from his chest, and I feel him between us, his girth digging into my hip as his fingers work inside me.

I let out a squeak as Lev's fingers push deeper.

"Fuck so tight, my cock is going to fucking own you, *Malyshka - little girl,*" he growls.

A whimper escapes my parted lips as Lev rubs my clit with his thumb as his fingers pump in and out.

I shatter with a strangled moan as my body convulses, leaving my body feeling like Jell-O.

Lev holds me up as he draws out every inch of my orgasm.

Placing a gentle kiss against my neck, I glance up at him, feeling my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

How could I let him touch me like that? And enjoy it.

I quickly look away, my stomach turning from his touch, feeling the heat descend to my neck as Lev removes his fingers, sliding them free of my neck before lifting them to his lips and sucks them before smiling.

"Fucking delicious, *Malyshka - little girl,*" he murmurs softly, running his fingers across my lips before he drops his hand to his side.

Lev turns and walks out, closing the door behind him, leaving me standing there staring after him and wondering what just happened and why I didn't push him away.

I can't let them get too close, I won't survive.

They'll never love me, never truly care about me. I have to stay strong, my feelings can't get involved. Obeying them isn't an option because if I do, nothing will stop them from using it against me.

CHAPTER 12

Lev

It took every ounce of my control not to claim Valentina, especially after tasting how sweet she was, but I knew in time I would. Just a few more days.

The way she came apart with just my fingers, fuck, it's a miracle I was able to control myself.

I'd left her to think about what just happened, but I knew she truly had to understand what was expected of her. Dante and I need to explain to her what we expect once she is our wife.

Turning on my heel, I make my way back to her room. Opening the door without knocking, Valentina startles, holding her hands against her chest.

"You could have at least knocked. What if I were naked?" she snaps.

The corner of my mouth lifts. "Nothing I won't see again real soon, *Malyshka - little girl.*" My eyes lock on her, my tongue darting out to wet my lips. I'd already enjoyed the delectable view of her body once, I'm looking forward to the next time.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Valentina's body tightens as a look of disgust forms on her face.

"You're disgusting," she murmurs.

Taking a step forward, she flinches and takes one back, stumbling before her back hits the dresser behind her. I grip

her hip with my hand, keeping her from tripping over her own feet.

“As sexy as your sass is, *Malyshka - little girl*, I won’t tolerate you disrespecting me,” I warn her.

Her face pales slightly before she narrows her eyes. “What do you expect? I’m nothing but something you acquired.”

“You are far from that I can assure you, *Malyshka - little girl*.”

“How can I believe you after everything that’s happened?” she argues. “You’ve both been so cold and distant with me, yet you expect me to become yours with a simple ceremony.” She has a point, both Dante and I will need to do better, but given our background it’s difficult to be anything but what we are.

“We are who we are, Valentina. We won’t change.” I growl in frustration, growing tired of her attitude.

“That ceremony will bind you to us, Valentina. Not only as our wife but as ours forever. You need to understand that no matter what, you will fulfill your duties as such,” I tell her. Eyeing me, she looks away for a moment then her gaze finds mine again.

“We will always protect you, Lyubov Moya - *My Love*.” Her face falls when I call her my love instead of little girl, not that she understands what I’m saying. It just slipped out. I wasn’t planning on calling her that, not yet.

“How can I believe anything you say?” Her eyebrows pinch together, worry filtering across her face.

“Believe that your father made the right choice in handing you over to us, and that no matter what, you’ll always be safe with us,” I murmur.

“The night of the wedding,” she questions before looking away again and then finds my gaze once more.

“Yes, Valentina, you are expected to consummate the marriage, with both of us.” She gulps as I voice out loud the news. I expect she’s known this to be true since the moment she found out she’d be our wife.

“Just that night?” she asks. I chuckle softly.

“No,” I respond. My jaw clenches, and the words come out harsher than I mean for them to. “You’re not stupid, Valetina. You’ll be expected to fulfill our needs as any normal wife would.”

For a moment we both stand frozen on the spot. Valentina’s eyes fill with tears and her entire body begins to shake.

Churt Vozmi - Damn it.

“Damn, brother, making our girl cry I see,” Dante’s voice says behind me. Valentina’s gaze moves to him then back to me as tears fall down her cheeks.

Lifting my hand, her body tenses as my fingers wipe them away.

“These tears are unnecessary Valentina.” I state.

“You scare me,” she admits.

“I know.” I say. “But I don’t have to.” I smile down at her, my thumb pulling at her bottom lip.

“You’re going to be such a good wife, Valentina, aren’t you?” I ask, running my finger down her cheek until I reach the column of her neck, feeling her swallow as my fingers wrap around her throat.

“Lev,” Dante’s voice growls in warning. But my fingers tighten even more, needing her to say the words.

“Say it,” I hiss.

Valentina swallows, her fingers fist my shirt as I lean in closer, my breath fans across her face while I wait.

“Say it,” I growl, clenching my teeth.

“I’m going to be—” Closing her eyes briefly she swallows. Taking a breath she whispers, “A good wife.” A breath shudders from her as my thumb moves along her jaw.

“That’s my good girl,” I murmur.

“You were always ours, Valentina. Let’s make that very clear,” I growl.

“Y-yes,” she stutters.

Moving aside, I drop my hand and hers detaches from my shirt.

It’ll be in her best interest to understand I won’t allow her to fight us every step of the way, and no matter what, Valentina will belong to us.

CHAPTER 13

Dante

Valentina practically melts when Lev exits the room.

“You okay, *Zaika - bunny?*” Lifting her eyes to me, she gives me a subtle nod, then steps around me and takes a seat on the bed.

“I want to be alone,” she whispers, pulling her knees to her chest.

“Lev is right, Valentina,” I tell her and watch as she lifts her gaze to me. Lifting my hand, I grip her forearm, pulling her forward. When my face is only a couple of inches from hers, her eyes widen.

“You must understand, Valentina, nothing we do is to hurt you. Our main focus is keeping you safe, and in doing so, we need you to obey us.”

“Why?” she questions.

“Because we demand control, and having you surrender it to us gives us complete satisfaction, *Zaika - bunny.*”

“What are you calling me?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“Bunny,” I tell her.

Dipping her eyebrows, a frown appears on her face, and I know she’s wondering why I chose to call her that.

It’s not any worse than Lev calling her little girl.

My fingers caress her arm, feeling goosebumps scatter across her skin I move closer until my lips are so close to hers.

“Such a good girl, *Zaika - bunny.*”

Shivering under me, my palm cups the side of her face, and my lips descend on hers. A possessive emotion floods my chest and the need to have her is strong. *Not yet.*

Moving down her body, I suck the skin on her neck, then slowly go down further until I reach where her nipple is poking through her dress, *fuck.*

Closing my mouth around her nipple, I suck hard, causing a strangled moan to escape her. *Fuck, those noises.*

Lifting my hand, my fingers wrap around the strap of her dress, slowly sliding it down her shoulder, I move the fabric of her dress aside, giving me better access to her pebbled delight.

Sucking her nipple into my mouth again and using my teeth this time to drive her wild, I lift my gaze as I watch her completely come undone. Her head tips back while her eyes are closed all while my cock is rock fucking hard and ready to burst.

Pulling back, I blow hot air over her nipple, making her whimper softly.

Valentina grips my hair as I tug her nipple through my teeth and bite down—hard.

“I can’t wait to fill this pretty pussy with my cock,” I growl as my fingers move toward her pussy. Moving her panties aside, I’m met with wetness.

Fucking hell.

She whimpers as I push two fingers inside her, meeting the tightness that awaits makes my cock twitch. She's so damn tight.

My cock will fucking rip her.

Taking her nipple between my lips again, I suck and pump my fingers at the same time. Knowing this is driving her wild is a huge fucking turn-on.

I might not take her pussy yet, but I'm going to enjoy claiming her this way.

Her pussy clenches around me and I know she's trying to hold back. Biting down hard on her nipple, she moans as she loses control and her body convulses, her wetness coating my fingers.

She falls back on the bed, breathing heavily as I lift my hand and suck her juices from my fingers.

Fucking hell, she tastes divine.

Valentina comes down from her high and scrambles to fix her dress as I stare down at her.

"I'm not going to bite, *Zaika - bunny.*" I wink. "Unless you ask me to." I chuckle when she growls at me.

A confused expression settles on her face. "Why did you touch me?"

"Got caught up in the moment." She stares down at the very obvious bulge in my pants.

Gripping my cock through my pants I chuckle. “Don’t worry, I’m saving that for the wedding night.”

A relieved sigh escapes her, and she visibly relaxes.

Moving away from her, she lies there while I adjust myself. I need to fucking kill someone before I take what she’s not ready for.

Turning, I abruptly leave her on the bed knowing I’m about to lose all control just by having that small taste of her.

She didn’t tell me to stop, didn’t push me away once.

Could she finally be accepting this—us?

CHAPTER 14

Valentina

I've been summoned to dinner. They've mostly let me keep to myself, but it's only two days before the wedding, one I'm still not fully ready for.

Lev eyes me cautiously as I take a seat, he sits on one end of the huge dining table while Dante sits at the other.

Moving his hand to his jaw, Lev's fingers rub over his stubble a few times before he lifts the tumbler beside him to his lips and takes a drink.

Dante's eyes search mine. My gut tells me something is wrong and my nerves feel like tiny bugs scattered under my skin.

Lev sighs, forcing my gaze on him. "We need to talk, *Malyshka - little girl*," Lev murmurs.

"Talk." It comes out as a squeak.

Dante nods, looking at Lev before he places his elbows on the table and leans forward slightly.

I stay silent, unsure what to say. With my heart hammering so hard in my chest, I wait.

Lev twists his lips, unimpressed. "This is what we mean, Valentina."

"One minute you're this fiery, sassy woman who gives us an ear full, and then you turn into this quiet mouse that's so afraid to speak," he says.

Opening my mouth to say something, I pause then close it again. I can't help it, I feel so powerless around them.

“*Malyshka - little girl,*” Lev growls. The way he says that name makes my skin tingle, yet at the same time, it feels like it's on fire.

“You are going to be our wife, Valentina, our queen. We need that fiery woman,” Dante tells me, giving me a soft smile.

“I-I'm afraid,” I tell them honestly.

“Of us?” Dante asks, raising an eyebrow. I nod slowly.

“You don't have to be afraid of us, Valentina,” Lev says, adjusting his jacket as he stands and comes toward me. Leaning over me, he slides my chair around forcing me to face him.

It's easier said than done, Lev is so huge compared to me, his body engulfs mine.

Placing his arms on either side of my head caging me in, Lev grins down at me. Lifting one hand, he brings it to my cheek, softly tracing my jawline with his fingers.

“I'm not going to stop until you admit you trust us.” Dipping my eyebrows, I'm about to ask him what it is he means when he kneels in front of me, lifting my dress. In complete shock about what he's going to do, I lift my hand smacking him away. He growls, grabbing my hands and forcing them behind the chair.

“Don't.” It's a warning not to interrupt him.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention as Lev forces his body over mine. I can't move under him, he's made sure that I won't.

"Please," I beg him.

"Say it, Valentina," Lev demands.

His lips brush against mine and I feel my nipples harden under him as his body pushes into mine.

"I can't," I whisper.

"You can, Valentina," Dante says, nodding when I twist my head toward him, still seated in his spot at the table.

"Why is it so important?" I demand Lev as he moves one hand up my leg and over my thigh, squeezing gently as he reaches the top just before his fingers trace over the lace of my panties.

"Because as our wife, you'll need to trust us, *Malyshka - little girl.*"

I roll my eyes in disgust as I imagine all the ways they'd enjoy making sure I bend to their will.

"Do it again," Lev says, giving me a tight-lipped smile.

"Ugh, you're infuriating," I snap.

"There she is. There's our fiery girl," Dante says.

"So you'll force me to say it is that it?" I sneer.

"If that's what it takes," Lev says.

I scream out loud as I lift my knee, aiming for Lev's balls. Gripping my leg, Lev holds it down with more force than

necessary and tsking, he shakes his head before yanking the material of my dress, ripping it to expose my right breast, right out in the open.

Before I can give him a piece of my mind, his lips close around my pebbled bud and he sucks—hard.

My thighs clench together as his teeth graze over the tip and then his lips close over it again sucking and licking until I'm a withering mess under him. My head rolls from side to side, trying to force myself to focus on anything but what Lev is doing to me, but it's no use, his teeth scrape across my nipple while his tongue does laps around it. I try to hold it back, but it's no use as an orgasm rolls through me and I moan while Lev watches me from above.

Lifting his head, Lev smirks, his close proximity causes the air to leave my lungs as we stare at each other.

“You are so beautiful when you cum, *Malyshka - little girl.*” Suddenly feeling very exposed, I push myself up and cover myself with what little material of my dress I can.

I just came at the dining room table, without any penetration. How is that possible?

Lev moves back, only slightly, giving me some space, he eyes me frowning as I cover myself.

Gripping my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Never feel embarrassed, *Malyshka - little girl.* Never,” he growls.

“You barely touched me and I just.” I swallow, feeling my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“Watching you come apart, *Zaika - bunny*, is the most beautiful gift you could ever give us,” Dante says, standing and moving toward where I sit.

“Tell us you trust us?” he says.

I can't.

I can't lie. Because right now even though things are widely confusing and messy, I still can't trust them.

I'm not sure I ever will.

CHAPTER 15

Dante

One more day, fuck it's so close.

I watch as Valentina exits the room she'd been hiding away in while the last minute adjustments on her dress were being made. She pauses when she sees me, her eyes flicking between me and the floor.

Moving toward her, I take a short few steps before I'm towing over her, lifting my hand I place it under her chin, tipping it up and forcing her to look at me.

"*Zaika - bunny.*" She flinches, moving her head to force her chin from my grasp.

"May I be excused?" Her voice comes out strained. She'd be avoiding us since Lev made her climax at the dining table. Unable to say those three words we wanted to hear. *She trusts us.* She'd done everything she could to keep away.

Sighing, I take a step to the side, knowing come tomorrow, she'll be mine, so letting her go right now, doesn't matter.

Valentina scurries past me, her heels clicking on the floor as she takes the stairs to her room. Watching her, I know without a doubt no matter what, this woman will own me.

My phone vibrates in my pocket pulling me from watching her ascend the stairs.

"Yes?" my tone is clipped as I answer.

"Sir, one of our warehouses has been hit." Joseph, one of our guards, informs me.

“Fuck,” I yell, letting out a growl as I walk toward Lev’s office knowing he’s on a call with one of our dealers.

“Which one?”

“Lot 54, sir.” I stop, knowing that lot holds all our ammunition.

Tapping my knuckles against the door, Lev frowns when I push it open and clear my throat. “Warehouse was hit,” I tell him.

“Fuck, which one?” he asks.

“Lot 54,” I relay to him.

Lev growls. “I’ll call you back,” he says, slamming his phone down as he shuts off the call.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I raise an eyebrow as I watch Lev pace behind his desk.

“You think there’ll be a hit tomorrow?” he asks me. The thought crossed my mind. Could Marco be behind this? Would he be willing to go up against us to get Valentina back?

“I think we prepare for the worst-case scenario,” I say, moving my hand along my jaw.

“What is it?” Lev asks me.

“Could this be Marco?”

Lev scoffs. “You think he’s stupid enough to come for us?”

I shrug because I’m betting the man will do anything to save his ass.

“I think he’s desperate and knowing that come tomorrow, his daughter will be ours, perhaps he thinks we’ll divulge his dirty secrets.”

Lev smirks, clearly the thought has crossed his mind to tell her everything.

“After tomorrow we’ll tell her,” he says to me, moving back to his desk and taking a seat, he drums his fingers across his desk.

“About tomorrow?” I say when he suddenly blurts out.

“I want to take it,” he tells me, watching my reaction.

“You what?” I bark, annoyed he’s going against our deal to wait until the night of the wedding to decide.

“I touched her,” he says.

“I know, I was there?” I sneer.

“No before that,” he tells me.

Glaring at him, I’m unable to hide my annoyance even though I did the same.

“Calm down it was just my fingers,” he says as if that makes it any better. I’m no better.

“Un-fucking-believable, Lev. We agreed to wait, and what you just couldn’t?” I snap.

“She’s still pure, brother,” he reminds me.

Not the point, Lev always does this shit. I scowl, tamping down my anger toward my brother. He knew I wanted first dibs at her, and he just had to do it first.

“I touched her, too,” I admit, and Lev just chuckles. “Well, well, I guess you’re no better than me, brother.”

Seems she’s calling to us both.

Either way, we both get Valentina. I just wish we’d waited.

“Fine, you take it,” I say, agreeing Valentina’s virginity be his.

Lev grinds his teeth. “You owe me for touching her before our agreement,” I remind him.

“Fine,” he grits out. “You can take her ass first,” he suggests.

Clenching my jaw, I think on it for a second then nod in agreement.

“Let’s deal with this fuckery before I kill someone,” he says, picking up his jacket and pushing his arm through as we walk out of his office.

Lev and I head downstairs knowing full well Valentina’s safe with our men.

Guess we’re about to go to war.

CHAPTER 16

Valentina

The light peeks through the drapes, inhaling deeply my eyes flutter open taking in the room. I must have fallen asleep? I guess it doesn't matter, I have nowhere to be.

My father hasn't contacted me, unless he has and my soon-to-be husbands have prevented him from speaking to me.

I wouldn't be surprised one bit. They seem to like control, and controlling me would be an absolute delight to them.

The betrayal of what my father did still hurts, am I really that disposable that he doesn't care to check on me?

The door suddenly bursts open, and I roll my eyes. They definitely don't know the word privacy, I sit myself up as Lev walks in throwing something on the bed at me.

"Put this on. Be ready in ten minutes," he states, turns on his heel, and walks from the room. Demanding as always.

Being childish, I stick my tongue out at his turned back and move down the bed to where the outfit he's thrown at me is placed.

Lifting it up, I stare at the gold material for a few moments before tossing it aside.

No way in hell am I wearing that.

I almost want to roll my eyes but even though he's not in the room I refrain from doing so.

The door opens again, this time Dante stands there smirking when he sees I'm still sitting in bed and the dress is tossed to the side.

“Oh, *Zaika - bunny*,” he murmurs, taking a step into the room. Glancing behind him he shakes his head. “You won't get far, Valentina,” he warns.

Picking up the dress he moves the material between his fingers.

“Stand,” he demands.

“Go to hell,” I snap.

“I gave you ten minutes, Valentina.” Lev's voice comes from behind Dante.

“And I said go to hell,” I snap angrily at both of them. “You can force me to marry you, but I refuse to let you parade me around like some trophy.” Lev raises an eyebrow while Dante clenches his teeth. They're infuriated looks bore through me.

Before I can move, Lev pounces on me straddling my hips and holds me down with the weight of his body while wrapping his fingers around my wrists he holds them above my head.

Kicking my legs, I scream.

“Obedience, that's what we asked for, Valentina,” he growls.

His voice deepens when he pushes his cock into me. Moving slightly, he lifts me, spinning me around and

slamming me back onto the bed face first this time. He grabs something and ties my hands to the board above the bed. I struggle trying to free myself before he straddles my legs again holding me in place. Dante comes to the side holding something in the palm of his hand.

Suddenly, my pant bottoms are shoved down around my cheeks, and Lev's hand slowly moves over the curve of my ass.

"Fucking perfection," he growls just as the first sting hits causing me to squeak out loud.

"This punishment is for disrespecting me, Valentina. Do you understand?" Lev snaps, making himself clear.

I nod through the haze of tears that begin to coat my lashes. Lev's hand comes down again this time harder.

By the time the initial shock of him spanking me has passed and his hand has come down for the sixth time, I squirm under him feeling the tension between my thighs growing. *No, I can't enjoy this.*

I refuse to let him see my body's reaction to his punishment.

Once Lev has delivered all ten hits he slides off me, moving to my side. Brushing his fingers through my hair, he smiles down at me.

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy that, *Malyshka - little girl.*" Lev grunts.

Dante leans over me untying my hands. I lay still unable to move because the confusion coursing through me right now is

hard to take.

Lev's right, I enjoyed it, I felt the wetness pooling between my thighs with every slap. It's coating the inside of my thighs.

Dante slides my bottoms up covering me. I lay on my stomach unmoving and not caring that they're still here, watching me.

"*Malyshka - little girl,*" Lev says. Turning my head to face the wall instead of him, I shutter slightly as the disgust in myself fills me in waves.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed by, Valentina," Dante says, but he's wrong, so wrong. I shouldn't have enjoyed that, I'm not supposed to enjoy anything they do to me yet my body keeps betraying me.

"You're going to be our wife in twenty-four hours, Valentina. Taking pleasure from us is not a sin," Lev states.

"Leave me please," I demand.

"No," they both say at once.

"You're to get dressed, Valentina. Everyone is waiting." My eyes widened at that statement.

"What?" I gasp, sitting myself up and looking between them.

"Get dressed, everyone is waiting on you," Dante says. Standing, he walks to the door closing it behind him. Lev looks me up and down, holding the dress up he gestures for me to take it.

Following his orders, I walk toward the bathroom, shut myself in, and take a deep breath as I realize there is no getting out of this.

CHAPTER 17

Dante

With Valentina firmly between us, Lev and I walk into the crowded room as all eyes turn to us.

The dress Lev chose fits her perfectly, showcasing her curves. Her hair falls over one shoulder. Anyone looking at her would think she spent hours putting herself together, but knowing she spent fifteen minutes and hated every moment of it makes the side of my mouth lift.

Mr. Moretti comes into view and the moment Valentina spots him she makes a beeline for the old man.

Wrapping her arms around her father, he holds her close kissing the side of her head.

“You look beautiful,” he murmurs softly, eyeing Lev and me over Valentina’s head.

Sensing us behind her, Valentina stiffens before turning her head to look over her shoulder.

“Darling, we must dance,” Lev murmurs close to her ear, pulling her away from her father.

Valentina looks to her father, hesitantly following Lev toward the dance floor so as not to make a scene.

“Did you steal from us?” I ask Marco as he watches Lev with his daughter.

“What?” He growls. “No.”

“Tomorrow, she becomes ours, and we’ll have no further use for you,” I tell him, causing his face to pale.

“I promise, I didn’t,” he states.

“We’re going to enjoy ruining you, Mr. Moretti. Valentina will have no choice but to surrender to us when we’re the only ones she’ll have in the world,” I say, giving him a devilish smile as I watch his face fall, while Lev spins Valentina in circles around the dance floor.

Lev gives me a look over Valentina’s shoulder and I know what he’s asking me.

Valentina’s father has to die. Regardless, there’s a price on his head.

One we put there.

* * *

“Come, you won’t get to see your daughter marry I’m afraid, old man. Your time has come to an end.”

Marco scowls at me. “She’ll never trust you.”

“I’m afraid she has no choice, we’re all she has left,” I remind him of his untimely death.

Ushering him from the room, Lev keeps Valentina occupied while I escort her father down to our basement. No need for her to see his end.

Opening one of the cell doors, I shove him hard causing him to fall to his knees.

“You kill me, you’ll never have her, not fully.” He turns, looking at me over his shoulder.

“I think it’s worth the risk, Marco. Don’t you? After all, Valentina is no good to us dead.”

Slamming the door shut, I lock Marco inside. Lev and I will deal with him later. Tonight, we convince Valentina her father is a traitor.

I find Lev and Valentina in the ballroom, the speeches are about to begin and tonight is when Lev will announce that Valentina will also be marrying me.

Lev nods for me to join them on the stage.

“Tonight, we’re here to celebrate. Valentina has agreed to become my wife.” Lev smiles looking over the crowd, applause begins, and Lev holds up his hand silencing it.

Standing to the side of Valentina, I look down at her and smile.

“But we have another surprise,” he begins.

“Tomorrow, Valentina will not only marry me, but marry my brother Dante too.”

Gasps and whispers spread through the room. Valentina looks to the floor completely frozen.

“Her father betrayed not only us, but her as well.” Valentina lifts her head eyeing Lev.

He looks down at her. “I’m sorry little one, but your father is a coward. He pleaded with me to spare his life; the only thing he had to offer me of any value was you.”

Valentina swallows hard, Lev grabs her hand, following them we all move toward the staircase.

“Leave, the party is over,” I call as Lev and I walk Valentina upstairs to her room.

Ignoring us, she heads straight for the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

“Is he there?” Lev asks, nodding as he turns and walks down to the basement. Closing the door behind me, I lock it and then follow behind him.

Tonight it all ends. Valentina will have no choice come tomorrow. If she leaves our safely, the target on her back will once again become active because we’ll stop at nothing to make her ours. We may have lifted it to claim her but even we will cross the line to guarantee she belongs to us.

Even if she’s caught in between us and a war.

CHAPTER 18

Valentina

Trying the handle even though it's always locked, I'm surprised to find it unlocked this time.

What?

Slowly twisting the knob, I tug open the door and peek through the opening.

Is this some sort of test? *Surely they're not being careless?*

I step out through the opening, looking both ways not seeing anyone, I pad along the long hallway on bare feet. Coming to the staircase, I spot a guard by the very last step. *Crap he's in the way of the exit.*

By some miracle, someone calls him and he leaves his post. Seeing this as my chance to run, I bolt down the stairs and turn ready to head through the door. A loud voice stops me, and I turn when it sounds again this time sounding even angrier.

Taking small steps, I make my way toward where the sound is coming from, my gut tells me something isn't right, but I continue. Twisting the handle, the door opens to a staircase. The voices travel up, sounding awfully familiar.

Opening the door wide enough to fit through, I take a deep breath, and

Swallowing, I take the stairs one at a time, slowly, dread filling me the deeper I descend.

A gurgling sound reaches my ears and without thinking I step down into the room.

A strangled choke sound leaves my lips when I spot Lev and Dante leaning over my father covered in blood. They turn abruptly, their eyes going wide spotting me.

Lev takes a step forward and I take one back.

“*Malyshka - little girl,*” he says, taking another step forward.

My breathing is rapid as I look at my father covered in blood. I can't even tell what they've done to him, there's so much. His face is swollen and unrecognizable, but I know it's him.

Lev's hands are covered in blood, and I watch as it drips to the floor beneath him. I turn and run, tripping on one of the steps, Lev is right behind me.

“Valentina,” he hisses. Reaching the top, I turn, slamming the door shut. I'm about to run for the front door when the door bursts open with both Lev and Dante breathing heavily as they each take a step toward me. I don't think I just turn and run. Heading straight for the backyard. I'll hide in the gardens.

I keep running, the rocks in the yard dig into my feet as I make the clearing but it's no use.

I scream when one of their hands wraps around my arm, yanking me backward, suddenly I'm lifted into the air and then slammed to the ground. Lev straddles me holding my hands above my head.

Letting out an animalistic scream, Lev struggles to hold me down as I buck and kick trying to free myself from his grasp.

“Enough,” he yells, startling me as he bends and gets right in my face. “Stop fighting.” His chest is heavy, his lips bend in an angry snarl and he’s completely covered in blood.

My father’s.

The muscle in his jaw ticks. Blinking up at him, I try to catch my breath as Dante kneels down beside my head.

“Ssh,” he whispers, running his fingers down my cheek in a soothing gesture.

Tears fall down my cheeks as I picture my father helpless and covered in blood.

“You’re safe, Valentina.”

“S-stop, please,” I cry.

I break, my entire body shudders and I can’t hold back the pain.

Lev loosens his grip on me, surprising me by pulling me up and into his lap. Fisting his shirt, I cry, unable to control my tears.

“Fuck little one,” he hisses.

His fingers massage my scalp as he holds me to his chest.

“Fuck, you weren’t supposed to see that,” he admits.

“*Blayd - fuck,*” he murmurs.

“Forgive us?” Dante asks me.

The tension is so intense, I feel sick. Nothing makes sense.

“Why?” I breathe, taking a deep breath. Peeking up at Lev, he looks down at me before he inhales.

“He betrayed us, he was marked from the moment he left the safety of his tower,” Lev explains.

“I-I don’t understand,” I question.

There’s a tense minute before Lev and Dante share a look and he spares me another glance.

“In our world, Valentina, going against us means you are our enemies. Your father showed on more than one occasion he was an enemy not a friend.” Lev declares.

“I’m confused,” I tell him honestly.

Lev lets out a sigh before he moves his hand, cupping my face.

“Your father got in bed with the wrong people, and he paid a price, there was a hit on your father and on you.”

“Me,” I squeak.

Lev nods. “Yes, little one.”

“W-who would do that?” I gasp.

Lev looks away for a moment and over my head, sharing a look with Dante.

“Us,” Dante says.

Scrambling from Lev’s lap to my feet, my gaze flicks between the two of them as they watch me.

“Y-you?” I stammer, taking another step back.

“We will not harm you, Valentina,” Dante says, raising his hands in surrender.

“B-but you want me dead,” I say, trying to put all this information together.

“No,” Lev says, taking a step forward, he stops when I take two back.

“Once we issued the order we went to your father and made a deal,” Dante tells me.

“I still don’t understand. You wanted me dead, but then you want to marry me?” Placing my hands against my temples I try to rub the aching spots.

“None of this makes sense,” I whisper.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, *Zaika - bunny*,” Dante says, placing his hands in his pockets, it’s then I notice he’s also covered in blood.

“It’s more than a lot.” I confess.

“In our world, things don’t always make sense, but your father was against us, Valentina, so to show him we were serious, you became a target as well.” Lev explains.

“What did my father do?” I ask them.

Lev’s eyes search my face, then the corner of his mouth turns down slightly. “He stole from us.”

“Stole?”

“Yes, Valentina. He stole millions of dollars, and we’re pretty sure he’s the one who hit one of our warehouses stealing all our ammunition,” Dante says.

“Your father isn’t the man you think he is, *Zaika - bunny*,” Dante tells me.

“What about you? Are you the men I think you are?” I say, raising an eyebrow at them.

“Oh.” Lev smiles, taking a step forward. “We’re much worse, *Malyshka - little girl*.”

A strained gasp leaves me. How can I marry these men?

“No harm will ever come to you, Valentina,” Dante reassures me. Lev stalks forward eating up the space between us, intense fear paralyzes me, as his large steps close us together.

“Stop saying that,” I shout, tired of hearing them telling me no harm will come to me.

Lies, it’s all lies.

I recoil thinking the worst, when Lev’s fingers grip my chin right before his mouth crashes to mine. The kiss is filled with so much passion, I forget how to breathe. His tongue works inside my mouth, then his teeth bite down on my lips, causing my body to react.

“You. Are. Ours.” His words are rough and demanding.

“I’m not a possession you can claim,” I say my tone is soft from the pain bubbling inside me.

“I know, we both do,” Lev says, lifting his hand, slowly trailing it across my arm, and watching the goosebumps spread over my skin.

His eyes lock with mine. “You feel it too, Valentina, you have to,” Lev says while his fingers continue their path across my arm. *I don't want to, but I do feel it.*

I suck in a deep breath, then glance at both Dante and Lev, Lev's fingers wrap around the side of my neck.

“Are you going to give yourself to us, willingly?” he commands.

And for the first time since this all started, I find I say the one thing I never thought I would.

“Yes, I will,” I whisper. Lev pulls me into him and staring into my eyes he demands, “Say the words.”

“I'm yours.” my voice shakes even as the words leave my lips.

CHAPTER 19

Lev

Lifting Valentina in my arms, I carry her through the courtyard and don't stop until we're outside her room.

Placing her down, she slides down my body in a slow, agonizing pace until her feet hit the floor beneath her.

She witnessed something she was never meant to see. Fuck.

Lowering my head to hers, I know she's even more terrified of us now, she has every right to be, after all everything we've done has been forced, but I'm not going to let her go. She finally admitted she's ours.

Taking hold of her slender arm, I tug her to me, forcing her to stare up at me as her feet rise from the floor.

Her eyes dart over my face, then behind me to where Dante stands.

There's a flash of nervousness on her face before she turns her head away staring at the floor.

"I promise you, Valentina, we will only ever cherish you. Between us, no one will ever hurt you," I say before cupping her jaw, I move it slightly exposing her neck to me.

"You wanted to hurt me." She whispers.

"It's in the past, Valentina." I tell her.

"Is it, really?" She asks, her bottom lip trembling.

“You drive us fucking wild, *Malyshka - little girl.*” I groan, my lips ghosting the softness of her neck. My cock twitches eager to claim her.

“I’m more afraid of you.” Dante chuckles at her admission.

“In time, *Malyshka - little girl,* you’ll see our only desire is to have you and watch you expand our lives together.

Her eyes widened when I admit out loud our plans for her.

I weave my fingers through hers and place a kiss to her forehead, then step aside knowing Dante is eager to do the same.

Leaving them alone, I head to my office. Valentina barged in on an untimely matter but soon she’ll truly know who we are.

Dante enters a few moments later, and I glare at my brother. “You left her door unlocked.”

“It was a test,” Dante replies.

“A test?” I hiss, repeating his words.

“I wanted to see what she would do,” he admits.

“Are you fucking crazy, Dante? She still doesn’t fully trust us and then she catches us torturing her father. For fuck’s sake,” I snap, my anger getting the better of me.

“Calm down, brother. It’ll only be a matter of time before she trusts us. Besides, she admitted she’s ours, that’s a start.”

“She better, Dante, because otherwise, this entire plan is a failure,” I growl.

Killing Marco was only the start. Valentina is the key to everything.

Fixing my tie, I watch Dante sip his tumbler of whiskey. He'd never admit it out loud, but I know he's worried Valentina will run today, she wouldn't get far, but I wouldn't put it past her to at least try.

Music blasts from downstairs; everybody is starting to arrive.

Dante gives me a small chin lift and together we exit the office to claim our bride.

CHAPTER 20

Valentina

I'm frozen, completely unable to move as I stare at myself in the mirror.

I thought this was unavoidable, that somehow, I'd escape this.

But here I am.

Time is up. In a few short minutes, I'll belong to the Vitiello brothers. Even admitting that I'm theirs out loud, somehow this all still feels surreal.

The door opens and the guard, Franco, who'd been assigned to guard me all week nods, letting me know it's time.

God, I don't think I can do this. They're going to kill my father.

Apart from the few kisses they each took from me and what they'd done with their fingers, they hadn't touched me, they'd never once forced me. Would that all change once I'm theirs?

Would they become cruel?

The mermaid style dress sits perfectly at my feet, the bodice showing each curve. Taking a deep breath, knowing there's no way out of this, I turn and take the first few steps, the dress swaying with the movement as I join Franco at the door.

Gesturing for me to go ahead, he walks behind me as we go down the long hallway and down the stairs before I come to

a stop just before the entrance to where my life is about to change.

It goes deathly silent for a moment, the only noise that can be heard is a few small, hushed whispers. Music begins, and I feel a hand on my lower back, gently pushing me forward. *This is it.* The doors open, my heart begins to hammer in my chest as every pair of eyes focuses on me. I begin to walk.

There are so many people.

Dante and Lev are at the very end, standing stoic with their hands folded in front of them. Lev nods at me and I know no matter what, this is happening. I'm about to get married.

They both exude power as they watch me come toward them.

Each step forward makes it harder to breathe, even if I turn and run, I won't get far, no one will help me. I'm doomed.

The corner of Dante's mouth lifts as he watches me, while Lev looks at me with pure possession. The fear of what will happen once we're alone causes panic to surge through me.

Lev extends his hand, taking mine, and pulling me the last few inches so I'm nestled between him and Dante.

Dante places his hand on my lower back and leaning in, he whispers, "You look breathtaking, *Zaika - bunny.*" His lips brush against my cheek. Pulling back, Dante smiles down at me before Lev does the same. "You are so damn beautiful, *Malyshka - little girl.*" He whispers, nodding for the priest to start.

“Today we are gathered to celebrate the union of Lev, Dante, and Valentina. As the Vitiello brothers, they have both agreed to unite together and take Valentina as their bride today.”

My heart pounds, this is really happening.

“Today is the start of their new lives together so let’s begin,” the priest says, looking between Lev and Dante, and then me.

He holds a book in front of them and together they begin to recite.

“I take you as my wife.

To be with you always.

In wealth and poverty.

In disease and health.

In happiness and grief.

From this day until death separates us.”

“Valentina,” the priest urges me, holding the book in front of me to recite the vows.

“Come on, *Malyshka - little girl*,” Lev murmurs next to my ear, kissing behind it gently.

Taking a breath, I look up at Lev who nods, then toward Dante who lifts the corner of his mouth in a crooked smile.

“I take you as my husbands.

To be with you always.

In wealth and poverty.

In disease and health.

In happiness and grief.

From this day until death separates us.”

Lev pulls me to him. Taking my lips in his, growling as he kisses me, his hand cups my face and he gently bites on my bottom lip. Then Dante tugs my hand, turning me to face him as soon as Lev’s lips leave mine. His hands cover my face and Dante’s tongue tangles with mine before he pulls away staring down at me.

“I now pronounce you, husbands and wife,” the priest says, bowing his head at Lev and Dante before moving away, giving us privacy.

I’m theirs.

Blinking, I do my best to focus on the moment ... I’m married.

These brothers both married me. I know legally I can only be married to one. But they are the Vitiello brothers, who’s going to tell them no?

Taking both my hands, they lead me down the aisle. I refuse to look at anyone, nothing anyone does now will help me.

Dante and Lev share a look over my head.

“Come, *Malyshka - little girl*,” Lev speaks first while they both guide me through the ballroom.

Music drifts through the room, a sensual ballad that pulls at my emotions.

Both the men hold me close, wrapping a hand around my middle before we dance in a triangle of some sort.

Leaning down, Lev murmurs, “Smile, *Wif - Wife.*” Doing as I’m told, I curve my lips upward, Dante captures my eyes with his and stares at me for a moment before he smiles down at me.

“At least look like you’re happy,” he states, raising an eyebrow at me.

Obey, just obey. I remind myself.

“Relax, Valentina,” Lev murmurs softly, rubbing his fingers across my lower back.

“We’re not savages,” he continues. My gaze finds his and somehow despite everything, I know he’s telling the truth. They haven’t harmed me yet.

“You’ll always be safe, Valentina. We promise, no harm will ever come to you,” Dante says.

I’m not sure about that. I’m so confused.

Because even though right now I’m safe, what happens when everyone leaves and I’m left alone with my husbands?

Will they punish me for everything I’ve tried to do now that I’m theirs?

I don’t want to think of what’s going to happen.

I just have to survive being married to the Vitiello brothers.

God, will this turn into a nightmare?

I exhale as Lev opens the door to his room, the dim lighting casts the room in a soft glow.

Dante comes up behind me. With his hands resting on my shoulders, I feel his lips on my shoulder and he places a soft kiss before he moves from behind me.

“Come, *Wif - Wife*,” Lev murmurs, holding out his hand for me to take, slowly I place mine in his and he pulls me softly toward a door. He pushes against the door, showcasing a huge hot tub that’s filled with bubbles galore and the entire room is cast in candlelight.

Looking back at Lev, he raises an eyebrow and I feel his hands on my back as he slowly pulls down the zipper of my dress.

Are they going to pamper me?

“As amazing as you look, I think you deserve a soak.” He kisses my shoulder as he slides the dress down my hips. I’m standing in nothing but a white lacy G-string, Dante takes his position in front of me. “Relax, *Wif - Wife*, we’re going to take good care of you.” He smiles down at me, taking my hand in his as Lev slides the lace down my thighs, his fingertips caressing my skin as he does.

Switching on a button, the hot tub explodes as the jets go on full force. Lifting a leg, Dante helps me into the water and watches as I sit back and relax.

“Better?” Lev asks me. I nod because for the first time since they brought me here, I feel cherished.

They both kneel beside the hot tub after getting rid of their jackets on a chair in the corner and rolling up the sleeves of the shirts. They both begin to wash me and my gaze falls to their forearms, the muscles move as they squirt some body wash into their hands.

Dante lifts each leg, massaging until he finishes at my feet, while Lev rubs my shoulders and neck causing a soft moan to escape me.

They're hitting all the right spots.

I can barely control the sounds coming from me.

"Now that you're our wife, Valentina, you are a part of this family, a part of our world," Lev tells me as he continues to rub my shoulders.

"And with that comes knowing the truth," Dante continues as his fingers rub the bottom of my feet.

This feels like they are working me up to something, like they're trying to relax me before they deliver a huge blow.

"There's something you need to know," Dante suddenly says.

"What do you mean?" I ask utterly confused.

"You were always part of our plan, Valentina," Lev tells me.

"Your mother promised you to us."

"What?" I gasp.

"She made us promise to always watch out for you and in exchange we could one day claim you." Dante says.

“We watched your father kill your mother, Valentina, all because she slept with our father.” Lev exhales.

CHAPTER 21

Lev

Valentina glances up at us through her lashes; her face goes ghostly pale after I admit the truth about her father. After all she witnessed, there's no denying his demise.

"I don't understand," she whispers.

"What don't you understand, Valentina?" Dante asks as he stands grabbing a towel for her.

Helping her to her feet, I lift her from the hot tub, placing her down on the mat just as Dante wraps the towel around her shoulders.

Lifting her in his arms, Dante carries her bridal style to the bed. Placing her on the mattress, she holds the towel against her body, tears trickle down her cheeks as she comes to terms with the truth. Her father is going to die. By our hands. Because of what he did.

"He's still alive?" she whispers, inhaling a deep breath.

Cupping her cheek to tilt her head, I take her lips in mine, consuming her completely.

Valentina's body sinks under mine, and knowing that she's surrendering is enough to pull the caveman out of me. We can talk later. Right now, I want to consume my wife.

"Say it, baby." I groan around our kiss. I'm going to make her forget about him, her only focus is us.

"I'm yours," she murmurs, making my cock twitch.

“Fuck, yes you are,” I snap, ripping the towel from her body to expose her to us. Her nipples stand taunt and hard, and I can’t help but take one in my mouth.

My lips wrap around it, sucking and licking until it’s solid beneath my tongue.

“Thuck idealno - Fucking perfect,” I growl.

Soft moans fill the space as my tongue sucks the tiny, pebbled bud into my mouth while my cock pushes into heat.

Crawling down her body, my lips trail soft kisses along the way. She gasps when I suck the inside of her thigh, wriggling under me.

Sliding down her g-string I throw it over my head, her soft moans filling the room as I rub my thumb across her clit. Dipping my head, my tongue replaces my thumb latching onto her clit, sucking hard forcing her to gasp out loud as I work her to a frenzy.

Breathing her in, I groan against her pussy as my tongue works inside of her. Clenching her thighs against my head Valentina whimpers as her body withers under me, her fingers find my head fisting the strands of my hair as she lifts her bottom up forcing me to hold her down as I devour her. Her cries are the only thing I hear as she explodes her orgasm coating my tongue.

“Fuck.” My voice strains, tasting her.

Yanking down my zipper, freeing my cock, I fist the hardness she caused.

“Say it again.” I groan. I need to hear her say it, after denying she was ours I need to hear her say it.

“I’m yours, Lev,” she whispers.

Lifting her hips, I wrap my arms under her and slide inch by inch into her, feeling her tightness strangle me.

Fuck.

“I’m yours,” she moans again as I take her completely.

Valentina whimpers under me, my cock is buried to the hilt, while her pussy grips me like a vice. Gripping her hip, I move slowly and precisely letting her feel all of me as I rip away her innocence.

Slamming her eyes shut, she opens them when my hand grips the side of her face, using my thumb to drag across her lip.

Valentina doesn’t fight me like I thought she would, she moves her hips in rhythm with me, gripping my shoulders tightly as I fuck her raw.

Fucking hell, she’s so tight.

With a hard thrust, I groan, while my palms find her breasts causing a moan to escape her.

“So fucking good, baby.” I hiss. Dante moves to the side of her watching as she lets me claim her.

“Yes.” She gasps. “Please.” She moans, biting down on her lip.

“You don’t give the orders, *Malyshka - little girl*,” I growl, smacking my fingers across her nipple.

She cries out when I twist one between my fingers, tugging just enough to let her know I'm in charge.

My thumb circles her clit. "Such a good girl," I praise her, forcing a strangled whimper from her.

"So fucking wet, *Malyshka - little girl*. Your pussy was made for my cock, baby," I tell her, slamming into her and forcing a scream to rip from her. Her body convulses as she climaxes again. Gripping my forearms, Valentina's entire body shudders under me and that's the last encouragement I need. With one more hard thrust, I bury my cock to the hilt and groan as I come so hard a savage growl rips from me.

Valentina lays still as I slide from her, evidence of her virginity covering my cock. I'm going to enjoy taking my wife whenever, wherever I want.

Moving back, I take a seat and watch as my brother claims her, pushing his cock inside her wetness.

CHAPTER 22

Dante

Fucking hell, she's tight. Her pussy grips me so hard and already I want to fill her up.

Valentina watches me as my cock takes her. Her teeth catch her lip, and she whimpers as I thrust in and out.

"Fuck, so tight." I hiss.

Valentina moans under me as I wrap my hand around her throat. "Let me hear you, little one," I urged her.

She moans as my hips thrust forward.

"Ya thuck trachnut - I'm so fucked." I hiss.

My hips keep a rhythm, as her sounds fill the room. "Please," she whimpers, clenching her thighs around me, fuck our girl is needy.

With a hard thrust, I push my cock in until I hit her so hard she cries out.

The bed begins to move as I rock my hips, lifting Valetina's legs. I hold them to my side and piston my hips while I watch my cock slide in and out.

"Say it, baby," I growl. "Fuck." I hiss, throwing my head back.

"I'm yours, Dante, I'm yours," she murmurs, and I let go filling her until she's dripping. Crying out, she climaxes again gripping my forearms as I jerk inside her.

Slipping free I move to the side, taking the spot next to her as I catch my breath.

Placing my arm behind my head and tilting my head to the side, I watch Valentina as Lev lays in the open spot beside her.

Running his fingers through her hair, he murmurs, “Are you okay, *Malyshka* - little girl?”

Valentina nods. “Yes.”

Sitting up, I head toward the bathroom and grab a towel, wetting it, I lift it up then move in between her legs and wipe. She clenches slightly when I add pressure, being as gentle as I can I clean her.

She stills between us. I’m sure the shock of what transpired between us finally registering.

She glances at Lev out of the corner of her eye before doing the same to me.

Letting out a chuckle, I tip her chin up, forcing her to look at me. “Relax, little one, you’re safe.”

I’ll reassure her as much as I can, she never has to be afraid.

“Tell me about the mafia,” she suddenly says, piquing both mine and Lev’s interest.

“Lev and I took over when our father passed. It’s a dangerous world, Valentina, one your father has always been a part of.” Frowning, she stares at me like she’s hearing about her father being in the mafia for the first time.

“You do know he’s a part of the mafia, don’t you?” Lev questions.

Valentina shakes her head. “No, up until you came and took me away, I had no clue what he did for a living. I feel so stupid, not knowing. How could I not?” She frowns harder, a tiny v appearing on her forehead.

“Your father betrayed us, Valentina, it’s why we were ...”

“Killing him?” She finishes my answer. I nod.

“Can I say goodbye?” She looks between us. Clenching his jaw, Lev frowns. Using his tongue to unlock his jaw he drags it against his lips before mumbling, “No, *Malyshka - little girl.*”

“What, why?” she questions him.

“Lev,” I say, trying to reason with my brother.

“I said no, that’s final,” Lev snaps, pushing himself from the bed and slipping on his trousers before he heads toward the door. Opening it, before he walks out, he looks over his shoulder and murmurs, “One day you’ll understand why, Valentina. But you’re forbidden to go near your father.” The door slams behind him as he walks out leaving a stunned Valentina sitting on the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees. Guilt rears up, swirling between Valentina and me as I slowly remove myself from the bed. Slipping on pants, I pad across the room, opening the door, I look back at her seeing hot tears stream down her face as she sobs.

“It’s for the best, Valentina,” I assure her.

She scoffs loudly. “You just want to control me, that’s all this has ever been about. Neither of you cares about me,” she snaps, tucking her head into her knees.

Nodding, I leave her. I know she needs this time to come to terms with her father’s death. Because by tomorrow he’ll be gone and there’s nothing she can do to stop it.

Opening the door to Lev’s office, he looks up from his computer when I walk in.

“Fuck, I shouldn’t have growled,” he admits.

“Perhaps not, but she needs to know we are in control,” I remind him.

Lev pauses to take a breath, then turns his eyes to me. “She’s still going to defy us, Dante, I can feel it.”

“Yeah, most likely.” I chuckle. I can’t see Valentina succumbing to us completely.

“Isn’t her fire that we love though?”

Lev smiles, he knows I’m right. Valentina has fought us every step of the way, but she didn’t run today, and she just gave herself to us both, I’d say that’s a small win.

“Back to business,” he says, nodding to the file he has on his desk.

Marco’s connections are there somewhere and we’ll find them even if it means we torture him some more to force them from him.

We won’t stop, not until we find the truth.

Valentina deserves that much.

CHAPTER 23

Valentina

My body was sore, but somehow it felt right. After Lev snapped at me about my father, I knew there was more to the story, there had to be. I can't remember my mother, I was so young. Did my father really kill her?

I knew there was a chance they had already killed my father, but I had to know.

I deserve the truth.

Padding across the floor, I wasn't sure if they were aware they'd left me in Lev's room, or for that matter if now that I was their wife, I was free to roam around the house.

Slowly, and as quietly as possible, I open the door, wrapping the silk robe around myself. They'd been thoughtful enough to leave some clothes for me.

I tiptoe through the hall seeing the landing for the stairs. Looking over my shoulder, I check to make sure they haven't heard me before I rush down the stairs, there is no one in sight. I don't have time to ponder about the silence. I head for the basement door. Opening it, I slip through, closing it behind me, and hoping I have time to question my father and that he's still alive.

The stairs creak as I tiptoe down into the basement.

My father sits tied to a chair, his head hanging down.

I'm too late.

On wobbly legs, I walk toward my father. A metallic smell fills my nostrils and I know it's the blood, there's so much.

Reaching out, I touch a part of his face that isn't covered in blood, gosh he looks terrible. What did they do to him?

My gaze falls down and I see he's missing a finger on his left hand.

Covering my mouth, a strangled gasp leaves me, they cut off his finger.

Tears flow down my cheeks as I look at the state my father has been left in.

They just left him here to die.

I lean forward ready to untie him, when he coughs and a choked gasp leaves him.

"Daddy," I murmur, bending to my knees in front of him.

"Valentina," he groans, trying to open his eyes to look at me. One eye is swollen shut and he can barely open the other.

"I'm going to help you," I cry, trying to free the ropes, but they're so tight I can't find where they start or end.

"Valentina." He coughs.

"There's no time, they'll come soon," I tell him, tugging on the ropes with every bit of strength I have.

"Are you theirs?" he asks.

"Y-yes," I tell him.

"I shouldn't have let them take you," he says.

"Daddy, why did you give me away?" I question him.

“I had no choice,” he says softly coughing again, but this time he spits out blood.

“You’re not safe with them,” he says, lifting his head and trying his best to look at me.

“They said you killed my mother,” I explain.

He frowns slightly. Looking down at the floor.

“Did you?” My voice trembles slightly as he nods.

“Why?” I cry.

“She betrayed me,” he says so casually like she meant nothing to him.

“You need to escape, Valentina,” he murmurs.

“You killed her, you’re no different than them,” I tell him honestly.

“Your mother betrayed me, Valentina.” He coughs but continues.

“She was a whore, and those boys are no different.” He sneers.

“Why? Why are they so bad?” I ask him. He chuckles softly, causing him to cough until he can barely breathe.

“Because,” he starts, then looks at me just as I hear the door open.

“They only wanted you so no one else could have you.”

“Valentina,” Lev’s voice growls behind me. His footsteps are getting closer.

“You’re their sister, Valentina.” My father coughs and my entire world crumbles.

CHAPTER 24

Dante

Valentina crumbles to the ground at her father's feet. Her entire body shakes as his words ring through the room.

Fucking piece of shit.

Valentina struggles to breathe as she cries.

“*Zaika - bunny,*” I whisper as I reach for her.

Smacking my hand away she screams, “Don't touch me.”

“It's not true, Valentina,” I tell her. She shakes her head choosing not to hear what I'm telling her.

“Enough,” Lev growls and then a gurgling sound fills the room. Looking toward Moretti, his mouth dripping with blood as Lev twists the knife he's plunged into his chest.

Valentina cries out, “No, what have you done?” Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her back as she watches her father take his last breath.

Glaring at Lev over her head, he gives me a shrug knowing it was going to happen regardless.

Lifting Valentina, I carry her upstairs while Lev follows.

He's furious. His anger radiates from him in waves as he follows me toward the kitchen. Placing Valentina on the table, I begin checking her making sure she's okay.

“Disobeying again, Valentina.” She jumps as Lev's angry shout vibrates through the room.

“Lev,” I say calmly.

“No, you had one rule, Valentina. Is it that hard to goddamn listen?” he growls, moving in front of her and lifting her chin in his fingers.

Tearing her face away from his touch, she flinches when he steps forward.

“Don’t ever disobey me again, *Malyshka - little girl*,” Lev warns.

“Why? What will you do?” she whispers.

Lev trains his glare to the floor before he looks back at Valentina, lifting his hand and wiping his thumb across her trembling lip. “You,” Lev starts, then sighs. Lifting his hand to Valentina’s head, he brushes her hair back.

“You have no idea how important you are to us, *Malyshka - little girl*.”

“Your father lied, Valentina,” I assure her. This time she looks at me hearing my words.

“We’re not your brothers,” I say, even we’re not that deluded. “How could we be?” She frowns in confusion.

“Valentina, your father wanted to hurt you—us.” I move my hand up cupping her chin.

“We always said you’d be safe with us, and we mean it.” I smile.

“Everything is a mess,” she whispers, wiping a tear from her cheek.

“You’re ours, *Malyshka - little girl*, that means we take care of you,” Lev murmurs.

A breath quivers over her lips, and she looks down again avoiding our gazes.

Taking hold of her chin, I tilt my head to catch her eyes.

“What’s wrong, *Zaika - bunny?*”

Her breath hitches and a sob splutters from her. Catching her in my arms, I pull her to my chest holding her tightly.

Kissing her hair I murmur, “Ssh, it’s okay.”

After a few minutes she pulls back, adjusting herself.

“Why would my father lie about that?” she asks us.

“He was dying, Valentina. He wanted to hurt you one last time, and he did you believe him,” Lev says, crossing his arms against his chest.

“I-I don’t know,” she admits.

“Do you really believe we’d do something like that?” I ask her.

“I don’t even know you,” she says as a nervous laugh slips from her.

“You’re right, but we have an entire lifetime, Valentina,” I say, running my fingers across her cheek.

“Tell us what to do, *Zaika - bunny,*” I ask.

“Don’t lie to me,” she says, looking right into my eyes.

“Never,” I say, placing a kiss against her temple.

I step aside letting Lev move in front of her, he’s calm now, his anger seems to have vanished.

“I can’t promise I won’t lose my cool when it comes to you, *Malyshka - little girl.*” He smiles, brushing his knuckles across her cheek before he leans in, placing his arms on either side of her, and caging her in.

“But I will always protect you, cherish you, and,” he stops for a second, “love you. I know this isn’t normal, but if you give us a chance, we promise we will treasure you.”

Valentina looks away for a moment, then lifting her arm, she cups Lev’s jaw. Closing his eyes, he lets her hold him.

“You love me?” she asks as if she never expected us to fall so fucking hard for her.

“Yes,” Lev murmurs at the same time I growl.

“And we will never let you go,” Lev vows.

CHAPTER 25

Valentina

My mind is in overdrive as I try to comprehend everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. *I watched my father die.*

Why did my father lie about them being my brothers? Was Dante right, was he just trying to hurt me?

Dante stands in my doorway, leaning his shoulder against the frame he smiles over at me. "You good, little one?" he asks. I nod, curling my arms around my knees as I sit in the middle of the bed. Dante moves toward me, lifting a chair and turning it before he takes a seat.

"Are you going to avoid us again?" he murmurs.

I shake my head because the truth is, I don't want to. Everything happened so fast I'm still trying to adjust to it all.

"Is Lev mad at me?" I ask, wondering how angry he still is.

"Nah, he's fine. Don't worry that pretty little head of yours," Dante says. His tongue darts out, wetting his lip and he smiles when he catches me staring.

"Sorry," I rush out.

Dante chuckles. "Don't ever apologize for looking, *Zaika - bunny.*"

"Can I ask you something?" Dante nods. "If my father paid the debt, would you still have asked to marry me?"

“Without a doubt. We told you, Valentina, we’ve been watching you for a long time, we always knew that one day you would be ours.” He stands, moving in front of the chair. Taking slow steps, he strides toward me, crawling over me and caging me between his arms. Staring down at me his eyes ignite with passion.

“We would claim you and you’d be ours forever.” His lips descend on mine.

Dante’s body pushes against mine and instantly I groan.

Pushing on his shoulders, he pulls back, staring down at me, both of us breathless.

The corner of his mouth lifts in a hot smirk. My eyes lock with his as his cock pushes into me.

“You okay?” he finally asks, moving from under him I nod.

“I’m just still confused about everything.”

“Get out of your head, Valentina. We’re never letting you go, you are our wife.” He moves toward me, placing a soft kiss to my head before he leaves me alone.

I know they’re giving me time, but I know they won’t hold back forever.

After all, they’re the Vitiello brothers.

Moving my fork around the plate, the sudden clash of cutlery forces me to look up.

Lev glares at me, his eyes bore into mine. “Eat, goddamn it, Valentina.”

“I’m not hungry,” I murmur softly.

“We did what we had to, okay? It’s who we are,” Lev snaps.

“I know that,” I retort.

“Do you? Do you really understand who we are, Valentina?”

“Yes,” I almost scream.

Lev growls. “Kneel,” he demands. My eyes widen and I look to Dante for reference. Tipping his head, I slowly follow Lev’s command and sink to my knees at the table.

“Crawl to me, *Wif - Wife.*” Bowing my head, I slowly crawl toward Lev. He leans forward, tipping my chin up when I stop in front of him.

“Take out my cock,” he murmurs.

Lifting my hands, I unbuckle his belt and then slide down his zipper, freeing his already erect cock from his trousers and briefs.

“You know what to do, *Malyshka - little girl.*” He grins, eyeing me as I reach up wrapping my hand around his girth. God, he’s so big.

Opening my mouth, I take Lev and slide until I feel him at the back of my throat.

“Fuck, that’s a good girl.” He growls, fisting the hair at the back of my head.

I do my best to please him, taking as much of him as I can handle. Using my tongue, I move it along his cock, tasting him. Lev hisses, dropping his head back.

“Fuck.” His voice is strained as I take him deeper. I gag a little, feeling my eyes water. I ease back but Lev has other plans. Using the grip on my hair, he takes control, pushing me onto him and I gag and begin to choke. Using his strength, he overpowers me and I hate him in this moment, I feel like I’m about to vomit.

“I’m in control, Valentina, not you. Understand?” he barks. I nod, and then he yanks me back and I gasp for air and cough as I catch my breath.

Lev’s cock stands to attention in front of me.

“Don’t ever undermine us again, Valentina.” He eyes me, tipping my chin with his fingers. “Understand that at any moment, I will punish you, just because you are now my wife doesn’t mean you have the control.”

“I understand.” I breathe.

“Good girl.” Before I can move he lifts me. Placing me on the table, ripping my dress up, Lev’s mouth covers my pussy over my panties. Inhaling me before he slides his fingers through the material and then rips, I gasp when he throws my shredded panties to the side and his tongue laps me up tasting me as Dante watches.

Lev’s tongue circles my clit, sucking hard I whimper as he pushes his tongue inside me. Lev alternates between biting and lashing me with his tongue.

Lev growls and before I can register what's happening, I explode as an earth-shattering orgasm takes over me. Crying out as the pleasures takes over, my fingers fist his hair as he continues dragging my orgasm out wringing every drop from me.

I'm completely dazed from the bliss when Lev flips me and then his cock impales me with one hard thrust.

CHAPTER 26

Dante

Watching my brother fuck Valentina should piss me off, but it doesn't. I'm so fucking hard right now I can't wait for him to finish so I can have my turn. Valentina cries out as Lev slams into her.

"Fuck," he hisses, eyeing me across the table, he smiles then thrust again causing our wife to whimper as she scrunches her face up making her look fucking adorable.

Lev growls, holding deep as he empties inside her.

Leaning down, he places a kiss to the side of her ear. "Every time you disobey me, I'm going to fuck you until you can't take any more."

Valentina moans, closing her eyes as she lays across the table.

Switching places with Lev, I move behind her, freeing my cock I don't warn her as I slam inside her, taking what belongs to me.

My fingers dig into her ass and as I thrust up inside her, I yank her down. I know she feels the pain as she lets out a satisfied moan.

Fuck, the sounds coming from her turn me on more on more and I'm ready to explode.

My body jerks, I thrust hard and deep and cum with a growl, filling Valentina as she clenches around me coming over my cock.

“Fuck, yes baby, such a good girl,” I praise her.

Valentina is completely spent as I help her into a sitting position, clenching her thighs together. I love knowing she’s dripping with both Lev and me. Placing my hand on her thighs, she looks up at me through her lashes just as Lev moves next to her, placing his hand around the back of her neck.

“Show us,” he demands. Valentina hesitates. Embarrassment covering her features.

“No amount of clenching will prevent us filling you to the brim, *Zaika -bunny.*”

“Be a good girl, do as Lev says.”

Slowly she obeys, spreading her legs wide and showing us what we want to see.

Her thighs are coated, our semen dripping from her pussy hitting the floor beneath her.

“Fuck, baby.” I groan, using my hand to spread her thighs wider.

“I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than you right now.” Lev smiles.

Valentina’s cheeks tint and before she can feel anything else I lift her in my arms carrying her upstairs.

This is how we end, she was made for us, made to be ours.

Everything we’ve ever worked for was for this moment right here.

Valentina is our obsession. She’s ours.

CHAPTER 27

Lev

Two months later

“That’s it, baby,” I praise Valentina for taking me down, she’d been determined to learn how to fight and protect herself.

Straddling my thighs, she leans over me, giving me the perfect view of her cleavage.

“Say it, Lev.” She smiles down at me. “*Malyshka - little girl,*” I murmur softly, moving my hands up her thighs. Valentina pushes into me, my erection standing to attention.

The name she used to hate is now the only name she wants to hear from my mouth. She practically purrs as the name falls from my lips.

Lifting my hips, I twist us forcing Valentina under me, letting out a gasp she giggles then moans as I thrust my hips forward pushing my erection into her pussy.

“You don’t play fair.” She moans.

“Never said I did, baby.” I lean down, taking her lips in a bruising kiss.

“Are you guys training or fucking? Cause either way I want to join in.” Dante’s voice laughs behind us.

Glaring back at my brother, he chuckles knowing he interrupted us.

I move, letting Valentina up. She throws her arms around Dante, placing a kiss to his lips while my brother picks her up holding her to him.

He'd been away for the last week organizing a peace treaty between us and the brotherhood. An elite crime family.

"How'd the meeting go?" I ask, grabbing a towel and wiping the sweat from my forehead.

"All signed." He beams.

"Good, good," I state. The last thing we need is a war with the brotherhood.

"So, that thing we were working on before I left." Dante smiles down at Valentina. Quirking an eyebrow at my brother, she points her finger at him.

"No, I said I want to wait. You two are like horny teenagers."

"Can't help that you make us hard, baby." Dante smirks, while Valentina smacks his arm.

"You're ridiculous." She smiles, moving away from Dante and walking up the stairs, she leaves us alone and the moment she does I ask.

"Did you find it?" Dante nods. He'd secretly gone to search for the money that was stolen, that Marco had a hand in. Our money that belonged to us.

"In her account," he states.

Valentina deserves that money, after all her family died because of it.

But that's something we're taking to the grave. Valentina will never know Marco Moretti wasn't her biological father.

No, that man murdered her entire family, forced his wife to raise their daughter, and then killed his own wife when she came to our father for help.

None of that mattered, not anymore because Valentina was ours. She was now and always will be a Vitiello. Caught between my brother and I until our last breaths.

* * *

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NEWSLETTER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Lee is an Australian author who writes spicy romance, and men to swoon over. She comes from Hobart, Tasmania where she lives with her husband and two children. When she's not a stay at home mum wrangling her two small children or fighting the voices in her head to be quiet she's getting up before the sun rises as a qualified baker. Tara is a Pisces who survives on energy drinks, chocolate frappes and busting moves at Jazzicise for some me time.

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**YOUR HEART STILL BEATS
FOR ME
CORI ZAHARA**

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YOUR HEART STILL BEATS FOR ME

One cold cell. Two kidnapped victims. A series of uncomfortable sexual trials. A love that heals a broken heart...and a secret that will break it completely.

When Feebee wakes up in a room with no memory of how she got there and a series of uncomfortable tasks to complete, with only the help of the unconscious man chained to the wall, her mental health spirals downwards, and she only has that one stranger to get her through it all.

So, what is she meant to do when they fail a task, and he's taken away as a punishment?

Trigger Warnings: This book contains scenes of violence, captivity, assault and dubious consent.

CHAPTER 1

Feebee

I woke up cold against the stone floor, my naked body shivering. A dim light shone from above me, unhidden by no decorative shade. I was in a room empty of decoration and life, reminiscent of one of those creepy movies where you would have to cut off your own foot to break free.

But my feet weren't chained.

It was almost as if the psycho who imprisoned me knew I couldn't use them.

My hands pushed me up from the ground, and my head spun, a side-effect of my gaze bouncing around the corners of this vacant cell.

There was nothing sugar-coating my grim reality.

This was a real-life horror movie, and I was the leading lady.

Stone walls stared back at me, their heaviness feeling closer and closer as the seconds chipped away at my sanity. I felt them closing in.

My heart began to race, my lungs sucking air in faster than ever, as I spied a lone knife near the door, its blade sharp and ridged.

I guess that limb theory wasn't so far-fetched after all.

On the far side of the room, was a man. He was propped up against the wall but unconscious and bound by chains around his wrists. He was lucky enough to still be in his

clothes, though his shirt was torn, and his tie was loose and dirty. I focused on the fact that he wasn't wearing shoes and wondered where they were.

“Hello, Feebee.”

I jumped from my skin, my heart pounding wildly in my chest, my fingers now brushing the area.

“You're probably wondering why you're here,” the voice boomed, loud and robotic, from an overhead speaker on the opposite wall of a bright red light.

The disgust over someone watching me made my stomach roll and made me more aware of my lack of clothing. Skinny arms shielded me, wrapping around my breasts and covering my crotch.

I trembled, wishing I could run, when the heavy voice sounded again. “I'll tell you. You were the recipient of a heart transplant...”

The voice gave me time to examine the red-ridged scar beneath my fingers before it proceeded.

“You were never meant to receive that particular organ.”

That particular organ felt ready to give out.

“Hey,” I whispered, trying to get the man's attention on the other side of the room. He didn't budge.

“Hey, wake up,” I pleaded, my voice a little louder. “Please, wake up.”

When the man didn't answer, didn't move, barely breathed, my attention and eyes moved to the camera.

“Can you hear me?” I asked in a meek tone, instantly annoying myself for not putting on a brave front. That agitation caused me to straighten my back and lift my chin, causing the blunt cut of my hair to tickle my shoulders.

“If you can, what the hell do you want? It’s not like I can give it back.” I hid the tremble of my lower lip from the glaring red light. I found myself praying this deviant couldn’t actually hear me, as nothing could conceal the fear in my voice.

“I’m going to give you a task,” he said, giving me no indication of whether he could or couldn’t hear me. “If you complete it, you’ll be rewarded. If you fail, you can use the blade near the door to cut out your own heart before I do it for you.”

Swallowing down my nerves and the fear-driven vomit climbing my throat, I waited for his request. My face blanched white, my palms too sweaty to even consider failing. I wouldn’t be able to grip that handle. My clammy hands could never drive it into my own chest.

“Here is what I want you to do. In the room with you, is a man you’ve never met.”

My spine went ramrod straight, and my neck hurt as I twisted to see him. “I won’t kill him!” I spat out the words before the creep could ask.

“You have five minutes to unzip his pants and bring him some kind of pleasure. If you fail, you die.”

“I can’t! I cannot do that!” I squeaked, fear changing my voice and making it higher.

“Time is ticking.”

I was frozen. Cold tears rushed down my cheeks as I wasted seconds I didn’t have. I dragged courage from somewhere within and used it to shift myself across the floor, my unusable legs dragging behind with my shadow as the concrete scraped along my bare skin.

“I need more time,” I pleaded.

The robotic voice didn’t respond, but a loud ticking sounded, reminding me how fast time was moving against me.

I reached the unconscious man, my sweaty hands pawing at his face. He was cold beyond his dark stubble, like the room, but not like me, whose nerves started burning through my skin. Ironically, those hadn’t been damaged when I lost the ability to walk.

Unsure of how much time I had left, my clumsy fingers fidgeted with the button of his pants, taking far too long to push it through the small hole. The zipper was next, pulled down to reveal designer underwear.

My painted nails shimmered in the light, the color dancing on my fingertips as I pulled the man’s penis free. It was hard to do without yanking down his trousers. Hard to do without any help from him, and harder still, because it was huge.

I looked at his face, taking in the dark lashes and golden skin that hinted at an exotic heritage, mine telling him I was so sorry that I had to do this.

I prayed, my hands clasping as I said a prayer to a higher force. I angled my head up to heaven and asked God to get me through this.

“Please, let this work. Please guide me and let him finish in time. Please, help him to forgive me.”

I took one last look at the man’s face. His eyes were closed, long lashes shadowing on his cheeks. His lips were perfectly shaped and parted slightly. I ventured a slight glance at the red light, my eyes begging when my dry mouth wouldn’t.

The ticking grew louder, but only in my head, and I feared that time would run out before I did anything.

I turned back to the man in front of me, and placing my hand on his face, I closed the distance between us and whispered against his mouth, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I lowered myself down, my elbows propping me up. My fingers tightened on him, not closing but moving up and down his thick penis in a slow motion. It had been years since I did this. My experience was minimal.

Tears dropped to his length, and my hand moved over them, using them as lube. My breath landed on his tip, feather-light but enough to make him twitch as his cock grew long and thick against my palm.

My tongue met his silky skin, swiping over the tip and stealing the first bead of precum. I pulled back, my dry mouth now full of his salty taste. I licked my lips, looking up at him. He was still motionless.

I moved back in. Devastated by my circumstances, my hand stroked over his length, my mouth not granted much access due to his clothes. I took the tip of him inside my mouth, and I delivered my focus there. My head bobbed slightly as my suction increased. I took him an inch deeper, kissing and sucking him, my lips tightening around his shaft. My hand was still working every other inch.

I glanced up, expecting to see his eyes open. Expecting to see some kind of reaction, but he remained still. Unmovable.

“One minute remaining,” the metallic voice boomed.

I picked up my pace, more tears forming in my eyes. My fingers slipped to the edge of his pants, clawing at them to get them down lower.

The clock still ticked, ominously pressing down on me, making me aware I hadn't done enough to please this cruel master.

I put as much of the man's penis into my mouth as I could, my tongue lapping the length of his cock from base to tip and back again. I sucked hard, my mouth working up and down, as I tried to count down the seconds until this was over.

I breathed in his musky scent, absorbing it in all my senses. I relaxed my jaw a little but kept my mouth clamped on his sensitive tip, my tongue swirling, coating his slit in the saliva building up in my mouth, edging him closer and closer until...

He exploded, coating my tongue in a wash of salty cum. White dribbled from my mouth as I reared back, my bony

elbows aching from the rough concrete.

“Three, two, one.” My time was up, just as I swallowed the last drop, fearful that spitting it all over the floor would deem me unworthy of living.

The ticking stopped, and as if a magnetic force rattled through me, I spun toward the camera.

“Well done, Feebee. Your first mission is complete. Your stolen heart gets to beat another day.” My body turned cold with his words.

The wall held me up as I backed up and slumped beside my companion—the man I had abused. I took one of his bound hands, needing a friend, needing someone to share the weight of this trauma with.

A shiver ran over every skin cell. My legs were bent in an awkward pose, but I couldn't feel the discomfort—just the cold from the ice forming in my chest over what I had just done.

Another tear rolled from my eye, lonely and cold and so fucking symbolic.

I sat and waited for more instructions, but none came. A chill swept through the room with the silence. The ticking had long stopped, but it still echoed inside my ears.

I focused on it for minutes...hours...and eventually, hand in hand with the stranger next to me, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2

Mercer

I opened my eyes, blinking at the sight of the stone cell, a concrete box with no way out. No windows. Nothing but a dust-filled vent that made the air in here minimal and hard to breathe after a few hours.

A woman's delicate frame rested against my shoulder. Her hand, tightly clutching to one of mine, pulled the chain around my wrist to an uncomfortable position.

She was cold, trembling in her sleep and looking to be having some kind of nightmare. Her free hand was wrapped around herself, locked tight to her skin, and I couldn't tell if it was to keep herself warm or to hide the fact that she was naked.

Her swollen lips and the stickiness inside my underwear hinted at what had happened.

I looked down over myself, eyes scanning my zipper and the undone button. My shirt was tucked into my boxers, the waistband stained by my jizz, no doubt.

I wouldn't judge her for what she had done to me.

I wouldn't judge the maniac who locked us both in here. He had his reasons. As fucked up as they were.

CHAPTER 3

Feebee

Someone's fingers clamped around my hand, squeezing gently, pulling me through the sludge that encouraged me to sleep. My eyes blinked, struggling to stay open.

The man sharing this room was no longer asleep.

He was no longer bound and chained to the wall, either.

His eyes were opened and hypnotizing, making me believe for one second that life wasn't as bad as it actually was. The palest blue dug into me, straight into my heart—or whoever's heart it was—and pulled more tears to my eyes.

“I did something awful to you.”

The pretty blue stare dropped from my face and fell to the concrete. He knew. He already knew what I had done. I could see it written all over his face.

And it made me feel worse.

His head lolled back in my direction, and he took in my body, shaking with cold and lined with a thousand goosebumps to prove it. His gaze lingered on my chest, and I didn't even try to hide. I felt like I owed him something for taking from him. Not that this would be something he would want in return.

He made no comments. Spat no hate. Though I waited for his venom to hit me in the face, I apologized when it didn't. “I'm so sorry. So, so sorry.”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small half-used pad of sticky notes and a red crayon. I blinked again, my heavy eyes losing the image of him. When I opened them, a message sat on the top sheet.

That's a big scar.

I took a deep breath, grateful that he focused on the history of my heart surgery and not what I had done to him. Grateful that he would still talk to me when I had no one else in the world.

I simply nodded and looked away.

The knife in the distance was gone, replaced with a tray lined with fruits and vegetables, all drying and growing tasteless. They had been out for a while.

“Where’s the knife?” I asked, noting it wasn’t in the distance.

I scanned his clothes and rigid position to try to discover if he could be hiding it to enact real revenge.

He responded by staring at me like he had no idea what I was talking about.

“Can you talk...with words?” my unsympathetic tone sounded cruel, even to my own ears.

He pulled off the written note and stuck the green sheet to the wall to my left. After writing another message, he handed it to me.

I stutter. Badly. I have since I was little. Since my parents died. But my voice is different now, through injury—

His words ran off the page that I added to the wall with his other message as he penned the rest of what he wanted to say.

Last year, my girlfriend and I were attacked. Someone tried to cut out my tongue. Apparently, I was too loud. Karma sucks.

My eyes widened in shock. But I found it amazing that he could make a joke at a time like this. It lifted the depression creeping in.

I gave him a sad smile, and he gave me a bigger one, straight white teeth hiding behind the curve of his full lips.

A third note made it to the wall as I pulled it from the pad, distracting him. He wrote another.

Are you okay? You were asleep for a while. That note joined the others, decorating this room with a bit of color.

“I’m cold.”

His hands rubbed at my small biceps, defeating the army of goosebumps. I was glad he was no longer confined. His hands were free, the chains replaced by a thick red graze on each wrist. Free to unbutton his shirt and slip it over his broad shoulders before gifting it to me. I stretched out my heavy arms, happy to accept his generosity, and hide beneath the cotton. He and I froze at the sight of a needle hanging from my arm, the barrel empty, the tip buried in my skin, crusty blood clinging to it.

“What the fuck is that!” I panicked, my voice louder than intended. I gripped the barrel and tossed the needle at the wall.

“What do you think was in there?” I asked him, as if he had the answers to all my questions.

He saw the fear on my face, and tried to calm me, quickly jotting another note.

It was probably just a sedative.

He shrugged.

He’s giving you the chance to prove yourself. He doesn’t want you dead...yet.

I kept this message in my hand longer, trying to understand it as I creased between my fingers.

The man, whose name I didn’t know, stood tall and menacing, his personality soft and soothing. He stepped away from me, returning with the drying food. I tucked his note into the pocket on his shirt after I slipped my arms in and buttoned it up, but I didn’t have a reason not to add it to the wall with the others.

I forgot all about the note as he placed the food between us. His head bobbed—initiating ladies first—and his hair fell into his pretty eyes.

Not a fruit person?

“Fruit is okay.”

When I didn’t eat, he edged the tray closer, yet another note accompanying it.

What’s your favorite thing to eat?

I almost wanted to ask what was the point in telling him, feeling like I would never enjoy the earthy taste again, but I

appreciated this man's efforts to talk to me. To keep me sane.

"Anything with lentils," I mumbled, not wanting to give the person watching tips on what my favorite foods were should he choose to poison me.

My shaky fingers reached for a slice of watermelon. The man in front of me wrapped his hand around mine, steadying me and brushing my skin in a way that pacified me.

I smiled, this one feeling more real as our eyes met, and I fed myself.

Undignified, and with a very full mouth, as this dry fruit tasted better than expected, having not eaten for who knew how long, I asked, "What's your name?"

He wiped his fingers, ridding any proof that he had joined me for the most unconventional dinner date.

He wrote his name—Mercer Novaletti—on a fresh sheet. His pouty lips curved as he granted me another smile.

Novaletti, that sounded...Italian, maybe? That would explain his tan and dark features. Not those piercing blue eyes though.

"I'm Feebee," I said with a mirroring expression. "Mercer is an unusu—" I cut myself off. That wasn't really what I wanted to say. "Mercer, I need to tell you what the man holding us—"

Mercer waved his hand, his face showing understanding, like he, too, had to do bad things while here.

I took another piece of fruit, and we ate until the plate was clear. I offered him the last piece because the creep in charge hadn't even provided an even amount of food, but Mercer shook his head, insisting my rumbling stomach wanted it more.

* * *

After the plate was empty and our bellies full, a familiar voice sounded.

My stomach and eyes rolled in sequence. Now back at my side, Mercer stared over at me, seeing my reaction. It felt like he had been here longer than me and had already become desensitized to what went on in this room of filth.

“Today’s task is an easy one.”

I took a breath, my back straightening. A note landed in my lap. One, I hadn't even seen Mercer write.

I picked it up and read it silently.

We can do this.

The look I shot him hit like a bullet, one that delivered the painful truth that I wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 4

Feebee

Are you doing okay? A green note questioned as I lay on the floor, tired from this stressful ordeal. My eyes traveled up Mercer's body to see his face, clearly concerned for my well-being. He looked down at my tearstained face.

I'd lay here on the floor for hours, sadness rushing from closed eyes.

"He's gonna hurt us," I choked out. I tried to move, but the chemicals in my system still made me groggy. I slumped back to the ground, my gifted white shirt dirty and scuffing on the brutal concrete. "Why else would we be here?"

A sick game? The red crayon led the way for the words I already knew weren't true.

"No. This isn't a game." My fingers slipped into my shirt and found the red line trailing down my chest, gently feeling over the scar that still felt raised and looked angry. "He basically told me I should already be dead."

A tear rolled, dropping into my ear, which muffled the sound of Mercer shifting to a closer sitting position.

What do you mean?

"This is what he wants."

The confusion on Mercer's face made it appear he had no clue what I was talking about, so I continued...

“Last year, I had a heart transplant.” I rubbed the scar again, Mercer’s eyes trailing the movement. “I think it belonged to someone he cared about.” Guilt set in, and my words felt heavy on my chest. I needed to get up immediately.

I rolled over, pushing myself up. I used my arms to reposition my heavy legs, stretching them out.

I felt Mercer’s eyes on every movement, his jaw tight as they asked the question the crayon avoided.

“I’m paralyzed. I have no feeling in my legs from nerve damage. That’s why they’re a little skinny.”

How did it happen? He crayoned a quick note.

“A car crash. It happened last year. I was travelling back from a trip to Canada with my mom. We were visiting family. My dad couldn’t come because of work. The weather was really bad, and I got cold. I took my seat belt off for literally seconds to grab a blanket from the backseat. My mom skidded off the road. And that was that.”

“I woke up hours later with my body hanging half out of the shattered front windshield. I couldn’t move. There was blood leaking out of my spine. I was freezing, staring up at the sky with snow twirling down on me. I remembered thinking it looked pretty, but then reality kicked in, and I noticed every injury. And I realized I didn’t feel any of it.”

“I screamed for my mother, but she didn’t answer. Her eyes were closed, and she didn’t wake up. The sharp edge of a snapped tree branch was lodged in her chest. I wished I’d

never looked. Her pale face and the bright red blood dripping from her nose will haunt me forever.”

“I had to lay there, stuck on the hood, knowing she was dead. I cried for more than a day. And no one showed up for that long. We’d taken a shortcut with not much traffic. The bad weather meant even fewer vehicles than usual.”

“Then a guy in a truck pulled up. I could hear his boots crunching the snow and him saying something in the distance, but I couldn’t make out the words. He vomited before he reached me, and I heard that, too. He thought I was dead because I was too cold to move, and then I sneezed. That was why I needed the heart transplant.”

I glanced to see if Mercer was still listening and he was... he was so immersed that he was trapped in my story. On the sideline, unable to help as I lie frozen on the car, waiting for death.

“I’d caught influenza, a really bad case, and it led to severe myocarditis. I was born with a heart defect so that complicated things. Weeks later, my heart started failing.”

“My father was beside himself. He was suffering through the grief of my mother. He couldn’t cope and started drinking heavily. He lost his job. None of it changed how much he cared for me. He was still a good man, but he wasn’t himself. He couldn’t lose me, too.”

“He got involved with some dodgy people. I think it had to do with money. He lost our insurance when he lost his job, and there wasn’t much time to help me. He insisted on a private

transplant, and I think that was how he paid for it. I guess someone didn't want to give that organ away.”

I couldn't read Mercer's face, but there was pain in his eyes, matching mine, and it made me feel more connected to him.

“I don't see any scars on your body.” I eyed his torso. Lots of tattoos covered him, all hyper-realistic. I wondered if they were memories of the moments of his life he had enjoyed. Did they hide a transplant scar?

“No transplants? Do you know why you're here?”

No transplants for me, another note confirmed.

I've unfortunately met a lot of dodgy people from work. I'm assuming he's one of them, but I haven't seen his face.

My eyebrows dipped, falling into a frown. Before I could ask him what his job was, another note fell in my lap.

Do you get any physiotherapy to maintain muscle mass?

My eyes widened; my brows lifted. “Are you a doctor?” He talked like a doctor...scribbled like one, too.

I'm an art dealer.

Another note quickly accompanied the one stating his job role.

But I can take an interest in your well-being, can't I?

I nodded. A gentle swallow stole the moisture from my mouth, and I found myself looking at his. I closed my eyes to his perfect face.

He'd be the exact type of guy I'd like in different circumstances. Tall, muscular, handsome, good lips, teeth—any teeth were good, seeing as my first boyfriend had an incisor that often popped out due to his love for boxing. But Mercer's were perfect.

Mercer was perfect. And it was nice to feel like someone cared again.

I pinched myself, remembering where we were. Remembering that there was no point in feeling any kind of attraction to this guy, because we would probably never get out of here, and if we did, guys like Mercer liked the Barbies of the world.

I blinked, my eyes opening to see him with the physiotherapy therapy note stuck to his forehead, and it made me laugh.

“I've never had physiotherapy.”

We could try it. We have the time.

I choked on a laugh, wondering if that was even true.

I'm good with my hands, another Post-it told me. The winking face in the corner begged to differ.

“That drawing disagrees.”

A silent laugh slipped from him. He liked the banter and needed it as a distraction like I did.

“I am sorry about what I did to you. I—” I feel so guilty, I think it might kill me.

He cut me off, his fingertip silencing my mouth. The slightest breath kissed his tip.

He didn't want me to be sorry. He shook his head, strands of messy hair falling into his eyes. A second later, his hand left me to rake through it.

I don't want you to be sorry. I can guess what happened. I feel what happened. I'm sticky and it's uncomfortable, but I don't blame you for it.

His handsome face scowled at the glaring red light.

“He hasn't given a task today.”

Good, a new note said. But don't worry, it's probably my turn.

I sucked in a heavy breath and shook my head, not wanting it to be either of us.

Hating the silence I caused, because I was the only one who could speak, I reverted back to distracting him, distracting me in the process as I let a question roam in the air. “So, you're an art dealer?”

Mission accomplished.

A boastful look that made him look even more handsome crawled onto his face.

“I love that.” I smiled. “I'm a painter, not professionally, but I am. I was, I mean. I haven't indulged in many hobbies since the accident.” My fingers moved subconsciously, remembering how it felt to hold a paintbrush, how it felt to

glide colors across canvasses. I smiled over memories that would never fade.

“My mother was an artist, too. She was semi-successful. Her name was Madison Thelassa-Serrano. Have you heard of her?”

A curt and respectful nod told me he had and that he respected her work.

She was very good. He handed the note to me. The crayon was blunt now. He ripped at the paper around it that stated the obvious color, tearing it down so it wouldn't prevent him from writing future notes.

“She was amazing,” I agreed.

He dropped the paper to the floor, scrunched in a tiny ball, and flicked it across the room. We watched it bounce off the wall, having had little amusement here.

Bet you follow your father, was the first note written by the exposed crayon. He was taunting me. A playful bite of his lip made it obvious there was no real malice in his words.

“I don't, actually, and if we ever get out of here, you'll be begging for my art.”

Waving a hand at me, he laughed, again silently, but it felt like that was the truest thing I could ever say.

And I loved it.

I loved that he had hope to share with me.

But that hope faded away, a vacuum pulling it to the exit, usually bolted shut but open for a second.

A blade slid toward us, even sharper than the last to be in this room.

The room rattled; the heavy metal door slamming shut.

“Good evening, Feebee and Mercer. I’m glad you are so comfortable together, seeing as I haven’t grown bored of you yet.” The robotic voice caused a ringing in my ears that an abusive finger tried to get rid of.

Shivers ran down my body, fear coating me in sweat... Mercer, too. He stared up at the red light as I did, our bodies inching closer until they bumped. He wrapped an arm around me, trying to comfort me...but my heart still raced, my mouth grew dry, and my anxiety hit the roof, knowing what was coming.

My fingers reached for my hair, twirling strands and pulling them out, something I had started doing when I woke up in the hospital without a mother. And when I tried and failed to manage the stress that came with being a transplant recipient. The fear of my body rejecting the heart the way this creep rejected me having it, made my first few months with it torture.

Mercer pushed my hand from my hair, pulling it into his fist and holding it. Another wave of appreciation washed over me, and I rode it, letting it take me closer to him as I nuzzled into his tattooed chest.

“Mercer, it’s your turn for a solo challenge.”

My fingers dug into his straining chest.

“The blade in the room is for you to use. Pick it up.”

Mercer glared at the red dot; challenge prominent in his eyes. Hate burning inside him, seeping into the room through flared nostrils.

“If Feebee hasn’t told you yet, she is the recipient of a heart transplant.”

If...meaning he hadn’t listened in on our conversations together...yet.

Our eyes met for a second, no doubt giving the creep a clue what we had been talking about.

“That heart belonged to the woman I loved. And I did not want it given to someone else. And because it was, I was left heartbroken.” We both sat motionless as he continued. “The scar on her chest sits jagged, a perfect crack in the heart you’ll carve around it, matching mine.”

Mercer’s head began to shake, the tension inside him rattling through his body.

“If you do this, you’ll be rewarded with a commode. You must both be bursting by now. Remember, Mercer, you appreciated my generosity before we had a guest.” The maniac chuckled.

I visibly shook, the voice, as much as its words, putting me on the knife’s edge, balancing between wanting to die and begging to live. I sucked my lip into my mouth, refusing to beg because this creep had already proved it wouldn’t help.

“Now, pick up the knife. I will only warn you once. If you fail, there will be a punishment for one of you.”

Mercer shook his head, determined that he wouldn't hurt me.

“You have 3 minutes. Don't go too deep. We don't want her dying...today.”

Mercer's head was still shaking. Faster, his decision cemented. I stopped him, placing a hand on his face before he snapped his neck.

“I won't do it,” he mouthed, first to me, then to that little red light that terrorized us both. My hand left his face as he twisted to face it.

“I won't fucking do it,” he mouthed again.

The ticking of the clock counted down to my doom. My body shook, eyeing the blade, but I tried to hide my fear, pulling my quivering lip behind chattering teeth.

“Tick, tock, Mercer.” The monster laughed.

The knife lay on the floor, waiting to be picked up. Mercer didn't move, his head shaking again. Part of me was grateful he didn't want to put one of his badly etched designs on my skin.

But my churning gut knew this would have to happen.

Mercer's eyes grew watery from staring at the bright light, mine for another reason entirely.

The knife still waited for the man who wouldn't move. Only when my arms started dragging me over to it did he look my way. I stopped moving, turning back to see his hand close around my ankle.

“No,” he mouthed in warning.

“We have to. It’s not our choice.” He wasn’t happy with my words and looked positively fuming when I stretched to claim the knife.

I knew his grip would have yanked me back if it didn’t mean the corrosive concrete would scrape off layers of my skin. My hand wrapped around the heavy metal handle, and I knew by the weight of it that our captor meant business.

He had told Mercer not to go too deep, but this blade was heavy. A little too much pressure with the tip in my skin could do so much damage.

“Try not to go too deep.” I feared the worst. I envisioned a slow and painful death where blood rushed from my wound and up my throat, thanks to the lung I feared him puncturing. I opened my hand, the heavy blade balancing in my palm.

He accepted it.

“One minute remaining.”

I laid back, closing my eyes before I hit the floor.

Metal rattled in the distance that heavy blade bouncing off the far wall. My eyes sprung open, moving instantly to the blade as I shot back up. It had flown through the air like a boomerang, hitting that camera. But the red light still blared, just in a different direction. A low whining hum pierced the silence as the camera moved back to face us.

“You have to!” I practically screamed. Begged. Begged for him to hurt me because we had some control here. The

smallest amount...but it was something. It was more than we would get from any punishment.

“Please...” my fingers pressed into his tense, broad shoulders.

He took a deep breath. And then refused.

“I won’t,” he mouthed silently, taking my hand in his as the voice counted back from ten.

“You have to.” My panic clawed at him, using my nails to do it as I broke from his hold.

“Three, two...one.”

Our time was up.

Terror darted around the room. Mine. I begged the red light.

“No. No...Don’t punish us, please. Don’t punish us. You can’t. He was trying to do the right thing by me. Please. I’ll do ___”

Mercer’s hand wrapped around my mouth, keeping the guilt inside me as he prevented me from offering my soul to this devil. I tried to peel it off, to break free, but he was too strong. Too determined.

“You failed. And for that, one of you gets a day out today.”

We looked at each other, neither of us expecting that to mean a trip to the beach.

“Feebee, as it was Mercer who failed today’s task, you get to choose,” the voice boomed again. “How good is that heart in your chest? Is it made of gold?”

“It obviously is to you,” I sneered, nostrils flaring with rage.

Mercer handed me a note he wrote while I seethed.

Pick me.

I worried for him. It twinkled in my eyes, all the sadness and pain over potentially ending his life.

He continued handing me notes.

It's fine. Pick me.

“We don't know what he'll do to you.”

He could do worse to you. Do not put yourself forward.

I pushed those torturous thoughts from my head. Ignored the voice that whispered what goes around comes around.

My head moved from side to side. Salty tears stuck my face to Mercer's naked chest.

My eyes, wide and pink-rimmed, moved from the latest note and stared up at him as I waited for an alternative solution to pop into my head.

It's okay to put yourself first.

You don't owe me anything.

Pick me.

“You don't have to volunteer yourself.” I shook my head as if that made my point stronger. My glossy brown hair caught on my shirt, his smell all over it, all over me. His eyes landed on me, on my chest beating a little wilder over what the fuck was happening here.

He wrote me another message, something to hold on to while I didn't have his hand.

I'll be back.

I always come back.

Pick me.

And I did. I was almost sick with the thick taste of guilt as I turned away from him and to the camera, where I voiced my choice.

I chose him.

“My heart isn't made of gold. I choose him.”

Something clicked. The fine hairs on my body floated into the air, drifting from my body and the danger I faced.

Two men barreled into the room, the heavy door crashing into the concrete wall. They were dressed in black suits like they were fucking undertakers.

“Don't,” I begged again, Mercer's hand finally leaving me as he stood, his height rivaling theirs.

One moved in, and the other filled the doorway, preventing my hopes of escape. I didn't move. The man in the doorway was taken from my view, Mercer's legs replacing him. He stood in front of me...protecting me.

The man neared, a hood hiding everything but his eyes. Blood-red paint distorted every other feature.

A blade dropped between the invading man's knuckles, cutting through the ropes holding my fears in place.

“Mercer!” No one heard more than a croak from my dry throat.

The man in black moved closer again, the light above dancing on his blade. He was almost on us.

“Mercer!”

Limbs moved quickly, a flurry of fast fists and knees flying around. Mercer had tried his luck with a punch, knocking the man to the ground. He straddled him, sitting on his chest, when the sharp little blade dragged across his chest. My scream ripped into him, deeper than the knife, and feeling all the threats in the room, his feet pulled him back before real damage could be done.

He darted from the man to me, scooping me up and placing me in a corner. I didn't want to let him go. My hands tried desperately to hold on to him as he eagerly tried to break away. Thin nails left dainty imprints on his skin where I tightly clutched him.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” I reached for his hand, but he pulled back, using it to reach for the bigger knife.

“Ah, ah,” the robotic voice rang out as his hand covered the silver handle. “Don't do that. You had your chance to use it earlier. You chose not to. If you use it now, Feebee will be punished, too.”

Mercer visually tensed, all his frustrations seeping out as his hand moved away from the blade. The rage stayed, and he vibrated with it.

“Good. Now, stand up, and like a good boy, walk to the fucking door, and they’ll leave with you. One more attempt at playing the hero, and I’ll show her just how little you can do to protect her.”

He looked back at me, his shoulders dropping, his pretty blue eyes glossed and apologetic.

I couldn’t beg him to stay. I understood why he had to go, but it still hurt watching him stand tall, his back straightening. Watching each slow step as his sock-covered feet moved him to the door.

The man with the blade walked behind him, stopping as they approached the door. I didn’t protest when he stopped dead, his head turning before his body as he moved in my direction to retrieve the blade. If I could have, I would have kicked it to him, wanting him nowhere near me, but instead, I stayed still, stayed silent, in the corner with my legs tucked awkwardly.

He grinned at me on his exit, an unflattering smile revealing stained teeth. And then the door closed, and everything I felt rushed out, and I screamed.

I fucking screamed.

CHAPTER 5

Feebee

Mercer's smell was still around me, rich and intoxicating. Manly, even with his power stripped. I pulled the lapels of his shirt to my nose and inhaled deeply.

My body weakened from carrying too many emotions. The hard wall held me up as I wrapped my arms around myself.

That darn clock ticked. Ticked. Ticked. And I went crazy.

My mind shut down, blocking out different images of Mercer's pain, all fighting for priority in my head. It was so hard to get the visions of him getting punched out of my head without them being replaced by a still of his face, black surrounding his pretty blue eyes, marring his tanned skin.

Or, I envisioned him getting strangled, the first noises I heard from him being sounds of pain and distress. Hands around his throat. That little knife pressing into his perfect Adam's apple. The blood rushing out, the small blade and the hand holding it, gouging through skin and muscle.

But I pushed it all away, finding a temporary comfort as a cold hair follicle glazed over my lips. I played with it, in and out of my lips, needing the distraction, and when the root no longer felt cold, I pulled another hair and started again.

* * *

I lay in a river of tears, surrounded by small mountains made of my hair. A small bald patch met my fingers as I tried to pull another. My hungry stomach rumbled, echoing in the room,

but all I heard was the clock that probably wasn't even really ticking.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but it felt like a lot. I was awake for all of it. I couldn't sleep without knowing if Mercer was okay. If another person was dead because of me.

"Is he okay?" I begged the camera for an answer.

But I didn't get one.

I didn't get anything other than another wave of guilt.

* * *

I willed the door to open for the creeps with painted faces to charge back in so I could demand answers. I would even beg.

But it remained closed. Its reflective silver surface stared back at me with a vague reflection of a girl who looked like me.

"Please, bring him back," I groveled, willing to do almost anything.

But still, the door stayed shut. And Mercer stayed somewhere on the other side of it.

* * *

The second I closed my eyes—for a lengthy blink, not to sleep, because that was fucking impossible—the door opened.

My tired eyes blinked at the image of Mercer on all fours in the center of the stone room. I didn't see who brought him back before they locked the door. I was too focused on the new colors surrounding his tattoos, blacks, purples, greens, and

yellows. He was so badly bruised. He coughed, blood dripping from his bleeding lips.

I dragged myself to him.

He spat blood from his scarred tongue before falling onto his back. He winced from that and the pain of my gentle hands examining his injuries. Dry blood cracked under his nose as his teeth clenched in agony.

Something at the door caught my eye. A silver bowl, light bouncing off of it, resembling something stray dogs would flock around. Captive humans, too. But the water wasn't a cold drink. Rags were concealed in the water to wash Mercer's wounds. The warm temperature and the salty smell rivaled the metallic scent of fresh blood.

I dragged myself to it, spilling half of it as I pulled it back. Metal scraping against concrete had Mercer searching for the culprit assaulting his pounding head with noise. When he saw it was me, he didn't complain. He massaged his temples with shaky fingers and tried, impossibly, to relax.

Water cascaded, starting loud and heavy, decreasing as I strangled the rag, wringing out the excess. Carefully, I guided the cloth to his split lip. He grimaced, his pain telling me it wasn't too much but still stung.

My free hand brushed his cheek, his dark stubble pricking my skin, tickling me with its efforts to penetrate. I moved the cloth to his eyebrow, wiping away plasma from an injury his skin had tried to heal.

His soft lips fell into my palm as my hand cupped his face.

“Are you okay? I was so worried about you.”

Bloodshot eyes stared up at me, hooded over blurred vision. Blue moved from side to side, his struggle to focus on me still difficult when he gave up, looking away.

“What exactly did they do to you?”

He side-glanced me, his stare a little narrower.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I know you can’t talk.” I shook my head at my stupidity, continuing to wash his cuts and bruises.

He couldn’t thank me as I bathed him, but he showed his appreciation with little touches. His fingers twirled in circles on my leg. I couldn’t feel it there, but I could feel it... everywhere else.

* * *

The salty bowl of water looked more appealing now, the bloody rags not lessening the lure because my lips were getting dryer with each minute, hour, or whatever it was that went by.

I wished for a window. Wished for a connection to the outside world.

Miracles didn’t exist in this room.

Didn’t exist in my life.

I lay on the concrete, Mercer’s pained body between me and the bowl. Elbows pushed me up, and I licked my lips. My fingers stretched across Mercer’s body, heading to the dirty water. My tongue glossed my lips again, the thirst too much.

Mercer's tight grip wrapped around my wrist, his fingers touching. I was foolish to think he was asleep.

I sank back to his side, dread swirling in my stomach, wondering when we would get a drink or even more of the dry fruit that offered a little moisture to our tortured tongues. Mercer zeroed in, propping himself up on his arm as he twisted to his side, his face twisting, too...with pain.

“Draw me circles?” such a vague ask. But I needed something...anything, a touch, a hug...to comfort me.

A smile almost cracked the healing cut on his lip. His hand landed on me, shadowing my leg and not stopping until he crept under the hem of my—his—shirt and reached the curve of my hip. His fingers danced on my skin, and goosebumps rose up in worship.

“How old are you?” I wondered, needing to talk, needing to know more about him.

Two fingers appeared behind his head, sticking up above his wild hair and looking something like devil horns.

His other hand tapped my hip eight times before waltzing around and around again.

“Twenty-eight?”

He nodded a single nod. A second later, he did it again, asking me.

“Twenty-two. Siblings?”

His head didn't nod this time. It shook, his dark hair falling into his face. I brushed it away, careful with his injuries. “Me,

either.”

Fighting the urge to lap at the bowl, I licked my lips again, my mouth too dry to ask another question.

Mercer neared me, his fingers brushing my hair back. He looked into my eyes, seeing something beyond the redness of pain and the fear in my blown pupils, and then he looked to my mouth, my tongue on my lips again.

He moved closer, his hand slinking from one hip to another, pulling me, without injury, into his heated body. He tugged down my hem as the shirt lifted, revealing my ass to the pervert, who was no doubt watching this with his hand on his tiny dick.

His tongue pushed mine out of the way, coating my lips in moisture. He slipped into my mouth for a second, our eyes closed and bodies lax as I took everything he offered, and I enjoyed it for the seconds it lasted, my fingers on his face, pulling him closer, deeper. Needing him closer, deeper. Needing him so badly because he was all I had.

My mouth no longer felt dry as he pulled back, his eyes opening a second before mine blinked in his image.

My tongue was wet...I had what I needed, but I wanted more. I wanted the moments back when he made me forget that we lay on a cold concrete floor, with him bruised for refusing to cut open my chest. We were just a man and a woman, lost to the moment.

And now, he was gone, even with his hands still on my body and my chest pounding against his. My mouth had

nothing, was empty of him, but the stolen saliva still sat on my tongue.

It wasn't enough, and as I gazed up at him and he mouthed the words, "Get some sleep," my heart felt empty, too.

CHAPTER 6

Mercer

A mewling sound shook me from my sleep. I rolled to all fours, dazed, confused, and aching like fuck.

I glanced around, not knowing where I was because my brain hadn't woken up yet. The concrete hurt my knees as I searched for the noise, praying it wasn't the animal I loved.

And then I saw Feebee, and I realized where I was.

I wasn't in my bed or asleep on my sofa with a ginger furball resting at my feet. I was still in this fucking cell.

My gaze stretched across to her.

Her petite body hunched over itself, splashes of red dropping to the floor, her blunt haircut not showing me where or how she was bleeding. I edged forward in a crawl, closing the gap between us. Carefully, I touched her arm, guiding her to me.

And there it was. A heart carved into her chest. An angry red design so much deeper than mine would have been.

It shouldn't have happened.

I'd said no.

What the fuck?

* * *

Feebee

Mercer's touch was gentle, but the look in his eyes was filled with venom. I barely saw it, my own too full of tears. I had

gone too deep, not enough to kill me, but enough for the pain to cripple me and the blood to frighten me.

I woke up a little while ago to the sound of the door clicking shut. I didn't move, too afraid to see shadows moving around the room. But no further sound came. I pulled my courage from my belly and rolled away from Mercer. I saw the knife near the door, a note with strict instructions wrapped around the handle.

He failed. If you fail, too, he'll be punished again. If you don't, you'll be rewarded.

I glanced back at Mercer, watching his lungs strain, rising and falling through the hurdles of pain. He couldn't suffer again, which was my reason for seeing this through.

But he didn't understand, his eyes narrowing in question as he examined the depth of my wound like he was some kind of doctor. His head shook with fury.

"I'm hurt. It's kinda deep." My head nodded, the rush of movement vibrating through me, causing more red to stain my shirt.

He nodded, turning for the rags we had used to wash his wounds. He was quicker getting them than I was, returning in a second. I straightened, breathing in through the pain as the rinsed cloth touched my skin.

The water was cold now. A drop rolled between my breasts, bringing a chill to my body and making my nipples pebble beneath the thin material covering them. Mercer's pretty blues dropped for a second, and he visually swallowed.

Professionalism returned a second later. He patted my chest gently, reminding me to breathe back out.

The bleeding eased a short while later. The cloth, with our combined essences, was discarded in the silver bowl. The water again looked appealing, but it was stolen from my view as I crashed into Mercer's naked chest. His big hands held me tight as he walked us to our corner.

He scowled at the camera, angry and hate-filled, and I could feel all his tension as my fingers clutched his body. My grip turned to a massage, bringing his attention back to me. My fingers kept moving as our eyes locked on each other's faces. Eyes. Mouth. Eyes...mouth.

I leaned in, my breath tickling his lips. My courage had worn off since my new injury. The bleeding broken heart on my chest matched the one inside. The one I felt guilty for having. Guilty that the freak holding us captive was in so much pain because of me, he'd do these things.

I attempted to reel back, but Mercer's hand weaved through my hair, protecting me from the wall...then leading me close again. His breath was tickling me now. His slightly parted lips hovered over mine. He kissed me again, and his tongue moved over mine in a way that would have my toes curl if that was possible.

I moaned into him and felt him smile. We broke apart, him moving away. I followed, kissing him again, and he not only let me, he reciprocated, sucking my lip into his hot mouth. This kiss wasn't to help the dryness in my mouth. No, it was all about desire, hunger, and lust.

I was dazed when we broke apart again. I didn't feel empty this time. I felt safe, even here, as he shielded me against the wall, one arm around my waist, the other barricading me from the camera he glared at.

And with that minimal privacy, I let my body relax into him and waited for sleep.

CHAPTER 7

Feebee

I woke to another day in hell, screaming and my new heart pounding as I clawed my way out of a nightmare. A whispering touch skated over my cheek before gentle hands—one below my head and the other under my shoulder, currently being assaulted by the hard floor—lifted me.

I scratched at my skin, violently trying to get to an internal itch I could never reach.

It had been two weeks since I carved symmetrical lines on my chest, or so I assumed. We counted our sleepless nights together, talking and learning so much about each other until exhaustion pulled us away.

We learned a lot, keeping only our painful parts private. But we knew all of each other's intricate details. Our likes and dislikes. It was like we had been friends for years, and I was one of those friends yearning for more.

We hadn't known each other long, but it felt so much longer in here, where we only had each other. Days felt like months, weeks like years. Emotions grew quickly. It was like we were on one of those reality TV shows where you flew to an exotic island in the hopes of finding love with someone there. But without the island and the option of another suiter.

It didn't matter. I would always choose Mercer. He'd become my person. A torch. A light in the dark, who, even

with his energy dimming, still showed light. I would fight anyone for him, even this creep watching us.

The robotic voice hadn't made his demands today, and yesterday, we had been punished for refusing to cause the other physical pain with the blade that continuously made its way into this room.

Our commode, the gift for my carving, had been taken away. I was over the shame of Mercer having to hold me to pee. Over the shame of not being able to flush. I missed the luxury of not having to hold my bladder and the fact that I'd grown accustomed to the luxury of the portable potty. When it was taken away, life felt heavier.

The heart surgery scar cut straight through the middle of my healing design as it became a crispy scar. My fingers caressed both, trying to soothe my racing heartbeat. I hated it when it raced, fearing it would stop any second. Fearing the pain of a heart attack.

Mercer read me, his hand replacing mine.

Cashmere pants soothed the abrasions on my back as my dirty shirt rose up, all caused by the violent thrashing from my restless sleep. The shirt no longer smelled like Mercer. It smelled like sweat and ruin...like me.

Mercer's fingers moved to my hair, combing through the short length to rid the tangles my nightmare had encouraged. He mollified the twang of pain when his fingers got caught in the length.

A sticky note told me he was sorry. I accepted his apology and note, sticking the latter to the dull wall. There were no colorful notes on this side, but the far wall was almost completely decorated in tiny sheets of green and orange—all messages to me. Mood lifters, he called them, because every time he gave me one, my face lit up a little. I had tried to argue it was the reflection of the bright colors, but his sinful smile always disagreed.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” I quizzed, finally asking the one question I had avoided every time we talked, out of fear that he would tell me, *at home, with our kids*. My fingers twirled around an individual strand of frizzy hair.

He didn’t say that. He didn’t say anything.

“Does he have her, too?”

I hated to admit that I hoped this creep didn’t have her. That she was nowhere near us because if she came barreling through that door, I would no longer have my comforter.

No. We aren’t together anymore, an orange note answered.

Wish granted.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Mercer didn’t write me another message to say I shouldn’t be. Maybe it was fresh and still painful. I asked no more questions about her, my fingers pulling out a frizzy hair.

I played with the root the slimy bulb moving over my lips before Mercer tugged the hair from my fingers and shook it from his own. The little hair tried to stick to him but finally

fell to the floor, landing upon a small mountain of other hairs I had pulled out while he slept earlier.

That's bad for you.

You're hurting yourself.

I stuck the orange note to the wall after squinting to read it. The red crayon, peeled of its paper wrapping and wearing down, didn't show up as well on this color paper.

"I had a nightmare. They cause stress. Pulling hair soothes my stress levels," I told him, eager to change the subject.

The way he held me a little tighter than before told me it was my decision if I wanted to talk about the bad dream.

I pushed myself to face away from him, deciding not to traumatize him with the details. Bile rose up my throat over the mere idea of telling him I dreamed of violence and sexual assaults against me...when I, myself, had sexually assaulted him.

Before I knew it, I was being pulled closer to him. His tattooed chest against my ear, the gentle melody of his beating heart, soothed me in place of pulling hair.

My fingers traced the shaded designs. I didn't ask about their story, our Post-it sheets were running low, and I needed them. Needed them to bring me back to life, with his bad drawings and sweet encouragements, every time my mood slipped. Every time anxiety chipped away at each and every nerve.

It would be so easy to break...if I didn't have Mercer.

He handed me a little drawing of a fox whose mouth was far too wide, making the poor animal appear far more creepy than cute as it smiled up at me.

“That is terrifying.” I laughed, almost refusing to take it.

His face—jaw dropped and mouth wide—screamed of his offense. He blinked at his work, shaking his head over my opinion and dismissing it entirely.

The freaky portrait made it onto the wall, a centerpiece I couldn’t look at without laughing despite my surroundings.

I’m offended.

“Me, too. My eyes feel insulted that you showed them that thing!”

He’s cute.

“He is not.” I laughed again, holding his muscled arms and my own ribs, hurting from laughing so hard.

He shook his head again, his naturally dark hair shining in the light.

I’m an art dealer. I know my stuff.

“You could have fooled me.”

His lips curled upward, then down, as the sound of another voice filled the room.

“Good evening, Feebee and Mercer.”

In each other’s arms, we stilled, our bodies tensing with trepidation creeping over every nerve.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been getting closer. It’s been... amusing to watch. It might help with what today’s task entails.”

I swallowed down my questions, always being too eager to delay talking to the voice. Mercer’s fingers brushed through my hair and distracted me.

His jaw ticked, and the silence in the room allowed me to hear his perfect teeth grinding.

“For today’s task, you’ll need to lose your dirty clothes.”

Mercer’s mouth opened and closed with the words he couldn’t say. His chest rose and fell, hard and heavy. His deep breaths pushed me away, then pulled me back in.

“What...what do you want us to do?” I pushed forward, staring up at the red dot until it burned my eyes. I blinked away the ache, closing and opening my sore eyes three times, twisting my gaze to Mercer and his soft, sympathetic stare.

“We have to sleep together?” It was my voice saying those words. My new heart was pounding for multiple reasons. Beating for him...racing for him.

“Your task...is to have sex, and if you can find a way to get off, Mercer, with a partner who will have challenges in the way of pleasing you, she can live. If she serves you no purpose, she doesn’t.”

My eyes widened, already seeing my future failings. Mercer’s did the opposite, eyes narrowing on the glaring light, his silent argument honoring and defending me, but it didn’t help.

The heavy door opened, and the shadow of a human neared, his dark clothes and squeaky boots making noises that had my stomach rolling as he closed in on us.

I gripped Mercer, my nails pressing into his golden tan, and he gripped me, too, holding me tightly as the man dropped to his haunches, his wide knees clicking.

His face was painted again. Green today, like the vomit I was trying to keep down.

Mercer soothed me, his fingers stroking through my hair.

The paint cracked as the man smiled, revealing his crooked teeth. His hand opened before us, revealing a pink metallic square in the center of his palm. A condom that Mercer reached for. And with that, the man left without a word.

The pink packet threatened me with what was to come. The vision of it became blurred, and I couldn't make out the brand or the words it said about protection. I blinked to see better, and a tear fell.

Mercer's fingers closed around the pink square, one of them catching the tear from my face, a corner of the packet poking me as I flattened his hand to my cheek. I couldn't let his hand go.

"I guess this is goodbye."

His pretty eyes squinted. His body moved awkwardly to collect the pad and crayon from where he had left them on the floor.

He wrote me a message with his non-dominant hand, which made his scribbles harder to understand, especially with

the tears.

It's not the end.

The disagreement from my face brought a million emotions to his. And I saw them all.

“I won't be able to please you. I can't move my hips. I won't be good.”

I'll help you, another note told me. *I won't let it end this way.*

“It won't work. He sets time limits. We won't have enough time.” I angled my head to the red light, waiting for him to remind us of what I'd done on day one, but I beat him to it. “I had one when I sucked you,” I meekly admitted, my eyes low with shame, ironically aimed close to his crotch.

Two of his fingers lifted my chin, making the robotic voice that talked at that exact moment seep deeper into my ears.

“Your time will begin shortly. You'll have no more than fifteen minutes.” There was an odd sounding click through the speaker, then more words. “Don't feel put off by your audience.”

I didn't. The creep watched everything anyway. Mercer felt differently. His tense body was hot and cold, the drawings on his chest glistening with a cold sweat. His questioning expression brought forth new lines on his face. He put me on edge. Not the man who forced us to do these things, him, because of his reaction.

My tongue moved in my mouth, trying to push away the instant dryness. “Wha...” I choked, trying to ask what was

bothering him.

I never finished that question, the heavy door opening and interrupting me. Footsteps moved in the room, and the door closed. One painted face looked to the other. Their true expressions were hidden by cracking green paint.

I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat painful...and still there when the saliva passed, not allowing my words and fear to come out.

I shook my head, praying Mercer would see my silent worries.

I cannot do this.

His eyes moved to the men. They stood on either side of us. The one facing me looked far more menacing as his pink tongue licked his green lips like some kind of scaled reptile.

He stared me down, causing me to melt into Mercer's lap, and in that very moment, I knew the center of this room would become the place where I would hand over my virginity... because what choice did I have?

* * *

Mercer

They were in here.

Fucking creeps.

They shouldn't be in here, watching us, this, all that was about to happen.

I couldn't wipe the irritation from my face, and I'd tried to for the brief seconds where my hands left Feebee's trembling

body. She was scared. Each and every tear spoke of her fear. A graphic story no one would want to read

I rubbed her arms, not taking in the words that left her mouth in a splintered sentence. My fingers weaved through her hair, and she leaned into me.

“Please,” she silently begged. For what, I didn’t know. Her head shook when I didn’t answer, her stare still pleading as her mouth opened to breathe.

“We can do this,” I mouthed.

* * *

Feebee

Mercer twisted us around, his body descending over mine as he set me on the ground and settled between my open legs. My fingertips massaged him with gratitude for facing my naughty bits away from the direct view of the hungry pervert, who had now sucked the paint from his thin lips.

My head still shook, and Mercer’s hand was still smoothing out the knots and frizz that I had caused. I invaded his space, my fingers clutching at random hairs as my stress levels rose uncomfortably.

Again, Mercer stopped me. Gentle fingers wrapped around my wrists, taking them to my sides.

He kissed just next to my lips, making me cold all over. My hands gripped his face, my nerves needing another kiss to settle.

But it didn’t work.

My wild eyes moved from side to side, examining the men. One looked like he had so many better places to be. With the bulge growing in his pants, the other looked like he wanted to push Mercer out of the way and show him how it was done.

I couldn't let that happen.

My hands started wandering over Mercer's chest, then down to the waistband of his pants. My nervous fingers struggled with the button until he helped me, popping it free. I licked my lips, giving him an invitation to kiss me that he accepted.

My nerves tasted ugly in his mouth.

His lips and gaze left me, moving to the horny creep.

I wrapped a sweaty hand around his, stealing his attention for a few seconds. Heavy breaths escaped me, filling the air with all the tension I felt. I waited for the walls to crack with it, breathing a little harder when they fucking didn't.

Mercer's arm waved, shooing the creeps away. The green creep with the rock-hard bulge waved back, laughing over Mercer's attempt to get rid of him.

Blue on blue, our eyes met again for a second. A second before he looked away because he felt like he had failed me.

He didn't.

I pulled his face back to mine, staring into his eyes as I whispered words I didn't believe, "We can do this. Together." I nodded, tears still leaking from my eyes and coating his lips as he kissed them away.

It did something to me. Made me feel closer to him. Made me crave him. But fear still hung over us like a blanket, so heavy, it made us both sweat.

He unzipped himself, pulling himself free of his pants. His hand wrapped around his length, his fingers barely touching. All my fears came back.

I couldn't pull my eyes away. They widened in horror at the size of him. It would feel different down there. Different from my mouth, where I had control. I wouldn't even be able to move if he hurt me, and that giant thing would fucking hurt me.

I would just have to lie here, unable to move until it was over, hiding the pain on my face because if I did something to lessen his potential enjoyment, I wouldn't live.

The condom stretched over his length, his hand rolling it down to his balls.

A quick glance asked if I was ready.

No.

I nodded, lying.

Leaning over me, he popped the buttons on my shirt through their tiny holes. My nipples hardened under the material as he moved it away, exposing me to the men in the room.

One—with something almost decent still living inside him—looked away. The other, fucking salivated.

“You good?” Mercer mouthed soundlessly.

I nodded, and he leaned in to kiss me. His hand guided his thick cock between my pussy lips, and he rubbed, getting me wet.

The pervert moved for a better view, and I did all I could to focus on anything but him.

“Don’t worry about getting her wet. She can’t fucking feel anything anyway.” The robotic voice blared, reminding us we were wasting time.

Mercer ignored it, questioning the poor assumption as his touch sparked a reaction. My pussy grew wetter for him each time his cock nudged my clit.

He leaned over me, seconds away from pushing inside me.

“That’s not true. You know I’m responsive. You can feel it. And I’ll feel it. It’s just my legs that don’t work. I’ll feel this, and if you’re not gentle, it’ll hurt me, and it’s my first time.” All the words rushed out in one breath.

I couldn’t help my lip wobbling as he looked at me with shock and just a hint of compassion, and I couldn’t stop it until he kissed me.

That was when his penis stopped moving, positioning itself at my entrance. I tensed, and he felt that, too...unwelcome. His kiss deepened, his tongue moving over mine.

All of a sudden, he became the only one in the room. The only thing in my world. Lust flickered in our eyes as they closed in harmony.

His arm slid under the small of my back, pressing our skin together. I touched him. His face. His shoulders. His back.

Everywhere.

His hand drifted lower, lifting my ass up to press me against him...angling me perfectly to make it less painful.

I blushed, emotions for him taking over. He cared about me enough to be gentle and loving despite the circumstances and the desire to race and get this over with.

He broke off the kiss, his heated stare appreciating my flushed cheeks. He twitched at my hole, his cock wanting to be deep inside.

His eyes asked one last time, *do I have your permission? Say yes.*

I nodded, holding my breath as he reared back. His eyes darted from my pussy to my face, back and forth as he fed me the first inch. His thumb worked my clit, remembering the response I gave when he touched there earlier.

I relaxed a little. Then another inch had me burning as my hymen tore.

I shivered, clenching my fists as my arms wrapped around my chest. Hugging myself as I held my breath again.

The fingers on my clit moved higher, flattening as they reached my pubic region. Dark hairs pivoted under the touch moving up my body, gently rubbing near my wound, careful not to touch it as he encouraged my first breath.

“Good girl,” he mouthed.

I bit my lip to keep in the ungodly moan those silent words coaxed, my teeth threatening to draw blood. Mercer’s warm

mouth touched mine again, his tongue sliding in, distracting me as he pushed in another inch. I gasped while struggling with the fullness. I held on to his face. I sucked on his tongue like it was my source of air.

Another inch had me wishing I could writhe away. He stilled inside me, his mouth leaving mine pulled tears to my eyes, and their reason for being changed when his mouth landed on my neck. Kisses pressed onto my skin, starting below my ear and shadowing down to my clavicle.

His hand moved back to my clit, pinching it, rubbing it, making me wet. His teeth punctured my skin, creating a whole new burn to focus on. He sucked, loving the taste of me.

A low hum seeped through him and into me, all the way to my core. I vibrated for him, pulling him deeper inside me. My chest rose, my hard nipples grazing against his skin.

A gasp fell from my lips, this one not from pain, even as he edged deeper and deeper. His wet tongue lapped at my nipple, his eyes on me as he squeezed my breast and sucked it into his mouth.

Shamelessly, I moaned. My breaths turned shallow, his fingers, tongue, and cock all working harder on my body.

His hips drifted back, pulling out a little, then pushed back in, but not all the way. He repeated the action, only this time, filling me completely, and I moaned for multiple reasons.

Burning, splintering pain.

Searing, heated lust.

With a slow rhythm, he invaded me with tender thrusts. One of those shallow breaths crept out each time he pulled out of me, and a low moan escaped each time he pushed back in.

It wasn't hurting now. The pain had been dispelled under the power of desire.

I expected it to hurt for longer. All things prior hurt for longer. But it felt like we were molded for each other.

He felt too good inside me. My nails raked through his hair, my back arching as he teased my nipple. I threw my head back when he moaned, too. He moved his fingers so his pelvis could grind against mine. It felt even fucking better, and he thought so, too, his hands locking my legs up over his hips.

His pace picked up a little, our sweaty bodies so close. His mouth moved back to mine, promising to devour me with the first touch of his lips. I wanted that. Wanted him. I kissed him hard, and he kissed me back with the same passion, the same need, and then everything felt funny...I tingled in strange places. In my lower stomach and my pussy, through my whole body.

My fingers clawed at Mercer's back, desperately pulling him closer.

Our kiss became messy, our mouths too hungry for a taste of one another. We ravaged at each other's faces, throats, any-fucking-thing. We left trails of saliva and a path of lust that would lead our mouths back together.

I whispered against his lips, "I feel like...I don't know. I feel like I'm gonna..."

He just smiled, looking so devilishly handsome and the perfect last thing to see when my eyes rolled.

* * *

Mercer

I no longer thought of anything but the look on her face as she came apart for me. Mission accomplished. She looked fucking beautiful, and she felt incredible gushing all over my balls and squeezing my cock until it surely bruised.

She almost dragged me over the edge, but stupidly, I held on. I wanted more of this feeling. Of my balls wet and nothing else mattering.

Her warm breath caressed my lips. I didn't kiss her again, not while she was coming down and overtaken with emotion. But I couldn't resist thrusting faster, harder.

I lowered us to the floor, the pants around my thighs proving to be a hindrance the closer we got. I spread her legs wide, knowing she was wet enough to take the brutality of what I needed right now.

"It still feels good for me," she murmured, and it drove me fucking wild when she gushed again.

I thrust with fury and passion, with anger and desire. Rage over the situation drove me on, that, and an unexplainable lust for this woman.

Her fingers pulled at my hips, almond nails scratching at me, burning grazes around the lines of my tattoos.

I roared into the air before gripping strands of her hair and yanking her head back for her mouth to take my tongue as deep as she could while I slammed into her tight cunt as fast as I could, rutting in a frenzy.

I couldn't hold back this time. My load shot from me, filling the condom at the entrance of her womb.

Ol' pink lips in the corner, the creep with drool dripping from his chin clapped, then left, ushered out by the other one who had no fucking desire to be in this room.

The dying waves of pleasure shifted from tidal to steady, and I collapsed on top of Feebee, my mind going numb to all the trauma, all the pain, feeling nothing but her hand brushing my back and her heart humming against my ear. A fast, steady beat...just for me.

CHAPTER 8

Feebee

Mercer filled the room with dirty intentions and romantic promises. Color kept our moods high. The scent of us—the dirty, hot sex we had—kept our souls high.

I laughed as another poor drawing made it onto the wall. The tiny crayon left behind on the concrete floor neared the end of its life without contributing to a masterpiece. Tomorrow, I would change that. I would draw for him because I no longer needed the little notes Mercer wrote to make me happy.

As long as I had him, I would be okay.

I didn't care about the loss of my virginity or my new heart because it had again, been given to someone who wasn't born with it. Clearly, now belonging to him, along with every smile on my lips and butterfly that fluttered around in my empty stomach.

I couldn't say what sex did to young romantics, but it heightened all my feelings for him. Brought out apple-cheeked smiles and real hope that lit up the misery down here. I hadn't pulled a hair for hours, and the desire to do so wasn't there. It was still on Mercer, watching as his body stretched to place another sticky note on the wall across the room.

He returned to me, a pink note in hand, a message already scribbled.

“Am I supposed to be able to read that when I'm this tired?”

He shrugged, muscular shoulders rising and falling. He stuck the note to my chest, nowhere near my injury, and sat at my side, the wall granting support. My shirt, only buttoned midway, was his doing. He had bitten his full lower lip as he buttoned me up, his eyes still sparkling with lust. They still sparkled now, watching as I read his note.

I wish I could use words to tell you what you mean to me.

Desire deflated inside me, the need to soothe him taking over.

“You don’t need words. I feel you. Us. It’s special. It’s everything to live for.”

He smiled, about to snatch the note and scrunch it, deeming it not good enough for the wall, another that he would flick for amusement, but it was my favorite.

Twisting around, I made room for it, shifting two others an inch to the left and right.

I hadn’t turned around yet when he scooped me into his arms. He cradled my head as he lay us on the ground, using his body and the wall to barricade a little heat for when I would grow cold during the night.

“Mercer, I love you.” *And I’m glad it was you for my first time.* I would have said that, too, but his mouth was on mine, stealing all the perfect words and feeding them back to me in the most amazing kiss.

* * *

His dirty, calloused hands were on me, big fingers pulling at my legs. I couldn’t feel it on the outside, but my new heart

cracked with each touch. My hands pushed him away, but I was weak, too weak to fight, as I sat, propped up by lots of pillows on my bed. The happy memories and smiling faces filling the frames in my pink room mocked me.

A lucky strike hit my assailant on his bulbous nose, and blood ran down his left nostril, dripping onto and staining his already dirty tank top. The surprise pushed him back, the pain dragged his hands to his nose, and they muffled the curses he called me as they flew through his chapped lips.

I wrapped the bedsheets around me, tucking them under my legs. “Get out,” I shouted, or tried to, holding the blanket in place. The words hurt me. One hand moved to my bandaged chest. A crimson stain was making its way through the layers. I froze, my fingertips brushing the gauze as a laugh echoed in the room. It had only been three days since my surgery, and this monster—a man who should love and protect me—abused me on each one.

He dipped his fingers under the bandage and yanked me forward until I landed on him. My hands flew out for safety, and one of them landed on his hard cock, his baggy shorts already damp with sweat and precum. I vomited all over him, green adding to the many colors on his disgusting tank.

He grabbed me by my hair, forcing me to look at him. He licked his lips, his mouth moving close to mine. I wheezed, a weak attempt at a scream that my aching chest warned against.

Determined hands landed on his chest, splashing my own sick back at me as I fell to the carpeted floor. Desperately, I

clutched the short fibers, trying pointlessly to get away.

Feet neared, heavily stomping the few steps between us. A giant foot landed on my back, the dirty toenails scraping at my gauze.

Tears hung from my eyelashes as my fingers let go of the carpet. The same carpet that burned me as I was dragged back by the man in the room.

The mirror opposite was angled perfectly for me to watch my nightmare play out. He pulled my dirty panties from my body. Filthy, with yesterday's blood. And he loomed over me, using his forceful hands to open my legs, his body between them now. He pulled out his cock, and my eyes closed. I couldn't watch as he forced it inside my rear...I tensed, waiting for the pain, and then it came.

I ripped. I screamed. My heart broke, and the scar on my chest cracked with the tension, bleeding out through my bandages and onto the pink carpet.

A scream woke me from my sleep. I felt for Mercer and the comfort he gave, but he wasn't there.

I searched the tiny room.

The floor at my side was cold...like me, breaking out in an icy sweat.

In Mercer's place lay a note.

"Goodbye." I read it aloud, my nails scratching at the skin on my arm. "No! No! No! Mercer!" The door I screamed at, of course, didn't answer. I turned to the camera, screaming in its direction. "Where is he? Tell me where he is! We did what you

asked!” I didn’t even realize I was scrunching Mercer’s last message to me.

My mind ran wild.

Where is he? Is he okay? Will I ever see him again?

No answers came. No sound. Nothing.

I was alone here with my thoughts and tears. My hand moved, breaking the habit of subconsciously scratching and drifting to my hair.

Remembering all the times Mercer removed my hands, I pulled my fingers from my hair and cried into my hands, holding the message against my skin. I could smell the crayon, the very scent that kissed my skin every time Mercer touched me, and it broke my heart.

I cried. I begged. I pleaded with distorted words even I couldn’t understand...

And I was ignored.

CHAPTER 9

Feebee

Was it morning?

I hadn't slept, but it had been hours, the bald spot on the side of my head proved many of them. I'd given in to temptation.

A noise lingered near the door, a key unlocking it on the other side.

I pushed myself up, peeling my still-exposed cleavage from the floor. I wasn't worrying about an infection because death was coming either way.

I forced a button through a small hole in my shirt, needing the extra protection, just in case it was the heart collector who was at the door. It wasn't. It was the painted-faced men. Today, they were white, blue tears added to their cheeks for dramatics.

They looked...terrifying.

I dragged myself back to the wall, Mercer's scrunched note still clutched tightly in my grip. I held it like a lifeline like it had some power to protect me. But the truth was, I held it because it was all I had of him.

"Where is..." I stuttered, reminding myself more of Mercer, before trailing off, fearing they would say he was dead.

"Mercer?" the perverted one said, his hungry stare locked on where my hand moved to hold my lapels closed together.

I nodded, needing to know either way, needing to know how horrible my life had become.

But I couldn't imagine.

Because polished shoes clacked on the hard floor and in walked Mercer. More groomed than I had ever seen him, in a fancy suit to match the others, clean and pressed, like he was ready for a business meeting.

His hair was gelled, looking darker under the light. His scruffy stubble was trimmed to a five o'clock shadow. Those black shoes tapped the concrete as he carried a breakfast tray to me. Pancakes drowned in syrup and juice sat atop. The metal tray reverberated with sound as he placed it on the ground.

I reached for his hand; my sweaty palm was so different from his calm skin. It shocked me, but I didn't let go. I just stared at our joined hands, and so did he, as if something alien held them together.

"I was worried about you." The words were a whisper that escaped through an open door, almost unheard while he still hovered on his haunches in front of me.

He pulled away from me, and I tried to hold on, but he shrugged me off, and I lost my balance. I put my hands out to save myself before I headbutted the breakfast tray.

My back straightened, and I found him back in the doorway. A wave of his hand encouraged me to eat, but I couldn't. My mouth was already full of all the questions I couldn't voice. Even as it opened and closed to talk, I was as

silent as him. There was no sound in the room but the ruffle of clothes as I wrapped the creased arms of my shirt around myself.

I broke the silence.

“Have you made some kind of deal with them?” Terror lingered in my tone, and swallowing it down made me feel sick as I waited for an answer.

He shook his head, his dark hair styled and unmoving, so different from his usual floppy mess. His mouth lifted into a cruel smile.

“I don’t understand?” I didn’t want to understand because none of this made sense to me.

Why was he standing with them? Dressed like them?

My eyes moved from Mercer to the others. One’s eyes met mine. They were dark, like chocolate, and sympathetic to my bleak situation. The other guy’s were as cold as this room now that the door was open, and a chill was welcomed in.

“Probably time to explain it to her,” Chocolate Eyes said. He sounded a little like how I thought Mercer might have sounded once upon a time. American, with a tiny hint of Italian loitering on his vowels.

Discomfort slumped him against the wall. His foot kicked up, pressing against the colorful notes and drawings, and it would have painted an ugly look on my face, but my eyes were back on Mercer, my ears waiting for answers.

“Can you talk? Was it all lies? Are you on their side?” My eyes didn’t lower from his face, not even to see the tormenting

freedom lurking behind him. They just narrowed on him, giving my tears little room.

Mr. Cold Stare laughed, unable to control himself. Chocolate Eyes kicked away from the wall, already growing restless. The badly drawn little fox was stuck to his black shoe, and it twisted something painful inside me, feeling like an invisible knife stabbing the heart I shouldn't have.

I didn't say a word, letting him crush the lie Mercer had painted. I would let him crush them all, making it less painful when each one became exposed.

I lifted my head to the camera.

"You don't need to worry about that, Feebee." I froze at the sound of that same robotic voice that barked daily orders.

Mercer held a device in his hand, a small keyboard that could transmit messages to speakers for me to hear. In that voice. That robotic voice I hated.

"I...you?" I didn't know what to say. "It was all lies? Please say I'm wrong!" My gut knew I wasn't. Knew he was on their side—no, he wasn't working with them. They were working *for* him. I could tell by the way they watched him for direction. Every other part of me couldn't face that knowledge, but my gut knew. "You're the voice."

My shoulders slumped, and my head dropped, missing any reaction on Mercer's face.

"But you were hurt...instead of me?"

"I was. That had to happen to help accelerate the fictive feelings you think you have for me." The impersonal twang

stabbed into my ears.

“My feelings are real,” I said, my words making Chocolate Eyes uncomfortable.

With them standing so close, I could see a resemblance lurking behind the white paint—it was the mouth, the perfect teeth.

“I thought you were an only child. Was that another lie?”

“We’re cousins,” Chocolate Eyes answered, moving closer to his *cousin*.

“A family of crazy people who agree with kidnap and torture?” I quipped, overtaken by a rogue feeling of anger that slipped from my control.

Mercer dismissed the outburst.

“This was all your doing?” My voice broke.

“Yes. Though they did go rogue once or twice.” He side-eyed Cold Stare with hate in his eyes, and I knew exactly what he was talking about. “You’re aware of the reason you’re here.”

I couldn’t read anything from his face as my eyes glanced between that blank expression, now that it was back on me, and his fingers rapidly moving on the tiny keyboard.

“You’re not with your girlfriend anymore because she’s dead?”

“Probably wise not to talk about his dearest Chandelle.” Cold Stare laughed.

I waited for him to drop, for the look on Mercer's face to do what it wanted and kill him. But it didn't. Eventually, that cruel expression moved toward me.

And in that moment, I wanted his glare to kill me. I wanted it to happen quickly. I wanted out of this room, this world.

“What I told you about Chandelle and me was true. We were attacked on vacation. Then kidnapped and separated, and she was killed.”

“And you blame me?” he couldn't possibly. “I didn't kill her.”

“But she is dead because of you. Because Daddy wanted a new heart for his dying little princess.”

I was grateful right now that Mercer couldn't talk. There was enough emotion in those words without a human voice. He hated me, I could feel it, and it hurt more than anything else he could ever do to me.

“No...”

“Yes. And it's strained my fucking heart for the last year. Be grateful you're still alive. I killed everyone else involved with her death...well, all but one. But you being here might have already done that. You told me yourself Daddy couldn't face losing you. Maybe the cunt has drunk himself to death. If not, he's next on my list.” He smiled cruelly.

I said nothing, letting him continue and letting anger flare in my nostrils.

“I brought you here, broke into your home in the middle of the night, and drugged you so I could put you in a situation to

fall in love with me. I wasn't sure you would. But you played my little game well. I couldn't have wished for a better participant."

Participant, that was all I was to him.

"I comforted you through the trauma. I made us both live so you'd clutch at the good in me. I made us both do unpleasant things. I had these guys rough me up a little. I even fucked you, all so you'd feel something for me."

"And then, when you finally felt like you had a reason to live...I'd take it all away. Break your heart so you'd know how it feels."

"You were my first." My anger was back.

"More fool you for waiting so long. You've had years to give it up."

"I hope you feel guilty for disrespecting your girlfriend by fucking the reason she's dead."

My cold words stabbed into his heart. He swallowed hard, definitely affected by the truth in them. And that hurt me. Cold tears fell from my jaw to the pancake I had no intention of eating.

"Eat up. You have nothing else to do now that you'll be down here alone."

"I thought what we had was special. Was real." I let my eyes meet his, our stares similar in color, yet so different as they locked on each other.

“What I had with Chandelle was real. Real struggles, real arguments and disagreements. That’s a real relationship, not what—”

I cut him off, not wanting to hear the next part. “Sounds like you were in the wrong relationship. You didn’t mention the good stuff that comes with being with someone. The gentle touches, the comfort they bring, the way they hold you through a nightmare.” All the things we had experienced together.

Mercer visibly swallowed again, well aware of what I was doing.

“You don’t deserve to know every detail of our life. She is dead because of you.”

The words silenced me.

Retreating footsteps caught my attention, big boots and then squeaky shoes, both annoying me. The men slinked out the door, leaving Mercer and me alone.

I could have begged to go home...but Mercer wouldn’t listen. The voice never did. And, in truth, I didn’t have a home. I had a shiny pink room that invited a monster in from down the hall to abuse me.

This cell was no fucking worse than that.

My only choice was to stay here and starve or eat...and starving meant this shit show life would be over quicker.

The only thing I had, Mercer had taken away.

Fuck him.

Fuck the heart that he adored.

I didn't want it beating anymore. I looked down at the breakfast tray, praying for a knife, blunt or sharp, anything with a jagged edge that could end my misery.

No knife.

I heard the windy sneer come from his nostrils, but it wasn't until that voice talked again that my ears prickled. "Do you really think I'd give you a knife? While you're not strong enough to fight the urge to use it. I have no intention of giving you an easy way out. You'll live with the guilt. I fucking have to."

I already lived with enough guilt. Something I had kept private in all our chats, and boy, was I glad I had.

"This is your life, Feebee, stolen like Chandelle's. Get used to it." And with that, he left me, the sound of the slamming door haunting the room.

Anger swirled in my stomach, that and the emotional pain mixing into a potion of hate for him. He had brought me here, drugged me, and could have fucking killed me with whatever he had injected me with. He had forced sexual situations on me. Broke my fucking heart.

I hated him.

I hated him so fucking much.

And I was sure I would have been fucking dandy and able to survive if any of that were true.

CHAPTER 10

Feebee

I didn't sleep.

Fear held my eyes wide open, fear over what might come next. I stared at the freezing pancakes and the walls, the gray stone, and badly drawn pictures. Now, I hated the green and orange notes so much more than the dull canvas they covered. I hated the lies they told of a man with good intentions. A man who had grown to care for me. Such a fucking lie.

One I had too easily believed.

I hated the sweet aroma of cold syrup, making my situation feel all the more sour.

I rolled onto my back, the plain ceiling staring down at me, weighing down on me, making it harder to breathe. I didn't close my eyes, tears rolling out on their own accord. I stayed awake for hours...days...I thought of all the ways I could kill Mercer if I got close enough and all the ways I could end my own life, because even if I could kill him, I wouldn't.

* * *

At some point, exhaustion beat fear and granted me a reprieve, sending me into a sleep where no nightmares interrupted.

But that came to an abrupt end.

Water beat down on my face, sneaking into my nose and trying to drown me. This wasn't one of the ways I had planned to end my life. It was the crippling pain of starvation. It wasn't the tight grip of stress around my throat.

But a tight grip held me.

Fingers squeezed my cheeks, pulling me forward and angling my face, preventing the flooding of my lungs.

I coughed, water spluttering from my mouth.

I blinked my eyes open, the hot water clouding my vision.

A heavy slap hit between my shoulders, and I coughed again.

I felt around, trying to find Mercer and his heavy hand that I didn't want to put bruises on me.

I couldn't see him.

I couldn't see anything with the water still burning my tired eyes.

The lights were out in this bathroom. A dim glow crept in through an open door, but it wasn't generous with what it delivered.

I finally found wet clothes surrounding me, tailored pants and a shirt, different than the ones I had seen him in last, hinting this was a new day...or night, judging by the dark sky meeting the frosted-glass window.

My shirt was missing from my cold body, water droplets splashing up at my skin from the puddle where we sat. Pebbled nipples met the chill, and his gaze dipped.

I couldn't ask him what the hell he was doing. He couldn't answer. Wouldn't answer, even if he could.

I pushed myself under the water, needing the heat to erase the ice forming in my blood. I hid what he'd already seen

behind my arms, and I was almost sure I saw a flash of white teeth in the dark.

The monster was smiling at me, finding humor in my embarrassment.

He stood. Expensive shoes splashed through the water, proving he found things disposable.

I gulped, a tear falling into the water below. He stood before me, his crotch, with a very prominent bulge, too close to my face as he leaned in to dispense a blob of shampoo into his hands.

Those expensive shoes nudged me, encouraging me to turn around.

The mango-scented gel touched my scalp, dancing around hair strands and bald patches as his magic fingers directed. He was careful not to get it in my eyes...funny, I didn't think he would care if something burned me. It wasn't like he hadn't already set my heart alight.

I glanced back, and he was still careful. His hand created a barrier against my forehead before his thin thread of patience snapped, forcing me forward.

Anger made me stiff. I had questions for him...him and his passive handsome face. He acted nonchalantly, making me think this was normal to him. Mistreatment and cruelty weren't how I was raised to treat people...regardless of circumstance.

I bit my tongue, literally. It was the only way to keep my hateful words inside.

He didn't deserve to hear them. He didn't deserve my hate and sneers. He didn't deserve my voice.

And I deserved compassion I wouldn't get.

He pulled the shower head into his hand and watched as the bubbles in my hair slid down my back. When he was done, he guided me back with his hands, not that wretched shoe this time. He sat in the water, wet clothes still on, his eyes examining my face.

He washed me with a peach-colored shower gel and a clean sponge in circular motions, starting at my breasts. He massaged all kinds of emotions to the surface as he washed away weeks of dirt. I dared another glance at his face, finding he was already looking at me with his icy stare.

My breaths came harder. Faster. Drawing his attention to my mouth. His gaze dwelled a little too long, and something, neither of us could say what, compelled him closer.

A whisper of breath asked for a kiss as it skated across my lips. And I gave it. I didn't pull away when a simple kiss became passionate when it became more. When this fully dressed man shadowed over me, his tongue dominant and demanding to my sweet and innocent mouth. He laid me down, his body over mine. Close. So close. The shower rained on us, and the bulge between his legs pressed into me.

Thoughts of what he had me do down in that cell came flooding back, and I choked on them. Them, or his tongue, as it pushed deeper into my mouth, deep enough for me to lick his scar.

He pulled back slightly, his own insecurities giving me space to turn away. I wanted nothing at all to do with him because that scar was the only thing he hadn't fucking lied about.

He seized my cheeks, and my mouth popped open by the sheer force of his grip. His tongue rushed back inside, insecurity hidden by control and vulgar dominance. His fingers loosened, slipping down to my throat but going no further. His grip tightened around my throat. He wasn't hurting me, but he was showing me he could and was choosing not to.

The hand necklace made me wet.

The inability to move my legs made me grateful for the first time ever. I couldn't buck up against him like my body begged to. Fingers moved to my breast, kneading the nipple between his forefinger and thumb. I clenched against nothing, but his crotch was close, his hips rocking, teasing.

Arousal pooled in my eyes, lust in his. His hand moved again, squeezing my breast before tracing my minimal curves. It disappeared between my legs. A long finger made my back arch from the water below as it sank inside me.

I moaned again, and he swallowed it. Another finger, another moan. I kissed him back with the same fervor and need he plastered into me. My body tightened, gripping his digits and pulling them deeper, and that was when he did it.

He pulled out.

He froze above me and placed one single kiss on my lips that left us both confused, then he pulled me from the floor

and tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of garbage—that no longer smelled like garbage—and he turned off the shower.

Arousal still leaked between my legs, the scent of it thick in the air with the mango shampoo. Shame coated everywhere else.

I dangled, the blood rushing to my head, swamping all my thoughts and helping my embarrassment redden my cheeks.

We walked through a low-lit bedroom. Black artsy furniture filled the space, while gold accessories accented and brightened it up.

Before I could take anything in, we were in the hallway. It was long and dark, creepy, and made creepier by this nutjob's volatile moods. His grip on my legs would put another bruise on me, but I wouldn't feel the pain from this one.

His long legs swallowed up the distance from one room to another. A wooden floorboard screamed, and fuck, I wanted to scream, too.

He opened the door just down from his, turning on a light. Pink welcomed me inside and surrounded me. I loathed it, but I liked the idea of the bed he dropped me on. Four posts and a soft voile closed me in. His wet shoes left imprints on the carpet, and it annoyed me more than the color. But still, I didn't talk.

He threw a bath towel at me. I had no idea where it came from. It was pink, like everything else, and soft. I rubbed it over my body and squeezed the excess water from my hair.

He sat at an oak dresser near an open window that let in a cold breeze as he penned me a note with the stationery set there. I shivered, and he slammed the window closed.

I jumped when the noise rattled the entire room, the stuffed toys on a high shelf trembling, too, but he did nothing to soothe me...that was expected. His interest in me, or whatever it was he briefly showed, had washed away down the drain.

I should have bitten his tongue.

I should have attacked.

He had no idea how I seethed on the bed as he continued to write, but frustration overtook him, too. And I got the impression he couldn't finish whatever he wanted to say as the fluffy pink pen shook between his fingers.

Something howled beyond the glass, sounding more like a wild animal than the wind, making me more grateful it was closed. It interrupted him, and my watching him. And he finally set the pen down.

He made his way over to me, causing more shoeprints on the carpet, and sat down. I hid behind the bath towel, not wanting him to see my body, which was still showing signs of arousal, with hard nipples and my pussy glistening. I couldn't help it. I hated, loved, lusted for, and wanted him all at once.

But I wouldn't show those last three feelings when he gave me nothing but lies and confusion.

The edge of my bed grew wet thanks to his soggy clothes, all of which clung to his body in the most sinful way. I needed to stop letting him affect me this way. The perfect satin sheets

were now crumpled and cold, and it was his fault. And all I could think of were ways we could warm up.

He stared at the note in his hands, tanned fingers folding it in half. He handed it to me, snatching my bath towel in exchange.

I jumped again, but he didn't so much as look at me.

He didn't wait for me to read his note.

He was up and gone, squelching shoes carrying him away before I even asked how he knew how to spell my name.

I flipped open the folded sheet the second my door clicked shut, hiding the untraditional spelling of Feebee, and I read...

Your antics in my bathroom were amusing. But that's all you are to me. Amusement. Don't ever convince yourself you can be more.

The only reason you're alive is because I don't have it in me to stop Chandelle's heart.

I thought I could have a little fun without the guilt of feeling like I'm cheating.

I was wrong.

You don't taste like her.

You don't kiss like her.

Because you're not her.

You're nothing to me.

Unworthy.

And it makes me sick that you're living while she's not...

He didn't say more.

He didn't need to.

Enough had been said.

CHAPTER 11

Mercer

My tastebuds twitched with her taste, slightly sweet, slightly spicy...fucking delicious. My eager tongue drove in deeper, my nose hitting her clit. My name danced through melodic moans, and almond nails scratched my scalp, pulling me deeper into her.

I opened her legs a little wider. Her cold feet hung lifeless over my shoulders.

“I like that,” she murmured. Fuck, I liked it, too. Half-moons embedded into her ass, my nails biting into her soft skin to pull her closer. Closer to the fucking edge.

Her moans came louder, a beautiful sound, interrupted by a voice floating through them.

“You know what I don’t like?” The voice was different, blade sharp and murdering the moment.

“I don’t like that you’re moving on.”

My fingers loosened, moving from Feebee’s ass to her skinny thigh. I watched her pale skin develop a tan, and her legs thicken beneath my palms, my fingers expanding to cover more weight.

I looked up between her parted legs to see her staring at me...Chandelle. “God, Mercer. A fucking year. Did I mean nothing to you?”

I jumped back, sitting up and licking my lips without even realizing what the fuck I was doing. I felt her anger. Her

disgust, and I felt my own, too. What the fuck was I doing? Whatever it was, I had to fucking stop. I wiped the excitement from my mouth, Feebee's cum and my drool.

Chandelle leaned away. The light above shone in her eyes as tears multiplied across her waterline.

"You meant everything to me." I could talk... somehow. My accent stronger than I remembered it being, as the words vacated confused lips.

"So, what the fuck are you doing?" Her long blonde hair whipped across me as she turned back to me. "Why are you licking her there? Why do you want her?"

"To feel close to you."

"Bullshit. Dreaming of licking some girl's pussy brings you closer to me? I don't fucking think so."

So, I was dreaming? Either way, shame forced my eyelids down.

"You can't really like her!"

I didn't say anything. My eyes opened. I bit my lip, intentionally keeping quiet.

"You can talk here! You have a voice here!" she spat. "Tell me you don't really like that thing. She's nothing, remember? She's here to share your guilt over me. She's not a plaything. And you're a fucking cunt for thinking of another woman that way!"

Chandelle's finger jabbed into the air, and I had to reel back to avoid a red pointed nail gouging out an eyeball. I bit

my lip harder, drawing blood, tasting it. The blood and Chandelle's anger pushed my feelings of resentment around... for Feebee, who I had almost used tonight...

And for Chandelle, for not really fucking being here to argue over this because that was all we had ever fucking done together.

Moist beads of sweat seeped into the bedsheets that would be changed before the sun climbed to the sky as I shot up in bed. The satin fell around my waist, shielding my depleting erection from my own judgment.

What a fucking nightmare.

I had dreamed of Chandelle. Dreamed of how much she would fucking hate me for what I did in the shower tonight... and a part of me...didn't care.

No, I did. I cared too much about what she thought.

She influenced my every thought, every word a robotic voice spoke or a Post-it declared.

And that was why this was so hard.

I was living a nightmare.

And I needed to snap myself out of it. I needed to wake up and realize anything I did with Feebee had no value.

She would never be Chandelle.

But as I lay back in my bed, silky sheets lingering at my waist to avoid snuggling in my own sweaty filth, I thought to myself...what if I didn't want her to be?

I looked to the bedside table, to the home of Chandelle's photo. Her narrowed eyes judged me for the dream she'd invaded, and I couldn't fucking stand it. I pulled the drawer open, and another wave of guilt churned in my stomach as I placed her inside with the pens, Post-it notes, and a hint of dust, then closed it, concealing the false smile on her face in the dark.

CHAPTER 12

Feebee

The sun crept up, light shining in my window as it pushed nighttime away. I had watched every hour pass, the light in my room still on. The furniture in the room had become old news to me.

The pink that taunted me had become boring and lifeless. And I felt the same as my fingers weaved through my hair, tugging out the thicker strands. I played with them for a minute or two before I ditched them to find another.

My stomach rumbled, and as if it conjured a food-bringing genie into the room, the door swung wide, leaving a dent in the paint. A curse followed, slipping through the thin painted lips of the genie, except she wasn't a genie but a little old lady, shaking under the weight of a breakfast tray.

I wanted to get out of bed and help her, but I couldn't. I could only watch as skinny legs brought her closer. I sat up in bed for her to place the tray on my lap, the sheets hiding my modesty.

“Eat up, child. I don't want you starving to death. You're too skinny as it is.” She waved her arms, her encouragement looking something like a wounded bird.

“Who are you?”

“Name's Beatrix. But Trix is fine. Or, Nonna, if you'd prefer.” Her accent was the perfect blend of Italian and American. Of the country where she was born and where she now lives.

“You’re Mercer’s grandmother?” I asked, examining the cannoli she brought for me. Before she could answer, I asked another question. “Is that even his real name?”

“I am, and yes, it is. It was his mother’s maiden name. Beautiful woman. God, rest her soul.” She drew a cross in the air, an unknown to me condition making her hands shake. “He has her eyes, you know. The Italian genes didn’t win that round.”

I bit into the cannoli, stopping myself from saying something horrible, like those baby blues were the only thing the creep had going for him. Then, my other feelings reminded me that wasn’t how I really felt.

“I’m leaving tonight,” the old lady told me. “But don’t worry, the boys are harmless, and I’ll be back in three days. While I’m gone, I’ve warned them to stay on their best behavior.”

Harmless? I almost choked on my cannoli. Mercer had done nothing but given me scars, harmful and painful emotional scars that I would never heal from. The deepest one he gave me last night. Those awful words were still in my mind’s eye, invading my focus on this woman in front of me.

The tear stains on my red face spoke of the hurt he had caused me. I didn’t deserve to live, in his eyes, at least, and that hurt because part of me, a small hidden part that my anger tried to hush constantly, still craved a hug from him...because for only a minute, they made everything better.

That was why I’d kissed him in the shower.

But I wouldn't get a hug from a man who hated me and despised my existence.

I doubted I would get another kiss.

That was a bitter pill to swallow because the worst thing in the world was loving someone who didn't love you back and not being able to let go. Maybe it would have been easier to let go if I had something—someone—else to hold on to. But I didn't.

I had nothing.

And for some messed up reason, after such a small amount of time, I did love Mercer, and I could no longer blame that tiny cell for it.

A tear fell, soaking through the last bite of cannoli.
“Please, stay.”

Her being here felt safer to me.

“I'm going on a bingo tour.” Trix smiled, excited over her trip.

“Can I come?” I almost begged, mouth full and undignified. I knew nothing about this woman, but I knew enough about her grandson to not feel safe here alone.

“I think the time here will be good for you both.”

I forced the rest of the cannoli into my mouth, washing it down with freshly squeezed orange juice.

“He's not going to hurt you. I'd kick his ass if he ever put his hands on a woman—”

“Do you know about the cell?”

“I do, and I know you agreed to things under false pretenses, and believe you me, he heard my thoughts about that, too!”

“It won’t be good for me to stay here. He’s already hurt me. He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you, honey. The situation is just... complicated. He’s as confused as you are, and I know he’s done some things that haven’t been fair to you. You may have heard me yelling at him for those things this morning.”

I hadn’t heard anything. Nothing but music and the echo of an overly loud food mixer.

“Let me share some advice. Allow a man one mistake. They are stupid creatures, after all. If he learns from it, he’ll be better. If not, cut your losses.”

Surely, she knew I had no losses. No choice in anything that happened here.

“He’s in a dark place, and I know he’s dragged you into it, but you can walk out together or separately. Well, you’ll have to wheel out, but you still get to pick your direction.”

She was making it sound as if I had a choice. Or a wheelchair—I had neither. I would just have to continue to be dragged by Mercer and tossed away when he grew bored, and eventually, he would grow bored. He had hinted at that so many times.

I finished my freshly squeezed orange juice, the juicy bits still on my tongue when I devoured the second cannoli. I

wiped the crumbs from my lips before thanking Beatrix and saying no more about my situation.

She took the hint, understanding that I wasn't in the mood for company, and she collected my tray, hobbling away. At my door, she turned back and said, "It was nice to meet you, Feebee. Remember what I told you. And don't take no shit from that boy while I'm gone."

* * *

I wasn't hungry that evening, and I didn't get any food with Beatrix out of the house. But I got bored. Bored of watching the clock arrows move and listening to the annoying ticktock they traveled with.

I hated that fucking sound.

After a full twelve hours, my naked body dropped from the bed with a thud. Darkness was outside again, welcoming creatures of the night. Barn owls and their prey made sounds beyond my window. Some were pretty melodies, others, screams of terror.

That was why I threw myself from the bed, needing something else to listen to, and a TV remote taunted me in the distance, promising the music channels would be much better if I just retrieved it.

The soft carpet cushioned the fall as I landed awkwardly on my wrist. I dragged myself a mere inch when the door swung wide, hitting that same part of the wall, the pink paint chipping again.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the robotic voice I hoped to forget barreled loudly through my room and made me twitch in my skin, my soul trying to escape because my body couldn’t.

I didn’t look for the speaker.

“Mind your own fucking business,” I spat, taking Trix’s advice, lacing my tone in venom, and refusing to take his shit. I glared at the doorway; my eyes filled with anger. I was close to hissing at him.

He stepped inside my room, tainting the bright colors with his dark aura.

“I hate you,” I lied.

He didn’t care, looking neither amused nor displeased.

I turned away, carpet fibers parting beneath me as I heaved my naked body to the other side of the room to a giant TV and its remote, desperate to drown out the sound of wildlife murders outside.

But I never got there.

Mercer’s legs brought him quickly toward me, which brought envy rushing up my throat. If only my legs worked, I could kick, I could run.

Cruel fingers grabbed my ankle, tugging me back. My hand was up, ready to slap him in his face, but it just made it easier for him to grip my pained wrist and swing me onto the bed. I bounced, almost falling off the other side. I stared at the remote, promising myself I would get it once he left, the pain in my joint already forgotten.

“Is that what you want?” the voice questioned.

He walked toward it in ten simple steps. Don't ask me why I counted them, but I did. In my defense, I had nothing else to do, that is, until I was shielding myself from the hard black plastic that would have broken my nose if I had raised my arms a second later.

The lack of a fractured bone allowed steam to burst out my nostrils. I glared at him, praying looks could kill, then praying they couldn't.

Damn this fucking man.

He sent another message from the small keypad in his hands to the speakers, and they delivered it. “I don't want to hear any more from you.”

I almost felt sorry for him. He had a weakness, too, and the look on his face, hidden beneath all the agitation I caused, told me he hated that. Hated that he had no voice.

He headed for the door, his ass looking too good in his gym shorts. His naked back looked just as hot, with the sweat glistening between his shoulder blades.

I cursed myself for thinking such things, turning away with tears in my eyes. Because while I lusted over him, he was wishing I was dead. Wishing for another woman to breathe the air, he believed I was stealing. For this heart in my chest to pump her blood. Blood that would heat under his touch, just like mind did.

I felt sick. Another tear rolled down my cheek as the door clicked shut. The back of my hand wiped it away. How I had

any tears left to cry was beyond me.

But at least I waited until he left the room to do it.

I fingered the button to turn on the TV, needing a distraction from the noise in my head and the arguments between one animal and another still going on.

Happy smiles filled the screen as a home video portraying love started playing. Long blonde waves blowing in the breeze of early autumn. She ran through leaves, chased by love...by the man who gifted that emotion with his whole heart. By Mercer.

My heart cracked, and pain shot through my chest. I rubbed it away and turned the channel to another recording... another season. Winter. Snow fell from above, and a large pond iced over. She skated, her forward spin, perfect, her hair, face, and smile, all perfect. She didn't deserve to die...

And watching her, I started to feel like Mercer was right. I didn't deserve to live.

CHAPTER 13

Mercer

Guilt clung to me like sweat, making my gym shorts feel heavier as they clung to my body. I walked with heavy feet around my room. I stomped back to apologize for launching the remote at her.

I froze with my hand on my doorknob as a migraine formed behind my wide eyes. It had been a long fucking day, one that I had been happy to burn off in my gym before my ears alerted me that she had fallen from the fucking bed.

Her anger had ignited mine. It didn't take much after the deal I wanted fell through this evening. I was so close to detouring to Feebee's house on my way home. So tempted to slit her father's throat and wash away my stress in his blood.

Yeah...I was that angry. And he was still on my kill list. So many others had gone before him in recent months, all in painful ways. All destroyed completely so no one would find any trace of them. Stefan Serrano was the last person on my kill list—the man who had started this nightmare by requesting a heart for his daughter from someone living and breathing.

Guilt flooded my stomach again. Feebee's face flashed in my mind, her innocence and beauty calling to my darkness, wanting to ruin her...in so many ways.

I pushed her from my mind, guiding thoughts back to the man who created her. The man who hadn't gone to the papers with an appeal to find his missing daughter because I'd been checking daily.

He deserved to die...for being a shitty parent, which made no sense, as he had hunted the globe for a fast-track heart transplant for the same daughter he had stopped caring for the second she was out of sight.

Something wasn't right there.

My nostrils flared in anger, only returning to their natural shape when I saw him in blood, a slice across his throat, and gashes around his untuned stomach, where my blade protruded from.

My bloodstained dreams were interrupted by the sound of night. Owls threatened the smaller birds, who fretted and screamed over the fear of being eaten. I closed the heavy drapes, shutting them out.

I was on my bed, crumpled sheets gathered beneath me. I couldn't say how the fuck I got here. The memory was gone, along with so many others.

Again, I thought of her. Her and her shiny blunt-cut hair, her fucking fingers and how they had touched me, nails dragging over tattoos and muscle. Her eyes and how they looked when I brought the light back into them down in the cell...and how they looked yesterday when I took it away again.

She fucking hated me.

And I couldn't blame her.

But it felt so much better when she didn't.

It muted my pain. Made the tension causing pains in my neck lessen. Amplified the ache in my cock, but I could deal

with that.

I needed to see her. I needed to see her now, without the anger we brought out in each other every time we existed in the same room.

And I could.

I gripped the remote on a floating shelf high above my bedside table, pushed a button, and lit up my TV, giving me options of what to watch—Netflix, cable, and the cameras I had set up in this house. I selected the last option...then, her room.

The tears in her eyes didn't stop my fingers from rubbing over my crotch, didn't stop my cock from responding to the sight of her. Her chest rose and fell, and teardrops had her skin glistening.

I freed myself, the strain against the material growing uncomfortable. I fisted my shaft with a hard and brutal grip, needing to strangle something...needing one painful ache to leave me the fuck alone.

Feebee sniffed on the screen, her attention moving to her own TV. She watched my memories play out before her eyes, all painful and beautiful times...but I saw none of them.

I only saw her.

Newer memories filled my mind...her between my legs that first day in the cell. I had played dead...practically, out of it, unaware of her talents and turmoil.

But it was all a lie as I had rested, slumped against the cold wall, my cock in her mouth. I had felt everything. Her tongue,

teeth, suction...her pulse pounding in her fucking throat as she sucked me deeper into her mouth. And it had felt fucking phenomenal.

Hiding my moans that day was one of my life's greatest challenges.

The screen burst through my reverie. The image of Feebee crying over Chandelle's existence, or lack of, amplified my guilt, but it didn't stop me as I tugged myself harder, fingers slipping over my tip, smearing the precum dribbling out from me.

One last look into her eyes as she glanced in the direction of the hidden camera, not having any idea of its existence, as it hid in the beady eyes of a stuffed bear, and that was it. I didn't need my eyes on a great body, my stare on something sinful or arousing. I came all over myself...by looking into her beautiful fucking eyes, and I knew right at that moment I was fucking ruined.

Because of her.

CHAPTER 14

Feebee

My body was weak, still naked, hidden beneath my bedsheets. My pillow—covered in hundreds upon hundreds of hairs I had subconsciously pulled—was the only thing that offered me support as I rested my pounding head. Her voice, sweet and rich like caramel, was still playing inside my head, overpowering every thought that didn't involve her.

I couldn't use her name. It made her more real. It made it harder for me to come to terms with the fact that I was partly to blame for her death.

The pretty girl on TV died so I could live...and I couldn't, not with the heavy weight of guilt crushing *her* heart.

My stomach rumbled, and I ignored it. Dinner time was near, but I didn't want food. And I probably wouldn't get it. Trix was off playing bingo now, stamping out numbers, hoping to get lucky. She wasn't here this morning with a breakfast tray, and no one else came, either.

Knuckles rattled my door...another genie, this one more menacing sounding than little old Trix.

I didn't bother to answer, having no power to keep whatever creature lurking out there out of this room.

The door opened despite my lack of welcome.

"Mercer requests your presence for dinner," a man told me.

"Chocolate Eyes."

“Actually,” he stalled, rubbing the back of his neck. “My name is Ethan.”

Ethan didn't move. Not disrespecting the pink carpet by traipsing in with his shiny black shoes.

“Mercer can fuck off.”

“Do you have a death wish?” He laughed.

“Ironically, I do.” I had enough of life and all it had thrown at me. Had enough of survival and the guilt that came along for the ride. I wanted to be with my loved ones.

“I can escort you—”

“I said no!” I blared, anger rising as I turned to face the dark-haired loser in a fancy suit, not caring as my naked chest almost spilled out into his view. It wasn't like he hadn't already fucking seen it.

He blinked twice, dark eyes capturing nothing but my stress and agitation...probably to feed those images to Mercer during the dinner I wouldn't be sharing.

“Your choice. Your funeral, seeing as you'd rather starve to death.”

“If only...” I grumbled to myself as he clicked my door shut.

I didn't have time to bask in the bitter silence under the bright light that reminded me of all the things I had here but didn't deserve. The dresser, the ensuite, the vintage armoire that looked like it could come to life any second, doors

flapping wide as it danced around the room, showing off its extravagance. The roof over my head and the offering of food.

All things I had no appreciation for.

For the third damn time, the door crashed into the wall, delivering a bigger dent that swallowed up the old ones. I jumped, and not because of that.

That wretched robotic voice sounded again. I threw the TV remote at the little culprit I spied in the corner, but the speaker was far too high.

“Not hungry, cuore mio,” it said.

Mercer, with that keypad in his hand and a suit that matched the one what’s-his-face wore, covering the muscles of his body, stood in my doorway. The sheet slipped from my hand.

He didn’t pay my breasts any attention. The look of disinterest on his scowling face was insulting to my body.

“I’d die before eating with you.”

He typed another message. “You might just do that. Because if you don’t eat with me, you won’t eat at all.”

“Fuck you!” Two hate-filled words brought him closer, another pair of black fucking shoes leaving more prints on the pink carpet.

I scowled, and he followed my gaze to his feet.

“Do you not like me messing up your cute little girly room?” the voice asked.

The rage painting my cheeks red answered for me. I hated it. I hated how it reminded me of home. Of how a pretty pink room could be tarnished by filth and changed forever.

Another message played, “You’re probably wondering why you’re up here and no longer locked in the cell.”

I shrugged, acting as if curiosity wouldn’t kill me if given half the chance. I had wondered many times. Wondered if it was all to do with Trix, but no thoughts other than Chandelle stayed in my head for long.

He stepped closer, another message already typed and transmitted, when two fingers flicked my chin and guided my face to his. “You can have a pretty room, my little prisoner. It’s not like you can run away.”

He lowered to his haunches, long legs taking his weight. He lifted the bed skirt, pulling something out from below me.

A wheelchair was brought into view as he stood, my eyes blinking in confusion as he unfolded the pink chair, setting the safety clips into place.

He looked down at me, a smirk on his face. “You’ve even got some wheels,” the emotionless voice spoke again. “You don’t have to spend your last days sitting in this bed...you could go to the window and see the freedom you’ll never get.”

“I will,” I lied.

He stilled.

“I will be free of you,” I lied again. “You won’t kill me, you twisted creep.”

He leaned in, his shadow pushing me down. His fingers gripped my throat, pulling our faces close enough to smell his spearmint breath.

What makes you so sure? His gaze questioned.

He smirked, looking demented and handsome all at once.

“You’d have done it by now. You don’t have the balls to stop her heart,” I spat, actually spat, into his face.

His grip tightened, and he seriously looked like he grew those murderous balls right at that very moment.

“Starvation will do that.” He didn’t even look at the keyboard to type that message. His eyes never left my face, his sinister smile trying to unnerve me...and succeeding.

But I held my ground, playing a game, convincing him otherwise, and after an agonizingly long staring contest, our blue eyes fighting a silent battle, he left, called away by the smell of well-cooked food.

I could smell it from here...something with lentils.

My favorite.

And he knew it because it was one of the things we had talked about in that fucking cell.

Cruel fucking bastard.

CHAPTER 15

Feebee

Day three came and went, darkness falling over the view from my window where I sat, clothed, for a change, watching the world go on without me.

The pretty crescent moon glowed on a large oval lake; its reflection distorted by swimming fish. The green grass appeared a darker shade, a terrifying metropolis for tiny bugs who may become prey to the bigger insects lurking in the dark.

I wasn't a tiny bug, but I felt like one these last few days. One that had already been crushed.

I was kidding myself to think I wouldn't really die in this room because if Mercer or starvation failed to kill me, boredom would do it. The stuffed animals and Raggedy Ann dolls sitting high on shelves I couldn't reach would be the only ones to attend my funeral. No tears, no pain, just peace.

And that was more than I could wish for.

I was pulling my hair out, literally. I created a new bald spot on the other side of my head that could only be hidden by the thickness of my remaining hair. I didn't even realize I was doing it half the time, but my fingers needed something to do to take my mind off everything else.

Mercer, the devil in a fancy suit, had been true to his word, happy for hunger to end my life.

Nothing had crossed my lips for days, nothing but glasses of water I'd taken from the bathroom sink. I had filled the glass that once housed my toothbrush multiple times, giving it a new home on my bedside table.

A tap rattled on my door, loud but gentle. Trix must be home. I waited, spinning the bright pink chair around to welcome her, but my door didn't open.

"Come in, Trix!" I shouted, but she didn't enter. "You can come in!" I tried a little louder.

My wheels crushed carpet fibers, moving me to the door. I pulled it open, and a wheeled dinner tray greeted me, on it sat a plate, hidden by a fancy silver dome. I lifted it, and the smell, oh, the glorious, wonderful smell, hit me in the face.

My favorite dish taunted me, a voice in my head telling me, *eat, it's for you.*

I didn't want it, making a point by slamming down the lid, but then I thought of Trix—the only person who showed me kindness here, and how horrible it would be for her if I threw that kindness in her face. So, I put the tray on my lap, and the drink accompanying it in the attached holder on my chair and closed the door.

Back at the window, I stared out at the silver moon, taking the first bite of food. My tastebuds screamed out with joy, and my stomach flipped and danced, excited for the arrival. I took another bite, my eyes closing as my body regenerated.

A noise came from outside, barely stealing my attention from the food and all the delicious thoughts rushing through

my head, but curiosity won over when the noise came again.

I put my meal on the dresser, stretched my fingers across the window ledge, and pulled my heavy body from my chair for a better view. I didn't weigh a lot, not really. Mr. Silent certainly tossed me around quite easily whenever he felt like it. But my energy was...was just...gone. I glanced down, almost wishing I had the physical strength to end it all...

But my mental strength suddenly crept from somewhere I thought was sealed shut, the key tossed away. It told me that wasn't my path, and I was strong enough to walk, well, wheel, through this darkness and find a light at the end.

A tear rolled from my eye, not wanting to do any of that, not wanting to do anything. I watched as it disappeared from my sight, growing farther from me and becoming lost in the image of grass and flowers below.

A moment went by when my attention wandered to the serene lake, the crescent in the sky still reflected there. Owls tooted in the distance. A fox pounced on what he thought was prey, only to be disappointed by the fact it was some other predator's leftover lunch, and there wasn't much left over.

I admired the freedom of the animal but not the hunger it felt. Hunger I still felt. My stomach rumbled, and I glanced over to the meal brought for me. Lentil pie and vegetables hidden in mashed potatoes. My favorite. The gravy sitting in a miniature jug at the side was getting cold, the steam rising up and diminishing with each second of the ticking clock.

I felt guilty.

Guilty that I could eat and the little fox couldn't. Guilty that I hadn't.

I looked up at the speaker in the corner of my room, wondering if it was also a camera. The hateful scowl I became accustomed to crept onto my face. I reached for my plate, poured the brown gravy, and began eating, wishing I could share with the animal outside.

He was weary now. I watched him as I chewed, his orange fur standing on edge. Watched as he cautiously moved through the long grass at the water's edge. Pastry crunched between my teeth as I stared in disbelief at the small fox accepting food from my captor. A feast of fruit laid out before the creature on a round silver plate, similar to mine.

My jaw dropped, seeing Mercer lying opposite the creature, their noses close as they greeted each other. I had to be quick to catch the mouthful of food that almost fell from my mouth.

He really had a fox...like his drawing, just less menacing. And he loved the furry creature. Showed compassion to it. And it reminded me of the man I thought he was and proved he wasn't all bad.

There was good in him...in the evil man who wished me dead. This fox saw it. Felt it.

I saw it...felt it. And believed it was a lie.

It was buried deep, but it was there.

It made me feel...like I could accept all the things I felt that weren't anger and upset.

Maybe this was the lie?

Maybe he didn't want my heart to stop. Maybe he was just shielding his own.

I knew enough to know that the only truly evil things people had buried were the secrets they kept and the bodies of the innocents they had hurt.

Mercer was hiding so much more than that. He was hiding emotions.

He looked up to my room, the bright light almost making it easy to spot me as I leaned out of view.

I tried to glance around my curtain—the velvet material and royal shade of fuchsia making it impossible to see through—but I couldn't do that without him seeing me.

I counted to ten, taking in a fork full of mashed potatoes between each number. Then I looked back to the window, praying his attention was back on the animal, and it was as he patiently waited for the fox to finish its meal.

I ate, watching him give attention and love to the playful animal. Pushing more food onto my fork, I looked back to find a lonely fox staring up at me. Mercer and the food were no longer there, and I found myself wondering, *were they ever? Was hunger bringing out hallucinations?*

I wanted to believe there was good in him, but with him out of sight, I took the last bite and questioned the truth... because only when Trix had returned had I been fed.

CHAPTER 16

Mercer

I did something stupid last night. The camera in her room showed me she was asleep, and the exhaustion on her drained features told me she would be for a while.

I avoided the creaky floorboards, knowing exactly where they were, as I moved across the hallway in nothing but boxer shorts. If Nonna had caught me, I would have been castrated right then and there.

There would be no excuses as to why I would be sneaking into the room of the girl I had kidnapped, especially with my hard cock, jutting out, making me look guilty before I could defend myself with lots of flapping arms and head shakes.

I didn't carry my keyboard or Post-its. The only thing in my hand was the cock I couldn't stop stroking through the thin material of my shorts.

I opened the door to Feebee's room, quietly creeping in. The dent in the wall and all its flaked-off paint greeted me as I closed the door. The lights were on, so bright, I felt like I was under a police spotlight, and the reality was, I should be for the things I was doing to this woman...

But she did something to me every time I saw her...

And it got harder to ignore each time.

I had only caught a glance of her behind the curtain, peeping down at me with something other than hate and anger in her stare...

But that was enough.

I had to leave my little pet behind. I had to be alone. I wanted to come over her image. But I couldn't because it wasn't enough. I needed to see her. I had to see her.

And as I stood there hours later, right in front of her, watching her as she rested in her chair, hair grazing her delicate shoulder as her head lolled to the side. A shirt, open slightly, keeping so much of her body from my view. All I could see were long legs. I dropped, my knees crashing into the carpet, desperate for a closer look. I touched her toes. The pink paint on her nails growing out didn't turn me off.

She couldn't feel me touching her here, and I didn't feel like I was assaulting her because, well, I was caressing a fucking foot, for fuck's sake.

I lifted her ankle, something inside me wanted my lips on her. The guilt of abusing Chandelle's honor could kill me for it later. Right now, I didn't give a fuck.

I kissed Feebee's foot, kneeling before her like I was begging for her attention, and if she woke up, I probably would have fucking begged for her attention. I would beg with my eyes and gentle touches. I would plead with my tongue touching anywhere she could feel.

I tested a lick on her foot, my tongue moving from heel to toe, the electric pink polish disappearing between my lips. It felt arousing, and I wasn't a foot guy...until tonight. A night where I needed any part of her to touch me. I kept an eye on her face, stealing glances of the sleeping beauty as I sucked harder, grew harder, and ached beyond fucking words for her.

I nibbled before moving to her instep, kisses shadowing the movement.

My cock peeped higher above my waistband, coming to see why it wasn't getting attention. I rolled down my boxers, took it in one hand, and began stroking myself again. My fingers moved slowly, pulling my skin back to reveal a shiny head. I needed more. I needed to fucking come so I could get out of this room and get these thoughts out of my head.

My grip tightened, my thumb rubbing over the most sensitive part of my cock as my pace picked up. My head dropped back, but only for a minute. A minute where I convinced myself this woman was open-legged—her satin underwear looped around one ankle while she played with her clit as I masturbated at her feet.

She wasn't doing that. She was still asleep.

But she still looked fucking beautiful.

I dropped her foot into my lap, and it landed so close to my cock. I shuddered, waiting for the blast of pain that didn't come. But it still interrupted my rhythm. My cum sank back into my balls just as I was about to blow. I looked down at her toes, the pretty pink hypnotizing me into doing something I never thought I would.

I put her toes against my cock and my hand around her foot, and the thought of her touching me here...it made me fucking hot. My hips rocked into our joined touch, her toes rubbing over the wet head of my cock, and I tingled, oh, I fucking tingled, from my head to my toes tucked under my ass.

My breathing went wild, noises that didn't bother her as much as they did me, fell off my scarred tongue, and I came. Laces of hot cum lashed her foot and my fingers, sticking us together, the milky white stream running between her pretty perfect toes. I wasn't opposed to the dirty stuff.

I brought her foot back to my mouth, seductively touching my lips with her sticky toes. My eyes stayed on her. Her eyes were still closed, long lashes fluttering. My other hand was still on my dick, convinced it had more to give.

And it did.

I blew again all over my stomach as I licked her foot clean.

I massaged her foot until it was dry before placing it back on the footrest of her chair. I fell back on my ass, needing to be away from her.

I instantly felt dirty. Felt regret. Again.

I felt hate...but it was no longer for her.

It was for me.

I betrayed Chandelle's honor and all our memories. Again.

And I fucking hated myself for it.

CHAPTER 17

Feebee

My aching neck screamed a wailing sound of agony, only drowned out by something much louder in the hallway. Men. Loud, with tools that rivaled them. I'd fallen asleep in my chair, gravity pulling my head to an uncomfortable angle. My fingers tried and failed to rub away the ache terrorizing the muscles in my neck.

I blinked the tiredness from my gaze, having no idea what was going on beyond my bedroom door, and I wasn't brave enough to venture out and ask questions.

The pink sky matched my room, looking prettier for only being outside. I didn't turn to see it, catching minimal reflections only from the view of a mirror.

My body craved the feel of grass again. It had been so long. So long since I did anything I liked. I forced myself to turn, my arms working slowly to spin my chair and not put any more pressure on my stiff neck.

My tray was gone from the dresser. I careened back to the door, shocked I hadn't heard anyone come in and take it...that hurt my neck, and I yelped. My door flew open, Mercer filled the open space. A second later, he was between my legs. Close. Too close. Close enough for me to see lines of concern etched on his forehead.

"What hurt you?" he mouthed, not waiting to pull out a Post-it or that annoying little keyboard that triggered the voice I loathed.

“Nothing,” I stuttered, shocked by his concern. His eyes dwelled on my lips, fascinated by the stammer. His finger followed, gently tracing the fullness of my lower lip before I said, “I have a stiff neck.”

His features hardened, turning back to stone and pelting me with it. Eager legs removed him from me, taking him from the room.

He didn't close the door, and I followed him without even thinking about it. Confusion led the way, the wheels beneath me giving me the power to wander. The brief appearance of anxiety on his face gave me the courage to finally venture from this room.

I wheeled out into the hallway. A grand wooden staircase stood between Mercer and me. I followed the sound of his feet moving over wooden slats, his shadow disappearing from the bottom step as he rounded the corner. Two other men invaded my view, toolbelts hanging around the waistbands of their denim pants.

“Hey!” the younger of the two—a man around thirty—said, looking my way.

My stiff neck prevented me from looking over my shoulder to see who else he might be talking to.

“I take it this is for you?” He smiled, and I realized he was definitely talking to me as I looked over what appeared to be a stairlift. “We're almost done. We just have to tighten one last thing...” He pointed to his companion, a man who was probably double his age and had a familial resemblance. “And then you can test it out.”

Sure, I'll give your masterpiece a test run. I wanted to roll my eyes but remained respectful, eyeing up their hard work.

The older man did as he said, tightening the last of many concealed bolts with a hand-held power tool.

A button was pressed, a motor kicked in, and a comfortable-looking pink and satin seat traveled the tracks to greet me.

These guys must have been working for hours, and I hadn't even heard them until dreams of a sweet fox licking my toes and the man who called him away had ended. Mercer haunted me, invading every sense, lingering in my mind when I thought I zoned out. Nope. He was still there. Still with me as I slept, replacing the nightmares that terrified me.

I blinked away thoughts of him, the two men appearing before me again. The young blond stepped forward; his graying father stood behind him.

“Happy?” the older guy asked.

I nodded, unsure what to say. Unsure why this contraption had been installed.

The stairlift crept around the handrail, twisting to a position that made it easy for me to slink onto. I dragged myself from one chair to another, declining with thanks when both men offered me help.

I sat comfortably on the chair's plump cushion and fastened the seat belt.

I glanced back to my wheelchair, wondering what I would do when I got to the bottom.

“Your other chair is at the bottom, waiting for you.” Lines deepened near the older man’s eyes as he smiled at me.

My other chair? I didn’t verbally question, choosing to play whatever role Mercer had written for me.

I pressed a button on a golden keypad and descended, seeing rooms I’d never seen before as I lowered slowly into an open-plan space. The chair rounded the corner, another chair waiting, with giant wheels on the tiled floor, a cushioned seat, and a battery-operated toggle that would allow me to change direction.

I shuffled into its comfort, confused by how to drive the damn thing. It took me only a second to have it moving, and it moved much faster than I was used to. I whizzed past the workmen, thanking them for their hard work, then past the grand double doors, mahogany, like the banister, and all the other expensive woodwork.

The kitchen came into view, a prodigality of huge navy units. The room, glittered by pink accessories, all currently in use as Trix prepared the biggest breakfast in the world. Wheels moved over the prettiest floor as tiles gave way to cherry blossom petals encapsulated in resin. Wonderment put a smile on my face, as I admired the beautiful details. It was art.

Condensation coated the shiny backsplash and tiles, the open window not filtering out much steam, given how much food was being cooked. Trix looked up from the center island as I slammed to a halt before crashing into it. The rolling pin in her hand, covered in flour and beaten eggs, waved at me.

“Good morning, Feebee. I’m glad to have you down here. I’ll need some help once these scoundrels get to work.”

That wooden roller moved between two men, Mercer and the loser, also known as Chocolate Eyes. Damn, I’d already forgotten his real name, but as he sat there, innocently eating his breakfast cereal, I felt guilty for thinking of him as a loser.

“You’ve met Ethan.” She smiled, pride brightly showing as she reminded me what to call him.

Ethan’s strong throat worked, swallowing down the last of his cereal. He patted his mouth dry with a nearby dishtowel.

“I’m the least favorite grandchild.” He smiled.

“Oh, shush, you stupid man. I love you both the same. Now, one of you lift Feebee up to help me.”

Mercer stopped dead, a sip of hot tea still in his cup when he pivoted to me. Ethan got to me first, and with a smirk on his face and his eyes flicking between me and the man he looked so similar to, he asked, “May I?”

I nodded, appreciative that he at least asked before touching me. Maybe he was my favorite of her grandchildren because he didn’t touch me without asking or coerce me into sex under false pretenses. But he wasn’t...because I was fucking broken and liked the fucked-up one.

I let him lift me, our bodies close until he positioned me on a barstool. I removed my tight grip from his shoulders when I felt safe enough to do so, brushing the creases from his designer jacket.

Mercer's stare burned into me. The teacup in his vicious grip did the same to his hand. He tossed the cup into the sink, and it cracked against the matching teapot.

"Damn you, boy. That one was my favorite."

Mercer glared across the table at Ethan, now back in his seat, before he ducked out of the way of a rolling pin attack. It narrowly missed, unlike his Nonna's agitation. "One of these days, Mercer! One of these days! It'll be your head and not my fine china!"

"Just think, if you weren't the favorite, she'd have caught you by now." Ethan laughed, not caring all that much that he was second in line for her love.

A robotic voice came from a nearby speaker. "It's not her lack of love. It's your inability to do anything at the appropriate time." Mercer had stolen Ethan's smirk and a cannoli, from which he took a single large bite before placing it back on the table. Remembering how delicious they were, I craved one and had to wipe the drool from my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Have one," Trix encouraged, "Who knows when you ate last."

"Last night...thank you. Dinner was delicious."

Trix straightened, old bones clicking. "I didn't get in until after twelve, dear, but I'm glad they fed you. They're decent cooks when they make the effort."

My eyes moved to Mercer, and he stepped out of my view, knowing my stiff neck wouldn't allow me to follow him and

see the truth.

He had fed me.

Like he did the little fox.

And it brought a smile to my face that I couldn't hide.

Trix started kneading dough by hand, her fingers flattening out the thickness.

My eyes wandered again, seeing the gleeful expression on Ethan's face as he mouthed the words, "I knew you'd cave," to Mercer, who stood as far away as possible and his body stiffer than mine.

The workmen popped their heads around the corner, already paid and ready to leave, and shouted their goodbyes.

Trix and Ethan replied with the same generic words of parting.

I said another thank you.

And Mercer bowed his head, his tense smile barely visible to them as they slipped out.

"Anyway, finish that cannoli," Nonna insisted, and her favorite grandchild refused, moving back into my view and shaking his head, his hand on his stomach like he was already full. I'd eaten one when she offered, but the half he left called to me, and I found myself reaching for it while more silent messages were exchanged between the men on each side of me.

Ethan's lips moved, "Looks like your little crush is still reciprocated," he mouthed. "She doesn't mind sharing your

tongue germs.”

I finished the cannoli, my theft uncommented on.

A lump of dough landed before me, thrown across the tabletop by Trix. Flour dusted the long shirt, which was surely a man’s. I’d dressed myself in it yesterday and hadn’t changed.

I started to knead, but I had no idea what I was doing.

“Never cooked before?” Trix asked, a gray eyebrow disappearing beneath her wispy bangs.

“Not really. Not since making cakes with my mom as a child.” I lifted the dough, the pieces I pressed still stuck to the table. “What are you making?”

“Torta Della Nonna. And you’re going to help. It’ll give you something to do today.”

“You’ll have to walk me through it.”

“I intend to. A woman your age should know how to feed herself, and no disrespect, but it looks like you could do with some fattening up.”

“Nonna!” Mercer began typing another transmission, this one coming through Ethan’s mouth.

“Her leg muscles have deteriorated because she can’t use them,” the robotic voice added.

“She can use her arms just fine, and they are skinny, too.”

Mercer’s fingers hovered on the keyboard as he contemplated his next words.

“It’s fine. I know I’m skinny. The muscles in my legs are wasting away, yes, but I don’t eat right back home, and that doesn’t help. I don’t get out of my room much to make anything.”

“Why not?” Trix questioned, her brown eyes hiding behind thick lashes narrowed at me.

“My home doesn’t have a stairlift.”

“How is that possible? You lived in a mansion. Your family has money,” the robotic voice spoke again, this time belittling me.

“Didn’t you notice that when you broke in and stole me?”

“No. I didn’t. I used the back entrance. The back stairs. I figured the front would have something for you.”

Trix didn’t say anything, but her eyes told me she’d already voiced her disapproval of what her grandson had done.

I shrugged off Mercer’s words. “Anyway. I didn’t have a stairlift or a wheelchair. We didn’t have much. We weren’t rich. My grandfather built our house.” I twisted my neck to see Mercer, and it clicked. I rubbed the pain away, my smile well and truly gone.

“Ah, how ironic! The boys’ grandfather built this one!” Trix quipped, still kneading the dough that was ready for her dish.

“Lies...” A transmission interrupted us, not talking to her but me. “Your father could pay for illegal organs but not a stairlift for his disabled daughter! It makes no sense.”

“Well, it hadn’t been that long since her accident. You said that was only weeks before the transplant. Maybe she was tired after all that, and her family just hadn’t gotten around to it.” Trix held up the wooden weapon in a warning. Warning him that flour would cover his slick hair and expensive black suit if he didn’t tread carefully.

She could feel his emotions rising.

So could I.

But unlike me, unlike him, she didn’t feel like I was to blame.

“We probably shouldn’t talk about the transplant, but I was tired. I ended up with two infections shortly after, and I almost died.” My head lowered, staring down at the dough and what I was doing wrong.

I knew I’d said too much. The room lingered in silence and stillness, pity from Trix and Ethan stared back at me when I looked up.

But neither of them voiced it.

“Show her how to do it.” It was a simple request for Mercer, and for whatever reason, he listened, moving behind me without a fight and rolling up his sleeves to reveal corded arms.

I tried to give him space, using my hands to push myself away while on my seat, but I almost fell off, risking the break of too many bones to count. Splayed fingers wrapped around my back, steadying me. That look of concern—the etched worry—was back on his handsome face as he pulled me near

and corrected my sitting position. He sank into place behind me, intimately close.

“Can I ask you a question?” Ethan technically asked me a question, then another, “Did you know where the organ came from?”

Silence fell around us, no one daring to breathe.

“No,” I timidly said as Mercer’s tense muscles sealed me in, his hands taking mine, showing me how to knead the dough in a way his Nonna would approve.

And she definitely did, given the big smile on her face. “Then it isn’t your fault.”

“I’m not sure everyone agrees.”

Mercer’s hands dug into mine, his grip tight and unyielding. His breath on my neck was the opposite, calm and controlled, his chest tapping my spine as he breathed. It felt... sensual. His hands loosened like it suddenly dawned on him that he was hurting me and like he cared he had.

“They will. They won’t go against me, dear. No way.”

A shadow came over me, Mercer’s head—heavy with the weight of so many uncomfortable thoughts—dipping.

“Damiano is running late. He should be here by now.”

Ethan’s comment turned my stomach. There was something about him I accepted. My soul recognized his as light and trustworthy, despite my circumstances. I didn’t get that vibe from the other one. Cold Stare.

“I don’t trust that man. Not at all. He’s bad news. I can smell it!” She leaned across the surface, slapped away mine and Mercer’s entwined hands, and peeled the dough from the table. Not a tear in sight. “That’s perfect.”

She turned her back on us, taking her dough and ours, placing them out of our way and returned with a mixing bowl loaded with eggs and sugar. The bowl pirouetted to me, and a whisk followed.

“Mix.” She waved her arm, sure that I could do this without further instructions. Mercer felt the same, his heat leaving me as my arm moved to mix.

“I don’t think you should bring him here anymore. Not with a young lady in the house. He’s got an aura I don’t like.” Her warning was for Mercer, but her attention quickly moved to Ethan, a smile on her face as she said, “I much preferred your step-brother helping out. How is Gio doing?”

Mercer’s glare was like a bullet, shooting at his grandmother from the other side of the room.

“Do not ask of him while I’m in this house,” he warned with the keyboard back in hand.

“Mercer, hush. At one point, he was your best friend. He was here every day. I’m allowed to miss him.”

Fast fingers stabbed the touchscreen letters. “Not even his name is welcome here.”

“And yet you forgave Chandelle, welcomed her back into your bed after jumping into his.”

Another word. A final word. “Enough.”

The front door opened, revealing a heavy fall of rain. Goosebumps lined my body, creating a prickly exterior that wouldn't protect me. It wasn't the sudden turn of weather bringing them forth but the person who let the cold in. Cold Stare, or Damiano, as everyone else knew him.

Boots padded across the floor, and loud squelching sounds followed. Trix rolled her eyes, knowing she'd likely have to mop it.

“Hey, hey, look who's out of the cell.” Damiano's giant hand landed on my shoulder, stealing my balance. “And at the breakfast table.”

I clutched the table edge, desperate not to fall. Mercer and Ethan both moved in on me, but neither man put their hands on me. I shrugged off Damiano, hating the feel of his calluses snagging on my shirt and the sight of his dirty nails close to my face.

“Hey,” his heavy tone, loaded like a rifle, banged into my ear.

Stuttering breaths skated off my tongue. His hand pressed me down again, determined to have control over whatever happened between us. Mercer stepped in, acting like my hero. He clutched Damiano's wrist, his short nails jabbing into a vein and causing pain. He used no words, but his stare was enough, and I turned just in time to witness the warning.

“Okay. Okay, man. Chill!” He pulled back, rubbing out the injury. “Fuck, talk about marking your territory. You're one step away from pissing all over her.”

Damiano didn't care about his choice of language, feeling no guilt for cursing in front of an old lady who was more than likely religious, judging by her clothes, jewelry, and love-all-life attitude.

“Anyway, I thought the reason she was here was to be terrorized? Was the pussy that good?”

No one answered, but I turned pink with shame, and Trix looked ready to kill.

And I wanted her to kill him. To beat this creep with her rolling pin until he couldn't say any more vile things.

“Let's get going, huh?” Ethan suggested, leading Damiano back out the door. “Bye, Nonna...Feebee.”

Neither of us said goodbye, too lost in our mutual hatred for Damiano.

Mercer took one look at me, a million things to say, the letters beneath his pulsing fingers ready for pushing, but all he gave me was a deep exhale and another layer of confusion before he followed Damiano's dirty prints and slipped out the door.

* * *

Trix had left me to my own devices shortly after the boys left, and the dinner dishes were loaded into the oven. And it took me almost the entire time—twenty long minutes—to get from that barstool to my new chair. I didn't ask for help, knowing her frail bones struggled to hold her weight, never mind mine.

And luckily, she didn't hear the challenge it was for me, thanks to her choice of music.

I found her in an eclectic regency-style living room, snuggled on a fuchsia sofa, a soft blanket over her thin legs, listening as opera played loudly. Emotional, melodic leaps caressed the house...and me. It guided me here and pulled me in.

Pulled my attention back each time my eyes shot around, admiring expensive furniture. Vast paintings covered so much of the walls, the metallic colors twinkling as twin chandeliers reflected off them, brightening up the dark wood.

They were the most beautiful designs I'd ever seen.

My gaze circled back to Trix. Her nail polish—a shade of pink so bright for a woman of her years—glowed in the autumn sunlight, once again peeping from behind pink clouds. The weather was weird today, but at least the rain had stopped.

Drapes were pulled back, showcasing an open floor-to-ceiling window, which blew back and forth in the breeze.

Her fingers tapped on the blanket. Her other hand rested on the sleeping body of an orange fox, its fur bushy and wild, like he, a nocturnal animal, should be. I didn't see him until my wheelchair took me closer, and my mouth dropped when I did. A loud gasp fell out of me, heard over the beautiful song as Trix lowered the volume.

“He's precious, isn't he?” Her smile spoke of unconditional love for the creature, still sleeping placidly.

“I wanted to call him that, you know. Precious. It's more fitting than Trouble.” Her fingers weaved through his fur, scratching at his ears. “He's no trouble at all.”

“Is that his name?”

She nodded, her eyes on her furry companion for a moment. “Mercer started calling him it when he was just a cub. He was a feisty little thing, and he liked to dig up the flower beds. It wouldn’t have been an issue if my husband hadn’t buried all sorts of things out there, including an enemy or two.”

Trix’s shoulders vibrated as a small giggle crept out. She took in my lack of reciprocation. “Did Mercer tell you about his grandfather?”

“Mercer doesn’t tell me anything.” I looked away, my body itching with irritation. I scratched at the annoyance, making my skin red.

“Is that a nervous thing?” Trix pressed gently.

I shrugged.

“Well, my husband was a mafia boss,” she said those words like murder and manipulation schemes were the norm. As normal as if he were a lawyer or a doctor. “I thought Mercer might have told you on one of those little Post-its he wrote to you while in his Nonno’s cell.”

I simply shook my head. I could not say a word, not without offending Trix, surely.

And she knew her confessions had made me uncomfortable like I was sitting on a bomb about to go off.

“Don’t worry, honey. They were all bad people. He never hurt the innocent.” Her smile was genuine, making her words believable. “Like Mercer.”

I digested the information, struggling with the weight of her truth. It was a hard lump to swallow, but it made sense. Mercer lived in his family home...a beautiful and sophisticated home atop a creepy torture chamber to gift his enemies painful deaths. The average person didn't have one of those...but a mafia boss? Well, sure, they would.

“And you were okay with it?” I asked, eyebrows sneaking closer to my hairline as each second ticked by.

“I loved him. I still love him dearly. Was he a perfect man? No. If you wait for one of those, I doubt you'll ever truly love someone, but...he was perfect for me. Good to me. And that's what matters.” Her smile grew, and she laughed. “You can lower those accusing eyebrows now.”

And I did. The brows retreated to their regular position.

“Men are complex, honey, and lots of them don't know how to love...”

“Your grandson did.” The words crept around the lump in my throat.

Trix sighed. “Mercer loved Chandelle, but they weren't forever...despite the shit she fed him. He could have, should have, done better for himself from the start. It's nice to see he's noticing that now, too.” She gave an accusing look of her own, her eyebrows wiggling in my direction.

I drove my chair closer. “What do you mean?”

“You, darling.”

“He hates me. He keeps me here, but he hates me. If I didn't have her heart—”

“Yes. If you didn’t have her heart, you wouldn’t be here. But you do, and you are. And it’s not her heart he’s looking at when he side-eyes you when he thinks no one is looking. It wasn’t her heart he was touching when he breathed in the scent of your hair this morning. I noticed, even if you didn’t. I notice everything, and I’ve noticed he’s not touching her heart, but you’re touching his.”

“Please... he’d happily keep me in my room, out of sight. Only happy because a part of her is still here—”

“Do you think that man would put that contraption on the staircase if he wanted to keep you locked in your bedroom? Though, I’ll admit, these legs,” she tapped them, “are glad he did. Do you even think you’d have a bedroom...? Or would you still be in that cell?”

“I thought it would’ve been your idea to get me out.”

“It would have been, but he’d already beat me to it when I found out about you. He isn’t perfect. Hell, he did kidnap you, and that’s beyond crazy. crazier than some of the other stuff this last year led him to do. But he could be good...for you.”

“He’s been pretty bad so far. He’s been awful.”

“He has, and that led you to look away from the regret in his eyes. From the pain, turmoil, and guilt. But trust me, darling, there’s more to him than that. I’ve raised this boy since he was twelve years old when his and Ethan’s parents died in a car accident.”

My heart stopped. He’d lost his mother in the same way I’d lost mine. The sympathy I saw as I told him that was real.

He'd lost his father, too. He knew the pain.

“What he feels is not hate.”

Trouble moved, distracting us both. Mud-stained white paws—proof that his flower-digging habit hadn't been laid to rest—and a very bushy tail circled on Trix's lap.

She angled a small black remote to a corner of the room, and flashing lights of song names stared back at me as I looked over to the media station. The volume of the song increased, and she sat back, delivering affection to Trouble, who loved this song...

And so did I.

It was my favorite.

And having something in common with the animal made me want to bond with him.

I moved a little closer.

Trouble's opera-loving ears flattened to his head as Trix smoothed over them. His little face and the beady eyes I recognized from a few nights ago smiled up at me, trusting me before knowing me.

His judgment was shit...as he trusted Mercer, too.

Though, I didn't doubt Mercer's devotion for Trouble... just everything else about him.

I guess Trouble's judgment was good, after all.

And he chose to be here when freedom was his nature.
Chose to live with these people over his own family.

I guess we have more things in common because, in truth, I secretly wanted to do the same.

I wanted to stay here, never to return home.

I touched him, and he got excited by me or the song playing. I couldn't tell, but his little noises made it sound like he was trying to sing along. My hand caught my chuckle, keeping the sound low, not wanting to interrupt Trix's enjoyment of the music.

The tenor picked up, sending shivers down my spine. The master of the song's pitch dragged me under a spell, hypnotizing my mind and making love to my body. I grew wet, the voice strumming me in the most perfect way, and I found myself drifting from the animal.

I stared at nothing, the room around me becoming a blur. A love story played in my head. A princess was trying to warm the cold heart of a handsome prince and trying to survive the riddles surrounding him.

She would surely fail...

I interrupted my own fantasy, "I love this song. Whose rendition is it? I've never heard this one before."

Trix's eyes widened, her gaze dragging over me and yesterday's shirt, disbelieving that I didn't know. "It's Mercer, dear."

My back straightened, my eyes rushing to the music player as if he would magically appear there with a mic in hand, proving her right.

"He was a singer?"

“No. Last year, just before the trip, he finished school to become a doctor. He had so much love to give back then. He wanted to help people, and he was gifted. Born for it.”

A doctor...someone who could drug another, knowing the correct dosages without killing them. He'd done it to me, and I'd fumed over him risking my life, but he hadn't...because he knew exactly what my body could handle.

It was never all that risky to him, too confident in his abilities.

“He sang because he enjoyed it. It broke my heart when he couldn't anymore. And then, somehow, like his grandfather, art called to him, too.” Trix's lips curved into a proud smile.

“He was amazing.” *At so many things.*

“He was...these recordings were from competitions in his teens. He came second on this one. He was robbed.”

I nodded, agreeing as the song came to an end.

Her smile was still on her face, cracking the lipstick she always wore. “When you get bored of the music, he told me to tell you there's a gift in your drawers...it's quite fitting with this art thing he has going right now.”

She smiled, and I smiled, too...because being an art dealer was another thing he hadn't lied about.

CHAPTER 18

Mercer

I shook the man's hand, a false smile hiding my real emotions. He looked at me with condescending eyes, like he could hear my thoughts.

Pleasure not doing business with you, prick.

“Sit down, gentlemen. Are we sure we can't come to some sort of agreement?” Ethan was still seated to the left of me on our side of the cherry-oak table.

I shook my head in Ethan's direction. This was done. The guy, still attached to my hand as we stretched from one side of the table to the other in this office I rented, didn't want my offer. He wanted more and in truth...I didn't feel he was worth it. I thought I was too generous to start with, and I would be lucky to make my money back on his knockoff shit.

The painted sunflowers, wilted and crisp, stared at me from across the room as I let go of Mr. Duyuck's sun-damaged hand and penned a quick note.

We have another meeting, and I'm sure Mr. Duyuck has other business to attend to.

I granted the man another smile and gave one to the men on each side of him—his agent and lawyer. I sat back between Ethan and Damiano. The birdbrain and the brainless musclehead who never said a word at these meetings...easy to guess who was who.

A curt nod told the men opposite it was time to leave, and they did, with Ethan's rehearsed speech following them as they collected the ugly painting and carried it to the door.

“Thank you for your time. We appreciate you meeting with us, and as it has not worked out here, we wish you the very best with your art. I'm sure it will end up where it is truly appreciated.”

I tuned them out before Mr. Duyuck started muttering beyond the door about lousy offers.

Ethan laughed, finding amusement in their change of attitude.

It was funny how someone could go from ass licker to asshole the second something didn't go their way.

I hadn't been in this business too long, and neither had Ethan. I'd achieved my dream and had gotten my doctorate in medicine, but that profession had been put on hold because it didn't allow the flexibility of time so I could run around murdering the traffickers who'd wronged me.

Art was relatively new to me, but not the family name. Thanks to my grandfather, who used art to hide his real job, I already had a good name when I took on this hustle. Everyone wanted to work with me—the good artists and the bad people, which was what initially attracted me to it.

People like Damiano. Damiano who annoyed me beyond reason as he picked the scum from his nails. I stepped away, I had to before I fucking killed him. I stared out at the city of Boston. Buildings towered around us but didn't seal us in. It

was pretty if you liked the hustle and bustle of city life. I did, I guess. But, maybe, that was just because I was used to it.

Maybe that was how it went with things.

Maybe that was the case with Chandelle.

Maybe if I thought that was fucking true, I could let go of the guilt I held hands with every time I thought of Feebee.

Feebee.

Fiery little Feebee.

The sweet scent of her was all over me today. I smelled of mango, pastry, and innocence...what a concoction.

I couldn't get her off me. I didn't want her off me.

I wanted her all over me, and I couldn't even deny it anymore.

The truth hung on to every smile I gave these artists. The lies on every sarcastic sneer I shot at Ethan because he dared, more than once, to comment about my flushed cheeks. I was hot and bothered, sweaty and needy. And I needed to be home. Needed to be close to her.

She looked so pretty earlier today, with her hair silky and scented of mangos, with her round, inquisitive eyes staring at me with something other than anger. With her hands in mine as I taught her how to knead pastry.

You'd think hands like hers would be capable of doing so many wonderful things and wouldn't have needed teaching. But she did, and I was happy to acquire a student. Happy for a reason to touch something other than her pretty little toes...

Happy, for the first time in fucking months.

“What are you daydreaming about?”

I heard Damiano but ignored him as he flicked dirt from his nails to the powder blue carpet.

“Uh, hello! What are you fantasizing about over there?”

Too often, I missed my voice, purely because I wanted to tell this guy to shut up and mind his own business...too often, my hands wanted to say what my mouth couldn't. But him showing up to meetings with shiners and bruises on his face wouldn't look professional.

But neither did the snow boots slotted under the table, not with suit pants tucked into them.

I had met him under unusual circumstances, ones I'd never shared with Nonna. She didn't trust him. I couldn't imagine her finding out I'd met him when he pulled a gun to my head, catching me in the act of hunting down the traffickers who took Chandelle. He was one of them, not personally involved with her kidnapping or death—or I'd have found a way to fucking kill him—but a trafficker, all the same.

The right amount of money and the promise of more put him on my side. And got me what I wanted—the blood of his acquaintances.

That was why he was here...getting paid for sitting at my side and doing fucking nothing. Tolerated when he shouldn't be.

“Did you screw her again?”

I turned around, the frustration clawing through my veins, settling within the agitated expression on my face made it obvious I hadn't had sex again.

“That’s a no then?”

My scowl grew, focusing only on Damiano and not whatever Ethan was doing on his phone. Probably checking with the next client who hadn't rolled out of bed yet. The next guy was good, but his time management skills were as slim as my patience.

“Can't imagine her being much fun...not that we need to imagine her skills.” Damiano leaned over to Ethan, giving him a nudge. “Catch my drift?”

“Shut up, man.” Ethan moved away, creating a bigger distance between himself and Damiano, his phone still in hand. He stared down at the mirrored screen protector, turning his back on us.

My eyes narrowed on Damiano...if only looks could kill.

“I mean, come on, she's fucking paralyzed, and she looks nothing like your Chandelle. She's got her heart, but you're not dipping your dick into her fucking heart. You're dipping it into her cunt, and she can't even raise her hips to meet you. The girl has fucking nothing going for her.”

Steam flurried down my flared nostrils, so much of the anger he caused not fitting inside me

“Your ex-girl would be saying, what the fuck happened to your standards?” he said with a feminine voice, and fuck, it did sound like Chandelle.

From my pocket, I pulled out my pen and Post-it notes. Ethan's eyes were on me as I stabbed the inky tip into the page, breaking it like I wanted to Damiano's neck.

Three long strides got me back to the table.

She probably would have. She was a right bitch, at times. But I'd tell her the same as I'll you. To shut your fucking mouth because I don't feel that way.

I slapped the green note in front of him, my hand sliding off it to reveal tiny words he read quickly.

“She's got nothing, man. Nothing you could like but a wet cunt and an organ that isn't hers.”

Evil rushed through me; my hands twitched at my side. Fingers curled into tight fists, both eager to race to his temple...but it would be just my luck for the next artist to show up at that exact moment.

My feelings for Feebee were complicated but definitely there.

Definitely real.

And none of them were any of Damiano's fucking business.

The desire to give him a heavy fucking punch grew, and as my fist tightened, my vengeance was interrupted by Nonna's sweet voice as it blared from the call Ethan had been on for fuck knows how long. I hadn't been listening, lost in thoughts and daydreams, no sound dragging me out but Damiano's voice slicing through my peace and invading it.

“Ethan! Does your friend not realize how rude he is? How his words...”

I stopped listening to Nonna when a tap rattled the door. Business meeting number two was about to begin, and I couldn't wait for it to fucking end.

* * *

Feebee

God...that hurt. That hurt a lot.

Could I not be wanted because I couldn't move half of my body?

Earlier today, I wouldn't have said Mercer felt that way, not after he gifted me a little more freedom and these art supplies.

But when Trix called Ethan, failing to get ahold of Mercer on her prehistoric-looking cell to see what time they would be home for dinner, my stolen heart broke again.

My afternoon was ruined.

And it was a nice afternoon.

After Trouble had left, Trix awaited her turn on the stairlift, following me up to my room. She had helped me with my hair and painted my nails, and I enjoyed the pampering. She had been up here for hours, leaving once to take care of meal prep. She had returned quickly after another ride up, taking a seat at my wooden dresser, watching with bright eyes as my paintbrush glided across the canvas.

Mercer had put art supplies in a drawer for me, something to pass the time. To kill the boredom that wanted me dead. Trix was fascinated, her head resting on her hand as she watched me work, only moving to make that call.

Damiano probably didn't know, or care, that I had heard the awful comments he made while Trix's loudspeaker was activated, and I'd heard no retaliation of anger from Mercer, which really hurt.

Yes, he couldn't speak. But that keypad was practically glued to his fucking hand.

He should have defended me.

He would have defended me...if he actually wanted to.

Who the fuck knew what he wanted.

Black paint landed in the center of my canvas in the center of the beating heart I painted...cracking it.

A tear landed there, too.

Damiano was right. Mercer didn't dip his dick into my heart, but he had dipped his silence into my chest and crushed my heart.

And I captured all that pain with my painting in the shades of pink, red, and black...and real-life tears.

CHAPTER 19

Mercer

I couldn't understand why Feebee wasn't sitting at the table, why she had pleaded with Nonna to let her eat in her room. She had heard the call, Nonna told me so. She wasn't eating with us, either. They used Feebee's dresser, preening it up as a cramped dining table of their own.

Feebee didn't look hungry when I delivered the dinner and drinks. All those nasty words floating around in her head pulled down her features, and when her head dipped before me, I noticed another fucking bald spot.

An elegant glass kissed my lips and a swig of Campari washed down my unappealing pasta. I looked through a wall of windows from the quiet dining room out to the field. No Trouble in sight, but the dug-up plants told me he had been here today.

"It will be okay." Ethan's mouth was full...and he was fucking talking...and it turned me fucking sick. "She's not mad, just—"

My electronic voice cut him off. "It won't be okay." I continued typing. "It isn't okay. I have a kidnapped girl living in my spare room."

"Better that than Nonno's cell." Ethan laughed, his mouth finally empty, thank fuck.

"She shouldn't be here. What the fuck was I thinking? She's not Chandelle. I shouldn't have taken her. It was a stupid

idea that bit me in the fucking ass because I shouldn't feel the way I do."

"True. True. True. She should be at home with her family."

My full gut twisted for many reasons, and I took another drink to calm it down.

"She isn't Chandelle, and you shouldn't have broken into her house in the middle of the night to bring her here. It still shocks me her father survived that night."

"I told you he wasn't home." I took yet another drink.

"And you do know if you send her home, you'll have to let him live? She needs someone to help take care of her.

"She's quite independent." I shrugged, more alcohol swishing down my throat. I topped up my glass, offering more to Ethan. A shake of his head told me he was done drinking for the night.

"She's got no wheelchair or means to get up and down the stairs back home." He looked sympathetic now.

"I can take care of that."

"You really think she'll want anything to do with you if you kill her father?" Ethan stood, hands grappling at his dirty dishes, collecting them on his way out. "She won't. You know that." He stopped at my side, his shadow darkening all my thoughts.

I didn't look at him. My gaze drifted between the drink I swirled and the glowing moon outside.

“It would be over between you two. No chance...and deep down, I know you well enough to know you don’t want that. How this started doesn’t have to be how it ends. Maybe in some twisted way, the universe is giving you what Chandelle promised...her heart.”

He left, leaving me alone with too many thoughts and half a bottle of alcohol, and I used that bottle to drown them all.

* * *

I woke with my head on the shiny table, my empty glass shaming me as I lifted my heavy head. Nonna pattering around in the kitchen had interrupted sweet dreams of the past...of a life I once had. But the girl I shared those memories with wasn’t the one who held my hand in my mind’s eye.

Before I knew it, I was halfway up the stairs, with the Campari bottle gripped tightly in my fingers. I took the last sip as I rounded the top. Nonna’s little noises made their way up here, but they weren’t coming from behind Feebee’s door, where my gaze was locked.

Some kind of magnetic force pulled me forward, and I didn’t think about excuses, reasons, or consequences as I opened the door, sneaking in quietly. The lights were out, but the backyard light offered a little guidance.

She had a nice view from this room...my favorite view. The lake, the trees, nature...beautiful nature. A cruel taunt, as she’d been cooped up inside for weeks.

I brought the bottle to my lips again, feeling slightly annoyed when only a single droplet landed on my tongue. I

turned from the window, my black shoe kicking something over.

She'd used one of my canvases...one of my gifts. I lowered to my haunches to examine the fallen painting. Luckily, it was dry, and the attack of fluffy carpet fibers could easily be brushed away without causing ruin.

Her design was beautiful, the perfect image of a broken heart. I felt its pain as my fingers dipped into the crack, all made deeper with artistic tools and sharp skills.

Feebee was the kind of artist I wanted. Someone with talent and emotion, putting both of those things into her art pieces.

I smiled, looking over to her on the bed, sheets pulled up to her throat, hiding whatever she wore beneath. I put the painting down...wanting to see more of her...needing to see more of her, and I made my way over to her.

She lay on her back, legs stretched out, her head tilted to the side, with her hair covering so much of her pretty face. I wanted to move it. To touch her. I wanted so many things that confused the fuck out of me.

And I felt sick with guilt because of them.

* * *

Feebee

Had alcohol fogged his vision, or was I a better actress than I thought?

He thought I was asleep as gentle fingers pushed back my hair. My eyelashes fluttered, lowering closer to my cheeks so he wouldn't see my deception.

I didn't see him suck air in, but I heard him exhale as he drifted away, trailing the posts of my bed, the voile between his fingers. I felt colder without him. Lonely as he reached the door.

Silent wishes prevented him from turning the door knob. Another wish brought him closer. The bottle in his hand never made it to my bed as he slipped from his suit jacket, leaving all his concerns in the tweed pockets and on the floor.

He sunk down beside me, not touching me. He made himself comfortable on a soft pillow.

I wish I knew what he was thinking. That silent wish was granted when a pen and Post-it left a note on my bedside table. It was barely readable in the dark, the red pen granting a small mercy on my eyes.

You have no idea what you do to me.

He changed his mind about leaving that message. His body pressed into mine as he leaned over me to collect it, scrunching it into a pocket. He smelled like an erotic dream, sweet tonka melting into creamy sandalwood.

I breathed him in.

The scent of him intensified as he unbuttoned the black shirt clinging to his body, losing it to the floor when the last button popped through a tiny hole.

My side-eyeing of him caused strain, but I didn't look away as he pulled down his pants and kicked them and his shoes off.

His warmth wrapped around me, stiff muscles close. He breathed me in, taking in the mango scent fading from my hair. He hardened against my leg, and I had no idea until he indicated it by rocking his hips into me once.

Full lips pressed against my jaw, and my breathing hiked in response.

He stopped dead, pulling his lips away but moving his eyes closer. And, I, again, became the world's best actress.

The mattress cushioned him as he rolled away. He lay there, staring at the ceiling. Long fingers pushed dark hair back and clung onto it in frustration. He had so much to say in the darkness, where no one could hear, but he wouldn't—couldn't—voice it.

I felt his gaze caress me again, the coldness of his icy blue eyes making my nipples pebble beneath the sheets. I wanted to know what he would do if he saw them. I discreetly shifted, causing the blankets to move down and away from my body. He froze, checking again to see if I was awake.

His boxer briefs were tented. His erection sprung from nowhere, lifting the waistband from his tanned Adonis belt.

His fingers rubbed over his crotch, his eyes on the rise and fall of my chest, hurt me...because it was *her* he wanted...the part of her I housed.

He pulled himself free, and my mouth fell open, a gasp rushing out. His head angled, checking my closed eyes again. Content with me being asleep, his fingers stayed at his cock, now free from its cotton prison.

My heart—his girl’s heart—raced to the rhythm of his fingers as they moved up and down his long length. Moonlight and some outdoor lamps granted a little light, allowing me to see his hand work his shaft.

Discomfort settled inside me, only there because my mind reminded me it wasn’t me he wanted...

And then his gaze lifted, stopping on my face...on the o-shape of my open mouth.

And that was all it took for my mind to be changed.

I wanted more. I wanted him.

I turned my neck, wanting no more of the nasty strain on my eyes. He reeled back, his body tensing, his mind racing to catch up with the excuses he didn’t plan.

But he didn’t need any. My head stayed lulled, and my eyes stayed dipped, angled low, perfectly in line with his cock and the little bead of precum shining in the moonlight. His thumb smeared it in over thousands of nerve endings. He made a noise—a moan, and my back arched.

His hand brushed up my leg, thinking I couldn’t feel it. I couldn’t, but I secretly watched and fantasized what it would feel like as he moved closer to my panties, wettened by my swollen pussy.

* * *

Mercer

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't. I tried.

I failed.

What would I do if she woke up? I wondered, fingers trailing up her leg, pushing up her silky nightdress. I wished I could just say, *you're fucking mine, and I can do what the fuck I want with you.*

But that wouldn't go over well, and I convinced myself I'd be the one working tomorrow with a black eye until...

Dampness kissed my fingertips, her panties soaked and stuck to her. A sleeping woman shouldn't be so affected. I caressed her puffy pussy lips once, twice, three times, and her hand clasped around mine, holding me close, making sure I didn't stop.

Pretty eyes fluttered open, lashes tickling my cheek because I moved in so fucking close. She stared up at me. No venomous questions left her lips, just little moans of want, of need, and of pleasure. Her eyes spoke the same language, a little desperation shining in the pretty flecks.

She looked like she would beg any second for it, and fuck, if she did, I'd be done for.

I'd fuck her all night.

Her mouth with my tongue, her tight cunt with my fingers and cock.

I rubbed her pussy harder, and she was licking her bottom lip and then biting it to keep in the moan.

Fuck. I was already done for.

Struggling with her delicate weight, she tried to push her body onto its side to face me. I slid my hands under her hips, neglecting my cock for a second to position her correctly. I pushed a knee between her legs, forcing them open.

Her tiny fingers moved to my cock, closing around it... almost. She jerked her wrist, the delicate touch feeling divine. She shook with the fear of rejection as my eyes dipped to her chest. She didn't know I was monitoring her breathing, watching to ensure her excitement wouldn't give her a heart attack, and not wishing for the heart pounding against me to be inside someone else.

There was no one else. Not in that moment.

I let my hand wander her body, moving up where she would feel it and not down where she wouldn't. I slipped it under her dress. My fingertips met my eyes on her chest, moving to her breast, small and firm in my hand. Perfect nipples pebbled, showing her arousal.

"Mercer," she whispered my name, letting me know the touch from my knee wasn't enough stimulation. She needed stimulation. She deserved it. "Mercer..."

She squeezed me tighter, her fingernails dragging over the tip.

I twitched, loving the feel of her.

"Mercer," her voice trembled from a tingle between her legs. I rubbed her again, two fingers sneaking beyond the satin.

I couldn't resist the need to kiss her. And she felt it, her tongue popping out, sliding over my lips playfully.

I don't like being teased.

I needed more.

I needed to taste her on my tongue, and I couldn't wait. I dove in, my tongue pushing through her soft lips. My fingers searched and found her clit, swollen with desire for me. She let out a small gasp, breaking free from my mouth.

No fucking way.

I leaned in, my mouth taking everything that left hers, gasps, kisses, moans, air...it was all fucking mine.

I was on her, two fingers dipping into her wet folds, delving into her tight, warm hole on the second stroke. Her fingers still clutched my throbbing cock, pumping it slowly.

My other hand gripped her face, harsh fingers ensuring she wouldn't turn away again. My eyes stayed open, proving to her she was the only one I wanted to see.

Her fingers seized handfuls of my hair. Her pretty eyes stayed locked on mine as I finger fucked her slowly.

Come for me.

She was soaking. My fingers were fucking drenched, and there was a wet slapping sound echoing in the room as I pushed in and out of her.

Somehow, she pulled back, her pretty mouth silently saying, "I want you. I can't help how I feel."

I couldn't respond, and she took my silence as emotional rejection...but as I kept pumping my fingers inside her, and she kept fisting my length, she knew physically, I wanted her.

"I want you. You want me, too...but I'll settle for whatever you're willing to give me right now."

My forehead collapsed on hers, our open lips and wet tongues finding each other again.

If only I could tell her what I wanted. That it was her and only her, in that moment. My eyes were still staring into her, trying a new method of transmitting. I wanted to tell her that I wanted my cock stretching her tight cunt.

I wanted her pretty little mouth screaming my name as she came multiple fucking times. I wanted to tell her that that still wouldn't be enough, and I wouldn't let her move until she was full of my cum. I would continue to fuck her when she *was* full of my cum, pushing it deeper and deeper inside her. Into her womb...into her very existence.

The door opened, crashing into the wall and crushing all my dirty fantasies. I pulled my hand from inside Feebee and my shorts up over my ass, hiding it from Nonna, who didn't notice me when she said, "Sorry, I was so long, Feebee."

Feebee adjusted herself, a red flush and flustered smile on her face as she looked around me to the door.

I jumped from the bed, quickly gathering my clothes and using them as a shield to hide my erection from Nonna, who had now found me in the dark.

"What are you doing in here?"

I pointed to Feebee's artwork—the broken heart that once resembled mine, trying to tell Nonna I came to admire it.

“Uh-huh, is that why you're undressed?” Her raised eyebrows questioned me. Her intense, accusing stare was on me while Feebee moved across the bed, granting me the small mercy of not allowing my dear sweet Nonna to sit where I'd been fucking my own hand. She also had the decency to flip the sheet down. She deserved another gift for that.

“Get out, you filthy man. I'll be having words with you tomorrow. She's sad. That's why I'm here. I don't want you taking advantage of her.”

Nonna's feet—hidden in pink bunny slippers—took her around the bed, all without knowing I hadn't taken advantage...because it was given freely.

I moved to the door, glancing once at the chipping paint we had both contributed to, and I tuned them out as Nonna said something to Feebee.

“Mercer,” Feebee interrupted their conversation, and the hold she still had on me pulled me back, my cock still twitching at the sound of her voice. “Goodnight.”

I nodded once, and I closed the door. My feet no longer cared about the creaky boards as I walked back to my room, I knew I wouldn't get any sleep.

Because I would be up all fucking night, bruising my unsated cock over thoughts of her.

CHAPTER 20

Feebee

Shades of autumn lit up under the morning sun, inspiring my latest painting. I didn't feel like adding to my unfinished broken heart because today, I had less inspiration for that.

I sat at the window, supplies on my dresser and my paintbrush—a bigger one than yesterday—in hand. It dragged over another white canvas while I sat up here alone, listening to tiny chirping birds, safe from predatory owls by the morning light.

A wave of discomfort rolled in my lower abdomen, caused by my period that started around an hour ago. I shifted, also shifting the toilet paper I had stuffed in my underwear to conceal the bleeding.

Later, I would ask Trix to add tampons to the shopping list, as Mercer hadn't thought of me needing those.

She had left after our sleepover to prepare brunch, all of us missing her delicious breakfasts, including Ethan, who was here early for a business meeting. Apparently, it was rare for Mercer to work from home, only offering his personal space to artists whose work he desperately wanted.

I was honored he showed appreciation for my talent. My lips curved up, wondering what he would think of this one.

I wanted to see Mercer, and aside from him whizzing by my door while Trix slipped out, I hadn't today. But I hadn't failed to notice his gaze creeping around her or his eyes raking

over my body for a single second, making me needy for him again.

His expensive suit clinging to his body had my paintbrush venturing into a stray path, ruining the red maple tree and dishonoring the appearance of my inspiration as I was lost in daydreams of him.

The subject judged me through the window.

My shoulders dropped, but I knew I could fix it as I placed it on my dresser with everything else.

Tap, tap, tap. Knuckles rattled my closed door.

“Come in!” My voice was loud, powered by vim and excitement, displayed by my bright smile.

My happy expression dropped to the floor, grabbing my wet paintbrush and taking it with it.

“That’s gonna stain,” Damiano pointed out the obvious.

A crimson spot stared up at me as my eyes dropped to it for no more than a second.

A second that he used to get in front of me. His dirty boots pressed the color into my carpet and snapped my favorite brush. His closeness had his crotch too close to my face. He leaned in closer, and as I backed away in my chair, his cotton-covered cock brushed my skin.

My neck, still a little stiff and sore, clicked as I twisted away from him quickly.

His hand came up, and his ringed fingers slapped my cheek. The injury smarted, pain and blood rushing to the

surface to form a bruise.

“It’s rude to look away from a guest.”

His face was the image of evil. There was nothing pure in his vile expression. It was cold and hard, with a venomous smile on his lips.

Dirty hands pulled my painting from the dresser, his fingers smudging all the pretty painted leaves on purpose. I just watched, my hands cradling my face, still in shock from the slap.

And then the realization of danger gifted another slap to the face. I was alone. With the one person I feared most in the world.

“I think you should leave now,” I almost stuttered, somehow managing to hide my nerves.

I pushed my wheelchair toward the door, and he gripped one wheel, throwing me from the chair that landed on its side, its wheels spinning.

He threw the painting to the floor next, all my hard work and happiness ruined in one second.

My arms worked hard to drag my body away, but I knew it was useless and pointless, even as I tried harder.

He was crouching over me in a second. His violent hands flipped me onto my back

I gasped, desperate for air. I couldn’t scream. The pressure on my jaws and teeth became too intense as his fingers dug

harder into my cheeks, causing blood to leak down them as his dirty nails pierced my skin.

Terror wrapped around me, holding me down for him in this awful position—below him.

His other hand moved between my legs, and I tried harder to scream as he pushed my panties and all the tissue to the side. He laughed about that, guessing what it was, and then his fingers were invading me.

I whimpered, still unable to scream.

My upper body tried to fight, desperation egging me on.

My nails weren't sharp enough to damage his skin, but I tried...I tried so hard.

The hand on my face grew wet as my tears rapidly fell from my eyes. His violent grasp let go, trailing to the loosely fitted cups of my nightdress, where he ripped it open. He licked his lips, his perverted gaze locked on my nipple. I closed my eyes in time to avoid watching his tongue lap over it. I kept them squeezed shut to the point of pain as he sucked me into his mouth, his horrible rough tongue flicking over the sensitive spot.

I kept my eyes closed until my small breasts bored him, and I opened them so he'd know no different. My disgust was plastered on my face, held tightly in place by my grinding teeth, grinding harder as his fingers stabbed into me again and again and again.

I wished for a miracle.

I wished for Mercer to come upstairs, and I ignored the pain still echoing on my face to call out, “Mercer.” The plea was muffled by fear and Damiano’s violence.

“He does not care about you. He won’t save you. He raped you, too, remember?”

But that was different. Because he was different, to me, regardless of what I was to him.

Another tear rolled from my eye, bringing forth a dare for me to act out.

I didn’t think about it.

I went in for the kill. I went for his eyes and wished my nails were sharper so I could gouge them out.

Pain rattled through him, a gift from my fingertips. He fell back, his hands leaving my body to comfort the eyes he couldn’t open.

I dragged myself across the floor, the carpet punishing me with each inch as if it was on Damiano’s side. Fire spread across my breasts. I lugged myself mere inches when he hauled me backward with bloody fingers.

Fast hands rushed for anything to grab onto to stop him from pulling me into his arms. A nail bent and broke, snapping before the free edge and causing immense pain as my fingers slipped off a bedpost. I grappled with something else, failing to see what it was until I swung it behind me, hitting Damiano in his nose with an empty glass bottle of alcohol.

I dropped it on impact, but he somehow caught it. His movements were much quicker than mine as he flipped me

back onto my back and yanked me by the ankles so our bodies lined up.

My heart raced. I could almost see it pounding in my ribcage. My hair frizzed behind me, caused by friction from the carpet, as I shook my head, unable to accept what was about to happen.

The sound of his zipper stopped me dead. I froze, air rushing out from my lungs, too fast for me to inhale a good breath, watching as the pompous swollen head of his cock came out in greeting. He fisted himself, his hands rough, his mouth already drooling and grunting.

His anger bent my fingers as I fought to stop him from ripping my panties from my body.

He didn't care about the blood between my legs. I needed him to stop, so I reached for the bottle again. I struggled to get a good grip when he smashed it under my palm. A piece splintered into my wrist, disappointing me that it wasn't deep enough to kill me, saving me from a worse fate. He grabbed a bigger shard, and I panicked as its ridged end moved closer to me. I screamed as loud as I fucking could.

* * *

Mercer

They were late. Of course, they were. In my experience, the best artists rarely showed up on time. It was like they knew you would cancel your plans because they had what you wanted. *The medical field wouldn't have this issue*, my internal thoughts reminded me.

I wandered back to the house from the custom outdoor office at the far side of the lake. A pretty wooden building that, in reality, was no more than a glorified shed that had been decorated nicely.

Curiosity over what Feebee was painting today pulled me in...but I also wanted to avoid Nonna, who had made her way into the office and was interrupting Ethan, who paced back and forth, flustered with the constant voicemail he got during every attempt at getting ahold of Damiano. The guy was fucking late today, and unlike the artist, I had no desire to offer him leniency.

I lingered by a set of shelves behind my sofa, growing irritated by the sound of the food mixer—that Nonna had left running—making its way in from the kitchen. A photo sat atop the shelf. Chandelle, watching my every move. A necklace she loved hung over the silver frame...a blue heart. Some would say it looked like one from a very famous movie. I would say it resembled my own. Blue and cold, often in need of thawing. I examined the silver chain between my fingers, wondering why it had been left here to collect dust.

A noise from upstairs grabbed my attention. My eyes moved, acting as if they had the power to see through thick ceilings.

Paranoia...a dangerous fucking thing.

I could run up there now, and Feebee would look at me stupidly again, wondering why I was so panicked over her squealing over a stiff neck...like yesterday. The truth was, I

always thought the worst these days...thought she could have had a serious fall...an injury.

I tried to ignore the niggling in my brain that told me something was up. And I managed to do that for about six seconds. I tapped some buttons on my smartwatch, the device already connected to the cameras in the house, and I saw life through the camera in the eyes of a stuffed toy—a little brown bear in red overalls. I saw Feebee’s room, but I couldn’t see her from this angle.

My stomach dropped, seeing her pink wheelchair sideways on the floor. Another sound echoed. My feet moved before my brain caught up, and then another noise—a soul-crushing scream of a woman in absolute terror.

“Mercer!”

I bolted up the stairs, long legs rushing up three at a time, and I rounded the corner, falling through her door because my feet moved too fucking quickly.

I froze for a second, and my brain finally caught up, registering that Damiano was in the house, that Feebee was on the floor, and he was stabbing into her with his ugly fucking dick.

A giant piece of glass was pressed to her throat, making her terrified eyes roll back, but they finally found mine. I hadn’t heard her fearful screams over the fucking mixer—which had conveniently stopped—and Ethan and Nonna squabbling about pointless shit.

“Please...stop him.”

I didn't even fucking hear her. I didn't hear the laugh that Damiano had the nerve to release when my eyes landed on him.

All I heard was white noise.

My limbs moved through the motions, my foot kicking at the shard in Damiano's hand before my hands dragged Feebee out from under him, freeing her of his invading cock.

I spun around with her in my arms, delivering a kick to the side of his head. Dropping her on the bed, she huddled beneath the sheets, hiding her nudity. Her gold nightdress in tatters, still hanging off her shoulders, made her look small and vulnerable. And so did her fucking tears. I brushed a soft thumbpad over a bruise on her cheek, smearing tears into her skin.

She clutched my wrist with both hands, her touch fearful and frail, as I leaned down on the bed. My nostrils flared, the heat from my anger giving her cold body a little warmth. My jaw ticked, infuriated as I heard him stir. I hated that I hated to do it, especially with the "please don't" falling from her trembling lips repeatedly, but I gently peeled her touch from me.

"I need you," she begged.

My shoulders rose and fell as I fumed in silence. I picked up the shard of glass that had been held to her throat, and I placed it in her hand for protection before I careened to Damiano, who was stumbling to his feet, those ugly fucking boots covering them, as always.

He pushed his bloody cock into his pants and zipped them up. “I thought I’d test her out, that’s all. Don’t worry, I’m clean.”

My eyebrows lifted. My eyes widened, furious by the words I fucking heard him say. Those were it for him. His final fucking words. Not giving him time to say more, I launched myself at him, and my fist drove into his ugly fucking face. His head bounced off the window, causing a slight crack in the glass.

But he was stronger than me, with twice as much muscle, and his body spun us around. He slammed an elbow into my ribs, and I hit the window, too, shattering the fucking thing and almost falling out of it.

“Mercer!” Feebee screamed, with panic and concern.

A single look her way, witnessing firsthand how frightened she was, changed everything. I hated that she was so frightened. Hated that Damiano was the fucking reason. I saw her sitting there through a vision of red, and because of it, I threw my whole weight at Damiano, and he hit one of the four posts of her bed, toppling onto it and landing on her legs.

She screamed, desperate to get away, but he was too heavy. Her eyes flew to me, watching as I picked up her broken paintbrush and stabbed it into the cock that had violated her.

He screamed so fucking loudly, and then he writhed toward the edge of the bed, allowing Feebee the freedom to drag herself away.

Her spine pressed against the wooden headboard, and her arms dragged her knees to her chest. No part of her wanted to be near him.

He kept writhing, moving until his heavy body fell from the bed and hit the floor. Red blood from his cock spewed out onto the carpet, which was now definitely fucking ruined. I dragged him up from the ground, pulling out the paintbrush that left splinters in his skin. My knee met his bleeding dick as he slumped against the doorway, clutching himself. My elbow met his nose. My fist, his temple.

He was a mess of purple and red, and I still kept hitting him. I couldn't fucking stop, not even when I heard bones crack in his face. Stained teeth fell from his mouth, words that made no sense tried to do the same.

A punch directly to the mouth shut him up, and he choked on one of those rotten teeth. The impact cracked my knuckles, but I didn't care. I just kept hitting him, raw fury pushing me. Punch after punch until he couldn't open his eyes.

I wanted him gone. Now. I didn't punch him again. Bringing the splintered edge of the paintbrush up, I jabbed it into his eye socket, straight into his useless brain, and then I pulled it and his eye out in one move.

He struggled for a few seconds, lunging for me one final time, but I was done, and so was he. He landed one punch to my face, causing my nose to bleed. Our fight moved us from the support of the doorframe to the floor with the cunt on top of me. I kicked the prick straight in the stomach, and he fell

through the banister, ruining the classic décor of the second floor.

I caught my breath, then raced to look down at the body below. The urge to spit on his corpse was intense, but I fought it and backtracked into Feebee's room. My nose dripped blood onto the carpet, but neither of us cared. I wiped at the blood with the back of my hand and continued to her on trembling legs.

Now that it was just us, her pain and fear fucking strangled me, making it hard to get to her.

She was still on the bed, still buried beneath the sheets I peeled from her. I sat close to her toes and touched her face, and she leaned into me, both of our breathing still manic.

I claimed the shard from her bleeding hand, my mind registering more than one injury as I placed it on the bedside table with a small clunk before pulling her onto my legs, jerking her until her thighs landed on my hips.

She didn't fight me. Her tiny hands clawed at my shirt and jacket, leaving a bloody trail as she tried to hang on, disheveling my now manic image a little more. We bled all over each other. Her chest was red from my nose injury. My throat harbored crimson from her little hands. I smothered her in my hold, and I must have done it too fucking tight because she crumbled to fucking pieces.

I left the bed, needing to be out of this room, but I only made it to the hallway before her sobs forced me to my knees.

CHAPTER 21

Feebee

Maybe I was weak, but I couldn't let go of him, and I didn't want to. Maybe it was wrong of me to clutch onto his shirt, pulling it to my nose to inhale his expensive scent and override the aroma of fear and unwanted sex. Maybe it was wrong that I held on tighter as Trix rallied up the stairs, not bothering with the stairlift and moved in, attempting to take me from a man who had never admitted he cared for me.

But it didn't feel wrong as his hands spread over my body, one covering my back, the other weaving through my hair. It didn't feel wrong as he held me to him, nuzzling into my neck and humming while he let me cry into him.

None of it felt wrong.

And I felt...safe. For the first time in years. In the arms of a murderer.

* * *

Mercer

I pulled Feebee into me, turning my body and staking my claim as Nonna reached for her. She meant well...Nonna. She cared. Her golden heart cared about all of us, and I loved that about her. But not enough to let her take Feebee from me. In that moment, neither God nor angels would pull us apart.

Her grip tightened on me, her little fingers pulling at my shirt again. It almost felt like she was trying to rip out my

heart. I hummed to her, trying to soothe her when I couldn't verbalize promises of things being okay.

Our faces touched, my stubble grazing her teary cheek. A sob wracked through her parted lips, swollen from unwanted kisses and crying, and it hit me down to my bones. I felt a million feelings rushing around inside of me, and not one of them was guilt about how I felt for her or what I'd done to the cunt who thought it was okay to hurt her.

Ding, dong...

The sound of rushing feet moving downstairs pulled me to mine. Ethan—who hadn't heard anything from the distance of the office—came charging in, wondering where the fuck we all disappeared to. His phone glued to his ear, he was still calling Damiano, whose phone had fallen from his jacket pocket and was now vibrating across my foyer's shiny floor.

"Holy...fuck..." Ethan's phone joined Damiano's, and he rushed to pick it up and examine the damage before the blood trailing from Damiano's head injury covered it in grime. He looked up at us. Feebee in my arms and Nonna at my side as we stared down at him, careful not to fall through the broken safety rail.

"I...uh...uh...I think the artist is here." Ethan's head flicked from the door to me, his eyes wild, his face growing sweaty and flustered.

"Maybe lead them around the back, darling, and not through the house," Nonna said, her hands gripping the wooden rail close to the splintered part of the wood. She

wasn't afraid of death or blood. She was used to it from her youth with my grandfather and all the assholes he ended.

Ethan nodded. "I'll stall them. Offer them some drinks."

I pulled my keypad from my pocket and sent a message to the speakers above his head. "Do whatever you have to do to make the deal. I'm not leaving her."

A stutter of breath tickled my neck. She was grateful, and it pulled my hand back to her body.

"Thank you," she whispered so quietly. I was surely the only one who had heard it.

"But, I...I can't," Ethan fretted from below.

"You can. You will. I'm not coming." My robotic voice was stern, but it didn't convey the emotions I felt.

"Mercer, I can wait with Feebee." Nonna turned to me, her arms reaching out as if she'd be able to support the weight of another person.

"No. Thank you. She stays with me. She wants to be with me. And nothing in this world will take me from her right now," my speakers told them all, and Feebee didn't object.

The doorbell rang again, and I sent my last message.

"You can do it. Don't let me down."

I didn't wait for another objection, knowing all too well Ethan's parting lips were ready to voice one. I walked to my room, anger and devastation controlling my speed, and I left my cousin to do my work, knowing Nonna would help in any way she could.

In silence, I walked through my room and straight into my bathroom.

I left my keyboard behind and walked us into the shower. I tested the water with my hand before I let it rain down over Feebee.

I sat in the puddle growing below me and ripped her broken nightgown from her body. I tossed it behind us, not wanting anything that scumbag had touched to be anywhere near her. The wet satin hit the wall and then dropped to the floor with a soggy thud.

“I knew you’d come. He said you wouldn’t, that you didn’t care. But I knew you would. I know you feel something...deep inside, even if it’s not for me.”

Her words hammered a crack into my heart, and where the ice had formed around it, it shattered.

She stayed on my thighs but peeled herself away from my torso. My jacket replicated the soggy thump of her dress as I let her push it from my shoulders. She needed my clothes off, this being too similar to the last time we were in here.

Her fingers popped the buttons of my black shirt, revealing more of my heaving chest. The dark color hid her blood, my blood, and Damiano’s, but the water revealed it when it fell to the shower floor. Her heart raced, fearing his germs on her body again, so I lifted her legs as I stretched for the shower head. Sitting back down, I found her fingers in her hair, wrapping around strands and pulling out enough to clog my drain.

Taking her fingers in mine, I studied the gashes on her palm. Luckily, none were deep enough to need stitches. But they did need washing, so I did that for her. I then guided them elsewhere, to my neck, for her to hold on tight while I bathed the rest of her.

I washed the cuts on her face, my fingers gentle with soap and water, before squeezing out some shower gel and using my hands to rub it into her body.

She didn't resist, and she didn't fight me. Her fingers stayed on my body, keeping busy by drawing circles on my shoulder. The pain in her eyes was horrific, but her breathing was controlled. Long, deep breaths had her small breasts meeting my skin on each inhale.

I guided her back until she was off my lap, and she tugged at my pants.

“Take these off, please.”

The quiet request almost knocked me down until I realized why she wanted that. She didn't want the power imbalance of being naked with someone who wasn't. Not today.

I obliged, not wasting another second to strip off my clothing.

Her pretty eyes lit up with terror over my body's natural response to her naked one.

The semi was uncomfortable, but it was only because she had been in my lap, and her body did something to my senses I couldn't control.

Lowering down after discarding my clothes, she was already dragging herself back to create distance between us. I wouldn't let that happen today. I pulled her forward in time to prevent the shower from pelting her bruised face.

My ass hit the water as I sat. I parted her legs—fading muscles catching right below my fingertips—and placed one over each of my hips.

I glanced down, and the shocking state between her legs immediately had my attention zooming in for a second look. My eyes widened in horror. While I had no intention of making her uncomfortable, fate intervened.

How bad had that fucking creep hurt her!

“Don't look.” Her hands swished the water, washing red stains from her thighs.

Steam from the hot shower allowed me to convey a message on the shower room glass. Grateful I didn't need to get my keyboard from its balancing position on my towel rail.

I'm going to need to check you over. I promise I won't hurt you. I have medical training.

She read as I wrote, her eyes watching the letters fade away almost instantly.

She turned back to me, her head heavy with so many thoughts as it landed on my shoulder. Her fingers moved again, this time drawing patterns on my legs. Patterns she wouldn't dare admit were in the shape of love hearts. I tried not to focus on that, too.

“I know. Your nonna told me. You’re a doctor, which explains why you don’t know shit about art,” she teased, trying to humor herself.

But I couldn’t laugh, though I saw the joke.

“I’m okay. It’s a period,” she said quietly. “It started this morning. I don’t have tampons or pads.”

I nodded and hoped she understood I would take care of that.

Her whole body tightened in my grip, bracing against the cramps in her abdomen.

I let her nails dig into me, and in return, I ran my hand over her back softly, giving her compassion.

My eyebrows pulled down, and I saw the blood surrounding us, the metallic smell catching my attention.

I used my hand to move the red stain—and the large clots of blood that caused her cheeks to pink with embarrassment—from us.

I tilted her head to the glass and wrote another message. My chosen profession was why I’d taken an interest in her well-being. *Yeah, let’s blame it on the profession.*

Endo?

“I don’t know.”

She didn’t know if she had endometriosis.

“I haven’t had any tests.”

What the fuck did she have at home? No tests for brutal periods. No wheelchair for moving around the house. No wonder she hadn't mentioned wanting to go home. All that was waiting for her was neglect. But neglect was better than abuse, I guess. And that's all she'd had here.

Maybe she hadn't mentioned going home because she was afraid I would walk in and murder her father accidentally on purpose. In the most violent way I could think of.

I needed that thought out of my head and to stay at bay, which was almost impossible...until Feebee looked at me. She wiped at the blood still loitering at my nose with the gentlest fingers. Then, her small body was twitching in my arms again.

I wrote her one last message, making a promise.

I'll look into it for you.

As soon as my medical room was gutted and refurbished, I wanted to help her receive the medical care she needed. I hadn't told my family of my plans to gut out half of the downstairs and turn it into a private medical practice. It was always the plan...then shit happened and postponed everything.

They liked me as an art dealer and thought art was less stressful. Fuck, it was rarely not stressful. But I had grown to enjoy my job. I wouldn't leave art behind for good, letting all the great paintings I could acquire dampen in dusty corners. I would just have to divide my time.

It was the only way. While I loved my job, I still felt like a part of me was missing when I wasn't surrounded by medical

tools.

I missed helping people.

People like Feebee, who crouched closely, one arm around me, her other around her stomach.

CHAPTER 22

Feebee

We sat in the shower until the sun dropped below the window and retreated for the night. Pretty pink painted the sky again... and I hated it, reminding me so much of the room I couldn't face.

“Can you lean me back? I'm thirsty.” It was the first thing either of us said to each other in hours.

Mercer shook his head, water from his hair flicking into my face. He licked his lips, feeling the same way. He stood from the floor, water dripping from every ridge and ripple, then holding me tight, he treads carefully on the slippery bathroom floor.

A quick rummage through his fancy drawers had him finding what he was looking for. He checked the date on a pack of sanitary pads and was satisfied enough with it to pick one out. Holding the packet between his perfect lips, he gripped a towel from the rail and walked me to the bed.

He wrapped it around me after wiping me dry, set me on the bed, and tossed the little packet to my side before disappearing out the door and into the hall, completely naked. Good thing Trix couldn't be heard pattering around out there. Seconds later, he was back, fresh panties for me in hand.

My eyes stalled on his abs, on the smearing of blood trailing down his V to the mass between his legs. He didn't cringe like I imagined most men would. His face remained

beautiful and free of ugly expressions as he went to get a towel for himself.

He wiped his stomach and returned to me, bending between my legs as my arms propped me up on the edge of his giant bed. My breathing stilled as he pulled the panties up my legs, the pad already in place.

Unsure what to do as he reached my thighs, he tipped me back, lifting my legs like he was changing a baby's diaper, then he destroyed that image by giving me a playful slap to the ass. I assumed it was a soft one, judging by the small noise that vibrated from it.

My lips lifted into a smile, but it quickly fell flat.

Water filled my eyes, pain and guilt drowning me. "Were they hers? The clothes?"

His feet took him away from me, but only to retrieve his keyboard, which had fallen to the floor when he grabbed my towel.

He typed a message, his fingers moving quickly, as always.

"They aren't hers. Never were. I got them for you when I removed you from the cell."

He climbed onto the bed, pulling me back with him, and he yanked the towel from my body and tucked it under his arm, settling me beneath the satin sheets.

Just as I was getting comfortable with a soft pillow supporting my pounding head, another stomach twinge caught

me off guard. It hurt. My entire insides were hurt and sore for multiple reasons.

I reached for Mercer, wanting something to squeeze, wanting someone to just hold me for the whole night, but he disappeared, jumping from the bed. I heard his footsteps rush down the stairs as another twinge caught me by surprise.

That ugly expression that wasn't on Mercer's face was on mine as I lay scowling at the door in agony.

I was in the process of calling him all the weird bastards under the sun, hoping that weird bastard had security cameras in this room so he could hear, which I didn't doubt when I heard his footsteps again.

He walked into the bedroom, feet padded the soft carpet, his arms full of goodies, and interrupted my verbally abusive sneers toward him. His cocked eyebrow and smirk told me he'd heard enough, then he laid out everything on the bed.

His body reached for mine, and I melted into him, enjoying the feel of his fingers roaming on me. Enjoying it a little too much, I moaned. His appreciation fell flat, each muscle tensing below me.

He distracted himself from whatever it was he felt for me by kicking his towel from the bed. His penis neared my hand on his lower abdomen as he stretched over, towing the first of the three items he brought toward us—a bottle of flavored water for us to share. I took the first drink—a giant swig that was kind of undignified.

The second item was one I struggled with, not knowing what it was. It looked something like a hippopotamus, but it was warm and cozy, with a belly full of beans. He tucked the stuffed animal between us, and the heat soothed my stomach.

The third gift he brought was hidden inside a red bag. A red bag I couldn't wait to open, my gaze tipped up with eagerness to witness long fingers dipping inside and pulling out chocolates, the smell bringing another sense of comfort. His eyes stayed on my mouth as he popped it inside.

Two fingers on my jaw encouraged me to chew, and a burst of salty sweetness exploded on my tongue. It was such a unique moment for us...one where he chose to be with me... for me, not for his own twisted pleasure...not for Chandelle.

For me...and what I needed.

And I couldn't keep the appreciation from my lingering gaze. I had so much to say but not the courage to voice any of it. The tenderness that would probably be long forgotten tomorrow kept me quiet.

And so did the confusion over what we were and could ever be.

He was the man who kidnapped me. Who locked me in a concrete cell. And now, he was taking care of me while I suffered the worst period cramps. He held me, snuggled in his bed, with a heated beanie between us, while he fed me salted caramel chocolates.

Any feelings of anger toward him dissipated, and complete affection for him came flooding back, wiggling through every

crevice inside me, taking away the pain of today.

Taking away the ache in my chest that only he could heal...and not because he caused it, but because my heart truly belonged to him.

CHAPTER 23

Mercer

Music played quietly, the wind outside interrupting all the best parts of the song playing.

The weather had been placid earlier today, but the pretty pink-stained clouds had long since bled out from the sky, intimidated by violent indigo and black, brought in, ready for a rough night here in upstate Massachusetts.

Rain poured, pounding heavily on my windshield, also interrupting the music I put on to calm me. Speedy wipers shoved it from my view as the car rolled to a stop.

The murky tones of the house ahead seemed deeper, darker than when I was here last, sneaking in and taking Feebee as she slept. Ironically, that was how I would return her.

My eyes veered to her—asleep on the back seat—through the rear-view mirror.

Regret swirled in my stomach over what I was about to do. I took a sip of cold coffee from the cup in my holder. I cringed over the icy taste, and my teeth brushed over my tongue to get rid of it. Regret swirled again, mixing with the coffee, making me feel sick.

I didn't want to be here, surrounded by giant trees and nothing else and her home in the distance. I didn't want to return her to it. I wanted to keep her, as fucked up as that was.

Today had been strange.

An optimistic morning became a fucking awful day, later melting away into a blissful evening.

We had laid in each other's arms, silence keeping us company, and it made me feel like if I stretched, I could find happiness again. I could share it with her and make all her pain fade away.

But her pain would never stay away.

Not with all the bad memories so close by.

Keeping her in my home after what happened there today wasn't fair.

She was struggling. She needed support. Her family could give that, and I could arrange all the things she didn't have—such as a stairlift and her wheelchairs.

A voice in my head told me my family could support her, too...and they would, Nonna and Ethan.

But in time, she would miss her father, even if she hadn't spoken of him in weeks.

The thought of her being with him and not me gave me another reason to want him dead.

But I would live with that anger. For her. And he could live, too. For her.

She stirred in the backseat, her light sedation wearing off. It was almost as if this house had given her a personal welcome or an abrupt one, shaking her to consciousness.

Her eyes blinked at me in the mirror, sleep-hazed and more sultry-looking than they should be. She had some kind of

effect on me, and it was growing daily.

But it was time to do the honorable thing for her...for once.

“Mercer, where are we?” her groggy voice asked me. Her arms failed in attempting to lift her weight. Her eyes, twinkling in the darkness, strained to see through the window.

Unease cloaked her, making her sweat beneath the paisley-print sweater dress I had dressed her in, which instantly became itchy. Rounded nails clawed at her skin, stretching out the neck.

My eyes questioned her, my mouth twitching to do the same.

Her gaze found me again. “Why are we here?”

I handed her an already written note, sealed with stamped wax to hide the message inside. She shook as she accepted it, and for that, I held onto it a second too long. I let go, seeing the look in her eyes...hate. Every feeling I thought we shared earlier, the connection, the need to be close to each other, was taken back and snatched away like it meant nothing.

A familiar lie.

She played me at my own game.

And I fucking hated it.

But I couldn't even lie about hating her since what happened earlier today.

And I wouldn't let her know that now.

I stepped out of the car. Rain soaked my clothes instantly. I yanked open the back door and pulled her out beneath dark clouds, her bare legs becoming saturated, causing my shirt to cling to me as I wrapped them around my waist.

A gentle click echoed in my ears as I pushed the door shut.

She looked ahead, not holding me or fighting me.

A look of defeat pulled her eyebrows down as her fingers wrapped around my shirt.

It was almost like she didn't want to be here.

Long strides took us closer to the glow lighting up the front room and the silhouette of a short, stocky man moving around. I stopped dead, feet sinking into the mud.

My stomach rolled, vengeance drifting in my veins. My grip tightened on Feebee's skinny legs, red mist again clouding my vision and corrupting my actions. I loosened my touch, feeling guilty for the bruises I was giving her. I forced my vision away from the man I hated to the woman I didn't. She snuggled into my chest, confusing the fuck out of me. A tear rolled from her eyes. Another followed, calling forth an army of sadness, all rushing to form an alliance with the rain to drown me.

My emotions were already doing that.

I trembled. Shaking it off, I blamed the cold, but I knew the truth.

"Please..." she begged, her voice so delicate and innocent.

I took another step, my feet struggling with moving toward the house.

“No!” Her voice was a whisper and a shout. “Please, don’t.”

She knew of my desire to end her father’s life but didn’t know my plan to hold back. Because all the things I felt for her trumped the hate I felt for him.

Her hand came up, fingers pulled into a fist. I clenched my jaw, ready for the impact, but she didn’t hit me.

She hit herself.

Hard.

In the chest.

And then she did it again.

“No!” It was such a small word, yet it came out so wrong. A sound that sounded like nothing...just noise.

She stopped moving, her pretty blue eyes looking at my mouth.

Feeling embarrassed and frustrated, I let go of one of her legs, letting it dangle. My palm clutched her back, crashing her chest to mine and protecting it.

She hit out at me, inaudible pleas creeping inside my shirt and hiding from my ears as she nuzzled in.

I grew taut, trying hard to listen beyond the sound of rain, wind, and the low hum of music in the distance.

“Please, don’t.”

Was she begging for his life?

Her pleas wouldn't stop me from killing him. But the fact that she would never look at me the same way had already secured his fate. Because who knew how long I would be able to stay away from her?

No doubt, I would return in a few weeks, offering the pretense of medical exams, which I would give, of course, among other things. Ethan didn't think I would make it a few weeks, and he couldn't wait to tell me in his oh-so-annoying voice as I carried Feebee to the car earlier.

"Please don't make me go back there." Her words stopped me dead, my feet sinking into the mud. "You don't hate me that much. Today, you cared." Her nails scratched at my skin, the thin marks allowing her words to seep in. "I can't go back there. Please, just take me home with you...or kill me. Just fucking kill me."

I turned to stone, my eyes flicking between Feebee and the creature who created her. The hate inside me amplified. She didn't want to go home. And even though she hadn't told me, I knew there was a very strong reason as to why.

She wasn't begging for his life.

She was begging for hers.

The hate she felt wasn't for me.

It was for him, which made no sense, as she had told me back in the cell that he was a good man.

But she didn't feel that way today.

She would be on her knees begging, if she could. Worshipping me like a god if it meant retreating from this place.

I stepped back, shadows from trees cloaking us, hiding us from view as Stefan stepped forward to draw the drapes. He paused, staring right at my car. But he couldn't see it, as the lights went off when I killed the engine. The music playing wouldn't be heard from the house.

I removed her fingers from the strands of hair wrapped around them, ready to remedy her stress. My own hand weaved through her hair, softening the places she fuzzed.

I kept moving back, drifting through the darkness with this woman acting as a second skin.

The drapes closed, and I didn't hesitate to get us in the car now that I could open the door and not have him see the internal light that would turn off quickly as I closed the door behind us.

She didn't let go, a bundle of limbs and wet clothes in my lap. She shivered against me. I started the engine, blasting the heater to keep her warm. My hand traveled up her dress, rubbing the cold from her skin. Her fingers moved over me, from my chest to my face, where stubble pricked her skin.

My free hand moved to her face, too. Two fingers beneath her chin forced her gaze on me. She looked away from the questions in my eyes.

What's wrong? What the fuck did he do?

I was combing through her wet hair with my fingers before realizing it. She didn't relax, and I didn't stop.

“Take me home. Your home. I don't want to talk about it.” Her words were firm, confirmed by tight lips, flaring nostrils, and a million silent tears.

I tried peeling her from me to place her in the passenger seat, but the moment there was any kind of distance between us, even just an inch, she broke apart.

Sobs fell from her mouth, some caught in her chest, making her breaths sharp and painful. She curled in on herself, making herself smaller.

I didn't fight her for a response. In truth, I didn't want to hear it. I wasn't ready. I also wasn't ready to leave her here alone and upset while I ripped apart her scumbag father with nothing but sharp nails and teeth.

Because I knew.

Deep down, I fucking knew.

She would rather die than go home...and there were only so many things that could have made her feel that way.

I pulled her back in close, knowing what she needed at this moment. Me. Just like earlier. And knowing that I could come back to end this son of a bitch at any time.

And I would be back.

Minutes became an hour before I lifted her from my lap to the passenger seat and ensured her seatbelt was on for safety.

I put the car into drive and coasted down the everlasting driveway, turning the headlights on as we slipped out of view of the house.

The journey home was shorter than it should have been. Our hands were joined in her lap the whole way.

We sped down quiet dirt roads as my mind raced with thoughts of all the ways I could end Stefan.

And not one of them was fucking good enough.

CHAPTER 24

Feebee

Mercer carried me inside the house, the fading aroma of Nonna's cooking welcoming us home. She was already in bed, the house in darkness. He flicked a light switch, and the room brightened up to show me Damiano was gone, along with all the blood.

I didn't ask or care how.

Mercer walked us toward the kitchen, the dark cabinets appearing black until he flicked another switch. He held me tightly. One hand held both my legs, and the other kept me close. I could feel the rage vibrating from him.

He moved around the work surface, not putting me down as he poured two drinks. The apple juice he poured me would be much easier on my throat than the scotch that burned his.

He was quiet...of course he was, but more so than usual. He made no sound as he breathed. His empty glass didn't clink as he placed it on the shiny surface of the breakfast bar. He sat on a bar stool, rocking me. My heart pounded against his, both beating to the same hasty rhythm.

I stared at the full glass waiting on the table for me and licked my dry lips.

I reached for it, taking a sip.

He searched the room for his keyboard, but it wasn't here. Remembering where he left it on his exit, he bobbed his head to his glass, giving a silent indicator that he wanted me to pick

it up. He gripped the neck of the whisky bottle, strangling it, and moved us into the living room.

An over-stuffed sofa cushion took our combined weight. A coaster welcomed his empty glass as I placed it on a nearby table. He didn't bother with the glass, drinking straight from the bottle.

Glassy eyes stared down at me.

And I stared back, seeing him through my blurred vision, his image corrupted by tears of fear and pain.

I wiped my eyes, wondering if he wouldn't look so unhinged when the sadness shifted away.

But he still looked manic, with his wet hair, icy stare, and tense muscles. Muscles that were still wrapped around me.

I pushed away—my aim to sit at his side and not straddle his lap evaporated under his strict touch. I wasn't allowed.

He didn't want that.

He wanted this. Me. Close.

“Tell me what happened.” The demand transferred from the keyboard in his hand to the speakers in the room, and I rushed to his pockets, searching for the Post-it notes.

They were there, like I hoped, accompanied by a pen, not a crayon, but they were wet and ruined.

He typed away, and the voice in the room boomed from dark corners.

“You prefer the notes?”

A dark eyebrow raised, questioning me.

I didn't want to offend him, in case the robotic twang was modeled from his own lilt.

"The voice reminds me of the cell." I remained respectful.

"I can change the tone," the voice I loathed told me. "From the main drive."

I nodded.

"Now...back to my question."

"I don't want to talk about it." I felt meek and lowly. Weak for getting upset. But I was the opposite. I was strong for surviving.

"I know what he did."

"Then why are you asking?" I was louder than intended.

A creak upstairs grabbed my attention, and I instantly hushed, not wanting to wake Trix or Ethan, who may have been staying over.

"I want details."

"Why? That's sick."

"It'll determine how painful his death will be."

I couldn't talk. I couldn't form any words at all.

"Tell me," he pushed. "Fucking. Tell. Me."

Cold tears ran from me. "He would rape me," I stuttered, and something like understanding brushed over me with Mercer's fingers.

“You said you were a virgin. I was sure you were.”

In a low voice laced with shame, I told him, “He didn’t use that hole.” My eyes finally moved back to his, and I didn’t like what I saw. It scared me because it was so hateful and full of desire, the desire...to kill.

I tried to shift away, my hands pushing his soggy chest. He stopped me from moving, one hand wrapping around both of my wrists tightly.

“Since you were little?”

I shook my head. “Since the transplant. The day I got home, I was abused. I fought and fell from the bed, but he didn’t care. He forced himself on me. I remember panicking, thinking I could catch an infection as my bandages frayed against the floor.” I tensed, penetrative phantoms haunting me. “My father wasn’t there anymore to protect me, and my uncle always had a dark side.”

“The man at the house isn’t your father?” Mercer was surprised, but of course, the voice didn’t indicate that.

I shook my head, finally ready to tell him more about my personal life. “My father was killed when I had the transplant. My uncle said it was something to do with a late payment with some dodgy people.”

“The traffickers?”

The heart in my chest sank, guilt pulling it down. “He died because of me. That’s why I can’t talk about him.” Tears welled in my eyes, desperate to get out and escape the pain inside me. “He tried to save me, and I never got to see him

again.” My hand brushed my chest, coaxing a steady beat. “It’s all my fault.”

“You’re the only innocent party in this. You and Chandelle.”

Chandelle...it always came back to her. It always would.

The light from the foyer highlighted her shrine. She had decorated this place. I knew that much. I knew it because all the colors in the house matched those she wore in the videos I saw of her. And not a fucking thing had been changed.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You asked me to.”

I nodded. “I told you, you could kill me instead.”

A smile hiked up the right side of his mouth, making him look more dangerous and beautiful at the same time.

“Why would I want to do that?”

I didn’t answer, sitting in silence for a minute that felt more like an hour.

“I’m never gonna be her. Her heart keeps me alive, but it’s not hers anymore.”

“I know.”

“And I know I’m not what you want.”

“Am I what you want?” His eyebrow raised again, and his gaze trapped my soul, asking the question before the voice caught up.

My lack of reply said enough. His tender touch manipulated me into talking.

“You shouldn’t be. You kidnapped me. You tricked me. You led me in under a false pretense, fed me a lie, and I liked the taste. Of you. But when I kiss you, you long for someone else. Wishing for the taste of another.

“I hate that. I hate that you made me love you before I even knew you. And I know how stupid that sounds.” Especially when what I did know were all horrible things. But spending time with only one person, day in, day out, made it feel like you’ve been with them so much longer.

“You’re in love with another woman. And for everything I feel for you, you can’t give me anything back.”

“I gave you a beautiful room, one that you spied on me from when I was out with Trouble. I gave you paint supplies.”

He listed the trivial stuff but deepened the conversation just as I was about to use his chest to push away from him again.

“I gave you attention that I never planned to...but yes, I did trick you. There’s no justifying that.” His dangerous smile exposed fangs, ready to sink into me and rip out all my truths. “And I will always love Chandelle.”

My heart exploded in my chest. I shouldn’t care about who he loved. But I did, and it hurt that he admitted it was her and not me after all I just said. After all we had done today.

I swallowed down my pain, but hearing her name made me shiver, and the omission he would never stop loving her

replayed in that robotic voice over and over inside my head. I felt sick hearing it.

Mercer's touch softened, whispering promises of gentleness that stalked down my spine as he stripped the dress, heavy with rainwater, from my body and tossed it into a heap on the floor.

I tried to look away as he did the same with his shirt, popping enough buttons to drag it sexily over his head.

I couldn't keep my eyes off of him. And I couldn't stop them from shedding tears, even as they locked on him, tracing all the details of his pretty tattoos.

His eyes glanced over my body, his gaze caressing each breast. He didn't look at me with longing. This was something else...something hard and cold, and it made me shiver.

His fingers traced the scarred heart, and I knew I was never really meant to get that injury.

I shivered again, knowing he didn't want me harmed, and that knife appearing back in the cell was not his doing but Damiano's.

A remote at his side lit the fire opposite us. Orange heat filled the wall, condensation rising to the poorly placed mirror above.

"Thank you." I appreciated the additional heat, but my voice was still heavy with sadness.

I couldn't compete with Chandelle, and it hurt.

He sat vacant, listening in on all my silent thoughts somehow. His fingers glided over the touchscreen keyboard without even looking.

“She was my best friend. Nothing can change that. Nothing will change that. I know you don’t like it.”

“I guess you could say your plan worked well. You wanted me to fall for you. To rip out my heart like they did yours.”

“I could. But we both already know that it failed, too, in other ways. I can’t honestly say that I don’t care for you, and that was never meant to be part of the plan.”

“Is it only because I have her heart?”

“It’s because you’re stealing mine. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“You were kicking me out!”

“I was taking you home because I thought you needed your family’s support to overcome the trauma you had been through. I had every intention of killing your father until tonight. But I walked away, without blood on my hands, for you.”

His words sank in as rainwater dried between us, encouraging my tears to do the same. His feelings for me would have kept my father alive...and...and I was stealing his heart.

I didn’t make jokes about him not having one.

My mood was too low.

But I stopped crying long enough to let my nails trace the designs on his body to an inked woman with brunette hair. She didn't look like Chandelle. She looked like me.

"I got her as an insult," he told me.

There was a blank expression still on Mercer's face as he continued.

"Chandelle was a childhood friend who became more, but we should have stuck it out as friends. There was never a time when we were it for each other."

I found that hard to believe, given how much he loved her. Thoughts of her with him stole my warmth, and he wrapped me in a blanket—one she no doubt had chosen—to warm me back up.

"She said we were end goals, and her heart belonged to me, but she had wandering eyes and was happy to give her body to anyone who commented on it."

I breathed deeply, listening to the words he didn't say... lots of people commented on it.

"I took her away on a make-or-break trip to Mexico. And that's where she was taken. Me, too." He took a moment. A breath. And then he continued typing.

"We were ambushed by five men. I wasn't prepared. I took a bad hit to the head, and they almost left me behind. But one guy convinced the others I was worth something. I woke up in a room that I'd never seen, surrounded by other men. We were all naked. All bruised." The heavy words felt so weird, spoken by such a monotonous voice.

“They were quiet. Well behaved. I wasn’t. I screamed, insulted, ridiculed, and as a result, one of those fuckers tried to cut out my tongue. I got a lucky punch in and killed the guy. He was my first kill.”

His heart was racing now.

“I got out of the room, two of the other captives daring to run with me. They were the distraction I needed in order to find Chandelle. I never did find out what happened to them.”

“But I found her in another warehouse in the area, similar to where I was kept but set-up for medical work. She was cut open, her heart already gone. Lungs and kidneys, too. It changed me. I went from medical graduate to murderer. I killed the doctor. Shot him with a gun I stole from the man who butchered me.”

“I was ready to put it to my head and pull the trigger. Then I saw an invoice with a name. Yours. And something inside told me not to do it. I waited in that room for what felt like hours...waiting for someone to come.”

“I was stitching my tongue, my shaking hands making a mess of it, when they finally did. There were too many of them for my bullets to save me. I had to run. I grabbed a few files, some that would lead me back to the monsters’ den and one that would lead me to you. I went back with help, but the whole place had been cleared.”

“I started working in art, remembering childhood stories that Nonna told me of all the dodgy people my Nonno met in that industry. It wasn’t long before one came along, and he led me to the others. I found three of the five men I was looking

for quicker than I thought I would. But I didn't find the others for months and never saw Chandelle again."

I rubbed his chest, feeling the tension beneath my fingers caused by his pain and guilt.

"And it hurts to admit that my love was fading before her death. Deep down, I knew we wouldn't last. But I hate that our time together was cut short by others. Our choice to fight for us was taken away.

"I hate the guilt that tells me it was my fault because I took her on that vacation. I hate the fucking world because there's so much evil in it. And because I became part of it."

"Because you took me."

"With the intention to make you feel like I did when I found her, her heart missing, and mine broken. I wanted you to fall for me, and I wanted to rip your heart to shreds. I wanted you to feel guilty for having it."

"I do."

His hands were in my hair again, finding more knots and brushing them out.

"You shouldn't. You didn't know. You didn't do anything wrong. You were just a woman wanting to live. Accepting something you thought was meant for you. I just needed someone to share the guilt with. It was wrong to put that blame on you. And aside from that stupid fucking trip, you're the only thing in my life I'm sorry for."

"You don't need to be sorry. People do crazy things when they're in pain." I hid my gaze from him, knowing his reaction

before I even said the next part. “My father did.”

Mercer turned to stone. His hand stopped combing my hair, the other rapidly typing another message.

“There’s no excuse for what he did...” His fingers paused on the device. “But I can understand why he wanted to save you, why he’d do *anything* to save you. I don’t even know what would have happened if you and I had somehow met when Chandelle was alive.”

He took a swig from the bottle before dumping it at his side. “We’d be over anyway, but at least she’d still be alive. And I would feel less guilty for how badly I fucking want you.”

My eyes found his icy blue ones, surprise wiping away new tears. “I wish she was still alive, too. I wish things—so many things—were different. I wish I never needed a transplant.”

Mercer nodded, agreeing with me.

“I wish Chandelle didn’t have her life cut short, and you didn’t have the guilt. I wish you didn’t have to hate my father because he really was a good man. Naïve but good. I don’t think he knew someone would be taken off the street for me to have their heart.”

Mercer didn’t answer.

But his gaze softened.

He still hated my father, needing to share the blame for this situation with someone, and I could live with that, as painful

as it might be on birthdays and anniversaries when I would want to celebrate his life.

But, at least, Mercer didn't kill the last man he hated. The only other man I ever cared about.

Someone else already had.

And it caused me tremendous pain to think about it.

But at least it wasn't Mercer.

At least I would never have to hate the man I fell in love with so quickly, so undeniably, and despite all of his flaws.

The robotic voice spoke again, interrupting all my thoughts and tarnishing them. "Tell me about your uncle."

My shoulders slumped, and Mercer's gaze turned sinister, promising he would kill another member of my family instead.

It would have broken me to pieces if he had hurt my father.

But, my uncle? I would thank him for it.

* * *

Mercer

Feebee had fallen asleep in my lap around an hour ago, and tears had dried her eyes closed after she told me of how her uncle—Samuel—would touch her, of how she had cried over the blood in her underwear, having no way to assess her injuries.

My blood was still boiling, only chilled slightly by the woman on top of me, still shivering despite my efforts to keep

her warm. He had hurt her like that while she was recovering from major surgery. I fucking hated him for it.

The cunt overpowered every thought. He made it onto my kill list and said, *step aside, motherfuckers*, as he pushed his way to the top. Thoughts of how I could murder the asshole swirled with the liquor in my system. Burning anger flowed from my veins, dissipated by his perfect niece resting on my chest.

She woke to a quiet room where the fire still crackled a sweet lullaby, trying to croon her back to sleep. She fought it, rubbing tiredness from those pretty blue eyes.

I hadn't slept, my bloodshot eyes were concrete proof. However, the empty bottle at my side could also be blamed for that.

The scotch tainted every exhale. I felt drunk from it or from my feelings for her. Lust. Need. Want. And yet, drained by all my other feelings. Disgust. Hatred. Rage.

Her soft hands roamed my chest, and my beating heart assaulted her palm.

“You're still awake.”

I didn't answer. Didn't move.

“I think it's time for bed.”

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't rest until her uncle would never wake again. If she had fallen asleep at my side, not draped over me, I would have already been back at his door.

She twitched, her body fighting for the impossibility of getting closer to me.

“My stomach still hurts,” she told me, not waiting for my gaze to question her.

I swallowed down my anger for her. The alcohol in my system would soon push it back to the surface.

I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to stay with my ass glued to this sofa all night, our bodies on display for when Ethan yanked the blankets off of us in the morning. So, with heavy feet, I stumbled, taking my first steps from the sofa.

The stairs were hard work. The wooden slats almost had me face-planting more than once. The thought of pinning Feebee to the steps, me hovering over her stripped body, made my cock grow hard.

Dirty thoughts gave me another reason to feel guilty, and they stayed with me as we made our way across the hallway.

She clutched me tightly as we neared her room and the broken banister. Her face burrowed into my neck, her warm breath on my skin, making me hot. Her nails created another scratch on my skin beneath the shadow of tattoos, making my skin tingle and my cock ache harder than ever.

My bed welcomed her, the soft mattress molding to her delicate shape.

She didn't stay still for long, searching through the dark before a modern lamp gifted a romantic glow to the room. The search for whatever it was she was looking for came to an end.

Wrapped snugly in the blanket from downstairs, she looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Where’s my…” she trailed off, changing what she was about to say. “Where’s the beanie?”

I moved to the bedside table to collect a pad of Post-it notes, not damaged by tonight’s weather.

I glanced at Feebee, shuffling through the drawer, wondering if she noticed the photo of Chandelle I had rehoused there.

Her downcast look told me all I needed to know. I pushed the drawer closed, penning a quick note on top of the table, before stepping out of my pants and scooching onto the bed, getting closer to her. I handed the note to her, her fingers brushing mine as she accepted the little green sheet.

I gave her time to read the message…

Your hippo is downstairs, and I know what you’re wondering. He was never hers. He was mine. A gift from my parents when I was little. But you can have him, if you promise to look after him.

I jotted another message, handing her that one, too.

I said some awful things a few nights ago. I didn’t mean them.

My anger was misplaced.

I’m sorry.

Sorry that I let my guilt manipulate me into monstrous actions when it comes to you.

I leaned in on her, this doing nothing for my persistent erection, my body shadowing hers as a single tear rolled over the roundness of her cheek and onto my finger as I lifted it away.

“Please, don’t let alcohol apologize on your behalf.”

Another note was given, this one written and rushed while I leaned over her. I added to the stereotyping of doctor’s handwriting, and her squinting eyes proved she had a hard time understanding it.

A drunken heart speaks sober words.

Her stare turned soft, her lips turning up. Mine mirrored hers. A magnetic pull brought us closer, gazes falling to each other’s lips. Our moment was interrupted by her head crashing into mine as another pain in her stomach took her hostage, bowing her forward.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She spoke with pain still heavy in her voice.

My fingers delicately brushed the red patch on her forehead, my pain sensors not even reminding me of the twin mark on my head.

“Maybe you should get my hippo.”

Another smile lifted my lips, my teeth popping through my lips, ready to nibble, bite, and brand.

I hated that I had to rush another note that wouldn’t convey the playfulness my voice would have.

You know...there are other things we could do to help with your cramps.

Given all that happened in the last twenty-four hours, I knew it was a risky suggestion. But she had a choice here. She held the power. A way to push Damiano from her mind because I wouldn't allow another man there while I was inside her.

And, if she gave into me now, opened up her body willingly, her beautiful soul, too, after all the fucked-up shit I had done, I would never let her fucking go.

Her beautiful crystal gaze landed on me, fire and heat burning beyond the cool blue shade.

“Would it be weird if I said yes? You know, after what happened earlier.”

I shook my head, keeping my gaze sympathetic.

“It'll be messy. I heard guys don't like it.”

My left eyebrow practically hit my hairline, my sharp stare cutting the truth from her.

“I heard it in a movie.”

I'm not your typical movie guy, another note told her. Curved lips made a promise of desire. My teeth punctured the bottom one, eager to give me something to focus on other than my throbbing cock.

“I think it might help.” Pink nails—courtesy of Nonna yesterday, bright with layers of glitter—skated over my skin.

She looked so fucking beautiful, the low hues of light creating a beautiful dewy glow on her face, highlighting such delicate features, along with two small cuts and one fucking bruise. I hated that. But only that.

And I couldn't help swooping in for a kiss. My tongue barely touched hers, teasing, making sure she'd want more. My teeth pulled her heavy lower lip.

I placed a line of kisses, moving down to her jaw. The last kiss landed on her neck, a gentle pulsing beat kissing me back. A breathy sigh of frustration escaped her full lips as I reeled back onto my knees.

“Second thoughts?” she asked, wearing a mask of indifference to hide her disappointment.

“No fucking chance, cuore mio,” I mouthed.

Her stare was full of need and heavy with want.

She wanted me.

She needed what I could give her.

She needed my cock in her wet pussy, driving away the pain, physical and emotional.

She needed our bodies and souls to come together.

I gripped my cock through my shorts, exposing the desperation I also felt.

I needed her, too. I wanted her. Fuck, I wanted her more than I could take.

“Then end my pain.”

I fucking intended to, in every possible way.

She tossed the blanket to her side, a layer of sweat coating the body I was almost fucking drooling over.

My thumbs hooked in the sides of her lilac panties, ignoring the pad and anything on it as I threw them behind me, not giving a fuck where they landed.

Lust-filled eyes followed my shorts as they slipped down my thighs, freeing my cock. The black boxers got lost in the satin sheets of the same color.

I pushed her legs apart because she couldn't, then situated myself between them. My hand guided my desperate cock through her pretty pink folds, teasing her with the tip.

Something slapped my forehead, reminding me of the bump—a little green note with better handwriting than mine.

I'm not on birth control.

A little heart dotted the “i” in birth.

Oops. I forgot to mention that little detail. That I didn't trust condoms to keep me safe from unwanted offspring, and I had already put a prevention in place by jabbing a contraceptive into her ass upon arrival.

I pulled the note from my face, turning it over. I stole her pen to fill the back with words.

That's not true, and before you moan about it. I knew it was safe for you. Your medical details were on the form for your operation.

“How?” She had lots of questions. “When?”

A raised eyebrow gave only one answer. *The cell.*

“Really? You promise?”

I promise.

My jaw lowered, eyes back on her pussy as it began accepting me, swallowing an inch. “Trust me, cuore mio,” I mouthed.

And she did, giving no protest as I pushed deeper inside her. Fingers raked my skin, pulling me up to kiss her quickly.

Her hands were on my face, desperate for more connection. For another kiss. My tongue entered her mouth, dancing with hers. Her fingers dug into my skin, my cock stretching her and forcing a gasp through her mouth I was devouring.

“Not too fast. Start like before.”

I nodded, pulling our faces apart.

I reeled back, lifting her slender legs over my hips as I rocked into her. Pain still showed on her face, but it was dispelling and my pace was affected by it.

I increased speed as her features loosened, her gaze taking me in.

I didn't see her watch in wonder, her perfect teeth sinking into the lip I wanted clamped between mine.

My eyes were on her pussy, my entire length disappearing inside her, dragging moans from me.

I wanted to tell her how fucking tight she felt. How the pain caused me pleasure.

Tell her what a good fucking girl she was for taking me so perfectly. For taking every fucking inch and doing it while looking so fucking beautiful.

I fantasized about grabbing her hips, rocking them to meet my thrusts while I leaned over her, whispering how she would forever be my personal little slut because no one but me would ever touch her perfect fucking pussy.

My personal little slut requested more attention with gentle moans as my hands on her hips gave me half of my fantasy. It wasn't enough. I wanted her fucking screaming, her voice loud enough to voice both of our excitement.

I pulled her close, my body pressing into hers as I flipped us over—always a fan of the girl on top.

Her arms pushed against my chest, her pert little tits in my view.

A look of perplexity shadowed her beauty, embarrassment at having no clue what to do pinked her cheeks, rivaling the flush of excitement already sitting there.

Her mouth opened, forming the perfect o-shape. Images of me pushing my cock between those lips flooded my head.

Another day.

Another day, she could swallow me, inch by fucking inch.

Eager to wipe the worry from her face, my fingers took her hips, my hands taking her full weight as I lifted and rocked her in a way that would feel fucking divine for us both.

Heavy breathing called me to her chest, the heart-shaped scar finally fading to match the jagged line through it. My lips grazed an erect nipple before sucking it into my mouth. My hands and hips continued what they were doing, giving the illusion she was riding my cock while I sucked her nipples. She had the best tits. A pair she'd probably say were small, but to me...perfect.

I couldn't see my cock sliding in and out of her pussy, but I saw her expression change. My cock grew impossibly harder while inside her, her tight pussy wetter with the natural lubricant.

It was clear my throbbing cock was hitting her g-spot. A whining noise echoed from those pretty lips as I pumped into her. Her body tensed in the throes of passion as I forced her down entirely onto my length.

I rolled her nipples with my tongue. Another suck gifted me the moan I wanted. Loud and uncontrolled. Her pussy tightened around me, and her cum dripped down my balls.

She collapsed onto my chest, her ears taking in the sound of my pounding heart as I continued fucking her soaking hole. She came again, nails digging into my skin. Her teeth left marks on me, too. It pulled a noise from me, a growl of some sort, something primal that had her eyes on me, full of lust, and that was good because I wasn't fucking done.

I had already given her two orgasms she was owed for the times I had used her body or image and brought myself to pleasure.

This next one...well, that was purely for here and now.

Guiding her in for another kiss, I rolled us over again, centering us in the middle of my giant bed.

Our roll pulled me out, but I quickly remedied that and thrust back inside her wet and ready pussy, which opened right up for me. Nothing mattered but her third orgasm and filling her with my cum. She groaned as the fullness rushed through her. And I returned her legs to the hiked-up position on my hips.

“I want you.” Her back arched, pushing her tits up into my face, showing me what else she wanted—my tongue all over her.

“I want you hard and fast. I want you to fuck me so deep, I won’t ever question your devotion.”

I nodded, a smug smile lifting the corners of my mouth, knowing I could do that. I moved faster, and pleading moans fell from her lips. Reaching down between her legs, I gently rubbed her clit while pushing into her as deep as I could.

Moans thrilled my ears, echoing in the dark room.

That’s it, cuore mio. Fucking scream for me.

“Fuck, Mercer! Don’t stop!”

I didn’t. I fucked faster, harder, chasing her orgasm as I felt mine approaching. My lips moved over her body, from her perfect tits to her stretched throat. My fingers moved there, holding her, owning her.

My breaths came fast, growls slipping from me and into her ear, reminding her, without words, that my devotion, my

honor, my fucking everything, was right here in this room...on this bed, laid out before me.

I sat up, my hand still around her throat as I watched her pussy lips suck my shaft. Watched myself drive in and out of her. Watched her pleasure, pink-tinted and plentiful, splash my balls and thighs.

It drove me fucking wild, and I was done for.

She clamped around me, her pussy fully encompassing my cock as she screamed my fucking name. I pushed harder, her orgasm still going, stronger and more powerful than the others, and I came inside her with a growl.

She shuddered beneath me, her arms reaching out in welcome, testing to see if I felt the same now that it was over.

Lowering her leg, I happily collapsed on her, my hand slipping from her slender throat. My dick still pulsed, still dribbled cum into her. Her fingers, all shaky with worry, lifted my chin, bringing my mouth to hers.

Her trembling, unsure lips kissed my nose instead of my mouth, and I kissed her chin in return. My hand replaced her nervousness, her pulse protesting as my fingers gently closed around her neck again.

I kissed her mouth once, twice, but it was still not enough. I kissed everywhere before pulling her onto me for the second time.

Feeling sated, I held her close, her strong heart beating at my ribs. A musky and metallic odor became more present in my nostrils, filling the air around us.

I was still inside her, keeping most of the mess we made—a concoction of arousal, blood, and cum—trapped.

“We made a mess.” Shyness laced her sensual voice.

My fingers on her soft skin told her I didn’t care. Slipping down to the curve of her stomach, they asked a question of their own.

“I do feel a little better. Thank you.” She smiled with gratitude, a soft inquiring stare asking another question, if here, in the silence, was I wishing she was someone else.

But I wasn’t.

She was the only one of us with Chandelle on her mind.

As of tonight, I would leave her in the past.

I was content for the first time in years.

Happy, and it had nothing to do with Chandelle...and all to do with Feebee.

CHAPTER 25

Feebee

The sun, level with the kitchen window, shone past me to caress Mercer's handsome face.

The purple stains under his hypnotic stare made it look like he hadn't slept for weeks, but it had only been one night. He gazed up at the ceiling, and I slept in his arms. He was still staring at the same patch of plaster when I woke up. I tried not to focus on it as he fed a chocolate-covered cannoli into my mouth.

Crumbs dropped between us, and I rushed to collect all seven, not wanting to waste a single one. Mercer's tight stomach made me question how much I should eat. I was small but soft in places where muscles pressed through his skin.

I felt the tension beneath his clothes, and my eyes wandered into the path of his distant gaze. Fear led the way to what I worried were thoughts of *her*. My eyes dropped, and the shirt of his I wore rustled as I reached for a crumb I had missed. My other hand found comfort in a single strand of hair. The frizzy ones—my faves—were harder to find in the aftermath of fresh conditioner.

The distance closed between me and his far-off mind, his baby blues now falling on me, disappointment weighing heavily. His tanned fingers weaved through my wet hair, removing my hand.

I asked, "Are you okay?"

A kiss on my forehead told me to stop worrying and reminded me he wanted to give this a try.

But it was hard to stay in an optimistic headspace when his love for her had been painfully drilled into my heart and soul.

That thought was cut off, interrupted by a robotic voice—a new one I had chosen before coming into this room.

It was hard to be in the basement again. It was hard to pass by the door where our first memories together were made.

But it was interesting to see the room I could only think of as the backstage set-up full of technology, gadgets, and cameras, including one that pointed from a peculiar part of my pink room. I should have known that damn stuffed bear couldn't be trusted, with his beady brown eyes always on me.

The voice repeated what it said since I didn't hear it the first time.

“I'm fine, cuore mio. You're the one who doesn't seem happy.”

“I'm confused,” I admitted. “How can such strong feelings just change?”

He raised my chin with two fingers and smiled at me like I was the best damn thing in the world. “Guilt stepped aside.”

I smiled, too, my fingers keen to explore him while my eyes avoided him. “What does cuore mio mean? You've called me that a lot.”

“It means my heart, in Italian.”

My smile grew and I started to feel like I was the best thing in the world to him...after the cannoli he reached for, of course.

“Sweet mother, you’re up!” Trix said, walking into the kitchen where I sat on Mercer’s lap at the breakfast bar. Ethan was close on her heels, stomping all over her shadow while he spoke on the phone.

“How are you doing, Feebee darling?” She stopped at my side, her soft touch gracing my arm. “I wanted to come check on you yesterday, but this one,” her finger stabbed into the air, pointing at Mercer, “wouldn’t leave your side.”

He hadn’t. And I appreciated that. Yesterday hurt, but it showed me what I needed to see...that Mercer cared about me.

“I’m okay. Thoughts drift in now and again, but I feel okay.”

“I’m glad, and I’m glad you pair made up.” Trix pulled out a seat, and Ethan helped her climb up as if the sturdy old broad was incapable.

He hung up his call, to who, I assumed was his step-brother, by the way Mercer scowled in his direction.

I didn’t take it as a threat. As pain over Chandelle. Not when Mercer still had one hand in my hair and the other sharing his cannoli between us. It was just the betrayal...of someone he thought of as family. I knew the feeling well. And that thought had me tensing, too. Had me itching.

Another kiss landed on my forehead, brushing away agonizing thoughts of abuse.

Trix interrupted us, “But now that you’re a little more than friends,” she said, pouring tea from another vintage teapot. “Can you be more than friends a little quieter going forward? Some of us need beauty sleep.” She fluffed her hair. “And I could hear you all the way down the hall.”

“I second that.” Ethan held out his cup, waiting for Trix to fill it before taking a seat.

I couldn’t turn to face them with my heated cheeks pink with embarrassment. I stayed locked on Mercer, who looked incredibly pleased with the remarks.

He fed me another cannoli, the munchies getting the better of me, but at least that was the only reason my stomach cried out today. He had taken my pain away, stored it somewhere with his own, and set them aside for us to live in harmony.

Standing from the stool, Mercer held me in his arms because who the hell knew where my wheelchair was. It was probably still sideways on my bedroom floor. I pictured the wheel spinning as it had been yesterday, and Damiano’s face filled my head, his ugly expression haunting me. His dirty breath, too.

The nightmare was flicked away by Mercer’s hand caressing my lower spine, quick to pull down my shirt, which had risen to reveal a lace pair of underwear.

“I hope you’re going back to bed,” Trix said, filling her mouth with breakfast foods, tea, and then more breakfast foods.

A curt nod was all she was getting from this silent man, and I was still too busy practicing calming methods to answer.

Mercer clocked this, running gentle fingers all over me.

With a full mouth, Ethan added, “Yeah, because you look like shit. Did you get any sleep at all last night?”

My fingers rubbed over Mercer’s face, which they thought looked less than perfect. My racing heart disagreed as I smiled over his dark stubble, tanned skin gifted by his Italian heritage, and the crystal blue eyes of his mother. He looked perfect to me.

He ignored Ethan, happy to whisk me away upstairs. Trix and Ethan’s private conversation made not so private by their naturally loud voices, could be heard as we approached the top. They thought we were good for each other, and it made my heart burst.

Mercer’s feet stilled at my door. I clutched him tighter, not wanting him to take the step inside I knew was coming.

Bare feet avoided the bloodstains on the carpet. He placed me on the bed I hoped never to sleep in again and moved to the canvas on the floor. His eyes and fingers roamed the painted tree, the ruin granting furrowed eyebrows and a whitewash of fury.

He was mad, but I saw the painting differently today. An abstract beauty that, ironically, thanks to the heavy rain that had appeared from nowhere in the last few minutes—weighing down the red leaves—held a closer resemblance to the maple now that it was blurred beyond the wet window.

He typed a quick message from his keypad. “This tree will be beautiful in winter. I’ll take you outside for a better view, and if you’re not too chicken, you can feed my fox some berries, too.”

He swapped one painting for another, the heart bringing out mixed emotions for him. He concealed them all by biting his lower lip.

Taking a seat at my side, he handed it to me.

“Is it done?” the new voice asked.

“Do you not like it?”

“I would like it to be healed. Is that possible?” His mannerisms, skating touches and sharp stares, smiles that the devil would be powerless to, dragged the truth from me.

“Yes.” I nodded. “We can heal it.”

We can heal our broken hearts.

“Good...because I want to display it for everyone.”

He carried me back to his room, and I carried the canvas, ready to add the first of many stitches to the broken heart. He left, returning moments later, paints and new brushes in hand. It was almost like he had a storage closet somewhere in this house that catered to each of my needs.

“Can you be finished by tonight? I have plans for us.”

I knew he didn’t mean a date. The cold, cruel look in his eyes told me exactly where we were going.

Home.

He was taking me home again for an introduction with the only family I had left.

CHAPTER 26

Feebee

The fine hairs on my neck stood up as the home I grew up in rolled into view. The car came to a slow stop, and I suddenly felt less comfortable in the very comfortable cushioned seat as I stared out through tinted windows.

A sharp breath hitched in my chest as I took in the place I once called home. It looked more like a house from a creepy story a teen babysitter would tell the kids as she tucked them in, than a loving family home. And that was exactly what it was...a place of taboo nightmares that collided with my reality.

A shiver ran down my spine, eyes roving over black turrets casting shadows on the ground below, sharp spikes threatening the dying flowers. The dark drapes sat open, revealing dull and lifeless rooms with hideous floral wallpaper peeling off the walls. The place needed redecorating.

The only lights we could see came from a candle in the front room downstairs and the flickering porch light, which spent more time off than on, thanks to faulty wiring.

A portable speaker attached to Mercer's collar asked a question, the voice too much like a sexy horror villain. I half expected to see him in some kind of ghost mask when I twisted my head to face him.

"You don't have to come in. You don't have to be here at all. But he's not going to survive the night."

Despite what Mercer said about us coming here tonight, he offered me the chance to back out, but as horrible as it was, I wanted to be here. I wanted to see the fear on this monster's face. I wanted to see all his nightmares come to life, just like mine had.

I had to be here to end my own nightmares.

I shook my head, my hair grazing the jacket I wore.

“You're sure?”

A quick glance back at the house had my scarred chest rising and falling faster. I fogged the window with a stuttering breath, and my fingers cleared it instantly.

“Yes.”

“Do we need a safe word?”

I shook my head. “I'll be fine.”

He nodded, trusting me more than I did myself, and then he opened the car door to start the final nightmare.

* * *

Mercer carried me over the threshold. The sound of the kettle screaming blocked out the noise of the front door clicking shut. My uncle was down the hall, pattering around in the kitchen where another candle lit up the room.

Wet footprints trailed behind us as Mercer carried me through the dark and up the stairs to the room where he'd taken me from weeks ago.

This was my request.

To end the nightmare where it began.

Mercer turned on the bedroom light, the yellow hue from an old bulb lighting up the room before he sat me on the bed. Fast feet took him around the room, wet shoes soaking my pink carpet. Ironically, it didn't bother me so much here.

An unauthentic laugh danced on my lips, induced by the nerves I was feeling. My permanent itch was back again, my arms protected from raw skin by my loosely-fitted jacket.

He bent down to examine the trinkets and odd collectibles I always loved as they sat collecting dust on my entertainment stand. His fingers felt over the fuzzy, brightly-colored hair of a miniature troll.

He shot me a side-eye glance, judging my treasures.

“Hey...I like what I like.”

“You have questionable taste.”

“Clearly.” I nodded in his direction.

“What in the hell?” My uncle's voice echoed in my ears. And so did the sound of his slippers dragging over the carpeted stairs as he moved closer. My head snapped to the door, waiting for the monster to darken the hall.

I eyed Mercer in time to see him pocket the pink-haired doll.

He brought a long finger to his lips, backing into my open closet. The clothes Uncle Sam deemed slutty were still on the floor from his last temper tantrum. He didn't like that I owned skirts and dresses. He didn't like the idea of me showing skin

to anyone else. Not that I ever saw anyone else or dressed myself.

“Who the fuc...” Uncle Sam appeared in the doorway, his words trailing off as he spotted me on the bed. Shock swirled around him and settled on his sweat-glistened face. Luckily, he forgot all about the wet footsteps he followed up here as he stepped inside.

He always was a stupid man.

The smell of cheap lemon deodorant entered my flaring nostrils. The memories it brought would have choked me to death if I wasn't so focused on the light bouncing off the giant kitchen knife in his hand. His wild hair stuck out, the brown color a hard contrast to his shocking white face. He looked like the bogeyman.

“Feebee! Where did you come from?”

“Hi, Uncle Sam.”

“I thought you were taken.”

“By who?” The shock jumped to my face.

“Never mind. I was clearly wrong. The good thing is you're home now.” He completely ignored my question.

“Did you look for me?” was my next question, only because I didn't want to say there was nothing good about being here, not while he had that giant knife in his hand.

“Well, I didn't think I'd find you.” He stepped closer, his giant slipper flopping onto one of Mercer's footprints.

“Did you try?”

“Feebee, honey,” he said in a voice laced with fake adoration.

The creaky mattress dipped as he sat, causing my weight to wobble closer to him and the knife, conveniently pointing my way.

I steadied myself, hating that I had to use his hairy shoulders to do it.

The soup he was eating—some horrible dish he and my father always enjoyed—stained his once-white tank top, and he used that dirty tank top to wipe the disgusting soup from his mustache.

“I thought those men had come for you to collect your father’s debt.”

“His debt ended with his life!” I snapped.

“But they could still earn money from you. They still wanted what they were owed.”

“How do you know that?” I wondered aloud.

“Honey.” His hand landed on me, callouses scraping over my bare leg, and I thanked the Gods above that I couldn’t fucking feel it.

But I still felt sick.

“They were coming back. Your value had decreased, but they thought it would be enough to cover what your father owed. No one lives for free.”

“My life cost my father his,” I reminded him, pushing his touch away from my leg. “And the life of another young

woman.”

“And a hefty price, which wasn’t paid in full. They told me the debt would be collected, but I didn’t have the kind of money they expected.”

I stared at him with all the hate in the world. His knife edged closer, the blade hitting my knee, piercing the skin as he leaned closer.

The hint of iron in the air pulled Mercer from the closet. He watched in the shadow of the doorway as my uncle confessed his sins.

“You told them they could have me?”

“That’s why I did the things I did. I was preparing your body, but I knew time was running out. I had no idea when they would show up.”

“You were pr-pr-preparing me!” I stuttered, the anxiety in my voice pulling Mercer another step closer.

“I knew the legs would be an issue, but you being a virgin would make you worth more. I knew they were coming, but I didn’t think they would bring you back. I thought you would be sold to some old pervert, and that would be the end of it.”

“For you. But not for me.” I shook my head, looking away from the selfish bastard. It was hard to believe he and my father came from the same cloth... clearly, his half had all the stains.

“You knew they were coming for me, and you didn’t protect me?” I shouldn’t have been surprised, not after what he

had done to me. His hand moved to my hip, and I flinched, hating the feel of his touch.

“Get your hands off my girl,” the voice, powered by Mercer’s keyboard and quick fingers, said.

Uncle Sam jumped, the blade pushing deeper into my skin.

Mercer moved around the bed, his feet swallowing the distance between us in three long strides.

Uncle Sam followed him with wide eyes, his neck almost snapping.

Mercer took a seat at my side, close enough for the mattress to pull me from my uncle, and leaned me on him instead. A grateful breath escaped me, and a deadly smile crawled on Mercer’s face, making him look all the more haunting as he stared with hidden emotions and his rigid body moved toward my uncle.

His fingers wrapped around the blade at my knee, his blood mixing with mine as he guided it from my leg.

“You’re not the one I met before.” Uncle Sam retreated slightly. He seemed uncomfortable.

“Because I wasn’t taken by traffickers.”

“And you never will be,” Mercer promised. “The men in question are already dead.”

“Who are you?” My uncle edged back some more, the blade dripping blood on the sheets, joining the previous similar stains as he continued to inch back. “What’s with the voice?”

“None of your fucking business,” *the voice* declared.

I admired that Mercer didn't need both hands or even his eyes to type his messages. His icy blues stayed on my pitiful uncle, freezing him in place and causing him to shiver.

“It's good to have you home, Feebee. Now, call off your dog, huh?” My uncle laughed, years of smoking making it wheezy and causing him to choke on his false bravado.

Mercer's robotic voice laughed, too. The menacing echo stole all the sound from my uncle's mouth. And then he stopped laughing, too.

“Apologize to her.”

“Excuse me?” Uncle Sam sat straighter. The grip on his knife tightened and set my hackles on edge. Mercer didn't fail to notice, his bloody hand wrapping around the small of my waist.

“One chance. Do the right thing by your fucking niece, and I'll let you live. Apologize. To. Her.”

Uncle Sam's bloodshot eyes landed on me, raking over every hidden curve of the body he had seen far too much of.

“I'm sorry, Feebee, that you feel I did the wrong thing.”

God...talk about a narcissist's attempt at apologizing. He shouldn't have bothered. Focusing on something better, Mercer's strong jaw, now ticking with exasperation, I looked away from the heartless liar. A tear rolled from my eye, wiped away by the softest touch.

Mercer's lips pressed a kiss to my forehead, staying on my frown as he typed another message, his eyes not leaving the man in the room with us.

I could feel all the rage vibrate through him as I clutched his jacket, the leather-looking fabric crinkled beneath my touch.

"If anyone else comes here looking to abuse her, please tell them she's changed address. Spare me the hassle of hunting them down to murder them for even thinking they could touch her."

My uncle's whole body twitched, a tsunami of fear building inside him, anxiety riding the wave.

He was fine hurting me, someone who couldn't fight back. But he was nothing more than a weak little man when it came to someone like Mercer. Someone who was a foot taller than him. His body and the anger filling it, so much fucking stronger than anything my uncle possessed.

Mercer's lips left me, and I instantly felt the loss. But that loss evaporated when his arms scooped me up into a princess hold.

"I didn't like your apology." I typed the words, and they sounded through Mercer's speaker. His eyes fell on me, the darker, sharper flecks telling me he didn't, either. It was nowhere near good enough.

He took the keyboard from me as a teal wingback accepted my weight.

He pivoted to my uncle, who stared down at his blade. A million thoughts ran across his face as he wondered who to stab...himself, or should he try his luck with Mercer.

But before he could make that decision, Mercer pulled him from the bed by his scruff and pajama bottoms, causing a wedgie that left little to the imagination. I gagged. The sight of him, the smell of his fear as it leaked from his cock and put another stain in this room, it all made me sick.

A kick to his ass as he picked at his wedgie broke at least two knuckles—given the scream that shook the room—and landed him at my pink-painted toes.

“Apologize in a non-narcissistic manner this time.” Mercer stood behind him, ensuring he couldn’t retreat and grab the knife he’d dropped on his fall.

His hand, despite the agony in his fingers, rubbed at his ass, the pain there giving him only a hint of understanding of what I’d felt. His face was a blubbering mess as he looked up at me. But there wasn’t a tear in sight. It was an act, a good one, that I would have believed if he wasn’t sitting close enough to see the lie holding onto each of his aging features.

“I’m sorry. Your father brought this on us.”

He still couldn’t take responsibility for his actions. My eyes rolled, seeing all the happy memories of my dad, seeing the good in him, like when he let this homeless creep into our lives and home because he couldn’t travel elsewhere with so many burned bridges.

I returned my gaze to him. I no longer saw him through the eyes of a trusting child. I saw the here and now. I saw Mercer's fingers pressing into Sam's oily face. And I heard his words rumble through the speaker, the tone somehow conveying hate.

"I'm sure he'd love to know that his brother started raping his baby girl only days after he fucking died!"

Mercer's nails punctured the skin, digging much deeper than Damiano had in mine. Garnet droplets ran down Sam's cheeks like tears. Mercer only pushed harder, his fingers causing bruises and pain and his nails causing cuts and inevitable scars.

I didn't care.

I just breathed through it.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Sam suddenly put more effort into his apology, rapidly repeating the words until they became meaningless again. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry, too." Mercer pulled Sam's head back, his fingers pulling out chunks of hair. Subconsciously, mine were doing the same, and that only pissed Mercer off more. All his anger showed in his tight expression, staring down at Sam's ghostly face.

"Sorry that she'll suffer from nightmares for the rest of her life. That she won't be able to smell a fucking lemon without getting assaulted by bad fucking memories. Sorry that she won't be able to think of her father because when she does,

she scratches at her skin because he looks like you in every memory.”

Mercer’s hair was just as wild as Sam’s when he looked at me, sweat dripping from his brow. “Say goodbye to your uncle, Feebee.”

I blinked twice, my dry mouth unable to say anything as my eyes fluttered closed, not wanting to witness another death...even if I wanted this person dead.

“No, wait! You said if I apologized—”

“I lied. No one fucking hurts my girl.”

The snap of Uncle Sam’s neck ricocheted through all my bones, my teeth grinding to dust as I prayed with all I had that he wouldn’t haunt me as a ghost, no more than he had as a real-life monster.

His body fell to the floor...

And then, it was over.

A gentle touch landed on my knee, covering the tear of blood. The only tear I had shed for Sam.

“You okay?” Mercer mouthed, his body blocking the image of death from my eyes now that they were open.

I nodded again, taking my time with my breathing. “What are we gonna do about him?”

Mercer’s fingers whizzed over the keyboard. “I have connections.”

“Then take me home.”

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

Feebee

Soft bristles dipped in the orange-red shade I made by mixing colors. I wiped off the excess paint against the white palette he held for me. Mercer. My Mercer. He sat on a bench next to my chair, a lazy fox making strange noises slumped against his thigh. Trouble, who'd enjoyed tummy rubs and grew bored with the berries at his side, rolled and wriggled for more attention.

A breeze picked up, blowing the pretty red maple so hard that snow fell to the ground, exposing more of the leaves that shared their color with the cold flush on my rosy cheeks.

I blew out an icy breath, taking in the changed scene as my brush dotted the canvas.

“Too cold?” The words came from his jacket speaker, the expensive little gadget immune to weather damage.

I was glad about that.

I still liked that sexy voice best.

I was also glad I wasn't cold, thanks to him making sure I was snug before bringing me out into the backyard.

The furry boots on my feet and the blanket meeting them at my shins prevented the cold from assaulting my body, even as snowdrops danced from the sky, landing on my nose and Trouble's as we looked up in harmony.

I thought snow would have been a painful reminder of my mother's death. But I could feel her presence and joy over the art I was creating. And it changed how I felt as the snow landed on my skin.

"Just right." My head angled to Mercer, my cheeks round with happiness.

He smiled back, one so hot that the snowflake on my nose melted, and my heart burst into flames.

This was my life now.

And it was close to fucking perfect.

I made myself comfortable, pulling my blanket higher as it tried to slide down my lap. I took a sip of the hot chocolate from the cupholder on my chair, and I returned to painting.

Mercer moved to me, leaving Trouble to his own devices, the berries amusing him again, his arm slinking around my shoulder. His cold lips pressed into the crook of my neck, his feathered breath telling me I was wrong, that I was cold and I needed warming up.

My paintbrush came up and marked his nose with a red dot, a silent reminder to stop clowning around while I worked.

I was a real artist now...I was paid for my work, by him, sure, but playtime couldn't interrupt.

He took my warning seriously but stayed close, his heat warming me. His scent of tonka seduced me. I shrugged him off, and he laughed, knowing exactly what he was doing.

“Ten minutes.” My world spun backward, my heart stopping as I sucked in cold air. It wasn’t the speaker talking. It was him. It sounded distorted, but I understood it. I understood he trusted me enough to talk to me in his real voice—something he never did in front of anyone. And it made me fall in love with him all over again.

“In ten minutes, I better already be in our bed...naked,” I said, with my breath hot on his mouth. “With you inside me.”

He crossed his heart, returning to the bench, taking a moment to adjust the bulge in his pants before he stretched the palette out to me, allowing me my last few minutes with the pretty maple.

He shot another sinister smile my way because we both knew, the reality was, that I didn’t have minutes. I had mere seconds before he tossed me over his shoulder and trudged up those stairs.

And we both knew how much I fucking wanted that.

* * *

Thank you for reading my short story.

If you would like to find out about more of my work join my reader group to keep watch for updates.

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* * *

Newsletter signup can be found on my socials.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi guys! I'm Cori Zahara, and I grew up in Wales with my mother and rescue cats. I have a love for travelling, reading, and all things creative. And I'm utterly useless when it comes to talking about myself!

I first started writing while going through home-schooling due to having severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. I started playing around with script-style projects around age eleven; and later, I went on to gain a level 3 qualification in screenwriting and playwriting. Growing older, I realised I had a fondness for books. . . often horror or romance, my favourite genre quickly became a combination of the two. . . and now, we are here!

**MAKING THE KING
A CRUZ KINGS MC PREQUEL
B. LYBAEK & SARAH JD**

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MAKING THE KING

Evil forced us together, but it's love, understanding, and respect that bind us together.

CARA

I said "I do" to my Rocco King at gunpoint.

My wedding was forged in darkness, and at the end of the ceremony, my hands were stained red by the blood of my dad.

I didn't regret my decision when the police took me into custody, or when I was given a prison sentence for my patricide.

Three years on, I step out of prison only to be placed back in the care of the man who purchased me as his virgin bride.

His actions are confusing, his tenderness a contradiction to his hard exterior, and my desire to kill him turns into a desire of another kind.

I quickly learn that my husband is the better of the evils when my family returns to take me back to a life of slavery, and my husband does everything he can to protect me.

I never knew it could feel so intoxicating. So all-consuming.

ROCCO

I'd been tasked to buy, marry, and protect Cara Rodriguez.

She never asked to be mine, and she never had any control over the situation.

And now, even though she's released from prison, she has no control over the fact that her parole terms state she must live with me.

I'm no fool, and I know she's capable of killing me in my sleep. While annoying her is entertaining, I can see past her strong facade to the girl she was before all of this happened.

She's all woman now, and resisting her is hard. But not giving her what she needs, what we both crave, is harder.

When her family tries to take her away, something deep inside me snaps, and I do everything in my power to make sure those vile predators don't get their hands on her *again*.

Cara is mine, and I'm never letting her go.

Trigger Warning: This story contains sensitive material that some readers may find offensive. See our website for more details.

PROLOGUE

Cara

“Do you, Cara Rodríguez, take Rochus King as your lawfully wedded husband?”

Blinking, I look up from the floor and stare into the scared eyes of the spineless priest. Being here, wearing this dress, is making a mockery of my childhood.

The strapless dress is a complete replica of a dress I once saw on TV, and promptly told my bitch of a mother I wanted to get married in. Everything matches from the sweetheart neckline to the floor-length skirt. The bust is so tight my tits are threatening to spill out, not that it matters.

I’m not even sure why I’m dressed, and a part of me almost wishes I wasn’t. Better naked than tainting one of the *few* good memories I had of my childhood.

“Cara,” my dad prompts, digging the gun harder into my back. “Answer the priest.”

I want to laugh at the fact he’s threatening me with a gun. It just shows how little he really understands me if he thinks the gun is the bigger evil when I’m being married off to a stranger at sixteen.

For now, I have to play along and not give away that I’m not scared of him. But how can I be when he’s lorded this very day over me for so long? I don’t know when I stopped being scared, only that rage and a burning need to punish my parents for taking something from me is all I feel now. My childhood. My freewill. And at times, even my will to fucking live.

I run my hands down the skirt of the dress, smoothing an inconsequential wrinkle. The bottom of the skirt is covered in blood, but sadly, it's not the blood of my enemies. It's the blood of the couple who accidentally walked into the church half an hour ago. Needless to say, they won't be telling anyone what they stumbled upon.

Tossing my waist-long, dark hair with purple streaks—that I only got to piss him off—over my bare shoulder, I sneer, “If I must,” answering the rhetorical question.

“Y-you have to say ‘I do’,” the priest says, his hands shaking so badly I absentmindedly wonder if he has arthritis or some shit.

“Why?” I challenge, my voice ringing out loud. “There’s a gun fucking pointed at my back, and another at yours,” I nod my head toward my twin brother, Mateo, who’s standing behind the priest. “So tell me, Mr. Priest man, why the hell does the wording matter?”

I quickly look away from my twin. I can't fucking stand looking at the traitor I shared a womb with for eight months.

Next to me, my groom, Rochus King, coughs, and it sounds like he's trying to cover up a laugh. “Can we just get on with it?” he asks, trying to take my hand. “I want to move on so we can get to the part where I can finally consummate this holy matrimony, or whatever the fuck you call it.”

I turn my head and look at him. If I force down my disgust, I can admit he's somewhat lucky in the looks department. Not that it matters. I might be a child bride, but I'll also make sure one of us is a widow before the night is over.

While my dad has a fucking boner for this marriage, it fills me with nothing but hatred. I knew it was coming, I've known that since I was twelve. That's how old I was when my mom sat me down and explained my purpose in life.

That was the day my childhood ended. With a few choice words, she changed my carefree existence into one where I had to... let's just say, knowing you'll be sold to the highest bidder when you're sixteen doesn't exactly make it easy to continue your life.

Not long after that talk, my parents dragged me to my sister Julietta's wedding because daddy dearest wanted me to know what was in store for me. It wasn't a joyous day, and I hated seeing my beautiful sister marrying the forty-something year-old guy. He reeked of sweat and alcohol, and I can still recall the offensive stench.

I've been told that Rochus King is nineteen, which I guess I should be happy about. Then again, if I don't take matters into my own hands, he might have a long life in front of him.

A snigger tries to burst free as I remember the vial inside me. The small see-through glass was brought to me by my sister, when she pretended to help me to the bathroom. According to her, it's a very strong sedative that she uses on her husband at least once a week.

Seeing as I have no pockets or anything to hide the vial, I saw no other option than to shove it inside me. I suppose it's almost poetic that the way to end my husband's life is in my vagina, a place he'll never touch. That's what I told my sister

during our rushed time together, and it felt good to see her tentative smile before her horrid husband dragged her away.

As soon as I was in place, next to Rocco, they left. But not before Julietta's husband made sure to announce he'd only allowed my sister to come as a reward for her good behavior. Personally, I think he just wanted her to see me miserable.

I startle, realizing I've been lost in my head when Rochus whoops, "Fuck yeah I do." He nudges me with his shoulder. "I mean, would you look at her? She's worth every fucking cent."

Swallowing down the disgust I feel at his words, I shoot him a smile I know is laced with innocence and not portraying my thoughts of how I want to make him scream in pain for buying me.

"D-do you have any vows?" the priest asks.

"No," my dad says, sternly.

At the same time, I say, "Yes."

"Cara," my mom scolds, speaking up for the first time.

I don't need to look at her to know she's scared, and I can't say I blame her. If I step out of line, my dad will make her pay for my transgressions. Maybe I should feel bad about that, but I don't. It's not my fault she married the devil, allowing him to sell her daughters. That's all on her, and as far as I'm concerned, she's as bad as he is.

Rochus smirks at me and nods. "Let's hear your vows."

Squaring my shoulders, I recite the practiced words. “I promise to give you everything you deserve. From today, and until our last day together.”

There. It’s vague, yet completely true. I’ll fucking give Rochus what he deserves, and one way or another, it’ll be tonight. When he wants to consummate the marriage, as he so eloquently put it.

Fucking pig.

As fucked up as it is, I’m glad my dad kept me a virgin. I guess he learned his lesson with Julietta. My fucked up parents didn’t even try to mask their disappointment when my sister was sold for less than they expected, all because they started whoring her out at twelve. So, they went to great lengths to keep me a virgin, always making sure I knew it was so they could sell me for more at their creepy black market auction.

“Get on with it,” my dad demands.

“Y-yes, of course,” the priest stammers. “Do you umm... do you have rings?”

I look expectantly at the guy who bought me. I fully expect him to say I’m not worth it and move on, but to my surprise he fishes a black velvet box from his pocket. When he opens it, my eyes widen as the two gold bands come into view.

“Of course I fucking do,” he says, smiling widely.

Taking my hand, he slides the gleaming ring onto my ring finger and winks at me. Then he hands me the other one, and I roll my eyes as I shove it onto his digit.

The priest clears his throat. “Rochus King, you may now kiss your bride.”

Fuck. Me.

I don’t want this man’s lips on me. Though I’ve never been kissed, I’ve been forced to watch the men with Julietta enough times to know it’s nothing like in the movies. The slobbering, foul smelling pigs she’s had to...

“Do you mind?” Rochus asks, and I look up in confusion.

Surely he wasn’t talking to me, was he? Because I mind a fucking lot. No, of course, he isn’t asking me. If you’re fucked up enough to buy a child bride, you don’t ask permission.

“Mind what?” my dad barks, sounding as though he’s being inconvenienced by the question.

Rochus sighs. “I don’t want to kiss my wife at gunpoint. So, I ask again. Do you fucking mind?”

No one talks to my dad with so much disrespect, so I’m fully expecting him to punch Rochus. But he doesn’t. To my astonishment, I feel the gun being removed from my back. Without meaning to, I straighten my spine, like I’m testing that the pressure is really gone.

Before I can contemplate doing anything, Rochus places his hands on my hips and turns me toward him. My gray eyes fly to his. They’re the color of chocolate, and there’s something hidden in the depths. Something that makes me feel...

“Relax,” he breathes.

I don't get the chance to retort. Rochus' lips on mine silence me.

It's not the disgusting and brutal kisses I've seen my sister be subjected to. In fact, it's soft and slow. He isn't using his tongue, only pressing his lips to mine.

Rochus' hands move from my hips, slowly trailing up to my head. He winds his fingers through my locks, and I take his lead, moving mine to his shoulders. Before I know it, I instinctively open my mouth, but to my surprise, he doesn't deepen the kiss.

This is nothing like I was expecting it to be, and I'm completely caught off guard. Forceful and disgusting, that's what I'd prepared myself for. After seeing what my sister's husband did to her, I wouldn't even have been surprised if Rochus bent me over a pew and fucked me right here. But this...

"That's enough for now," Rochus murmurs. Just as I'm about to rethink my opinion of him, he lets go of my hair and slaps my ass. "The rest will come once we're out of here. Don't wanna desecrate this holy place, do we?"

I almost throw up in my mouth as he turns around and winks conspiratorially at my dad, who laughs boisterously.

"When the last payment goes through, you can fuck her bloody for all I care."

The lack of care for my well being no longer shocks me. All it does is cement the fact that one day I want to dance on this fucker's grave.

As soon as the words leave my dad's mouth, the door slams open and a dark-haired guy struts through. When he reaches the couple lying in a pool of their own blood, he jumps over them and does a fucking twirl.

What the actual fuck?

“Did someone ask for money?” he asks, nodding first at Rochus and then my dad. Walking straight up to me, he takes my hand and kisses the back of it. “Congratulations, Mrs. King.”

My lips part and I want to hurl insults at him, yet no words come to mind. I can only stand there, gaping, as he pulls out his phone and shows the screen to my dad.

“There you go, Carlos. Cara no longer belongs to you.”

For some reason, those words hit me, making me feel lighter. I no longer belong to the man who's put me and my sister through hell while doting on our brother. Where I resemble our bitch mom, Mateo's the spitting image of our dad—and just as vile and cruel as him.

But now... I'm free. From my dad, at least. And soon, if everything goes according to plan, from my husband as well.

“So we're all good?” Rochus asks, arching an eyebrow.

Dad takes his phone out of his pocket and taps on the screen. “Yep,” he confirms with a nod. “The bitch is yours. Pleasure doing business with you, Rochus and Cain.”

Rochus pulls me to his side and throws his arm around my shoulder. “Do you want to say goodbye to your family?” he asks.

“Yes,” I snap, sarcastically. “There’s nothing I want more than a tear-filled goodbye with the people who just fucking sold me. Estúpido.” I didn’t mean to voice the Spanish insult, but I don’t regret it.

“I want to say goodbye to my daughter,” my mom cries out.

Bitch even sounds like she means it.

“Let’s go,” I say to Rochus, completely ignoring her.

“No, Cara. Please. I want to hug you one last time.”

I remain unmoved by her words. It’s too little and much too fucking late.

“We should get going,” Cain says, staring pointedly at the door he entered through. “Like, right fucking now.” He adds the last part so low only me and Rochus can hear him.

Rochus nods and rushes me toward the exit. I can barely keep up with him, almost stumbling in the stupid high heels I was forced to wear.

As soon as we’re outside, we come face-to-face with a group of masked strangers. Each one of them is wearing black from head to toe, the only thing standing out is the red diamond on their shoulders.

“Ready?” one of the men asks, and when Rochus nods, the stranger waves the others ahead.

“What’s going on?” I ask, but I don’t get an answer.

Without another word, the masked strangers, including my new husband, storm the church. It only takes seconds before

gunshots ring out, and despite my mantra of staying strong, I lean against the church with my heart in my chest.

Who the hell are these people? And more importantly, why am I staying out here? I don't care if they're slaughtering my family, only that I'm left behind.

Resolutely, I sneak back inside, ignoring the men calling out for me to leave. I flip a few of them off, but other than that, I keep my focus ahead. Luckily for me, their attention is on the scene unfolding in front of them.

My dad's kneeling at the altar, and his right-hand man lies lifeless next to him. I knew Henry was lurking around somewhere. Years of being my dad's daughter have taught me that he never goes anywhere without his backup.

"Please," my dad begs, pathetically holding his hands up like in a prayer. "W-whatever you want."

Hearing my dad beg like this has excitement coursing through me as I move closer until I'm next to Rochus,

"You," my dad spits, no longer pleading for his life. "You did this, you useless cunt."

"Careful," Rochus warns. "You did this to yourself."

He kicks my dad square in the chest, sending him into the blood surrounding Henry's body.

"I want to kill him," I announce, my voice steady and devoid of all emotion.

"W-what?" Rochus asks, eyeing me like he isn't sure he heard me correctly.

“He’s my fucking dad, and I want to be the one to end his miserable existence,” I say, hating that I have to repeat myself.

I don’t care who this Rochus is, or that he’s now my husband. He’s clearly not on my dad’s team, and that’s perfect for me. I’ll even consider not lacing his drink with the sedative if he gives me this.

Before Rochus can make up his mind, my mom is unceremoniously pushed to the floor next to my dad.

“Mija,” she sobs, looking up at me.

The endearment makes me flinch. She used to call me mija, meaning dear or darling, when I was a child. But she lost the right to call me anything like that years ago.

“Shut up,” I hiss.

The noise in the background fades away as I look into the eyes of the woman who gave birth to me, and also ripped away any semblance of safety and happiness I might ever have had.

“You’re as bad as he is.”

I don’t know I’m moving until I find myself ripping the gun from Rochus’ hand. As soon as it’s in my hand, I point it at my crying, pathetic mother.

“Cara!” Rochus warns.

Tuning him out, I bare my teeth. “Death is too good for you,” I snarl, my hatred for her coating my words.

I’m absently aware that more people arrive, and a scuffle breaks out close to us. I know I should look, but I can’t. I’m

too transfixed by my dad kneeling on the floor, and the evil glint in his eye that's always present.

The sound of gunshots ricochets off the walls, and there's a thud from a body hitting the floor. People are shouting, and...

As soon as the sound registers, I make a snap decision. I only have seconds, and I use them to point the gun at my dad.

"May you rot in hell," I scream.

As soon as I make the decision to pull the trigger, all the other sounds in the church assault my ears. The roaring of police, and the demand for me to put down the gun. But I can't. Not until my dad is dead.

"Drop your fucking gun."

My hands shake as I clutch it harder.

"Drop the fucking gun and get on your knees with your hands above your head."

Tears stream down my face, blurring my vision.

"No," I whisper.

"Do it!" Rochus hisses.

Then he steps in front of me, putting himself between me and the police, holding his arms out to his side. I don't know if it's to shield me or to show them he's unarmed. Either way, I know an opportunity when I see one.

I look into the cold, dead eyes of my dad, the man I once loved. It seems so long ago that I hardly remember what it was like.

Then I pull the trigger, sealing my fate.

CHAPTER 1

Rocco

The fuck is wrong with me? I'm anxious as hell, leaning against my truck, waiting for my child bride to exit the prison gates. Jesus, even thinking of her as a child bride turns my fucking gut. That day was never meant to end the way it did, with her locked up in prison.

The whine of the oversized gates opening draws my attention as the large metal barriers slowly start rolling open.

Fuck. How did things end up like this?

The job was meant to be simple. Well, as fucking simple as it can be when you're dealing with the sick cunts in the skin trade. There's always a chance that things will go south, but it's a risk we are willing to take if we can save as many of the innocent girls being sold to sick motherfuckers around the world as we can.

I was the fucking ruse this time, posing as a spoilt rich boy whose father purchased him a fucking virgin. The auction was done online, and finalizing the transaction happened a week later when I walked into that church and met Carlos Rodríguez, and his daughter Cara, only sixteen at the time, duressed to be my fucking wife.

I was only nineteen myself, but fuck, I'd been with the Diamond Crew for a while by that time, and had spent life on the streets for a number of years before that, so I knew how to bury my fear deep and only show the world a hard exterior. It's

how I learned how to survive the cruelty of adults that thought their needs, their desires, meant more than a child's consent.

The large metal gates come to a clanging stop, the tall wire fencing built right up to them like a cage rattles as a gate further in opens.

Shit. How can one chick make me so fucking nervous?

The Cara Rodríguez I met when she was sixteen was a contradiction. Her features were everything soft, from her satin smooth cheeks and large doe eyes, and how fucking soft and plump her lips looked. And fuck, they felt it too, something which fucking pisses me off.

Not the fact that her lips were soft, but how it was nice kissing them.

Like what the fuck? She was sixteen. And while there are only three years between us, I was still classed as an adult that day, so I should never have liked how her lips felt against mine.

It was torture enough having to fake that I was excited about consummating the marriage, and fuck, even having to slap her ass felt so fucking wrong.

So why was she a contradiction?

Because as sweet as she looked with her long silky dark hair, big eyes, and those fucking kissable lips, she had the fire of a warrior princess inside her. A warrior princess who saw an opportunity to take matters into her own hands, and fucking killed her dad in front of everyone, including the cops.

Now, here I am, three years later despite the fact she refused to see me the entire time she was locked up. I kept trying for the first six months, but I eventually gave up. I turned my attention to helping our crew, while our Aussie associate, Baz Marx, worked tirelessly to get Cara's murder sentence reduced to manslaughter, and get her released early.

Yeah, we had to pay off a judge, a couple of cops, and even the prison warden to remove the murders Cara committed while inside, but we couldn't leave her in there when we were meant to save her.

A group of women start walking down the caged tunnel, and I hear some excited gasps around me from others who are waiting for their loved ones to be released.

I stand taller, pushing off my truck and rolling my shoulders back as I watch the women get closer to the exit.

I'm not even sure if Cara will recognize me. She wasn't present during the closed hearing last week where the judge ordered her to be released into my care as part of her parole terms. I've seen her though. Well, a picture of her. A prison headshot. I've studied it daily for the last few months, conjuring scenarios in my head as to where the innocent-looking girl that I met three years ago went, because staring back at me is a woman. A hard woman. A woman who, like me, has learned how to survive.

A couple of prison guards move to the wire gate at the end of the cage and unlock it, pushing it open where the first woman steps out toward her freedom.

There are some squeals from a few cars down, and then they run into each other's arms and hug.

I ignore the commotion and focus on the gate, watching as woman after woman steps out, but none are my wife.

Where the fuck is she?

Frowning, I take a few steps forward to get a better view into the cage and see a tall figure strutting down the path as she talks to a female prison guard. The closer they get I can see a cigarette being shared between them, before they hug each other.

The moment Cara Rodríguez steps out of the cage and into the parking lot, my lungs fucking forget how to function. That definitely is not a child. That is a woman, curvy in all the right places, holding herself tall and proud and so fucking full of confidence, the same confidence I got a brief glimpse of at our wedding.

She glances around the lot, her body stiffening when her dark gaze lands on me, and she takes one last drag of her smoke, before dropping it to the gravel, and using the toe of her shoe to stub it out.

Jesus, where did she even get those clothes? She went to juvie in a fucking wedding dress, and walks out of prison in booted heels, skintight leather looking pants, and a fucking cheetah print cropped tank.

If I thought Cara needed saving from prison, I'm getting the feeling that I was very fucking wrong.

Her heels click as she walks over to me, one foot in front of the other, her hips swaying in a way that reminds me of catwalk models doing their strut.

Fuck. Do they teach them that in prison?

“Who did you fuck up the ass to swindle this?” she asks, coming to a stop in front of me.

I’m speechless for a moment as I take her in. She’s still there, that innocence from the child she once was. But either she’s covering it up to appear stronger, or, she’s been hardened in such a way that even though you can see signs of the nineteen-year-old in her features, her soul is ten years older.

Given the teardrop tattoo under her eye, something I know she got after committing murder while in prison, I’d say that I’m looking at the latter.

“Don’t I get a thank you? You’re free now.”

She scoffs. “Hardly. I’m going from one prison to another.”

“Living with me won’t be like a prison.” I snap, feeling the sting of her insult.

Her dark brows hitch. “I’m still your wife. That sounds like a prison to me.”

She brushes past me, moving to the passenger door, getting in.

Fuck. She could be more grateful. I get that this isn’t the best situation, but we’ve worked on getting her released for the entire time she was locked up, and this is what I get.

Rounding the truck, I climb in and start up the engine, acutely aware of her presence in the cabin. My knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel, my eyes trained straight ahead, not really seeing anything as her pissy attitude digs its claws into me.

Calm the fuck down, man.

She doesn't understand.

She thinks I bought her from an online black-market auction and married her underage.

Well yes, that is what happened, but she doesn't know that the marriage was a ruse to protect her. She doesn't know that we were there to save her.

She doesn't know me. She only knows the persona I was in that day as I performed the ruse.

Shifting next to me, Cara stretches her legs out, placing them on the dash of my truck, and my fucking blood boils.

“Get your fucking feet off the dash.”

The low growl that comes from me causes her to shift a little, but her feet remain in place.

Slowly, I release the wheel and turn in my seat, glaring at her.

“I won't ask fucking twice, Cara. Get your feet off the dash.”

A sinister smirk slowly spreads her lips, drawing my eyes to them and how fucking plump they still are.

“Too late. You already did.”

“What?” I snap in confusion as I drag my gaze from her lips to her eyes that appear more gray than usual.

“You said you won’t ask twice, but you already did. You asked the first time, and then right after you said you won’t ask twice. So you did.” She smirks. “Ask twice.”

My lips part to argue with her, but she has a fucking point which I don’t want to admit, so I lurch forward, grabbing her ankles and pull her feet down off my dash.

“Hey! Don’t touch me!” She hisses, her fists balled like she is preparing to throw a punch.

I chuckle. “You’re my wife. It’s my right.”

You fucking idiot. What sort of moronic caveman comment was that?

“Yeah? Well, I’m not opposed to becoming a widow. I hope you know how to sleep with one eye open.” She shoves me back, her small hands stronger than they look.

I chuckle. She’s kind of funny.

Even so, I’m not dumb enough not to take her threat seriously. I could always tell her the truth about that day. Explain to her why she’s still my wife when the whole thing was a ruse, but this way seems more fun.

Let her be fucking scared of me.

What do I care?

As soon as the twelve months are up and we can file for a divorce, assuming I can keep her out of trouble from violating

the terms of her parole, then she can walk the fuck away, and I can turn my focus back on saving more innocent children.

Turning my sights to the road, I pull out of the prison parking lot and turn the radio up to fill the cabin with music as we make the two-hour drive back to Santa Cruz.

She stays quiet for the trip, sitting mostly tense for the first half, but then relaxing back into the seat for the second half, putting her window down and letting her fingers dance in the wind as she dangles her hand out the window.

The more time that passes, the more I settle back to my old thoughts about wanting to help her, instead of slapping her for being such an ungrateful bitch. I need to remind myself that she's out of the loop with the details of that day. That she has been in survival mode for years and isn't going to trust anyone anytime soon.

As I slow the truck to suit the speed for inner Santa Cruz, Cara sits taller in her seat, looking out at our surroundings. I have no idea where she's originally from. Definitely California since we were tracking the movements of her father across the state for a while before the auction even took place. Though I get the feeling by how curious she is, that she isn't from Santa Cruz.

I look around, trying to see it through her eyes, and if she didn't know where she was, she does now by the Santa Cruz Warriors banner outside their office.

"Have you ever been to Santa Cruz before?" I ask, my words instantly making her stiffen.

“No.”

“The beaches are nice. The wharf is cool. Some good places to eat. There’s a deck that the sea lions lounge around on. The summer tourists love that.”

I can see in my periphery, Cara turning from the window to look at me.

“Are we going to go for strolls on the beach, hand in hand, before going to the wharf where you’ll hand feed me and look longingly into my eyes?” She makes a gagging noise before continuing. “If you think I’m going to be your well-behaved wife and bend to your will, then you better think again.”

I know I shouldn’t say it. I know it’ll just make things worse. But I can’t stop the words from falling from my lips.

“Oh, you’ll be bending to my will alright.”

“Un-fucking-likely!” she yells, and I shoot her a smirk.

“We’ll see.”

“You won’t live long enough to try.” She threatens and I chuckle.

“Again. We’ll see.”

“Ugh. You’re impossible.” She huffs, crossing her arms over her chest and sinking back into the seat.

I can’t argue about that. I am being impossible, just to annoy her.

On the other side of town, I scan the front entrance of the adult entertainment club, Dirty Diamonds, as we approach, noticing it’s quiet out on the street.

The club is open but doesn't get busy until night when most members have finished their nine to five, which gives us time to focus on the real business we do.

"That place there," I point as I slow the truck, "That's where you will work."

Her eyes scan the place before her head whips in my direction.

"I'm not fucking stripping for anyone!" Her declaration is loud in the cabin, and I smirk as we idle past the club.

"You won't be stripping there," I tell her, catching her mortified expression.

"I won't be a whore either!" she yells again and I nod.

"Good thing that's not a fucking brothel then."

"Then... what will I be doing there?"

I speed up now that we're past the club, turning the corner to take the street toward the waterfront, and my little beach shack.

"The books," I say, noticing her glance back out the windows as the buildings turn to houses.

"The books? Like, bookkeeping?" she asks, turning back to me, and I nod. "But I don't know anything about bookkeeping."

"That's okay. I'll teach you."

She falls silent, so I sneak a glance at her to find those dark brows hitched again.

“What?”

“You’ll teach me?” She scoffs. “Is it not enough that I have to stay under the same roof as you, but have to endure you at work as well?”

“Tough gig, I know, but I think you can handle it.”

She huffs again, and I bite back my smirk. I can see she wants to rile me up. She wants to make me mad, and it’s annoying her that I’m not biting this time.

As the ocean comes into view, out of the corner of my eye I see Cara sit taller in the seat. I love this place and my little patch of paradise. It’s nothing grand. The complete opposite in fact, but it’s mine, and it’s right across from the water.

At the end of the street, I turn onto my road, and a couple of houses in, I turn into my small driveway.

My shack is small. One bedroom, one bathroom, a living room and kitchen. The laundry is out the back in the small courtyard, but that’s the extent of my humble abode.

“Couldn’t decide what color to paint it?” Cara remarks as she takes in the façade of my house. Her new home.

I smirk, knowing she’s referring to the three different paint colors.

The timber cladding that surrounds my bedroom is a mint green, while the cladding that wraps around the front living area is yellow. The white trim is the only thing that ties it altogether, and the aqua front door is a statement piece.

No one but me has to like it, and since I do, I don't really care.

"It's unique." I comment and she fake laughs.

"You've got that right."

I try not to let her dig at my cozy shack annoy me, and climb out of my truck, hearing her do the same.

Opening the door to my home, I turn back to invite her in, but find her at the sidewalk, staring over the road to the mix of rocky banks and sandy beaches that stretch along this part of Santa Cruz.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I say, coming up behind her, and she nods.

"There's something freeing about the ocean, so open and as far as you can see."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "Well, now you get to look at it every day," I remind her, and she turns to look over her shoulder at me. "Sometimes, I sit out here for hours staring at its beauty." I gesture to the chairs behind me that sit under the living room window, and her eyes follow, spotting them. "There's also a great view from my bed."

Her face falls, and she turns back to the ocean.

"What about my bed? Is there a view from my room?"

"Sure there is. It's the same view I get, since my bedroom is your bedroom."

"What!" She spins on her heel, but I'm already making my way back to my door, stepping into my house.

“You can’t be serious?” she asks in a panic, stepping inside as well, and for a moment, she falls quiet as her eyes scan the small space.

“I’m very serious. You’re meant to be my wife. Your parole officer said he might do spontaneous home visits to make sure you are abiding by your parole terms. And since my home only has one bedroom, I don’t see where else you’re gonna sleep.”

Her mouth drops open before she storms through my little shack, going into my bedroom, and coming out the second door that leads to the only bathroom in the house. Then she steps into the kitchen, doing a spin before joining me back in the living room.

“This is it?” she asks, shocked, and I nod. “But there isn’t even a laundry room.”

“It’s outside.” I point to the back door, “in the little courtyard.”

“No.” She all but whispers, her face falling, her hard exterior vanishing for a beat before she puts her mask back into place.

“Yes. I’m sorry it’s not a palace for you, but with time, I’m sure you’ll come to love it as much as I do.”

Shaking her head, she glares at me. “I’m not sharing a bed with you. I would rather die.”

Rolling my eyes at her dramatics, I shrug. “Suit yourself. Enjoy the couch.”

Tossing my keys on the bar top bench that divides the living room and kitchen, I reach back and pull my shirt off, draping it over the barstool.

“What are you doing?” Cara asks, and I try not to react to the slight edge of fear in her tone.

“It’s hot, and I’m in my house.” I shrug, turning my back on her and going to the fridge to grab a beer. “Want a drink?”

“No.” She huffs, and I shrug, opening the bottle and drinking it down as I walk back into the living room.

Her dark gaze is on me, traveling over my bare torso, and when she notices that I’ve caught her checking me out, she quickly turns her back to me.

It’s weird having her in my space. It’s not like I haven’t had women here before, but Cara is different. As small as she is, she seems to dwarf my living space by her presence alone.

“So what’s it going to be?” I ask coming up behind her and she stiffens, moving quickly across the room so she can keep her eye on me. “You gonna sleep in our marital bed?”

“Sure. Once I’ve gutted you and buried the body.”

Throwing my head back laughing, she just glares at me and waits for my response.

“Okay, Killer. If you say so.” I tease before pointing to the bedroom.

“Inside the closet are some clothes for you. I had Alice and Sasha from the club go shopping for you. They got you some

toiletries as well, but if there's anything you need, we can pick it up later after we've been to the club."

"We're going to the club?" she asks, looking a little worried.

"Yes, but only to grab a few things so I can show you the basics of your job, because tomorrow, you start working there."

CHAPTER 2

Cara

The snores coming from Rochus are almost perfectly timed with the soft laps of the ocean. The few days I've been here, I've refused to join him on the bed, or take the couch. I'm sitting on the floor, hiding in the darkest corner of his house. Shack... whatever the hell it's called.

One thing I learned in prison was to never let your guard down. You're never more vulnerable than when you're sleeping, off in whatever nightmare your subconscious concocts for you. That's partly why I stay awake during the night, napping at odd times during the day when I can.

The other reason is my nightmares... the ones I've had since Julietta took her last breath. I can still hear the sounds she made as she choked on her own breath after she was stabbed to death. My beautiful, brave, and kind sister bled out on the dirty shower tiles.

She didn't deserve that. Julietta was the best person I've ever known, and nothing could ever be good enough for her. Let alone living her days out in prison after killing her husband not long after my wedding from hell.

If I allow myself, I can recall the feeling of her matted hair, and too thin body as she gasped for air she no longer needed. I knew she was dying, but I still held her and sang to her.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,

How I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high,

Like a diamond in the sky.

Esta noche allí estarás,

Cual diamante brillarás.

There isn't a perfect Spanish translation of the song, so toward the end, I was stringing words together from my memory. It's the song Julietta sang to me at night when I felt scared of the future. Even though she had to endure her own hell, she always found the strength to be there for me.

At least until she got married and had to leave our home in San Francisco to move in with her husband. The years after that were the hardest to endure. I missed her so much my soul fucking hurt.

I don't think about San Fran as my home, and I haven't since the day she moved out. Now, I guess I have no fucking home. A place to live, yes. But that doesn't make it a home.

Shaking the memories from my head, I look out the window. The sky is clear, making it all too easy to see the stars as they shine so brightly.

"Te amo mi corazón," I whisper into the night. "I love you so much your absence hurts."

So far, I've done a good job of avoiding certain things in my mind. Like, who am I without her? She was my heart, my conscience—everything that was good inside me died with her.

The price for Julietta's freedom was my soul, which is forever blackened.

I feel my eyes misting, but I don't allow any tears to escape. Julietta told me to be strong, to never bend to anyone, and to take control of my destiny.

"No one can keep someone like you down, Cara. Give them hell and then get the fuck out of there. Promise me you'll find a way to be happy."

"I promise," I murmur as I look up at the stars.

Unconsciously, I close my hand around the cross hanging from the necklace my sister gave me before she died. I still don't know how she managed to keep it in prison without anyone knowing.

A sinister smile stretches my lips as I recall the two women who tried to take it from me. Needless to say, one of them didn't live to tell the tale, and the other never bothered me again.

I reach for the cigarettes on the floor and light yet another one. The ashtray at my feet is already full, so much so the ashes I flick into it land on the floor. The dutiful daughter still living somewhere deep inside me wants to get up and empty it, but that's not happening. No way in hell am I risking waking my darling husband.

With a sneer on my lips, I look down at the laptop resting on my legs. When Rochus first mentioned I'd be doing bookkeeping, I hoped there'd be an easy way to get my hands on some of their money so I can get the hell out of here. Sadly,

I'm only given access to the fucking expenses, which is hella boring.

Since I've already completed the shit I'm expected to do, I take full advantage of having the laptop and start snooping through the other docs and sheets. It only takes me a few minutes of looking at the strip schedule to spot an error.

“Estúpido,” I mumble to myself.

One of the girls—or Diamonds, as they call them—is listed for a shift on a day they've also given her time off.

“Do you ever fucking sleep?” I stiffen as Rochus turns to his side and switches on the bedside lamp.

Despite my best intentions of ignoring him, I look up from the laptop. The white sheet he clutches when he's deep in slumber is barely covering him, so his torso and one leg are on full display.

My heart skips a beat as I involuntarily take in his toned physique. He really isn't bad to look at. Such a shame all those muscles and enticing grooves are wasted on someone who was willing to buy and marry a child.

I don't actually care about my age, that's the least of his offenses as far as I'm concerned. Whether I was sixteen or twenty-five, he bought me, and that's something I can never forgive, let alone forget.

Rochus clears his throat, and as I look into his grinning face, I know he notices me checking him out.

Putá.

“None of your business,” I sneer, finally remembering to answer his question. “And if you think I’m going to let my guard down around you, you’re badly mistaken.”

He nods like that’s what he expected me to say. “Are you at least going to shower and change your clothes today?”

I want to shrink in on myself, embarrassed he’s basically telling me I stink. He’s probably right. It’s been three days, and I’ve barely eaten or drunk anything, trying to avoid the bathroom as much as possible.

It’s not just that I can’t look at bathroom tiles without remembering my sister, it’s yet another time where I’d be vulnerable.

“Come on,” Rochus says, sitting up on the bed. “Is there... I mean... do you need help to shower?”

When my expression turns murderous, he immediately holds his hands up.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he rushes out.

Pretending not to notice the curious way he looks at me, I refocus on the laptop. I highlight the error in the schedule and leave a comment with a suggestion of who can fill in without it messing with the other schedules.

Within seconds, there’s a reply to my comment from someone named Cain. Curious about who he is, I click on his profile picture. Though he looks a little older, it’s clearly the guy who was at the church on my fucking wedding day, the one paying my dad.

Good catch, Cara. I owe you!

The six seemingly small words make me smile.

He's right... he owes me. Maybe if I help out, I can garner enough favors for my freedom.

I'm so engrossed in my thoughts I don't notice Rochus has moved until his hand closes around my upper arm, and he hauls me to my feet.

"Enough of this," he growls.

I kick out at him, but narrowly miss him when he moves to the side.

"Let go of me," I demand, outraged he's touching me.

I don't know why I'm surprised. On our wedding day, he did say he couldn't wait to fuck me, so this must be him reaching the end of his patience. Panic claws at my throat and I shake my arm, trying to dislodge his grip.

Rather than doing as I say, he moves until his body is flush against mine. Then he effortlessly throws me over his shoulder.

"Rochus!" I cry out, and slap his back, but he doesn't budge.

As he carries me over to the small bathroom, my breath quickens. No. I'm not going in there. I flail my arms and legs, doing my best to hurt him. Despite landing a few good punches, he doesn't react apart from a grunt or two.

"You're going to have to play nice eventually," he says as he puts me down on the bathroom floor.

My vision wavers, and it feels like the walls are closing in on me.

“I won’t let you fuck me,” I scream as I fight to keep my panic at bay.

Rochus chuckles. “I’m not in the habit of forcing anyone to have sex with me. But I don’t want to smell you all day. So get in the fucking shower.”

When I try to push past him, he quickly darts out the door, slamming it behind him. As I hear what sounds like furniture scraping against the floor, I jump into action and throw myself at the door.

It’s too late.

Whatever he moved is barricading the door, preventing me from getting out. Not that it deters me from kicking and punching the fucking door.

“Let me out,” I scream.

No answer.

“Rochus!” I snarl his name.

When that doesn’t work, I spin around and look for anything I can use to help me escape my new prison. Of course, there’s nothing. As I go through the cabinet and shower, I don’t even find a razor. The motherfucker must be hiding it.

Swallowing, I try a different tactic. “Please let me out. I promise I’ll be nice.”

Still no answer.

My heart thunders in my chest, and I swear the damn walls are moving nearer. If I don't get out of here soon, they'll swallow me whole.

"P-please," I sob, not able to control my panic.

I can't be in here much longer. The walls are almost touching my arms, and the light is flickering. If it goes out, I'll... I can't... I have to get out.

I only have one thing left to bargain with. Rochus doesn't know I'm still a virgin, or maybe he does since I've been locked up since we got married. But unlike many other inmates, I didn't indulge in any kind of sexual activities. I'm as untouched as I was three years ago.

Fuck, I really don't want to give my body to him, but I will if it's my ticket out of this cursed room.

"I'll make you feel good if you let me out," I offer, my voice breaking off on a whimper as the light flickers again.

When he still doesn't let me out, I start kicking and punching again while screaming at the top of my lungs. I even ram my head against the door.

I scream until my throat hurts, and the light disappears. Falling to my knees, I wait for the room to swallow me. To...

"Jesus fuck!"

I barely hear the roar or feel my body being jostled as he lifts me up and carries me out of the bathroom.

"Cara?"

Gasping, I greedily inhale as much air as I can. Despite the oxygen in my lungs, it doesn't feel like enough, and I continue to take in as much as possible. It's like a vicious circle, though. The more I breathe, the more lightheaded I feel. Yet I can't stop. My brain keeps telling me to carry on, so I do.

“Stop it!”

With each exhale, it feels like I'm depleting my body of the much needed air. I don't even try to answer him, instead I fight to make the room stop spinning.

Closing my eyes, I sag in his hold on me. I'm vaguely aware I'm in his lap, my head resting against his chest. The hairs on his chest tickle my nose.

The longer we sit there, the less I battle to breathe. My body relaxes, and I force my breathing to match the rise and fall of his chest.

It's still dark outside, and the only light illuminating the room is the bedside lamp. Its yellow light creates an almost cozy atmosphere.

When I try to open my eyes, they feel heavy so I decide against it. Barely aware of my actions, I burrow my head into him and breathe in his scent. Rochus smells of citrus and the forest mi abuela took us to for a picnic once.

One of Rochus' hands runs up and down my back, warming me everywhere I feel cold. I shouldn't be cold. Not when I'm fully dressed. Though a part of me wants to punch him for touching me, I ignore it. For the first time since I was a kid, I allow someone to hold me.

I'm so tired and weak from denying myself more than the bare minimum of food and water that I'm honestly not even sure I could fight him if I wanted to. Rochus is big, and from his need to always remove his shirt when he's in the house, I know just how ripped he is.

Before long, I feel myself drifting off, and despite knowing I shouldn't sleep when he's around, I don't have it in me to fight it.

I'm back in the prison, my sister lying on the floor with her head in my lap.

"It's okay, Cara," she whispers, with a smile on her lips. "I'll be free soon."

"No," I cry. "Don't leave me. Por favor quédate."

Even though I know she can't, I beg for her to stay with me.

"No one can keep someone like you down, Cara. Give them hell and then get the fuck out of there. Promise me you'll find a way to be happy."

The shiv in my hand clanks as it falls onto the floor. It's covered in Julietta's blood.

"Cara!"

I dart my head around, looking for whomever called my name. There's no one else here, though. There never is.

"You must go to him," my sister whispers.

"Who?" I ask, bewildered. "We're all alone."

She laughs, but unlike the other nightmares, she doesn't sound like she's dying. She sounds happy. "To your husband, of course."

"I don't trust him," I say, confused.

This conversation is all wrong. That's not how my nightmares play out. Julietta dies over and over, and we never talk about anything else.

"For fuck's sake, Cara!"

I look around again, trying to figure out where the voice is coming from. Fisting the shiv, I hold it tightly in case someone is playing a trick on me.

"You need to wake up," my sister sing-songs. "And you need to stop living in the past."

Jerking awake, I shoot my leg out, instinct telling me to kick first and ascertain the situation later.

"Fuck!" Rochus grumbles.

Without wasting a second, I roll to the side and off the bed, positioning myself in a defensive crouch. As I narrow my eyes and look at Rochus who's sprawled on his back, I register the fact I was on the bed and he's only wearing his boxers.

"What did you do?" I snarl.

Realizing I'm still fully dressed, even wearing my heeled boots, I relax a little. It's enough to notice the red welt matching the toe of my boot spreading on his chest.

"What did I do?" he sputters as he gets to his feet. "You fucking kicked me, you psycho. I was only trying to wake you

up.”

I blink, feeling confused.

“Why did you take me to your bed? Trying to fuck me while I was asleep?” I spit. Even as I say it, that doesn’t feel right.

No, wait. I fell asleep in his arms after he... he...

“You fucking locked me in the bathroom, you puta,” I hiss. My Spanish accent is coming out heavier than usual.

During the three years in lockup, I’ve worked hard to rid myself of my accent, and it’s gotten a lot better. Though, there are still times, like now, where it’s hard to hide, especially when Spanish insults slip out as well.

Rochus runs a hand down his face, and to his credit, he looks shamefaced. “I’m sorry about that,” he sighs. “I didn’t know you were going to have a fucking panic attack.”

Shit.

He knows my weakness now.

“So what?” I say, scathingly. “If you think I’m weak enough for you to take advantage of me, you’re sorely mistaken.”

His eyes twinkle with amusement as he runs his hand across the mark from my kick. “You’re definitely not weak,” he chuckles. Then he schools his features, removing all traces of amusement. “And just for the fucking record, I won’t take advantage of you.”

I roll my eyes because isn't that exactly what someone about to take advantage of me would say?

When he takes a few steps back, I finally get to my feet as well. Lord, even with the distance between us, he dwarfs me. At five-foot-nine I'm used to being amongst the tallest, but Rochus' six-foot-five makes me seem like a child. Which I suppose is apt since I'm his fucking child bride.

"What happened to Julietta? That's your sister, right?"

I glare at him. "Excuse me?"

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised that he knows that, but a part of me feels violated since he knows that about me when I know nothing about him. I suppose it's possible he came across her name when he purchased me, but that doesn't exactly make it better.

"You were screaming out her name in your sleep. Does she... I mean... is she okay?" He looks confused, but he sounds like he's worried.

Huh, maybe he does actually care.

"She's fine," I say, my voice almost cracking. "She's dead, so she's in a better place." I look upward, hoping what I'm saying is true.

"How did she die?" he asks.

A yawn escapes me, and I take my time stretching while I consider if I'm going to reply or not. It's not like I owe him an answer, yet I find that I want to give him one. At least part of the truth.

I look into his dark eyes, surprised I can see my own reflection. “A monster killed my sister,” I croak.

“When?” he asks, taking a step closer to me.

Although I want to flinch away from his intensity, I stay in place. “Almost a year ago. It wasn’t long after I got transferred out of juvie.”

His brows furrow in confusion. “Who told you?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “No one had to tell me, Rochus. I was there, holding her as her life literally bled out of her.”

“What?”

Rolling my eyes, I continue. “She was in prison for killing her husband, and we served our sentences together.”

I watch as Rochus opens and closes his mouth several times. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, still holding his hand over where I kicked him.

“Fuck. I should have kept an eye on her,” he says, sounding like he feels... responsible.

Now I’m the one who’s lost for words. Why does he even care? He only saw her once, when he married me.

“Whatever,” I sniff disdainfully. “She wasn’t yours to look after.”

“Maybe not, but—”

“No buts,” I hiss. “Just fucking drop it.”

He runs a hand through his short, dark hair. “Fine,” he spits back. “But I still want you to take a goddamn shower and put on some clean clothes.”

At the mention of a shower, my hands begin to shake. I ball them into fists to stop it, which doesn’t help. So I end up hiding them behind my back.

“Unless you want me to kick you again, you better rethink that,” I hiss.

He holds his hands up. “Yeah, whatever. Look, I get you don’t want to go into the bathroom, so I have an idea.”

I arch my eyebrow, silently asking him to elaborate.

“Follow me.” That’s all he says before spinning around.

Doing as he says, I trail after him and follow him through the back door out into the laundry area and small garden.

Pointing at the hose attached to the tap in the wall, he says, “There. If you don’t want to go into the bathroom, you need to shower out here.”

“Absolutely not,” I hiss. “I’m not going to—”

“Enough!” he barks. “I didn’t fucking touch you while you were sleeping, and I’m not going to perv on you either. You can keep your underwear on for all I fucking care.”

While I contemplate the compromise, he walks back inside. I’m still busy mulling the idea over when he returns with soap, shampoo, conditioner, a towel, and some clean clothes.

“Have at it,” he grins, slamming the door after him as he disappears again.

I tentatively move over to the hose while trying to gauge if he can see me from the window, and if any of the neighbors can watch me. Since I can't be sure, I decide to take his advice and keep my bra and panties on.

Showering in your underwear isn't as easy as it sounds, and it doesn't even feel like I'm getting completely clean. It'll have to do though.

I swear I hear Rochus laugh as I switch on the tap, spraying myself in the ice cold water from the hose. It's not ideal, but it's better than going into the bathroom. In record time, I wash my hair and as much of my body as I can.

Afterward, I use the towel he left for me to dry, and then to hide my naked body as I strip out of the drenched underwear. Though it's awkward, I manage to put on the fresh bra and panties underneath the towel.

I get dressed in the black jeans and purple tee Rochus left for me. It fits like a glove, but is nowhere near as comfortable as my leather stuff. I need to get my hands on some money so I can buy more because that shit is all I want to wear.

Looking down at myself, I can't help smiling at the purple. It's so unlike me that it makes me want to laugh. The only time I've ever had purple anything was... oh, right. The highlights I had when we got married. Does he think I like purple? Or is this a coincidence?

Wait, didn't he say someone else had picked out my clothes? I know it shouldn't matter either way, yet I think I like the idea of him picking this specifically for me.

CHAPTER 3

Rocco

The way Cara Rodríguez sways her hips when she walks should be fucking illegal. How does a nineteen-year-old know how to do that? Is it a natural progression into womanhood, to just instinctively know how to capture a man's attention with something as simple as walking?

Whatever it is, has my eyes lingering on the round globes of her ass as she walks in front of me as we enter Dirty Diamonds. I swear she's testing me. Waiting to see if I'll turn into the monster she thinks purchased her at the auction. Waiting to see if I'll throw her down and take what's owed to me as part of the marriage agreement.

Her virginity.

Fuck. I hate that she thinks I'm that person, and I also hate the way I'm so fucking drawn to her and eager to know if said virginity is still intact.

"I don't know why we are here. I already told you I finished all the book work." Cara's tone is laced with bitterness as she tosses a glare over her shoulder at me. "Jesus, were you just looking at my ass?"

Spinning to glare at me as she steps through the curtains into the main room of the club, I watch her fists clench like she is gearing up to punch me.

Fuck, I think I want her to punch me. I think I'd love to wrestle her to the ground and press my body into hers and...

“Rocco, my man.” Cain claps me on my back, snapping me out of my lust daze. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

I smirk at Cain. He knows exactly why I’m here. I sent him a text earlier making sure there weren’t too many of his pretty Diamonds around in the hopes Cara would feel more comfortable.

“Are the showers empty?” I ask, darting my gaze to Cara whose steely eyes widen.

“They are as empty as my soul,” Cain sing-songs, before throwing his head back and laughing.

Cara’s glare softens as a frown takes its place, her eyes now studying Cain.

He’s a crazy fucker. She will come to that realization quickly the more she comes into contact with him. As crazy as he is though, he’s solid. Reliable and trustworthy, traits that are hard to come by in our world.

“I have arranged all the most beautifully scented products for you to shower with.” Cain directs to Cara with a bow, and she jerks back like she’s just been slapped.

“What do you mean? I don’t need a shower.” Her gray eyes turn to me filled with panic and I frown.

I haven’t been able to establish why she doesn’t like showering. I thought perhaps she has a problem with confined spaces, but the dancers’ locker room has a large open shower space that allows multiple women to shower at once. I figured she’d feel more comfortable there, and since her last shower was a couple of days ago in my backyard after the whole

bathroom screaming incident, I figured another shower was due.

“Come on, Cara. I’ll show you. The showers here are in a large room that you can have all to yourself.” I step up to her, taking her upper arm, but she shoves away from me, beelining for the exit.

“I showered a couple of days ago. I don’t need another fucking shower.”

It only takes me two strides to catch up to her before I wrap my arms around her waist and tug her back against me. She flails against my hold, but when I press my lips against her ear, she stops.

“Cara, just do me a favor and at least take a look at the showers they have here before dismissing it. I swear, if you don’t want to use them, you don’t have to.”

Her chest is rising and falling rapidly under my hold, the fitted clothes she wore when she stepped out of the prison gates like a glove on her body again today. From this angle, I can see down the front of her top, the valley between her breasts squeezing together by the hint of the black lace bra she’s wearing.

Shit.

Don’t get fucking hard!

I will my dick to listen to my brain. Pressing a boner into her ass right now isn’t how I want things to go down. I’m trying so fucking hard to hide how she affects me.

She may be my wife, but she didn't choose this, and technically neither did I. Not for the purpose of love or some sick and twisted craving to possess a minor. By marrying Cara, I then became her guardian, which meant her parents, the sick cunts, could no longer have a claim on her. It was an arrangement I agreed to at Dante's request. Being only nineteen at the time, I was closest in age to her, aside from Cain, but he would have scared her more than anything with his flighty personality, so I was the best option.

So as married as we are, I will not ask her to perform her marital duties, or even pretend to give a shit about me. Except maybe when we see her parole officer. But other than that, I want her to just be free and safe, and fuck, even though I want her to shower, she smells so damn good.

"Do you promise?" she asks quietly, her voice a little shaky. "Will you give me your word that you won't make me use the showers if I don't want to?"

"Yes," I breathe against her ear. "I promise."

For a moment, a brief millisecond, I feel her lean into me, tilting her head to press her ear closer to my mouth.

Fuck!

DON'T GET HARD!

Think of something gross.

Gangrene toes.

A bucket of vomit.

A cow giving birth.

Cara tugs at my arms around her waist before I can do anything else, so I release her and watch as she turns to face me.

“Show me.”

Wait. Is she asking me to show her my hard dick?

When I don't speak, she rolls her eyes.

“Earth to Rochus. Show me the damn showers.”

Oh damn. Yes, the showers.

Fuck, I need to get my head out of the gutter when I'm around her.

Maybe I should find a Diamond to take the edge off while she's showering. That should help me stop responding to her like a fucking dog in heat.

“Call me Rocco,” I suggest, my voice sounding husky, so I clear my throat.

“Or, you can call him Mr. King.” Cain's voice reminds me that he's still here, having witnessed me losing my fucking mind. “Or Master King. Or just Master. He'd like that too.”

“Really?” I snap at him, and he shrugs like he's done nothing wrong.

“She's your wife. She should be prepared for how you like it.” Cain shrugs and I roll my eyes, turning back to Cara.

She's eyeing both of us like we are freaks.

She's probably not wrong.

“Come on.” I urge her to follow me, and she does, giving Cain a wide berth.

He gasps and slaps his hand to his chest like she’s just stabbed him, the dramatics coercing a giggle to fall from Cara’s lips.

Fuck, I like the sound of that. I haven’t heard that from her until now, and fuck if I’m not going to make it my mission to make it happen again. And again. And again.

Weaving through the tables, I lead Cara to the back section of the building and down the long passage until we reach the dancers’ locker room.

After a quick rap of my knuckles on the door, I ease it open, ducking my head in to make sure it’s empty, before pushing it wide and gesturing for Cara to step in.

She does so slowly. Cautiously. Like she’s ready for a fucking bear to jump out at any second.

I go with her, staying close to her side as she walks through the space, her eyes raking over the racks of skimpy costumes, and the lockers with each dancer’s name drawn in lipstick on the front.

“The shower room is through there.” I point toward the door at the far side, and she makes her way over to it by my side.

Her chest is heaving faster the closer we get, her hands trembling as her eyes widen with fear.

I have no fucking clue what happened to her. No idea why this is such a massive deal to her, and even though I have no

right to know, I want to know the reason behind it.

Taking the lead, I push the door open, revealing the large, tiled room beyond.

Cara gasps, leaps back and shakes her head frantically.

“No.”

“No?” I ask, still holding the door open, and she stumbles backward, tripping on her own foot as she frantically shakes her head.

Lurching forward, I reach out and catch her just in time, saving her from falling back on her ass.

“No!” She cries out, shoving at me, her breathing rapidly nearing panic attack level.

“Shhh. It’s okay. You don’t have to.” I remind her, holding her to me as I rub my hand up and down her back.

Looking down at her, I see her hands fisted in my shirt, her eyes wide with fear on the now closed door, like she can see through it to another realm where beasts roam the planet.

“Talk to me, Cara. Tell me why you can’t step foot inside that room.”

She shakes her head frantically, dragging her gaze from the door to press her forehead on my chest.

I’m not gonna lie. I fucking like having her this close. I just wish she wasn’t so scared.

“Talk to me please. I thought the room would be big enough.”

She nods this time, keeping her head pressed to my chest so I can't see her face.

“It's not the size.”

“Okay, well it can't be water since you showered outside. So what is it?”

She shakes her head against my chest. “I can't.”

My shoulders drop in defeat. Her fear. Whatever it is, runs deeper than I thought, which means until she knows she can trust me, she's not going to tell me her secrets.

“Okay. Let's go and grab a drink then. You can shower outside later when we get home.”

My words have the right effect, making her relax, her fists releasing my shirt as she steps back, her breathing not so dire now.

Reaching out to take her hand, she snatches it away like I repulse her, and I try to remind myself that's not why she did that, but it still stings a little.

She has no reason to trust me, I get that, and I could tell her the real reason why I married her, but she's not ready to hear that yet. She'll just think it's a lie, so I need to wait until I know she'll truly hear me when I tell her.

Leading Cara back out to the main room, some Diamonds are there, watching each other rehearse, so I head to a table on the far side to give us a hint of privacy.

“Oh hey, Rocco,” Mindy beams, doing a small, excited jump on the spot which makes her tits bounce. The patrons

love that shit.

Me, not so much.

“Hi ladies,” I offer them all, making sure I don’t single one out and make them feel special, which is what Mindy wants.

A drunken night and a gang bang later and she somehow has it in her head that she’s my girl. It’s been that way for a couple of years. You’d think the fact I haven’t touched her since would discourage her, but no, not Mindy. She’s dedicated, if anything.

The women all call their hellos as we pass by and I watch Cara when she’s not looking to see her annoyed frown as she looks at the women.

Ushering Cara to her seat, I excuse myself to get her a drink, and after I give it to her, I excuse myself again to find Cain.

“Is she enjoying the shower?” Cain asks as I pop my head in the supply room he’s rummaging through.

“Nope. She couldn’t even step foot in the room.”

Cain’s brows shoot up. “Damn. Any ideas what’s triggering her?”

Sighing, I cross my arms over my chest as I lean against the door jamb. “Nope. It’s not the confined space. And it’s not the water. So, I have no fucking clue.”

Nodding, Cain looks thoughtful as he straightens. “Maybe it’s just the room itself. It sounds like she’s had a bad experience inside a bathroom.”

One of my brows lifts. “You think?”

“I think about a lot of things. Toadstools. Magic mushrooms. Vaginas. Lizards. Cockroaches.”

I sigh at my friend. I shouldn’t have expected any other answer.

I look back down to the mouth of the hallway, seeing Mindy walk past, heading for Cara.

“Dammit,” I mumble, pushing off the wall. I don’t want Mindy messing with her.

Just before I reach the end of the passage, I hear raised female voices before Cain grabs my arm and yanks me back, shoving me hard against the wall.

His body weight is suddenly on me, and I frown down at him, wondering what the fuck he’s up to now.

“Wanna explain what the fuck—”

His hand slaps over my mouth, his eyes darting around sinisterly before he whispers. “Don’t let them know you’re here.”

“Why?” I mumble against his palm, and he rolls his eyes as if the answer is too fucking obvious to speak out loud.

“So we can hear what they say about you. Duh.”

I chuckle against his palm, but quickly forget about how close he is to me as Mindy’s voice gets louder.

“I don’t know why you’re looking so smug. You’re nothing but a child. You don’t have what it takes to please a man like him,” Mindy sneers and I hear Cara chuckle.

“Why don’t you take your jelly tits and go and tell someone who cares.”

Mindy gasps. “See. You don’t even care about him. Why are you even here? He’s married, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Cara asks, sounding more amused than anything. “Where’s his wife?”

“She’s probably at their house, preparing herself for when he gets home. On her knees, waiting submissively. Just the way Rocco likes his women.”

“And you would know, I guess?” Cara asks.

Fuck, does she sound annoyed?

Maybe I’m hearing things.

“Oh yes. I know.” Mindy purrs. “I know exactly how he likes it. Hard. Brutal. Controlling.”

“Tell me something,” Cara asks, “have you been with him since he’s been married?”

Mindy giggles. “Well, I mean, it was only that once, and well, everyone had a sample of everyone that night. If his wife had been brave enough to show up and join in, then I’m sure she would have loved it too.”

I struggle against Cain’s hold, but he shoves me back against the wall, shaking his head. “Uh-uh. Let’s see if she’s a mouse or a snake.”

I roll my eyes at him, ready to argue when I hear Cara’s voice again.

“So the answer is yes. You’ve fucked him since he’s been married.”

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“And what if she found out? What do you think she’d do?”

Mindy giggles. “She won’t find out. No one here is dumb enough to open their mouths about that if we ever get to meet her.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You seem pretty dumb to me.”

Mindy gasps, and then there’s a loud slap, and I can’t hold back anymore, shoving Cain back hard and rounding the corner.

Mindy screams as Cara fists her hair and spins her, slamming her back against the wall with an oomph. As Mindy gasps for breath, eyes wide, Cara grabs the neck of my beer bottle and smashes it on the edge of the table before pressing the jagged glass to Mindy’s neck.

I try to lurch forward, but Cain wraps his arms around me and grunts in my ear.

“Let her work it out.”

“She’ll kill her.” I grunt back but Cain chuckles quietly.

“If she kills her, then we’ll clean it up.”

“I guess you really don’t know who I am,” Cara hisses in Mindy’s face, who is now sobbing, trembling with fear. “I am Mrs. King.”

All the tension leaves my body at her words.

“I am Mrs. King.”

Fuck. Why do I like the sound of her saying that so much?

“Y-you’re h-his w-wife?” Mindy stutters through her tears and I watch a slow, sinister smirk spread across Cara’s face.

Fuck. She’s beautiful.

“I am,” she agrees. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you for touching what’s *mine*?”

“Oh man. She just claimed you.” Cain mutters in my ear, and I snap back to reality and shove him off me, again.

“I-I-I...”

“Cara.” I rasp, stepping up to her side, but she doesn’t take her eyes off Mindy. “Forget her. Let’s go home where you can punish me for my transgression.”

Mindy’s eyes widen, which is exactly the reaction I want.

What’s going on with her and Cara is a power play. Mindy has lost, but I want to make sure she knows she never had a chance of winning.

This time, Cara’s steely gaze flicks to me.

Good. I have her attention.

“Forget her. She means nothing. She is nothing to me. Let’s go.”

Cara stares at me for a few long beats, her eyes a tornado of fury, and I know it’s not really about being jealous. It’s about respect.

Slowly, Cara eases back, dropping the broken neck of the bottle to the floor leaving a trail of blood on Mindy's neck where it nicked her.

"Go near him again and see what happens," Cara snarls before stepping away and turning her back on a distraught Mindy.

"Rocco?" Mindy whimpers, which pisses me off. What the fuck does she think I'm going to do? Stick up for her? Un-fucking-likely.

"Next time you, or anyone else, disrespects my wife, I won't stop her from following through." Then I lean in closer. "And don't ever presume to fucking know me. You know fucking nothing."

Cain chuckles and claps behind me as I step up to my wife and link our fingers. I expect her to snatch her hand away, but she doesn't. Instead, she holds my hand tight and walks out of the club by my side.

I should probably be concerned that Cara may actually want to punish me for my transgression, like I offered her. The dominant part of me is furious at the thought, but there's a part of me that would gladly kneel for her if that's what she needed. I'd give her that, at least once, as long as she knew that if she steps over that line with me, there's no turning back.

CHAPTER 4

Cara

On our way back to the beach shack Rochus—Rocco—lovingly calls home, we stop at a drive thru and get some food. Despite my insistence that I don't need my own meal, Rocco ignores me. And maybe he's right to because putting Mindy in her place has made me hungry.

"I'm not fucking discussing this again," he snaps. "You need to eat more."

Scowling, I turn around and look at him. I don't like being told what to do, especially not when he's right and I'm wrong. I know I can't keep myself going like this, especially not if I'm going to keep my promise to Julietta.

"Okay," I say, trying not to giggle at the shocked expression on Rocco's face. "But I don't like banana shakes, and I want extra large fries."

I don't know whether I like banana shakes or not, I've never had one. I've never even been to a drive thru. While we wait in the line of cars, I use the time to study the menu placed between the lanes.

The options are overwhelming. How do I know if I like pickles on my burger? Or if the chicken nuggets are good?

"Do you know what you want?" Rocco asks when there are only two cars in front of us.

"Umm..." Hesitating, I skim the menu again. "I'll take the large cheeseburger meal, a vanilla shake, and... five cookies."

My stomach rumbles in agreement.

“Anything else?”

I turn my head to look at Rocco, unsure why he’s asking me. Then I look back at the sign, pondering what else I might want to try. “Mozzarella sticks,” I say. “And maybe an ice cream.”

“Is that all?” Rocco chuckles.

Feeling self-conscious, I wring my hands in my lap. Did I order too much? I did, didn’t I. “Maybe I don’t need the mozzarella sticks,” I sigh. “Or the cookies.”

Damn, I really wanted the chocolate chip cookies. They look so delicious in the picture, and so does everything else.

“You can have whatever you want,” Rocco says. “Personally, I’m a big fan of their curly fries and shakes.”

Rocco drives up to the window and places the order. Not only is he ordering everything I asked for, he’s also ordering other things and different flavors.

A knot forms in my stomach as I realize I don’t have any money to pay for my food. So far, Rocco’s been keeping me fed, and even bought me new clothes. But I can’t keep taking his money. Okay, so technically I am working for it by doing the books for Dirty Diamonds.

That reminds me...

“Cain owes me a favor,” I rush out once he’s paid and driven to the next window, where we wait for our food. “He wrote that in a comment after I corrected the shift schedule.”

Huh, I never knew there's so much waiting involved.

Rocco turns his head and looks at me. "Is that so?"

I nod eagerly. "Yes. Do you think I can use it to pay for my share of the food?"

His eyes twinkle with mirth, but he doesn't answer me until we've received our food and are heading back to the beach shack.

"Look," Rocco says, breaking the silence. "If Cain owes you a favor, that shit is priceless. He doesn't give out favors easily. So I'd save it for something you really want."

Without meaning to, I stare longingly at the bags of food resting in my lap.

"Cara."

Stupid tears gather in my eyes because I know he's about to tell me I can't have any of the delicious smelling food.

"Look at me."

Refusing to let him see my shiny eyes, I keep my gaze fixed on the paper bags for the rest of the drive. I even hold on to them when we're back at the shack, refusing to part with the food just yet.

My stomach hurts, it feels like it's gnawing on itself as pangs of hunger make me feel lightheaded and like I might collapse.

Once we're inside the cozy house, Rocco tells me to place the bags on the coffee table in front of the couch. I discreetly

hide one behind my back, the one with the ice cream and cookies.

After getting some plates from the small kitchen, Rocco sits down on the couch and pats the space next to him.

“Come sit,” he says.

Shaking my head, I take a step back. I look at the back door, wondering if I can get away with sprinting out there.

Rocco sighs. “Look, I get that I don’t know half the shit you’ve been through. But it’s getting real fucking hard not to take your attitude personally.”

Looking at him, I furrow my brows in confusion. I don’t get why he’s taking it personally. He hasn’t done anything wrong, I have. I’m the one who’s meant to cater to him, submit to him. That’s what my mom taught me, and Mindy said that’s what he wants.

“Can we just fucking eat in peace and... I don’t know... talk or some shit?” When I don’t move, he adds, “You know your ice cream is going to melt, right?”

My eyes widen as I realize he knows I’m hiding it from him. “You can’t have it,” I warn, lifting my chin.

I know I’m behaving like a kid, but it’s so hard to navigate my new reality. I never wanted to be here, let alone to be married. But I’ve never had a choice in these matters. No matter how brutal prison was, it strengthened me. In there, I didn’t let anyone walk all over me and take my food, and I won’t allow it on the outside either.

Even as a kid, I never allowed anyone to touch what I perceived as mine. I think that's the real reason I got so pissed with Mindy at the club. Rocco's my husband, and that should mean something. Even if it's not a love marriage, I'm not okay with him getting his rocks off while I was locked up.

"I'm not interested in your fucking ice cream," Rocco laughs. "All I want is to share a meal and have just two minutes where you don't look like you're contemplating killing me."

Tilting my head to the side, I look at him from beneath my lashes. He sounds sincere, and he doesn't look threatening. Maybe it's okay to let my guard down while we eat.

Moving over to the couch, I slowly sit down as far away from him as possible. I prefer to watch him closely, so I adjust my position on the couch by pulling my legs up and leaning back on the armrest. I even place the ice cream on the table with the rest of the food.

"What do you want to try first?" Rocco asks as he shoves some fries into his mouth.

I point at the burger, and when he hands it to me, I unwrap it right away. The first bite is so good I moan in pleasure. The meat is full of flavor, and the lettuce, tomato, and bun taste so much better than the prison food.

"That good?" Rocco laughs, and I nod eagerly. "Try a curly fry."

He shakes them in front of my face, not stopping until I take one. "Oh my God!" I exclaim with my mouth full.

“They’re great.”

As my gaze collides with Rocco’s, I’m surprised how dark his eyes are. I mean, yeah, they’re always dark. Yet, right now, they’re almost black. But instead of making him look menacing, he looks like a forbidden treat that I... I shake my head because it doesn’t matter how he looks.

Rocco continues to push food on me, not stopping until I’ve tried every single thing on the table and slurped the last of my shake.

“Do you want your ice cream now?” he asks, arching a brow like he’s daring me to consume more food.

“Absolutely,” I say eagerly.

Reaching for the tub, I scoop some onto the spoon that came with it. Once again, I moan. The caramel and chocolate flavors exploding on my tongue are too fucking much. This is the stuff of dreams.

“Can I try some?” he asks.

Despite the teasing lilt to his tone, I shake my head vehemently. “No.”

Rocco snorts and bends down to kick off his shoes. I know what comes next, and yep, like clockwork, his shirt is the next to go.

“Why do you always do that?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Do what?”

Rolling my eyes, I take another bite of the heavenly ice cream. “Walk around shirtless.”

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "I'm in my home, what's more natural than being as comfortable as possible?"

I take a moment to mull over his words. I guess it makes sense. Not everyone comes from a fucked up home where there was never enough food, or where being dressed was a luxury.

Putting down the now empty tub of ice cream, I unzip my boots and pull them off before getting up from the couch, placing them neatly by the door. It's awkward, but I walk backwards, refusing to take my eyes off Rocco. He might have had my back at the club, but that doesn't mean he won't pounce when I'm not looking.

As soon as I'm back on the couch, Rocco says, "I want to talk about what happened with Mindy."

Here we go. He'll probably tell me off for attacking her.

"I'm not sorry for what I did," I snap, defensively.

"You shouldn't be."

My lips part, but I can't think of any words to say. This isn't the reaction I was expecting.

"You and I aren't together, Cara. So I can do whatever the fuck I want. But—"

I jump off the couch and place my hands on my hips, my temper getting the better of me. "Is that so, husband?" I sneer. "Can I fuck around as well, then?"

Fuck me. I shouldn't antagonize him or remind him that I legally belong to him.

“You can try,” Rocco snarls, getting to his feet. “But it won’t end well for whoever you give your virginity to.”

His nostrils flare as he crosses his tattooed arms over his chest. I’m momentarily distracted by the ink on his chest.

“Cara!”

The way he snaps my name has my hackles rising. “I’m not a fucking virgin anymore,” I lie. “You’re about three years too late.”

Horror creeps over his features, and he takes a step toward me. “What?” Although I don’t want to give him any ground, I take a step back. “You weren’t a virgin when we got married?”

I force out a laugh. “Sure I was. But I took care of that within the first week in juvie.”

Bullshit, that’s what it is. Rocco doesn’t need to know that, though.

A low growl emanates from his throat as he clenches and unclenches his fists. He looks scary, so I’m not sure why I don’t feel any fear. He could easily pick me up and do whatever the hell he wants, and maybe that’s why I can’t stop pushing him.

So far, he’s been... nice, something I don’t trust. I need to see what’s underneath the surface. When Mindy antagonized me, I got a small glimpse of Rocco’s monster. Which reminds me...

“You want me to punish you?” I ask, completely changing the subject.

“Say fucking what?”

I nod. “You said I could punish you.”

Palming his chin, he runs his thumb up and down the scruff. “I didn’t say that for you.”

“But you deserve to be punished,” I exclaim.

I have no idea how I could do that, only that it feels right. In prison I punished everyone who disrespected me. Usually with my fists or feet, which was enough for them to learn their lesson and leave me the fuck alone.

Rocco’s different, and to truly punish someone, you need to know what they either fear or hold dear. With him, I don’t know enough to even take a guess.

“Take your best shot,” he smirks.

I nod. “I will. Eventually.”

“We’ll see.”

Without another word, Rocco disappears into the bathroom, and within minutes I hear the water from the shower running.

This is our routine. He showers before bed, and I half suspect it’s partly to give me privacy to change into the leggings and tee I sleep in. Well, sleep is much too generous. I still can’t relax enough to let myself go completely, so it’s more like I’m resting.

After tidying the empty containers and all traces of our food orgy, I brush my teeth at the kitchen sink and quickly get

changed. It feels weird to be out of my leather, and I still haven't decided if that's good or bad.

Lying down on the couch, I pull the laptop on top of my stomach and begin rifling through the files. It's mostly to have something to do since I already know there isn't any new work for me to keep myself occupied.

My eyes grow heavy, and I swallow down a yawn as I quickly reply to some of Cain's comments on my last notes. Once that's done, I'm blurry-eyed from exhaustion and the battle to stay awake is becoming harder.

Rocco might be as long as another half hour in the shower. I never know with him. So I make the snap decision of catching a speed nap while he's getting ready for bed.

I turn to my side so I'm facing the room and close my eyes, letting the waves crashing on the rocks across the road, and the water from Rocco's shower lull me to sleep.

“Cara.”

I groan, annoyed to be woken up, and blink to get used to the darkness.

“Be quiet and don't fucking move.” Rocco hisses, his mouth so close to my ear I can feel his hot breath on my skin.

I open my mouth to answer, and stiffen when I realize his hand is clamped around my mouth and his weight is crushing me to the couch.

That motherfucker. I let my guard down, and now... and now... I buck, trying to get him off me, but he doesn't budge.

“Whatever you think I’m doing, this is not it. Listen,” Rocco whispers urgently.

That’s when I hear it, someone is jiggling the door handle and it sounds like they’re trying to get inside. As soon as the realization hits me, I stop fighting him and become completely still.”

“Mija, I know you’re in there!”

I stiffen as I hear the endearment only my mom has ever used. It’s not a woman’s voice, though, and I already know who it belongs to.

“Don’t be a coward, Cara. Come out and play.”

Fuck. Mateo. My twin.

“You know who it is?”

I nod.

“Your family?” Rocco whispers directly into my ear.

I nod again.

He curses low enough that my brother shouldn’t be able to hear him, and then he reaches for his phone. The light is so harsh I close my eyes, shielding my irises.

Why the hell is Mateo here? I don’t belong to him. Rocco bought me, so my family doesn’t have a claim on me anymore.

“Caraaaaa,” Mateo shouts gleefully. “Why are you hiding from me, sister? Is it because your husband hasn’t claimed you yet?”

His words bring forth a memory of a conversation I overheard between my dad and Julietta's husband. Basically, dad was saying that until the buyer fucked my sister, the deal wasn't complete even if money had changed hands.

Fuck.

Rocco hasn't done... that. Does he know about this? Is he wanting me to go back to my family?

Sweat coats my forehead as I struggle to breathe.

I can't go back, not after killing my dad. I'd sooner fucking die myself.

"Are you okay?" Rocco murmurs. "Gray and Gunner are on their way. Don't worry, no one's going to lay a hand on you."

Right now, I'm glad for the darkness. With how perceptive Rocco is, he'd see the panic written all over my face within seconds.

"Nod if you're okay," Rocco urges, so I do. "Okay. Just hang in there."

Just as the words leave his mouth, a window shatters and I scream into his hand. Rocco curses, but doesn't move off me. If anything, he presses his hand harder against my mouth as we listen to the footsteps from somewhere outside.

I lose track of how much time passes until the sound of a vehicle approaching reaches us.

"That's them," he says, no longer whispering. "I'll be right back."

Rocco gets off me and throws open the door just as there's a knock. A young guy with dark wavy hair stands in the doorway.

"Gray," Rocco snaps.

"Gunner's looking around, but I didn't see anyone," Gray says.

"I'll check the back," Rocco snaps. "Stay with Cara."

"We already checked. Gunner dropped me off a few houses away and gave me a head start so the engine didn't tip them off to our arrival. There's no one here."

Rocco ignores him and walks over to the back door, keeping one hand at the small of his back as he kicks it open. Holy shit, does he have a weapon hidden?

I don't know why it never occurred to me that he'd be packing. It seems so obvious, and obviously a factor I've overlooked.

"Hey," Gray says sheepishly. "We haven't been formally introduced. I'm Gray."

I slowly get to my feet, my legs still shaking. "Hola," I greet him.

With no idea what else to say, I just stare at him. Unlike Cain and the few other people Rocco hangs around, Gray looks homeless. His clothes don't fit him properly, and he just has an aura of being lost.

"Are you okay?" he asks, sounding uncomfortable.

I shrug. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

He chuckles, which makes him look younger than I first thought he was.

“All good,” Rocco says as he comes back inside. “This is Gunner.” He points at the guy with sandy blond hair behind him.

“Sup,” Gunner says, looking anywhere but at me.

“Hi,” I say. Then I look at Rocco. “Is he gone?”

Something in my tone makes him pinch his lips together as he nods. “Yeah, no traces of anyone.” I wish he’d look away instead of studying me like I’m a rare specimen. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sure,” I say, trying—and failing—at sounding chipper.

Knowing that Mateo so easily found me has me on edge, especially since he’s right. Rocco hasn’t claimed me, but now I need him to. And fast.

“What did he want?” Gray asks, looking between us.

Rocco looks deep in thought as he says, “I’m not sure. I don’t even know who it was.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and plaster a smile on my lips. “It was my brother,” I say sweetly. Then I move to Rocco’s side, and place my hand on his bicep. “You saved me.”

His gaze snaps to mine, uncertainty swimming in his dark eyes. “Umm...” Palming the back of his head, he trails off.

“Thank you,” I say sincerely.

I might have a role to play, but my gratitude is still heartfelt.

Rocco takes my hand, and I allow him to intertwine our fingers while he talks with Gray and Gunner. Since I have to up my game if I want to make sure our marriage is consummated so my family can't claim me, I lean against him and wrap my arm around his waist. At first he stiffens, but he quickly relaxes and returns my affection by moving me in front of him so he can hold me from behind.

Too preoccupied with breathing and mentally talking myself into doing what needs to be done, I barely hear their conversation.

“Okay, we'll patrol tonight,” Gunner says, though he doesn't sound happy about it.

“For sure,” Gray adds.

After saying goodbye, they leave and I have a plan that I'm pretty sure will work.

While Rocco closes and locks the doors, I slowly move over to the bedroom. I turn to him and bat my eyelashes. “Can I sleep with you tonight? I don't want to be on my own in case he comes back.”

Despite the nod I get in return, I can feel his suspicion.

“Do we need to board up the window?” I ask as I suddenly remember hearing one shatter earlier.

“No, it wasn't one of ours,” he says curtly.

I watch as he gets back into bed, and I quietly climb in and make myself comfortable. We don't speak, we just lie there as a heavy silence stretches around us.

To keep my mind busy so I don't fall asleep, I try to remember the tips my sister gave me on my wedding day. Too determined to never let it happen, I didn't pay much attention back then. And now, I wish I had.

I smile as Rocco's breathing deepens and eventually his snores echo in the quiet room. Game time.

As quietly as possible, I shimmy my leggings down and kick them off. Then I move around on the bed, testing to see how deeply Rocco's sleeping. His snoring doesn't change, which means he's far gone. That's good since we're both sticking to our side of the bed, and I need to be much closer for what I have in mind.

Swallowing down my guilt, I move closer until our bodies touch. I cautiously lift the sheet, needing to get a better look at what I'm dealing with here. Unlike the men my sister had to fuck, Rocco doesn't have a beer gut hiding his crotch, which makes it a lot easier.

I move my hand to his crotch, but when I connect with his dick, it's soft. How the hell am I meant to make him hard and get his boxers off without waking him up?

Needing more time to form a new plan, I turn to my back and stare up at the dark ceiling like the answers to my problem are written there. They aren't. And the more I think about it, the more impossible it seems.

As the room brightens and the sun shines through the windows, I realize I'm out of time. I can't keep stalling. Throwing caution to the wind, I move back to my side and,

once again, I reach for him. This time, he's hard, and when I touch the bulge in his boxers, it jerks under my touch.

While dragging the sheet down, I keep my eyes on Rocco's face, needing to make sure he's still sleeping. Luckily for me, he doesn't stir and his breathing stays the same.

Now that I can see his boxers more clearly, I notice they have a slit in them. I snake my hand into the gap, and gently ease his cock through.

Rocco's dick is very different from the previous ones I've seen. It's huge, and there's a vein running along the length. The tip is angry looking and wet, something shines from the tip.

With jerky movements, I straddle Rocco and slide my panties to the side. I wrap my hand fully around his large cock, giving it a few strokes before I line the head up with my opening.

What I'm about to do is wrong on so many levels, and I wish there was another way. But having Mateo show up like that changes everything.

I can't go back. There's just no way.

Three!

Fuck, I don't even know if he'll fit...

Two!

I shouldn't be doing this...

One!

I *have* to do it.

Needing to get it over with, I slam down and take him all the way inside me in one move.

Fuck!

Pain flares to life, nearly blinding me as it feels like he's ripping my vagina apart. My eyes water, and I bite down on my hand to stop my whimpers from escaping.

Shit, this really hurts.

Rocco's lids fly open, and he gasps my name.

Despite the need to get away from him, I force myself to move up and down.

"What are you doing?" he rasps, but I ignore him.

The pain doesn't matter, only that I lose my virginity. Which I guess I've technically done now. I can't believe how much it hurts. Every move makes it feel like my insides are being stabbed.

I'm so focused on the task at hand that I don't notice Rocco's hands on my hips at first.

"Don't touch me," I hiss, slapping his hands away.

"W-what?"

He looks so confused I almost feel bad for him.

"This isn't what you think," I admit. "I... we... this had to be done."

"Had to be done?" Rocco echoes. "If you wanted me, all you had to do was say so." His voice is husky with remnants of sleep.

When he tries to touch me again, I leap off him and the bed. That's when I see it, the blood coating his hard dick.

Fuck.

Rocco looks down at himself, and I want to shrink under the death glare he sends my way when he notices the blood.

“What the fuck did you do?” he roars, sitting up.

I startle, and a part of me wants to cower and beg for his forgiveness. That's when the perfect excuse hits me.

“You had to be punished!” I shout back. “I told you I'd get you, and now I have.”

CHAPTER 5

Rocco

Cara has been outside under the cold shower for way too long. I need her to get the fuck back inside so I can find out why the fuck she did that. Why would she tell me she wasn't a virgin if she was, and then impale herself on me while I was sleeping?

That's not how she should have lost her virginity, and fuck, perhaps she shouldn't have lost it to me, but here we fucking are. Even though I didn't come inside her, I've never been happier to know she's on birth control. I think the record Baz and Dante showed me said something about hormone control or some shit like that.

Inside my bathroom, I kick off my boxers and sit my junk in the sink, quickly washing Cara's blood off. My cock is a bit raw. She was barely wet which is why I was so fucking confused about what she was doing when I woke up. She literally impaled herself. She wasn't ready, and even though I was hard, neither was I. Why the fuck didn't she let me touch her? I could have worked over her clit and made her slick for me in seconds, but instead, she slapped my hands away.

Fuck, I have no idea what's going through her head, something that I need to fucking resolve now. I'll shower later when I've had a fucking discussion with my wife.

A knock at the front door of my house makes me still, and I check the time on my watch. It's only 8am. Who the fuck is here at this time of day?

Remembering we had a prowler last night, I quickly shuck on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and snatch up my gun as I hurry to the door.

“Who is it?” I snap, my gun pointed at the timber separating us.

“Officer Dudley,” the gruff male voice says. “I’m Mrs. King’s parole officer.”

I relax momentarily until I realize what this means.

Shit. The parole board believes this to be a real marriage. They stated that they will visit to confirm we are actually living as a married couple, as I am now responsible for Cara during her parole term.

We are definitely married. Just not happily or with Cara’s consent.

Quickly shoving my gun in the drawer by the door, I pull open the door to see a short man, round in the belly wearing a crisp navy suit and glasses sitting at the end of his nose.

“Hi,” I say, cracking the door.

“Oh. Mr. King, I presume?”

“Yes. You’re here to see Cara?” I ask dumbly, because obviously that’s why he’s here.

“Yes. I thought a surprise visit nice and early would be the best time to catch you both before you start your day.”

“Ah... Yes. Of course,” I mutter, looking briefly over my shoulder to the back door that Cara is still behind, showering.

“My wife is currently showering. Would it be possible for you to come back later?”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.” He smiles, stepping forward and pushing against the door. “I can come in and wait.”

I want to punch him. Get my gun out and introduce him to that.

I can’t though. In order to ensure Cara follows her parole terms, she has to remain out of trouble, and therefore, so do I.

“Come on in.” I sweep my hand out, gesturing for him to enter even though he already fucking is. “Take a seat on the couch if you like. I’ll just let her know that you’re here.”

“Thank you.” He nods, moving to the couch while I make my way to the back door and duck outside.

My eyes immediately land on Cara’s shivering naked back as she stands under the stream of water.

Shit. She’s gonna freak when she knows I’m looking at her like this.

Glancing down, I see the towel draped over the back of the wicker chair and scoop it up before stepping up behind her.

“Don’t freak out and scream,” I say quietly, and she gasps, spinning wide eyed as she tries to cover her tits and cunt with her hands. I don’t look. I have the towel held out in front of me, ready to wrap her in.

“What are you—”

“Shhh.” I hush, moving closer to wrap the towel around her front. “Your parole officer is inside.”

“What?” she whisper-yells, and I nod, keeping my eyes on hers.

“He’s here. Wanted to catch the married couple before we start our day.”

Her mouth drops open as if she’s going to say something, but then she snaps it back shut.

“It’s okay.” I offer, leaning over to turn the cold water off at the tap. “I told him you were showering. I’ll say you went across to the water for a morning swim and you’re showering out here, so you don’t track sand through the house.”

She nods, her body still trembling from being so damn cold.

“Dammit, Cara. Why won’t you just use the shower inside where the water is hot?” My concern for her must surprise her, although I don’t know why, but her brows shoot high as her lips quiver.

“I-I like the c-cold.”

“You’re a terrible fucking liar,” I say quietly, reaching forward to brush a strand of her hair back, but she jerks away like I’m going to burn her if we touch.

“Jesus, woman. This guy needs to think we are married. When you step foot inside, you’d better turn into a good fucking actress.”

With that, I turn my back on her and go inside to entertain Mr. fucking Dudley while we wait.

“I thought you said Mrs. King was having a shower?” The man in question asks and I nod, moving to the cupboard to take down three mugs.

“Yes. She went for a swim over the road. She showers out back when she does that to avoid tracking sand through the house. That shit gets everywhere.”

Risking a glance at Mr. Dudley, I see him nod, happy with my answer.

“Coffee?” I ask, and he nods again.

“Black. No sugar.”

I set to work, putting the mugs in the microwave to heat before uncapping the lid on the coffee jar.

When the back door opens, both Mr. Dudley and I look up to find Cara walking in, fully dressed bar her bare feet, as she towel dries her hair.

“Oh. Mrs. King. Bruce Dudley. Your parole officer.” He moves into the kitchen, holding out his hand, and Cara just stares at it for a moment before she reluctantly takes it, like she’d rather touch anything else but him.

“Hi,” is all she says, and his lips thin.

Meanwhile, I try to focus on the task of making the coffee now that the water is heated.

I don’t know why Bruce tries to be so formal. He deals with ex-cons all the time and I’m sure the majority aren’t welcoming people.

“Let’s take a seat.” I gesture to the small two-seater table by the wall, and Bruce nods, making his way back out of my tiny kitchen.

“Can’t you make him leave?” Cara hisses at me quietly, and I shake my head.

“Nope. He’s your parole officer. Not mine.” I pick up a mug and hand it to her.

She takes it absentmindedly as she glares daggers in the back of Bruce’s head as he pulls out a chair and sits at the little table.

“Don’t forget to pretend to like me.” I grin, handing her the second cup.

She frowns now, her eyes dropping to the two mugs she holds while I pick up the third one.

I don’t know why I do it, but when I pass by her, I give her ass a light tap, and she goes to jerk out of the way, but remembers she’s holding two steamy hot cups of coffee, so she can’t go anywhere.

I chuckle as I pass by, but then her whispered words pull me up short.

“I could just expose you for the creepy dick that purchased a child bride. Then I won’t have to act and I won’t have to be your wife anymore.”

Slowly I turn back to peer at my wife, taking in her heated cheeks and tense pouty lips.

“Go for it, Killer.”

“I’ll do it.” She bares her teeth as she hisses at me, and I chuckle quietly.

“Even if Bruce believes you, he’s not the one pulling the strings. But go ahead. Waste my day and his. I’ll just end up back here by the end of the day, ready to take you to our marital bed to finish what you fucking started this morning.”

Dark eyes broadening wide, Cara goes to step past me, her nostrils flaring in anger, but I grip her biceps, pulling her up short and whisper in her ear.

“You don’t fucking know the hoops I had to jump through to get you released, but I can tell you, your only options are staying here with me, or going back to prison. Make the right choice, Cara.”

Knowing that the Bruce guy is staring at us, I lean forward and press my lips to her cheek, feeling how hot her skin burns under my touch.

Brushing past her, I walk over to Bruce and hand him his black coffee before taking the only other seat at the table.

Standing with a cup in each hand, Cara looks at me like she expects me to stand up and give her the seat.

I don’t.

I push the chair back a little more to make room and pat my leg.

“Come here, hun.”

Bruce beams across the table, and I tug Cara’s shirt, dragging her closer until she has no choice but to sit as she

places the cups on the table in front of us.

“It’s always nice to see a couple reunited.” Bruce grins before taking a sip of his coffee.

“Relax,” I whisper against Cara’s ear, and when Bruce looks up, I give her ear a little nip.

I don’t really need to go to all this effort to put on a show for Bruce, but Cara doesn’t know that, and by the way a shiver runs down her spine and she sinks a little more into me, I’m fucking glad I’m overdoing it.

“Now, Cara. My records show you have gained employment at a place called Dirty Diamonds. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Cara nods and Bruce writes something on the notepad in front of him.

“What is Dirty Diamonds’ main business activity?” he asks, and Cara stiffens.

“Entertainment.” I answer for her, and Bruce nods, writing that down too.

“And what sort of entertainment?” he asks, his expression all business and no fucking fun.

“It’s a strip club.” Cara responds this time, and a small smirk tugs at the corner of her lips as she watches Bruce’s brows hitch.

“A strip club?”

“Yes. Amongst other things.” She answers, and Bruce reaches up and tugs his glasses off.

“What is your job role there?”

I can see the glint in Cara’s eye as I peer around at her. She’s trying to cause trouble. And I just fucking know she’s about to announce that she’s a dancer.

“Cara does the book work.” I butt in, giving her thigh a pinch under the table, and Cara frowns, but doesn’t bother looking at me.

“Oh, good. You’re good with numbers then?” he asks Cara and she shrugs.

“It’s not hard.”

“Yes, it is,” I whisper against her ear, and she stiffens, shooting me a wide-eyed glare.

Luckily, Bruce is busy writing something and isn’t focusing on us, so I keep fucking going. Making sure to torment my darling wife.

“Can you feel it?” I whisper before giving my hips a minuscule thrust under her.

It’s not a lie. I am hard. My dick has been fluctuating between flax and hard ever since I woke up to have her riding my cock. It doesn’t fucking care that I’m a little tender there.

Fuck, she was so damn tight. I’m aching to squeeze my dick into her again. Next time, I’ll make sure she’s slick.

Bruce asks more questions, and for the most part, Cara behaves, answering what she can without hinting to the ruse and how we became husband and wife.

As Bruce goes over the appointments he's booked for Cara to attend at his office in the coming weeks, I press my nose to her neck and inhale her sweet scent until I'm unable to hold back, and I press my lips to her neck.

"Insecto del amor," Cara says sweetly, which sounds ridiculous falling from her lips. "Behave while we have a guest."

What the hell does insecto del amor mean?

Fuck, that annoys me. Why haven't I tried to learn some Spanish? She could have called me a dickless monkey for all I know.

Chuckling fakely along with Bruce, I'm fucking ecstatic when he puts his notepad away and stands.

"Well, thank you both. I'm glad to see you readjusting to life. You both seem very happy together."

Cara gives a nervous laugh while I smile and nod, easing Cara off my lap so I can stand.

We say our goodbyes, and the moment I shut the door, a pillow from the couch slams into my head.

"Ouch," I say even though it didn't hurt.

"Eres un idiota," she sneers, glaring at me.

Fuck, I like it when she's angry.

"Did you just call me an idiot?"

"Yes!" she yells, grabbing another pillow and tossing it my way.

Dodging it, I charge for her, and I expect her to squeal and run, but she doesn't.

No. Cara Rodríguez is not a scaredy cat, and if I were a smarter man, I'd be afraid.

Luckily I'm not smart.

"We need to talk." I growl standing over her as she holds her chin high, not backing down.

"We have nothing to talk about." She declares and goes to spin away from me, but I circle my hand around her bicep and hold her in place.

"You fucking know we do, Killer. You told me you weren't a virgin. Then you took advantage of me, and I don't believe your bullshit that it was a punishment for getting laid while you were locked up."

"I'm on my period. That's why there was blood. Don't flatter yourself to think I would give someone like you my virginity. You're a monster!"

Gripping both her arms now, I tug her flush with me and press my nose to hers until we are breathing the same fucking air.

"That wasn't period blood, Cara. I felt the moment I broke your hymen. Why did you do that? If you wanted me, I could have made you feel fucking good."

"I don't want you!" she shouts. "Let me go!"

"No," I hiss, leaning forward and hoisting her over my shoulder before she can run off.

“What are you doing? Let me down!”

I slap her ass for good fucking measure and walk us into the bedroom before tossing her on the bed with a bounce.

“Why wouldn’t you let me touch you?” I ask, and her lip curls as she hisses like a snake at me. “Goddammit, Cara. Just fucking answer me!”

“Because you don’t need to touch me to do the act!” she yells back, and I fall still.

What?

“The act?” I ask, my anger vanishing.

“Sex, you imbecile!”

What the fuck?

“What about foreplay?” I ask, and she frowns.

“What?”

“Foreplay. You know. Kissing. Cuddling. Touching.”

She just stares at me, her anger falling from her face.

“Cara, have you ever had an orgasm before?”

“What? I... Isn’t that for men?”

Holy fucking shit. Is she serious?

“Who told you an orgasm was just for men?”

For the first time since picking her up from prison, she looks as young as her nineteen years as her eyes drop to her outstretched legs.

“Mom said a wife’s duty is to please her husband and make sure that he is hard and feels good, and has an orgasm every time he wants one, otherwise I’m not doing my job properly. She said there was no pleasure for me to have, and suffering through the pain of it every time was how I would get my satisfaction.”

“Fuck, Cara. She lied to you. That’s not how it’s meant to be.”

Her gray eyes dart up to meet mine again, and her lower lip trembles and tears well in her eyes.

She’s never looked more vulnerable than in this moment.

“It’s not?” she asks quietly, and I shake my head.

“Fuck, no. Yes, the first time or two will hurt for you, but if the man is doing his job properly, the pain will subside and be replaced with pleasure. Ecstasy.”

She shakes her head, confusion contorting her beautiful features.

“But my sister... she never felt good. It was always so... brutal.”

What the fuck!

“Cara, is that why you hurt yourself on me this morning?” I ask, not able to hide the concern in my voice.

“Well... Yes. It had to be done. You’re my husband, and I...” She trails off, and I can see that there’s more she wants to say, but she’s not ready to reveal it to me.

“If you had let me know what you were doing instead of just... doing it, I could have shown you how it’s meant to be. Especially for your first time. You must be so sore.”

Her cheeks flush crimson, and her eyes drop so I can’t see them, telling me without even saying the words that she is.

“I’m a little sore too.” I admit, hoping it will make her feel better.

Her gray gaze shoots back up through the fan of her dark lashes.

“You are?”

“Yes. Even though you think you were ready to take my cock, you weren’t. I could have helped with that. Made you feel good so your... insides were ready.”

Fuck, right now I feel like I’m talking to the sixteen-year-old girl that I married three years ago. How has she not learned this stuff, even in prison?

“But isn’t it wrong for me to feel good? Isn’t it meant to hurt?” she asks on a whisper and my heart fucking aches for her. For the lies she’s been told by her own fucking parents.

“Fuck no.” I rush out, quickly kneeling on the end of the bed at her feet. “Let me show you that it can be the complete opposite.”

“W-what? How?”

“Let me touch you. Give me permission to pleasure you.”

Shaking her head frantically, Cara shuffles up the bed more until her back hits the headboard.

“Okay,” I say, holding my hands up. “Let’s try something different. How about you touch yourself?”

Her eyes widen. “No. I can’t. That’s not allowed. It’s dirty.”

“You can. It’s normal. Trust me, everyone masturbates. It’s as natural as the act of sex itself.”

Still, she shakes her head.

“Okay, then. Just watch,” I say, standing from the bed and tugging off my shirt. Her eyes widen but she doesn’t say anything, so I toss my shirt aside and tug down my shorts.

My hard cock springs free, the fucker already geared up to please her, and part of me hates that I’m so hard given the situation. But it’s her. The way she looks at me with those big eyes, so innocent yet curious. She’s fucking trusting me right now, and apparently, my dick likes that.

“Oh. Wait. What are you doing?” She looks panicked, but I hold up my hands and turn my naked body from side to side, hoping it will distract her.

“Let me show you how I get myself off. What I do in the shower each morning and night while I think about you.”

Wrapping my hand around my shaft, I keep my eyes trained on Cara’s as she stares at my engorged cock, and absentmindedly licks her lips.

“You think about me?” she asks, quietly, and I nod.

“Yes, I do. And doing this feels so good.” I tell her, pumping my cock, slowly turning to the side so she can get a

better look at what I'm doing. "I imagine it's your hand. I imagine you on your knees sucking my dick into your mouth, your cheeks hollowing as you suck me down as far as you can go. I imagine thrusting into your mouth, hearing you gag a little as I watch you watching me. Your eyes will water, but it's so fucking beautiful, that I can barely hold back."

Sucking her lips into her mouth, Cara shifts on the bed, pressing her thighs together.

"Do you feel it, Killer? Deep down in your cunt. A flutter. A hot gush. The need that you want something more."

"Yes." She breathes, and fuck, pre-cum rolls from my tip at her words.

Climbing on the end of the bed, I kneel in front of her, running my thumb over the bead of pre-cum.

"See this? It's my cock telling me that it's ready for more." I hold up my thumb. "You want a taste?"

She shakes her head, but her breathing deepens, and her eyes don't leave my cock and she presses her thighs together again.

"Just touch yourself." I suggest, and she shakes her head, even as she squeezes her legs tight.

"I promise it will feel good. Just pull your pants down and press your fingers to your clit."

Her dark eyes meet mine again now, and I nod. "It's okay. I promise I won't touch you. I won't do anything to you that you don't want me to do."

I jerk my dick faster, and that seems to spur her on. She quickly shuffles around until her panties and leggings are at her ankles, and then she toes them off, kicking them over the side of the bed, but she keeps her knees squeezed tight.

“Do you like looking at me like this?” I ask, pumping my cock. “Do you like watching what you do to me?”

She nods quickly, and I grin. Finally, I’m getting through to her. Connecting without getting into a sneering match.

“Open your legs, Killer. Let me see how wet you are.”

Slowly, as she bites her lip, she pries her knees apart to reveal the satin of her cunt, and it’s fucking glistening.

“Oh Cara. You are already so wet. So slick. I can see it.”

“Is that... wrong?”

I shake my head. “Fuck no. That’s perfect.” I start panting as my dick fights to take over, but I need to hold back. I can’t fucking come yet. Not until she has. “Press your fingers to your clit.” I urge, and when she looks indecisive, I wonder if she’s going to do it. I’m surprised when she follows my order, grazing her fingers over the area.

“Oh!” She cries out at the first contact, and I nearly lose my load.

“That’s it. Press into it. Or move your fingers in a circle over it.” I urge and again, she follows.

Her breathing is rapid now, and I hope like hell she can come, because she deserves to feel this pleasure.

“How does it feel?” I ask, my voice raspy.

“It... It feels sooo... Oh.” Her lids fall shut momentarily.
“Like I need something... I don’t know what.”

“Fuck, Killer. It needs to come. Your body needs to come.”

She nods, even as her face contorts into pleased pain.

“I can’t... I don’t...” She cries in frustration, and I release my dick, shifting closer.

“Let me help you. Let me take over and make you feel the best you’ve ever fucking felt.”

“B-but how?” she asks, glaring at my cock like it offends her all of a sudden.

“Let me show you how a simple kiss can give you what you need.”

“A kiss? I don’t understand. You want to kiss me?” she asks, her fingers still pressing into her swollen clit.

“Yes, Cara. I want to kiss you here.” I reach forward and only when I know she isn’t going to flinch away do I close the distance and press the tip of my finger to her lips, which part as she releases a breath. “And I want to kiss you here.” I slowly graze my finger down her neck, trailing over her top to circle the tip of her fabric covered breast.

The action causes her chest to push forward into my touch, and a whimper escapes her, but I keep going.

“And I want to kiss all the way down here.” I graze my finger over her abs to her bare flesh just above her mound. “And then, when I kiss you here,” I ease my finger under hers

and press it to her clit, “I won’t stop until you come on my face.”

A whimper mixed with a growl escapes her, and before I know what’s happening, she’s pressing her lips to mine.

I fist my hands in her hair, taking control, forcing her to slow down, and she follows quickly, allowing me to nibble on her lips, and slip my tongue into her mouth, until she’s moaning.

She’s writhing against me, and I know I can make her come now, so I don’t waste any more time, peeling her top off, and unclasping her bra as we kiss, and when it falls free, I begin my journey down.

My lips brush over raised skin between her breasts, and without trying to make it obvious my eyes travel over her skin there to find scars. Burn scars, like from a cigarette or something.

Fuck, I want to kill someone. I want to find out who would do such a thing.

Did she have these when I married her or did she come by them in prison?

Something to find out a different time. I need to focus on her. On pleasuring her, so I turn my attention to her dark nipples.

They are pebbled into hard peaks, large and fucking succulent. My cock jerks as I lave at her nipples. First one and then the other, and I fucking love how responsive she is, moaning for me, her fingers delving into my hair.

Continuing down, I leave her nipples to head to paradise, shifting back on the bed so I can get in a good position to start my meal.

“Lay back a bit.” I order, glancing up at Cara to see her gray eyes filled with lust and want as she watches on. “I’m going to kiss you here now, beautiful. And I want you to just let yourself feel everything. Just let yourself go. Let your body take you where it wants to go.”

She nods eagerly, and I shoot her a grin and a wink before turning my sights on the dark lips of her cunt.

The first lick causes her to jolt, so I grip her hips, keeping my eyes locked with hers as I give it another lick.

She moans and relaxes a little more, so I proceed with what I said I’d do, and I make her feel good with my kiss.

I kiss the folds of her cunt like it’s her sweet mouth, and fuck it tastes just as good, if not better. As I flatten my tongue up her center and over her nub, she starts writhing under my hold accepting the building pleasure.

I could insert a finger, but it’s not needed and since she’s still sore, I want to avoid causing her more pain. I can feel how close she is, I can taste the slickness oozing from her entrance as she lets go and accepts what her body needs.

Her cries come rushing out as her body tenses, and I fucking love how loud she is, probably unaware of it herself.

Flicking my tongue faster, I grip her hips tight, and she explodes against my lips in a pulsating convulsion, and my

balls tighten before I shoot cum all over the sheet underneath me.

“Fuck me.” I pant as I draw back once she melts into a boneless heap on the bed. “That was fucking transcending.”

A lazy smirk tugs at her lips as her lids flutter open and our gazes lock.

“You’re telling me. When can we do it again?”

CHAPTER 6

Cara

My body still sings with pleasure as Rocco pulls me closer, my back to his front. He palms my hip, his thumb stroking the skin as I do my best to relax.

“I hate to bring it up again, because you obviously don’t want to talk about it, but fuck, Cara, I want to understand.”

Rocco’s words make me stiffen and his arm snakes around me, holding me tight to him like he’s worried I’ll flee.

“Why did you impale yourself on my cock like that?”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I ponder whether I should tell him the truth. So far, he’s been honest with me, and he looked devastated when he saw my virginity blood coating his cock.

“I had to,” I mumble.

“But why?”

I shudder in his arms, and he moves his hand to my stomach, spreading it so he’s covering more of me. It feels good. Strange, but good.

“Because you hadn’t claimed me,” I admit in a small voice.

Rocco’s chest rises and falls rapidly, and his fingers dig into the skin on my stomach. “What the fuck does that matter?” he growls.

I don’t know why, but his reaction makes my heart skip a beat, and a smile I’m glad he can’t see, stretches across my

lips. Warmth spreads in my chest, something I've never felt before so I don't know what to call it.

“When dad sold Julietta, he told her husband-to-be that the sale wasn't complete until he'd fucked her.”

I shudder again as I remember how my sister's husband abused her while we all watched. That's how I always thought it would be.

When I was in prison, I heard women moan with pleasure, but I always thought that was fake. Something they did because they had to. I'm sure some of them did because not everything that went down was consensual, just like not all of it was forced.

Rocco shifts behind me and moves his hand again. At first I think he's going to touch me like earlier, and I'm not sure if I'm disappointed when he moves the tips of his fingers across my stomach. It tickles, but not in a way that makes me want to laugh. It's more like fire trails in the wake of his gentle touch.

“I understand why you did it.” He nuzzles into the crook of my neck, and I arch my back as his lips graze my skin. “But if you ever do something like that to me again, I'll make you fucking regret it.”

“W-what?” I stammer, not liking the harshness of his tone.

“Did it ever fucking occur to you that I didn't want to do something like that?”

I furrow my brows in confusion. “No,” I answer honestly. “You're a guy. Guys expect sex, and you were hard so I thought you would like it.”

When he doesn't answer, I ramble on.

“Besides, Mindy made it clear you like hard, brutal fucking.”

As soon as the words leave me, I wonder if he's angry because he wasn't in control. She said that's what he wanted, and I took it from him.

“So fucking what? I might be a guy, but I've already made it clear I don't force anyone to have sex with me. I never thought I had to fucking explain I don't want to be used either.”

Used... yes, I used him.

“I don't understand,” I say softly. “Explain it to me.”

He sighs, and the air tickles my skin. “Mindy should never have fucking run her mouth like that. But yes, I like fucking. And yes, I like it hard.”

“So you're upset with me because I did it wrong?”

I feel him shake his head. “No, I'm upset because you took my fucking choice away, and hurt yourself instead of talking to me.”

Silence stretches around us as I contemplate his words. I hear them, yet I can't make sense of them.

“And because your pleasure is important to me.”

There it is again, the mention of pleasure I never even knew existed.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because when you fuck me dry like last night, it hurts both of us. If you’re wet, it’ll feel amazing for us both. Sex with me is about pleasure. I’m not claiming to be a good guy, and I like pushing boundaries. But consent is important to me.” His solemn tone portrays just how serious he takes it, and it makes me feel bad for what I did.

“I didn’t know,” I whisper.

Should I apologize? I don’t want to because what I did had to be done, and even if it wasn’t intended as punishment, it kind of worked. Though a true punishment should be served in public, that’s what my family did and it worked.

When Mateo and I turned twelve, dad put him in charge of my punishment. I still have the burn marks from the many times he used my skin to put out his cigarettes. Sly as he is, he always aimed for places that would be hidden by my clothes.

After undressing me earlier, I know Rocco’s seen the scars between my tits, and maybe even on my inner thighs. I’m not ashamed of them, they prove I’m strong and that I learned from my mistakes.

“You had a fucked up childhood,” Rocco says. It’s not a question, so I don’t answer. “Sex can be a way to love someone with your body, but it can also just be about pleasure. Wanting to feel good. Do you understand?”

“I-I think so.”

Honestly, I’m not sure I do. But I want to, and I want to feel good again. I experimentally arch my back again, pushing my ass back against him.

“Cara,” he warns on a low growl. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to feel good,” I say. “You said it could just be about the pleasure. That’s what I want.”

Rocco rolls his hips against me, and I feel his hardness slide between my thighs. We’re still naked from earlier, which makes it feel even more intense.

“One last question,” he says. “Then I promise I’ll make you come again.”

Not liking the way it sounds like a trade, I ask, “And if I don’t want to answer?”

“I’ll still make you come.”

“Okay,” I agree. “Ask away.”

“Who hurt you?”

Fuck, he did notice the scars on my body.

The decision to open up isn’t a conscious one, my mouth just won’t stay shut. “Mostly it was Mateo. When I did something wrong, he had to discipline me in front of our sister and parents.”

Rocco makes an angry sound in the back of his throat. “That’s why you want to punish me, isn’t it? Because I did something wrong.”

“I did punish you,” I remind him. “Even if that wasn’t why I did what I did, it doubled as that. So we’re even.”

“You’re so fucked up,” he grumbles.

He's not wrong.

I'm just about to remind him of his promise to make me come again when Rocco moves his hands to my tits, palming them before he pinches my hardened nipples. When he thrusts his hips against me again, I moan. The tip of his cock slides through my folds and hits my clit, the touch making my pussy throb with want.

"Again," I moan. "Please."

He continues to move his cock between my thighs, and I feel myself get wetter with each roll of his hips. Fuck, this is what I wanted.

"Does it feel good, Killer?" he groans, and I eagerly nod.

"Y-yes," I cry out. "I need more."

The primal sound coming from deep within his throat stirs something awake inside of me, causing my core to ache. Rocco burrows his face into the crook of my neck. His lips and teeth graze my skin in a way that makes my inner muscles tighten.

Rocco slides one hand down my stomach and all the way to the apex of my thighs. As his fingers skim my clit, I moan his name.

"That's it, Killer. Fucking say my name."

"Rocco," I half-scream as he adds more pressure to my clit. "Yes, that's it. Don't stop." I barely recognize my own voice, it's throaty with need.

"Does it feel good?"

I barely hear him over the thundering beats of my heart. I'm too far gone to be able to form coherent words. Instead, I move my hips backward as he moves between my thighs, moaning unashamedly when he hits just the right spot over and over again.

"C-can I touch you?" I ask, desperate to know what he feels like but unsure if it's okay or not.

"Of course," Rocco groans. "Roll to your back."

Doing as he says, I roll over, immediately spreading my legs, welcoming him as he moves between them. The tip of his cock nudges against my opening, but he doesn't move inside.

"Wrap your hand around my cock," he commands huskily. "And rub me against your clit."

"Oh!" I cry out as I do just that, and it feels fucking amazing.

When I had him in my hand earlier, I didn't take the time to really get a feel for him. But now I do. The skin is smooth, except for the vein running along the length. Is it supposed to be this hot? To throb in my hand? It feels heavy, and... and... fuck, I don't know. It's hard to focus on anything other than the way he feels against my pussy.

Groaning, Rocco commands, "Squeeze me tighter." I don't admit that I'm afraid to hurt him. "Here, let me help you."

He places his hand on top of mine and adds pressure until I'm holding him how he wants it. He's so big I have no idea how he fit inside me earlier, and my hand can't even close around his girth.

“Now rub yourself.”

I lift my hips and angle them so he’s hitting me in a way that has pleasure coursing through my veins. I can’t stop moaning, every touch sends me higher, and I feel my toes curl.

“Rocco.” I cry out his name, unsure how to get us both where we want to be.

“I got you, Killer,” he groans as though he’s reading my thoughts.

He thrusts into my hand, hitting my clit with each movement and before long my legs are shaking and my free hand clutches the sheet beneath me.

“I-I’m going to... I can’t... Rocco!”

“Oh fuck,” he groans as he picks up the pace. “Yes. I’m going to paint your cunt in my cum.”

Unable to form words, I cry out as I come apart. This is nothing like before, it’s much more intense, and I can barely catch my breath.

Once I’m no longer shaking, I push myself up on my elbows. “What was that?” I ask curiously.

Rocco falls down next to me, a lazy grin on his lips. “What was what?”

“That,” I repeat, gesturing between us.

“An orgasm, Killer,” he says, rolling his eyes like I’m not making sense.

I shake my head. “Nuh-uh. This was nothing like earlier. It was... more.”

With a chuckle, he pulls me into his embrace, and I rest my head on his chest. “They’re not always the same,” he explains patiently. “Some are better than others.”

Huh, I never knew that. Then again, why would I when I never even knew a woman is able to feel good during sex.

Rocco’s phone vibrates on the nightstand, and he reaches for it, cursing as he answers.

“What?” he snaps into the microphone.

I can’t hear what’s being said on the other end, but whatever it is has Rocco getting out of bed, reaching for his clothes.

“Fine.” Silence. “Yeah, we’ll be there soon.”

I watch as he finishes getting dressed, unashamedly enjoying the show.

“We need to leave?” I ask, unable to hide the excitement in my voice.

Although this has been the longest day in some ways, I don’t feel tired. I feel reinvigorated, and like I need to do something other than lie here.

“Yeah,” he confirms. “Cain wants to go over something at Dirty Diamonds.”

Wrapping the sheet around me, I head toward the back door for a quick shower.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Rocco sounds amused.

Turning around, I face him. “To clean myself,” I explain, confused when he shakes his head.

“No way, Killer. I want to know your cunt is painted in my cum.”

I feel my cheeks heat at his words, and a refusal is on the tip of my tongue. But then I take a second to ponder it, and... I think I want that too.

“Okay,” I relent.

Ignoring his satisfied smirk, I get dressed in the leggings and top from earlier. It’s not as impressive as my leather outfits, but paired with the boots it’s not half-bad. Plus, without heels I feel too small next to Rocco.

We get into his truck, and he quickly drives us to Dirty Diamonds where Cain’s waiting outside. He’s leaning against the wall, one leg propped up as he blows smoke into the night.

“My, my, my. If it isn’t Mr. and Mrs. King,” he says as a way of greeting. “How are you doing, Cara?”

“Better than some, worse than others,” I say with a shrug, making sure to turn each S into a hiss.

Cain’s brows shoot up. “You heard me,” he laughs, and I nod. “Well played, snake.”

Rocco shakes his head and takes my hand. “Let’s get on with whatever’s the reason you dragged me down here,” he says as we follow Cain inside.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Cain retorts. “Did I disturb your sex-athon?”

“His what?” I ask.

With a wink, Cain elaborates. “You see, some people turn sex into a marathon, or as I call it, a sex-a-thon. Wait, are you two having sex?”

“None of your damn business,” Rocco growls.

At the same time, I say, “Yes.”

When Rocco looks at me, I just shrug. I’m not embarrassed by what we’re doing, and I’d rather that the word spreads than having Mateo show up again. Or bitches like Mindy think they can take what’s mine.

As we reach the bar, Cain points at the guy behind it. “That’s Tex. Make good friends with him, Cara. He holds the keys to the liquor cabinet, so to speak. And if he likes you, he won’t mind making you some fancy cocktails despite your age.”

I wave awkwardly at Tex who nods back at me.

“Right, I’m going to borrow your hubby,” Cain says, turning toward Rocco.

“Give me a sec,” my husband says, not taking his eyes off mine. “Try not to get into any more fights, Killer.”

I grin. “I can’t promise that.”

He chuckles, closing the distance between us. “Just know that it makes me fucking hard to see you stand up for yourself. So unless you want me to make you come here, don’t tempt me.”

Bending down, he fuses his lips to mine. His tongue licks at the seam of my mouth until I open for him, and snake my tongue around his.

Kissing Rocco is the sweetest addiction, and I almost forget where we are as he tilts my head back and deepens the kiss.

“Behave,” he rasps as he pulls back, shooting me a wink before he leaves with Cain.

I walk over to the bar, greeting Tex as I sit down on one of the tall barstools. “Hi.”

“You’re the wife?” he asks as he looks up from the glass in his hand.

“That’s me,” I confirm.

Without asking what I want he starts to mix me a cocktail. I don’t know what it’s called, but it’s pink and fucking delicious.

I quickly learn that Tex isn’t one for small talk, and that suits me just fine. Turning on the chair I watch the strippers on stage. There are five of them, and while some interact, others do their own thing.

The room isn’t as full as I had thought it would be on a Saturday, but with how many people who come up to the bar it looks like business is booming. Maybe it’s because it’s late. I don’t know when the club’s prime time is, but I suppose it’s possible it’s earlier in the evening.

“Are you Cara?” a woman asks as she comes up to me.

“Alana,” Tex says, greeting her.

I nod at her. “That’s me.”

“There’s someone here to see you.”

At first, I don’t understand. But then I remember that young homeless looking guy, Gray mentioning he might see me around here, and I assume it’s him. If it is, I’ll offer him a fucking haircut, so he doesn’t look as unkempt as he did last night... err... this morning. Shit, it’s all blurring together, making today the longest day.

When I get off the stool, Tex says, “Stay nearby so I can keep an eye on you.”

“He’s just right over there,” Alana says, pointing toward the nearest alcove.

I follow her over, and as she pushes through some of the guests, my blood runs cold. “Mateo,” I gasp. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

My twin looks more haggard than the last time I saw him. His eyes are wild, and there’s a welt on his arm.

“I came to see you, of course.” The smile on his face sends chills down my spine. “How are you doing, dear sister?”

Taking a step back, I eye him cautiously. “You have no right to check up on me,” I hiss. “You need to leave. Now. Before Rocco sees you.”

Mentioning the man who bought me doesn’t deter my brother in the slightest. He shrugs like it’s of no consequence

to him. “You’re family,” Mateo insists. “Why can’t I just come and see you? I’ve missed you. We should catch up.”

As I scrutinize him, I can’t decide if he’s lying or not. Mateo has never been sentimental, which would suggest he isn’t being honest. But... what if he is?

“I-I...”

“Come on, Cara. Me and mom are the only family you have left, and we want to start over.”

The words pluck at my heartstrings.

Family...

How often have I wished mine was different? That I was loved rather than used. This could be my opportunity to get what I’ve always wanted.

Just as I think that, Julietta’s face pops into my mind. It’s too late. The family I wanted included her, and she’s gone. Killed by a cold-blooded fucking monster.

“No,” I snap.

“Please, Cara,” Mateo begs, something I never thought I’d hear.

I straighten my spine and take another step backward. “Do you honestly think—”

Before I can finish speaking, Mateo gets in my face. Fury rolls off of him as he slaps me. “You stupid fucking cunt,” he snarls. “You never did learn your place.”

My hand shoots up to my cheek, it’s burning. “W-what?” I stutter, confused by his outburst.

Everything happens so quickly I barely have time to react.

Mateo lunges, swinging his fist at me, and I don't lift my arm quickly enough to block him. His fist connects with my chin, causing my head to snap to the side as I stumble backwards.

No!

Not to-fucking-day.

In prison, I took up kickboxing in the gym, and unofficially I learned to throw knives. Since I don't have my own blade, the latter won't help me.

"Is that all you've got?" I sneer.

Then I kick out, aiming for his stomach. But Mateo manages to move to the side, avoiding me.

"You bitch," he shouts.

Rolling my shoulders back, I stand as tall as possible, refusing to show any weakness. "At least I'm not some pathetic mama's boy," I taunt. "Unlike you, I don't hide behind our parents."

A sinister smile spreads across his lips. "And unlike you, dear twin, I'm fucking worthy. All you were good for was being sold. Tell me, did your pathetic husband finally fuck you?"

There's something in his voice that causes me to really look at him. They say that all twins have a special bond, and right now, that feels true, even though it's not a good one.

“It was a warning,” I say. “Coming to Rocco’s house last night was a warning, wasn’t it?”

He shrugs, pretending to look indifferent but I see the relief in his eyes. “So what if it was?”

Yeah... so what if it was? I don’t know. But surely it has to mean something.

“I don’t know,” I almost whisper. “Why would you do that?”

As if he’s angered by my question, Mateo clenches and unclenches his fists at his sides. “Don’t start asking questions, Cara. You and I were pitted against each other since we were kids, and that’s how it will always be.”

Tears form in my eyes, and a single one escapes, trailing down my cheek. “Okay,” I choke out.

I’m not going to attempt to change his mind, because he’s right. We haven’t been close since we were kids, and one somewhat kind act isn’t changing that.

I see the second he decides to attack me, and I swiftly kick out at him again. This time, I hit him square in the chest, and it’s his turn to stumble backwards.

“You cunt,” he seethes.

Rolling my eyes, I volley, “I’m getting so sick and fucking tired of people using that word against me.”

Without pausing, he comes at me. Or, he tries to. But before he reaches me, Rocco steps in front of me, a gun in his hand.

CHAPTER 7

Rocco

“You lay one more hand on her and it’s the last thing you’ll fucking do.” I seethe, my whole body vibrating with rage as I stare down who I assume is Cara’s twin brother given the same gray eyes staring back at me.

“This is not your concern.” The gutless prick glares at me even as I feel Cara’s dainty hand on the back of my shoulder.

“You’re wrong about that,” I hiss. “Cara is my wife and therefore my only fucking concern. The only reason I haven’t pulled the trigger yet is out of courtesy for her, but please, give me a reason to ignore her.”

“Rocco. Don’t.”

Mateo chuckles in front of me, holding his hands up and taking a step back.

“Okay, okay. I won’t lay another hand on her. For now.”

I growl right as Cain’s voice joins the fucking party.

“You know, I have no such fucking obligations to Mrs. King, other than keeping her safe, so I’m more than happy to paint the room with your fucking blood.”

“Cain.” Cara warns, and he chuckles.

“I’m almost tempted to do it just to have your wrath aimed at me, Señora. You fight like a badass.”

“And if Cain doesn’t do it,” Tex’s voice comes from the other side of where we stand, low and menacing, “I’ll fucking

shoot you simply for disrupting business.”

I smirk, believing both my friends’ words. Cain is a crazy fucker, and Mateo’s lucky he even got a fucking warning, and Tex, the quiet guy behind the bar, well he’s there for a reason, and it’s not just because he knows how to make those fucking fruity drinks the Diamonds love so much. The Diamond Crew only recruits the best, after all.

“I hear you loud and clear.” Mateo still grins, and I wonder if he’s a match for Cain’s energy. Something we shouldn’t take lightly.

Straightening his clothes, he leans to the side, his eyes traveling past me to where I assume he’s looking at his sister.

“Always a pleasure, sis.”

He shoots her a fucking wink as he steps over an upturned chair and makes his way to the exit. Keeping my gun trained on him, I watch Cain and Tex follow behind him as they make sure he leaves the premises.

As soon as they disappear through the curtain, I lower my gun and spin to Cara.

“Are you okay?”

My eyes dance over her face as I tuck my piece into the back of my jeans, before I run my hands down her arms, searching for injuries.

“I’m fine,” she says quietly, her attention shifting to the exit, which is when I see her swelling jaw and red cheek where I saw the fucker slap her from the security cameras I was watching her on while I spoke with Cain.

Pressing my fingers to the other side of her jaw, I tilt her face so I can get a better look.

“Jesus.” I mutter, hating to see her marked like that. I should have killed that fucker, if not for this, but for the way he left her scarred after the punishments he gave her as they grew up.

“Alana! Sasha!” I call, not taking my eyes off Cara’s inflamed skin, even as she tries to jerk away from my touch.

“Yes?” Sasha’s voice gets closer, but I don’t bother looking at her. “Can you get an ice pack for Cara, please?”

“Yes. Of course.” She agrees just as Cain and Tex re-enter the club.

“Is he gone?” I ask, and Cain beams, strutting toward us like a fucking king that just won a war.

“He’s gone, but he’ll be back. He’s as excited at the idea of playing as I am.”

“This isn’t a game.” Cara snaps, shooting Cain a glare, and he rolls his eyes.

“Everything is a game, mi pequeño salvaje.”

Shaking her head, a grin tugs at Cara’s lips as Cain struts by, and I frown, trying to figure out what the fuck he just said to her.

“What did you say?” I ask Cain, who shrugs before disappearing down the hall and I turn my gaze back to Cara.

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She shrugs before stepping around me and moving to the bar to take a seat.

“Yes, you do. It was something in Spanish.” I interject, moving to her side as I hear Tex chuckle to himself while he re-stashes his shotgun under the counter.

“I must have missed it.” Cara shrugs but the smirk on her face tells me fucking otherwise and I growl.

“Dammit, woman. Just fucking tell me what he said.”

Turning in her chair to face me, she shoots me a glare. “Why? Why must you know everything?”

“Because I’m your fucking husband.”

Her lips thin. “Not a good enough reason.” She turns back to face the bar right as Sasha places the ice pack on the counter.

“This should help.” She offers Cara, giving her a soft smile before retreating, and Cara picks up the ice pack and the thin towel and gently presses it to her cheek and jaw.

“Look, I’m trying here,” I tell her, sitting my ass in the seat next to her. “And the fact that you keep speaking in Spanish to me, doesn’t seem very fucking fair because I don’t understand it.”

“I wasn’t the one who spoke Spanish that time.” She points out, and I grit my teeth.

“I’m just trying to understand you. He said something that made you grin, and I want to know what it fucking was.” She shrugs, even as Tex speaks.

“He said, my little savage.”

My gaze darts to Tex, who grins past his mustache before shrugging and I grumble.

“Why the fuck does everyone but me know Spanish?”

Cara rolls her eyes. “I think the real question is, why didn’t you learn Spanish at school? In prison, I was told it’s an option for most schools that offer learning a foreign language.”

My mouth goes dry as I feel the familiarity of my uneducated past slam into me, making me feel like the dumb street kid I was ten years ago.

Without meaning to, I shoot Cara a glare, but try to hide any other response I have to it by facing the bar and knocking the counter.

Tex gets to work pouring me a whiskey on the rocks, and my eyes catch Cara’s reflection in the mirror behind the bar as she looks at me, a puzzled frown tugging at her brows.

Shit. She noticed my reaction.

I hadn’t meant for that to happen. It’s not something I’ve fucking given a shit about for years, but for some reason, now with Cara in the picture, I feel like my past will just show her how fucking unworthy I am to declare her as mine.

“Rocco?” Cara asks quietly, but Cain fucking saves the day, leaping in to burst our bubble with his larger-than-life energy.

“Tell me Mrs. King. Who taught you how to fight like that?”

My brows lift with interest, and I turn to see Cara's attention on Cain now.

"Prison. There's a lot of free time."

Cain nods. "I bet you ruled that place. Cara the Queen." He holds his hands up like he's framing a sign that has the words spelled out in lights.

Cara giggles.

Fuck, I love hearing that.

"Mr. King. Our fair ruler called me back." Cain bows like he's talking to fucking royalty. I wonder what pills he pops to live in the delusional world he lives in. Maybe I should ask him for some?

"And?" I ask, remembering back to the conversation I was having with Cain in the office before Cara's twin decided to show up.

"No location found as of yet, but Dante has people working on it. They are trying to track the most recent visitor as we speak."

I nod, ignoring Cara's curious eyes as she looks between us and tries to piece the information together.

I'd asked Cain to find out if Dante's sources had a lead on Cara's mom's location yet. After knowing it was her brother that came to taunt her at my house last night, or should I say, our house, I knew her mom mustn't have been too far away, but so far, she's been a ghost ever since she and her evil son got away after our wedding. I was hoping since Mateo showed up that perhaps they could get a new lead, and hopefully now

with what I decipher from Cain, they will since they must be following Mateo after leaving here.

“Now who’s keeping secrets,” Cara mutters and I bite back a smirk.

“I’ll fill you in at home.” I toss back the whiskey I haven’t touched, before standing. “Let’s go.”

Even though she shoots daggers at me, Cara stands and offers a wave to Tex and Cain as she holds the ice pack to her face. The moment she is standing, I link our fingers and ignore the eyes following us as we leave and head back to my little house.

“Are you ever going to tell me what you and Cain were just talking about?” Cara asks as I unlock the front door.

“I don’t see why I should since you didn’t think you needed to share what Cain said to you with me.”

I know I’m being petty, but if anything, I’m doing it to rile her up a little.

I like seeing the fire in her eyes. Seeing the spark of passion to not let anyone rule over her. It’s the only way I know how to keep her motivated to keep fighting.

“Tex told you what he said.” She complains, stepping inside with me, and I shut the door, locking it before shaking my head.

“Tex told me. Not you. I asked *you* what Cain said.” I point out, and her shoulders slump.

“Whatever.”

Sometimes I forget that she's still in her teens. I know I'm not that much older, so I probably shouldn't think like that, but it's hard not to when there is a part of her that seems so much older than her nineteen years, and then there are parts that make her seem like she's newly a teenager.

I fucking hate her parents for raising her with such twisted beliefs.

A knock behind me at the door makes us still, and Cara's eyes go wide in panic.

Reaching for my gun, I whisper to my wife. "Hide." Before calling out. "Who is it?"

"It's Martina. Martina Rodríguez."

As Cara dashes into my bedroom to hide, I move to open the door, making sure Martina can see the gun in my hand.

"What do you want?"

"I-I want to see Cara." She stutters, her dark hair shorter than it was three years ago, her curls barely long enough to touch her shoulders.

"No." I snap, glaring at the woman who told Cara obscene lies about sex and her duty as a wife.

"But she's my daughter. I miss her."

I chuckle darkly. "She may be your biological daughter, Mrs. Rodríguez, but you're no mother."

"You know nothing. Please, I'm here to help you. Take her off your hands. She can be so troublesome."

I hear the faint hiss from my bedroom, confirming that Cara must be right behind the door, listening.

“Spare me your lies and fuck off. Cara is my wife, and I will not hand her over to you.”

“You say that now, but you see, Mr. King, you will eventually regret saying that. Cara was born a little different. She’s not so smart. Needs a stern hand. She has a lot to learn.”

“If she needs a stern hand, then rest assured, I will deliver it.”

I move to shut the door, but she puts her booted foot in the way.

“Fine. How much? I’ll buy her back.”

“She’s not for fucking sale!” I hiss, raising my gun to point it directly in her face, but she doesn’t even flinch.

“Of course she’s for sale. What’s your price?” Martina ignores my words, her expression holding too much fucking confidence for my liking.

“Why do you want her?” I ask instead, and she rounds her eyes, trying to appear innocent.

“Because she’s my daughter and I love her.”

I scoff, right as Cara flies from the bedroom and tugs the door open.

“You don’t love me! How could you? When you love someone, you don’t do the things you did to me. To Julietta.”

For the first time, I see Martina flinch, and even though Cara is inside the house with me, I still position myself a little

more between them.

“That was your dad forcing my hand,” Martina cries. “Things are different now.”

Cara laughs but there’s no humor in it. “Things are not different now. Mateo spoke with me and tried to coax me as well, but you know what? He can’t hide his true colors. I know you don’t have good intentions either. What do you have planned for me if you get me back?” Cara sneers. “You gonna sell me again? I’ll fight. No one will get near me. I’ll kill them.”

Martina falls quiet, her expression turning from devastated to sinister.

“When we get you,” she snickers, leaning in a little, “and we will get you, my darling girl. I’ll make sure you are so hooked on coke that you’ll do the most depraved things for your next hit.”

In an instant, the barrel of my gun is pressed against her forehead.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just shoot you here?”

“Rocco,” Cara whisper-yells, rushing forward to drag my hand down so I’m no longer pressing the gun to her mother’s head. “Company.”

It takes me a second to figure out Cara’s meaning, but then my eyes move past her evil mother to the police cruiser slowly idling by.

“And on that note,” Martina mutters before turning her back on us and quickly darting toward the waiting black car in the driveway.

“Fuck,” I hiss, keeping my gun low so the cops, who are carefully watching as they move slowly past, don’t see me packing.

We both stand in the door waiting for the cops to move on as the black car reverses and speeds off in the opposite direction, before I urge Cara back and slam the door, locking it once again.

“Do you think that’s why she really wants you?” I ask Cara, who is still staring at the door like she can see through the solid wood. “Cara?”

Slowly, she blinks, before directing her gaze to me. “I’m not a virgin anymore, so the only thing I’m useful for is turning me into one of their whores.”

“Jesus.” Not able to hold back, I step forward and pull her to my chest, wrapping one hand around her to hold her to me, while I use the other hand to take out my phone and call Dante.

He’s in the UK looking after his nieces, so I hope it’s not like three in the morning there, because I have no fucking clue about all that shit.

“Hello?” His deep voice is loud in my ear, and Cara must hear it, because she pulls back to look at me.

“Dante, I’ve just had a visit from Martina Rodríguez. She was in a black car. Get your tech team to hack into my security

cameras and get her plates.”

“Why would she be dumb enough to visit you?” Dante asks in confusion, because it’s not the typical MO in this sort of situation.

“She thought she could buy her back, and that I’d fucking say yes.”

“She’s either really stupid, or she has a back-up plan.” Dante points out before he turns his attention to something going on in the background. “Caitlin, give Avery back the glue.”

“I’m leaning toward the latter.” I admit after he apologizes and turns his attention back to me before cursing.

“Okay. I’ll put more men on the streets. Someone has to know where they are hiding.”

“Thanks. Let me know if you find anything.” I suggest and Dante agrees.

“Of course. You’ll be the first person I call.”

Ending the call, Cara moves away from me and starts pacing.

She’s angry.

I can see it in the way her shoulders tense, and how her hands open and close into fists, over and over.

“Hit me,” I say, placing my gun on the table by the door.

“What?” she asks, stopping abruptly to frown at me. “No.”

“Fucking hit me,” I urge again, slapping a hand to my chest, asking her to use my body to take out her frustrations.

Slowly, she shakes her head, but the way she bites the corner of her mouth, tells me she’s considering it.

“Come on, Killer. It’ll help with your anger.” I slap my cheek this time. “Hit me.”

And she does. I barely see the punch coming before her fist slams into my jaw, rattling my teeth.

“Shit,” I hiss, eyes flaring wide. “You’re strong. Do it again.”

She does, this time the blow coming to my chest, causing me to cough a little as the wind flies from me.

“Again, Killer!” I yell, feeling the blood in my veins ignite.

This punch slams into my gut, bending me at the middle, and I don’t get the chance to tell her to go again before she swings, but this time, I catch her fist and shove her hard against the wall by the door.

“Fuck me,” I demand, staring into her furious gray eyes as her nostrils flare. “Fuck this anger out of your system. Use me, Cara. Take what you need and fuck me.”

“I don’t know how.” She breathes, even though I can see how much she wants this by the scorching heat in her eyes.

“Then give me permission and let me fuck you until you can’t fucking think anymore,” I demand and fuck, she nods.

“Yes.”

I'm on her in an instant, my lips claiming hers even as I palm her tit through the fabric of her top.

“Get this off,” I growl, moving back as I drop to my knees, happy to see her hurrying to do as I ask.

Working her leggings down, I drag her panties with them exposing her flesh, and my heated gaze travels up her body as she flings her bra to the side.

“Look how filthy you still are.” I press my nose to her exposed cunt and inhale audibly. “My dry cum makes your cunt look like a delectable treat.”

Her heated gaze widens even as her lips part as she watches me close the distance and lick over her seam.

Instantly, her hands fist in my hair, and I love this about her. How she likes to hold on. Make sure I stay there until the job is done.

I wonder if she even realizes she does it.

Flattening my tongue, I press it into her clit as I drag it, and she widens her stance, giving me better access.

“Fuck, Killer. You're already so wet.”

“I-is that bad? Should I be embarrassed?”

I growl against her mound, gliding my fingers up her inner thigh before pressing two fingers to her opening.

“Fuck no. Wet is good, remember. Wet tells me you want me. Just like a man has an erection, a woman's slick cunt is her version of a stiffy.”

“Oh.” She cries out, when I sink the fingers into her tight hot heat, stretching her.

As I start working my fingers into the spongy wall of her g-spot, I watch her face transform into a lust crazed expression.

“Tell me how to say beautiful in Spanish,” I ask her, and she presses her head back against the wall as she starts to move her hips, chasing her high.

“Hermosa.” She pants, and I grin, pressing my lips to her clit and kissing her passionately there.

Lost to the pleasure, she starts grinding against my face while I mash my fingers harder and faster, helping her get closer to ecstasy.

The moment she starts clamping around my fingers, I free my cock with my free hand, and when her cries slowly die off from riding her high, I stand quickly, hitch her legs up, and ease my cock inside her.

She tenses, but my lips find hers as I kiss her, letting her taste herself on my tongue, and I use my free hand to circle her clit, building her pleasure again to mask any discomfort she feels at my invasion.

I slowly thrust a few times, feeling how easy my dick moves inside her with each motion, and then her hips are pressing into mine too, wanting more.

Lifting her legs, I wrap them around my waist and walk us awkwardly, with my jeans around my fucking ankles, to the

side and through my bedroom door before falling us onto my bed.

I don't stop moving. I continue pumping into her, faster and faster, loving her panted cries as she claws at my shoulders, holding on.

Breaking our kiss again, I push up, getting better momentum and pounding harder, watching how her tits jiggle with each thrust.

“Am I hurting you?” I grunt out, and she shakes her head.

“Yes. No. Don't stop.”

I fucking grin. I knew she'd be a good student.

“Does it feel good?” I ask, before biting my lip and willing myself not to fucking come yet. I want to wait and ride that high with her.

“Yes. Oh yes.” She cries, arching back and squeezing her eyes tight.

“Eyes on me,” I demand, and her lids fly open, her steely gaze locking with mine.

“Hermosa,” I tell her in her native language, and she smiles, like she appreciates that I remember the word I asked her for a few minutes earlier.

“I want you to come for me, Killer.” I rasp, pistoning inside her. “Squeeze my cock. Milk me.”

Even as I say this, I press my thumb to her clit and after only a few strokes, I send her soaring again with a loud cry.

The moment she starts clamping around me, my nuts draw up before pleasure erupts, shooting hot cum from my cock and filling her, deep inside.

I swear my hearing fucking vanishes with how hard I come, but after a few moments, Cara's panting breaths come back to me, and I blink myself out of my orgasmic daze to look down at her.

"Now that is how it's done," I tell her, and she giggles.

"That was... so much more than earlier. Will it keep getting better and better each time?"

"My cock aims to please. I'll be sure to try to bring you to new heights each time."

"Damn. Don't let me stop you."

Slowly a wide toothy smile spreads her lips wide and with the way her cheeks are flushed red, and her lips are puffy and well kissed, I fucking know I'm never going to get enough of her.

Of my wife.

CHAPTER 8

Cara

“So what’s the deal with you and Rocco?”

I press the cold water bottle harder against the side of my face, feeling the plastic bend under my grip. Luckily, Mateo’s punch didn’t leave much of a bruise, so I don’t even know why I keep cooling the skin down. Since it’s been a few days since he hit me, the bruising would have already appeared.

“Why do you want to know?” I shoot back at Alana, tossing my long hair over my shoulder and narrowing my eyes at her.

She grins wider. “Because I’m so fucking curious. We all heard the stories of your marriage, but I don’t think any of us expected you to become a real couple.”

I’m not sure there’s a label for what Rocco and I are. Yes, we’re married, and we live together. We also do all the stuff married people do. So maybe that’s my answer.

“Come on, mamacita,” Sasha adds, playfully wiggling her eyebrows. “Give us something.”

The word hits me right in the heart. I know that mamacita has become a slang word that can be used for all women. But it means little mom or hot mom. Something I never want to be... a mom, hot or otherwise.

“Wait.” I turn around just as Cain comes sauntering up to the bar. “I want to know as well. Like, is my bro good in the sack? Does he—”

“Fuck off, Cain,” Alana giggles as she picks up a coaster and throws it at him. “This is girl talk.”

“Yeah, but Sasha is asking questions she already knows the answer to,” Cain gripes.

My back stiffens, and I turn to the Diamond in question. “You’ve fucked Rocco?” Since that much is already clear, I ask what I really want to know. “While we were married?” I’m unable to hide the malice tinting my tone.

Sasha immediately holds her hands up. “Hang the fuck on. I don’t fuck married men,” she rushes out.

“We all have a past,” Alana says. She shoots a glare in Cain’s direction. “And some of us should stop fucking antagonizing the rest of us.”

“But where’s the fun in that?” Cain chuckles as he reaches for the glass of whiskey Tex’s holding out to him. “It’s much better once everything’s out in the open. I’d hate for any nasty secrets to come back and bite any of your lovely asses later.”

He has a point, and after how I behaved with Mindy, I can’t exactly blame him for forcing the issue.

“I don’t care,” I say to no one in particular. “Whatever Rocco did before me is none of my concern.”

The words are pretty, but the way I’m now looking at Sasha isn’t. It’s not her fault, and I’m rational enough to know I need to keep my inner bitch locked down tight. Because unlike with Mindy, Sasha isn’t throwing it in my face, and I had no claim on Rocco then.

“None of your concern, eh?” Rocco asks, as he comes up to the bar.

“Double Gs,” Cain grins and nods at Gray and Gunner as they trail in behind Rocco.

While Gunner is all smiles, his pal looks like he wants to be anywhere but here.

Honestly, why does Gray look so... homeless?

I’ve never asked Rocco about his finances, and I never will. But as I look around at Dirty Diamonds, and all the people here, money doesn’t seem to be a concern.

It’s not like anyone is brimming with wealth, but no one looks as rugged as Gray. I mean, his clothes don’t even fit him, and he’s in dire need of a haircut. And don’t even get me started on his lack of shaving. Unlike Rocco’s scruff, which looks intentional, Gray’s patchy stubble looks like it’s from not caring.

“Nope,” I quip, popping the p. “But I should warn you that if you fuck around on me, I’ll fucking castrate you.”

Sasha and Alana gasp while Cain and Tex chuckle. Rocco, though, he just smiles widely.

“And if you fuck around on me, Killer, I’ll kill the guy in front of you and lock you up,” he growls.

Considering my past, that warning shouldn’t make my body ignite with desire. There’s no helping it, though. Especially not when he comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my middle, definitely not as he licks and nibbles on the shell of my ear.

“Make no mistake, Killer. You’re mine.”

“Prove it,” I shoot back.

With a playful smile grazing his lips, Rocco lifts me off the barstool and easily turns me around in his hold. I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist and my hands rest on his shoulders.

As Rocco’s lips descend on mine in a bruising kiss, the rest of the room fades away. I can no longer hear their laughter, teasing jabs, or anything else. They become inconsequential and forgotten as I stroke Rocco’s tongue with mine.

When he moves his hands to my ass, squeezing the globes, I moan into his mouth. My hips move of their own accord, and I rock against the hardness growing between us.

“Not here, hermosa,” he rasps into my mouth.

“Then where?” I moan impatiently.

I’m vaguely aware of Cain mentioning his office, but I don’t pay much attention. Instead, I pepper Rocco’s jaw and neck with kisses, licks, and soft bites as he carries me away from the bar.

“Are you sure?” Rocco asks as he sits me down on what I assume is Cain’s desk.

Rather than answering him, I undo the button and zipper on his jeans. My movements are hurried, jerky. I want him—my husband—inside me right the fuck now.

“Answer me, Killer,” he demands.

I look up at him from beneath my long, dark lashes. “I’m sure,” I confirm.

I barely recognize the person I’ve become as I shove his jeans and boxers down his muscular legs. The lust pulsating inside me stirs my action, and all I can think about is the way it feels when he moves inside me.

Letting go of me, Rocco pulls his shirt over his head, and kicks his shoes and socks off. I lick my lips expectantly as he stands in front of me, completely naked.

Damn, this man is as sculpted as they come. His cheekbones could cut diamonds, and his muscles call to me in a way I’ve never considered before. But I want to touch them, lick them, make sure I’ve tasted every inch of his skin.

“Stop looking at me like that, Killer,” he rasps.

I frown. “Like what?”

He chuckles and holds his hand out for me to take, which I do. I let him pull me off the table and to my feet, and as soon as I’m standing, he rids me of my crop-top and bra.

“Like you want to devour me,” he smirks. Then he palms my tits and pinches my nipples. “Like you want to own every part of me.”

My mom’s training kicks in, and I immediately avert my gaze. “I’m s-sorry. I didn’t m-mean to.”

Rocco’s growl makes me flinch, and for the first time, I feel scared of him. My eyes widen and my breath comes out in pants as he bends until his face is right in front of mine.

“Rocco—”

“Don’t,” he says. The velvet smooth tone is such a stark contrast to the anger marring his face. “Ever fucking apologize for looking at me like that.”

“But I—”

He cups my face, bringing our faces so close his breath fans across my lips. “Do you know what it does to me when you look at me like that?”

I shake my head.

“It brings me to my fucking knees, Killer. It’s humbling to have a woman like you look at me like I’m a treat you can’t wait to fucking dig your teeth into.”

Looking into his dark eyes, I relax. I can’t explain what it is about Rocco, but he has the power to bring me to my knees as well. With him, I don’t feel ruined, or like the monster I really am. He makes me feel treasured and wanted.

Rocco has shown me a side of life I never even knew existed, one I’m wanting more of. It’s still unbelievable to me that I’m feeling like this, and I’m not sure I know what it means. But maybe I don’t need to. Perhaps I just need to accept it, and ride the wave for as long as possible.

“You do that to me, too,” I admit softly. “Thank you for being so patient with me.”

To my surprise, Rocco lets out a booming laugh. “I’m not patient, Killer. I’m selfish.”

“Selfish?” I ask, confused about his choice of words. “No. You’re generous.”

Rocco moves his hands to my pants, practically tearing them off me along with my thong. Both pool around my feet, and I step out of my stilettos so I can kick the clothes off.

I’m now standing just as naked as Rocco, and despite the blinds not being closed so anyone can look in, I don’t feel ashamed. How can I, when my husband is looking at me with barely contained lust?

“Yes,” Rocco says, his hand cupping my pussy. “I’m very selfish when it comes to you. But I don’t think I care anymore.”

I don’t understand what he’s trying to say, so I ask, “What do you mean?”

He slides a finger through my folds, and I’m surprised I’m already wet. “I want you, hermosa. And I’m not sure I could give you up even if you wanted me to.”

“Why would I want you to?” I ask. “You’re my husband.”

Fuck, I can barely believe my words. How I feel about him now is such a stark contrast to the day I got released from prison.

“Yes I am,” he rasps as he rubs the heel of his hand across my clit. “But do you want me to be? You don’t even know me, or what I do.”

I moan when he slowly pushes a finger inside me, and before I know it, my hips gyrate to get more of his addictive touch.

Reaching for his cock, I squeeze it just like he's shown me he likes. I stroke it from tip to base, fascinated by the wetness that glistens at the engorged head. Without thinking, I run my finger through it and bring it to my mouth.

"Fuck. Cara," Rocco growls as my tongue darts out and I lick my digit clean.

"What is that?" I ask as my eyes flutter closed and I savor the taste.

Rocco chuckles. "It's called pre-cum."

Right.

Now I feel stupid for not realizing that. This is the effect Rocco, and a fucked up upbringing, have on me. It reduces me to an unthinking, insecure mess.

I'm surprised that the flavor doesn't repulse me. My sister's told me horror stories of having to drink cum from a jar, so if this is that, it's not bad. A bit salty, but I don't mind it at all.

"You taste good," I purr. Then I let the tip of my tongue dance around my finger pad again, greedily licking it completely clean. "Really good."

"Cara."

I like the way he growls my name.

"Get your ass on the desk. Now."

Pouting, I let go of his cock. "You didn't say please," I remind him with a wink.

I yelp when he playfully slaps my ass with a growl. “And I’m not going to.”

This is a completely different side of Rocco, one I haven’t seen before. The other times we’ve had sex, he’s made sure to ask if he could touch me. While I appreciated that, I think I like this side of him. The one that doesn’t ask permission, but tells me what he wants.

As I climb onto the desk, I have a moment of hesitancy since I don’t know how he wants me. I ignore the part of me that wants to ask him and instead do what I want, which is sit on the edge with my legs spread wide.

Remembering how he taught me to touch myself, I slowly circle my clit. Now that he’s done it to me countless times, I have a better idea of what I like, which makes it easier. It’s not the same as having him touch me, though.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch?” I sass.

“Tempting,” he rasps, fisting his cock. “Your cunt is so fucking pretty. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of looking at it.”

I moan. “What if I want you to come over here and touch me instead?”

Rocco arches a brow. “Is that what you want?”

I don’t answer him right away. The way he fucks his hand is mesmerizing, and I can’t get enough of watching him as he unashamedly jerks off for my viewing pleasure. And what a pleasure it is.

“Yes,” I whimper.

Rocco squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his free hand.
“Tell me, Killer.”

“I-I...” My eyes turn heavenward as I struggle to get the words out. “I want you to touch me. Please touch me, Rocco.”

“Where?”

Gulping, I spread my legs wider. My finger is still on my clit, though I’m not moving it anymore. “Here.”

Rocco chuckles and looks at me. Shit, the lust in his eyes is almost too much.

“Not good enough, Killer. I want to hear you say what you want. Or better yet, demand it.”

I clear my throat and swallow thickly. “I want you to touch my p-pussy. Use your finger to rub my clit while you fuck me with your cock.”

Fuck me, I didn’t know if I’d be able to get the words out. But there they are, hanging between us. I said it, despite my voice wavering.

“Fuck!” Rocco growls. Then he closes the distance between us. “Do you still not care if people can see us?”

I bite down on my bottom lip and shake my head. “Not at all.”

Until her marriage, my sister didn’t have sex behind closed doors so it’s never been an expectation for me. And that aside, I want the horny Diamonds—especially Mindy—to see me please Rocco. They need to know once and for all that he’s taken.

“Are you wet enough for me?” Rocco asks as he steps between my spread legs, and I nod. “I’m trusting you, Killer. Remember, it’ll hurt us both if you’re not.”

Yeah, I don’t need a reminder.

“I’m wet for you,” I whisper.

Rocco growls. “Good. I’m going to fuck you now.” I pant as he lines the head of his cock against my entrance. “Hold on to my arms, Killer.”

I place my hands on his arms at the same time as he moves his to my hips, and when he roughly thrusts into me, I dig my nails into his skin for better leverage.

“Rocco,” I cry out as he pounds into me. “It feels so good.”

My tits jiggle with the force from Rocco’s fucking, and my pussy clenches around him as my orgasm builds.

“Cara,” Rocco growls, and my name sounds absolutely sinful on his lips.

Rocco bends, fusing his lips to mine. My eyes flutter closed as his tongue slides into my mouth, and I can’t help grazing the organ with my teeth, which elicits a rumble from him.

I break the kiss and look up into his eyes. “Touch my tits,” I demand, feeling brazen.

He stills between my legs, and I’m just about to ask if what I did was wrong. But then he rasps, “Lean back on your arms.”

Once again, I do as he says. Moving my arms behind me so I can rest on them as I lower myself. “Like this?” I question.

Rocco groans in approval. “Just like that, Killer.”

As he thrusts into me again, he captures my nipple between his teeth while palming both my tits. I cry out, and I think I call his name as pleasure shoots through my veins.

“Don’t stop,” I moan.

My cunt squeezes his cock so tight I know I’m hovering on the precipice, ready to fall with the next few thrusts.

Rocco picks up his pace, slamming into me so hard the desk moves with each piston of his hips. I wrap my legs around him, and push my heels into his hard ass in an attempt to get him deeper inside me.

Just as my orgasm crests, I sense eyes on me, and I look toward the window. On the other side of the glass is Mindy, the home wrecking bitch who tried to tell me I wasn’t enough for Rocco. If I wasn’t in the middle of the ultimate pleasure, I’d flip her off. But instead, I shoot her a shit-eating grin.

Take that, bitch!

My nipple falls from Rocco’s mouth with a pop. “Fuck. Killer. I’m going to... I—” Rocco’s words turn into a guttural groan as he slams into me once more.

I feel him spilling his hot seed into my pussy, that’s still holding him in a vise.

“That’s it, mi rey,” I moan.

Feeling too boneless to hold myself up any longer I move my hands to his broad shoulders as I lie all the way down on the desk. Slowly, I slide my hands around his neck and pull him toward me.

“What does mi rey mean?” he asks as soon as both our breathing has returned to normal.

I try to hide my laughter. “That’s for me to know and you to dot dot dot,” I say.

“One of these days,” he says, but he doesn’t complete the sentence.

Even though I want to ask, I don’t. I already know he won’t answer me until I tell him what I just called him. My king. That’s what Rocco King is. *Mine*.

Rocco stands and pulls me up with him. He hands me my discarded clothes, and we get dressed together in silence. It’s not awkward, it’s actually nice that we can be together without feeling a need to talk non-stop.

When we’re both dressed, Rocco hovers near the door, and I get the feeling he’s struggling to say whatever’s on his mind.

“What is it?” I ask, deciding to help him along.

“I need to ask you a favor.”

Exhaling slowly, I say, “Okay.”

“Me and Gunner have some shit to do today, but I don’t want to take Gray with us. He’s in a bad fucking mood and needs to get out of his own head.”

“And he needs a fucking haircut,” I mumble like that’s important right now.

Rocco chuckles. “He does. But he doesn’t have his parents, and he’s... well—”

“Gray needs help,” I finish for him. “Okay, I’ll help him.”

The gratitude I expect doesn’t come. Instead, Rocco furrows his brows. “Yes, but I just need you to keep an eye on him. Make sure he doesn’t start a fight or something.”

“Sure,” I agree.

I already know there’s more to the story than what I’ve just been told. But I’m not going to ask Rocco to betray Gray’s trust. Plus, I know a little about what it’s like to be your own worst enemy. And if my hunch is right, that’s exactly what the homeless looking boy is.

CHAPTER 9

Cara

After Rocco and Gunner take off to do God only knows what, I walk back inside Dirty Diamonds to find Tex and Gray at each other's throats.

"It's just one fucking beer," Gray fumes, balling his hands into fists.

"And it was just one fucking no," Tex smirks. "You're not old enough to drink, boy. And I'm not fucking serving you."

Sasha and Alana are still hanging out at the bar, and judging by their cackles they've had quite a few drinks.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Gray roars, taking a step closer to Tex.

The bartender shakes his head. "Don't even think about it, boy. It won't end well for you."

As I look at Gray, like really look at him, it hits me what he needs, and it's definitely not alcohol. He needs an outlet, a place where he can let out the angsty and toxic energy inside him. I should know. That's how I felt when I was locked up, and it's the reason I took up kickboxing.

Rounding the bar, I hip-bump Tex out of the way, and glare at Gray. "That's no way to speak to people," I dutifully say.

"What's it to you?" Gray spits, glaring back.

Rolling my eyes, I point at the door. "Let's go." When he just stands there, I add. "You can come with me willingly, or

I'll drag your ass out of here. It's your choice, but believe me, you're no match for me."

Predictably, he laughs mockingly at me, which is what I was hoping for.

"I don't think so. I like Rocco, and he'd never forgive me if I hurt you," he smarts.

Tex looks at Gray and bursts into laughter. "Oh, that's right. You haven't seen her fight. Believe me, boy. You're no match for her."

Gray straightens and puffs out his chest. "Make me," he challenges.

I smile sweetly at him. "And here I thought you'd never ask." Before he can retort, I jump onto the bar. "Let's dance."

Angling my leg so the nose of my shoe connects, and not the point of the heel, I kick Gray in the arm. I don't use all my power since I'm not actually trying to hurt him, only provoke him into letting go.

"You fucking bitch!" he shouts as I leap off the bar and onto the floor next to him. Then he shakes his head. "I'm not going to fucking fight you."

"Why not?" I argue. "Scared to lose to a woman?"

I'm absentmindedly aware that Cain's joined us, and that he, Sasha, Alana, and Tex are all placing bets on who's going to win. I hope Gray hears it, just as I hope it's going to rile him up.

He lets out an angry growl, and raises his fist, sending it in my direction. I quickly lift my arm to block him, which I manage just in time. But fuck me, he has a mean right hook.

“Again,” I encourage him. “Hit me like you really fucking mean it.”

He does, and I block all but one punch. That one lands on my tit.

“That’s dirty,” Sasha calls out.

“Foul play,” Alana agrees, laughter palpable in her voice. “No tit punching.”

After kicking Gray back, I quickly look over at the women and grin at them. But since I can’t afford to remain distracted, I turn back to Gray and discreetly force him toward the door as I keep moving closer to him.

It takes a few more kicks and punches, but we eventually reach the door that’s being held open by the bouncer.

“I win,” I declare as I force him to move one foot out the door. “So now you’re coming with me.”

Without waiting for his reply, I push him all the way out and slam the door behind us with the bouncer inside. We don’t need prying eyes for what I have in mind.

“Got a smoke?” I ask, only a little surprised when he pulls a pack and a lighter from his jeans pocket. “Thanks.”

I take it and light it, inhaling deeply as I watch him fumble to light one for himself. Damn, his hands are shaking badly, and I know it’s anger that’s at the forefront of his mind. He’s

probably angry with me, but more importantly, he seems angry at the world.

“So what’s your damage?” I ask as I purse my lips and create a circle of the smoke I’m exhaling.

“My damage?” he barks, looking at me like I’m out of my mind.

I nod. “Why are you so angry? And honestly, why do you look homeless? Have they not given you a place to stay?”

Gray spits on the ground. “What’s your fucking damage? And why do you walk around looking like a trashy whore?”

Though his words sting, I shrug. I had a dig at him first and fair is fair. “My damage is my family,” I admit. “They raised me to be the perfect cum dumpster, and then they sold me to Rocco.”

“W-what?” he stutters, his eyes wide like he either can’t believe my words or that I’m telling him.

I don’t know why, but I feel an odd kinship to Gray. I recognize his anger, and that damaging attitude. But I don’t want him to end up doing something he can’t take back, something he’ll regret for the rest of his life.

“Why are you telling me that?”

Shrugging, I admit, “I asked you first, but that hardly seems fair if I don’t want to answer myself.”

He looks at me so long I’m close to giving up. Then he lights up another cigarette and leans back against the wall.

“I killed my dad,” he admits.

“Me too,” I offer. “But you don’t sound like you enjoyed it as much as I did.”

He lets out a humorless laugh. “It was an accident, and I guess I didn’t really kill him. I just... it was my actions that got him killed.”

“Was he a good man?” I ask.

Gray nods. “I think so. I mean,” he gestures to the building we’re leaning against. “No one here is a good person. And my dad was mixed up with Dante. But they don’t kill innocent people.”

“Only buy them and marry them,” I spit before I can stop myself.

Shit! I didn’t mean for that to come out.

Hmm, so maybe Gray isn’t the only one in desperate need of a heart-to-heart. As much as I’m warming up to Rocco, that’s still a sore spot. I’m not trying to rewrite the past, what’s done is done, and a part of me likes that he’s my husband. But I’ve yet to understand it, and maybe that’s something I really need.

“How much do you know about what’s going on here?” Gray asks.

While he throws the butt of his cigarette on the ground and uses his shoe to stub it out, I consider his question. Fact is that I barely know anything, and that’s partly my fault. I haven’t asked any questions.

“That’s a topic for another day,” I say, wanting us to stay on track. “Where’s your mom?”

He barks out another laugh. “Busy turning tricks, spreading her legs for any man who’ll pay her.”

I recognize the bitterness in his tone, and it makes me even more adamant that I need to help him before it becomes a toxin running so deep it infiltrates his bloodstream.

“At least she’s doing it herself and not selling you for her own selfish gain,” I say flippantly. “But tell me something, Gray. Do you think the people here are... I don’t know... good people?”

He rolls his eyes. “I already told you they’re not good people,” he snaps.

Okay, yes, he did say that. But that’s not what I mean, and I explain that. “Are they good to you? Do they take care of you and keep you safe?”

“I’m sixteen, I don’t need anyone to fucking take care of me.”

I arch my brow. “Is that so? Then I ask you again, why do you look homeless instead of taking pride in your appearance?”

“What’s it to you?” Gray sneers. “You’re not my mom.”

His words remind me of my mom’s visit a few days ago. The side of my face throbs as I recall seeing Mateo earlier that evening as well.

Both of them threatened me, but it’s my mom’s threat that makes me shudder. I don’t know how to describe the look in her eyes. It was evil, sure. But it was also so much more. Like she believed every word she spoke.

The woman that came to Rocco's house is so different from the sniveling, pathetic mess I spared on the church floor three years ago. I didn't pull the trigger back then, because she wasn't the bigger evil. And, if I'm honest, I wanted her to live with her mistakes. But that woman wasn't the same one who came to buy me back.

With a shake of my head, I will my mind to stay on track instead of thinking about my deceitful mom.

I repeat my question to Gray, not looking.

He kicks off the wall and turns toward me, stabbing a finger in my direction. "Because it doesn't fucking matter," he roars. "I failed my dad, and you don't know what that feels like. Rumor has it you willingly pulled the trigger, and someone did that to my dad because of me. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

"No," I say as I shake my head. "I don't. But I know what it's like to be so angry with the world you'd rather burn it down than be in it. And I know what it's like to make yourself a victim."

"I am a fucking victim," he shouts.

Snorting, I throw my hands out to the side. "We're all fucking victims," I bite. "We don't have to act like it. We can become stronger and get to a place where we're living instead of just surviving."

I don't need to know everyone's story to know my words are true. Whether it's big or small, we're all victims of one thing or another.

The door swings open, stopping Gray from saying whatever he was going to, and the bouncer comes back out.

“You two need to move it along,” he says as he attaches the door to the wall so it’s wide open. “I need to get back to my post.”

I look up at the sky that’s darkened with thunder clouds. None of them have broken yet, so I’ll take that as a sign to stay outside for as long as it takes.

With a nod, I drag Gray around to the back entrance where we sit down on the pavement.

“You know,” I say when it becomes clear he’s not going to speak. “My mom once told me that my only option in life was to ‘fake it until you make it’.” I make air quotes around the six damning words. “And as much as I hate her, I think that’s true.”

To my surprise, Gray nods thoughtfully, like he’s actually considering my words. “I don’t know where to start,” he admits. “I’m so fucking angry at her, at myself, and my dad. But mostly at myself.”

“Do you ever start fights just to blow off steam?” I ask, and when he confirms my suspicion, I carry on. “I did that a lot my first six months in juvie. Everyone assumes I did it to be the top bitch, and sure, that was the result. But mostly I needed to hurt someone else so my own pain felt less.”

He runs a hand through his messy waves and tilts his head back. “So how the fuck do I fake it?”

“That’s easy!” I exclaim. “Get your fucking appearance under control. That’s step one. Because if you look better, people will assume you feel better. It’s basically step one in the fake-it-until-you-make-it program.”

The sound of rumbling engines reaches us, and I turn to look as several bikes drive around the building, presumably to park near the entrance. None of the riders spare us any glances, they’re all looking ahead.

“Know who they are?” I ask.

As Gray looks at the bikers, he tenses. “Trouble,” he sneers. “They’re nomads who have banded together and created their own club.”

He barely manages to finish his sentence before his phone rings, and I watch as he answers.

“Rocco,” he says as a way of greeting.

There’s some chatter on the other end, but I can’t hear it.

“Yeah, she’s here with me. Why?”

Gray’s dark eyes find mine, and he says, “Rocco wants me to get you out of here.”

I scrunch my face in confusion, but before I can answer, there’s a loud scream and I leap to my feet.

“Gotta go, man. Hurry up.” With those words, Gray ends the call.

I’m not aware I’m throwing open the back door until Gray wraps his arm around me and pulls me back.

“Sorry, can’t let you in there. Rocco wants you far away.”

Stomping on his foot, I spin around and bare my teeth. “Don’t fucking touch me,” I hiss. “And I’m not leaving.”

“Cara!”

I know from the urgency in his voice that he’s trying to do the right thing, and I appreciate that. Not that it’ll change my mind.

“We’ll tell Rocco you tried,” I say. “But I’m not leaving when someone needs help.”

I’ve never been a do-gooder, so I don’t know why it’s so important for me to stay. Maybe it’s because a small part of me likes it here. With no time to stand around and self reflect, I continue down the dark passage.

As we reach the end of the dark hallway, we’re greeted by bottles being thrown, and I narrowly miss one being thrown in our direction.

“Fuck!” Gray hisses.

We both duck in time, but one of the Diamonds isn’t as lucky and a bottle hits her right in the face.

I watch from the shadows as Sasha storms to her defense, helping her up from the floor and over toward the door leading into the shower and changing rooms.

“Hey!” one of the nomads calls out. “Where the fuck’s the rest of your pussy? We didn’t come here for bitches who whine about being touched.”

His fingers dig into the round ass of one of the dancers, who winces like he’s hurting her.

Motherfucker.

“Keep your hands to yourself!” Tex’s voice rings out, and the rowdy laughter from the nomads isn’t enough to drown out the sound of his shotgun being loaded. “Now!”

“Where’s Cain?” I whisper to Gray.

I don’t understand why the man in charge isn’t out there trying to get rid of the scum.

“Dunno,” Gray replied. “He could be digging his way to China, or getting ready to burn the building down with them inside.”

Huh? Neither of those options ring true, but I get the point Gray’s making. And the fact that Tex is alone with the Diamonds out there does make it seem like Cain’s up to something.

“Well, what if we want a specific Diamond?” A mean-looking nomad asks. “Do you fuckers take requests?”

One of the Diamonds clears her throat. “Of course we do. What’s your pleasure?”

“Not you,” he sneers as he backhands her. “We want the one with a teardrop tattoo.”

The room falls silent.

I look at Gray, who’s looking at me, and I can see the cogs turning in his head. Right now he has to be thinking the same thing as me; why would they want me?

“Not happening,” Tex snaps. “Get the fuck out of here. Now.”

The nomads shake their heads, menacing grins splitting their faces.

“We like it here,” a big, burly guy sneers.

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, the stage light changes to an eerie red, and smoke erupts from the stage. There’s so much it only takes seconds until it’s enveloping most of the room, making it impossible to see through it.

“Welcome to the party!” Cain’s voice rings out from every corner of the room.

A gunshot sounds and a body falls to the ground.

“Get down,” Gray hisses.

Even though he can’t see me, I shake my head. Narrowing my eyes, I try to see through the smoke, and I’m pretty sure I see some of the women run scared.

Another gunshot, and this time it’s followed by high-pitched screams.

“Cara!” My head jerks in the direction of the deep, booming voice. “We have a message for you from your mom.”

“What is it?” I shout back, unable to help myself.

“For every day you refuse to return to her, someone from your new life will die.”

I see red as a woman lets out a bloodcurdling scream. Before Gray can stop me, I run into the room, not stopping until I collide with a body. Up close it’s easy to see it isn’t someone I’ve seen before, meaning it must be one of the nomads.

“Estás muerto,” I scream as I kick him in the gut.

“You can’t kill me little girl,” he wheezes, doubling over as I kick him a second time.

Someone tackles me to the ground, and I flail my arms and buck as his crushing weight descends on me. He tangles his fingers into my hair and slams my head against the floor. I cry out, but don’t stop struggling despite my vision swimming.

More screaming, and at least one more body hits the ground. The smoke is still too thick to see properly, but I have a feeling the Diamonds aren’t fairing well. Feeling an unfamiliar need to help, or maybe it’s punishment I want to dole out, I continue to try to land punches, but none of them stop the guy on top of me.

Luckily, someone barges into him, and the second he’s unfocused, I buck again, unseating him. Using all my strength and training, I roll to my side and wrap my legs around him. Reaching for my shoe, I slip it off and use it as a weapon.

The guy laughs, not even realizing his end is fucking near.

“I told you what would happen,” I hiss at the same time as I ram the stiletto heel into his neck.

I try not to cringe at the sound, but really, it’s disgusting. So is the way he gasps, unable to form words.

Not wasting time, I leap off the ground and make my way toward the area I think the women are hiding. On my way I come across Cain, who’s laughing victoriously as he swings his bat into the head of one of the nomads.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says to me.

“Fucking loco,” I mumble. But then I remember where I’m headed. “Are the Diamonds okay?”

Cain shrugs. “No idea. But I fucking hope so.”

The murderous glint in his eyes is downright psychopathic when paired with the joker-like smile he’s sporting.

Before I can move again, Cain holds his hand out to stop me. “Here,” he hands me a knife. “Something tells me you’re good with one of those. So give them hell and don’t let them fucking capture you. I’d hate to kill you for doing something as stupid as getting yourself womannapped.”

Taking the blade, I nod. “Later, loco,” I say.

Leaving Cain, I continue my search for the Diamonds. By now, their screams are coming from all directions, and I’m unsure where to go.

More gunshots ring out, but this time no one falls to the floor.

I narrowly manage to escape a fist swinging in my direction, but I’m not quick enough to see the second hand coming out, wrapping around my throat.

“Gotcha!”

CHAPTER 10

Rocco

The screech of my tires is loud as my truck slides sideways into the parking lot of Dirty Diamonds. Gunner holds on for dear life, but he should know better than to be scared of my fucking driving. I've become an expert over the years, and the pelting rain only adds to the maneuverability.

“Gun ready,” I hiss, and I slam on the brakes, my eyes scanning the parking lot past the windshield wipers to make out the numerous figures running out from the club entrance.

“There!” Gunner yells, pointing out the windshield, but I don't need his direction. My eyes have already honed in on the fucker dragging my wife by her hair as she kicks out, trying to get away.

He's a fucking dead man walking!

Throwing my door open, I tug my automatic shotgun from under my seat and leap from my truck, aiming at a leather cut wearing motherfucker who aims his handgun at me, and I pull the trigger.

The boom is loud, and I ignore the vision of the gaping hole in his chest as he flies backward, thumping to the drenched asphalt, before I step over him.

I continue shooting as I go, hitting a few of the nomad gang before my aim is off, missing another fucker as he charges out of the club doors.

A loud crack pierces the air before the asshole's back arches and he's thrown forward right before Tex steps out of the club entrance with his shotgun.

Grinning at my friend, he gives me a nod before we both turn our sights on my cursing wife, her insults not for the fainthearted as the cunt-faced prick manages to drag her up to a bike.

A war cry sounds as Gray comes charging from the back of the building toward my woman, but a nomad steps in his path, stopping him, and they start swinging fists.

My target is clear as I elbow an asshole that comes at me from the side, and as he stumbles back, I aim and shoot.

I grin at his stunned expression as the bullet practically eviscerates his throat.

Cara's insults draw me back to her, and as I storm across the lot, I watch my warrior queen as she fights back as best she can, kicking her attacker in the shin before she slips on the wet ground, losing her momentum.

The motherfucker still has her by her long dark hair and it pisses me the fuck off.

That is my hair to fucking fist! Not his!

"Hey!" I boom, and his head jerks up in time to see the barrel of my gun, only three feet away. I pull the trigger.

Cara squeals in fright at the sound as blood and brain matter rain over her. Panicked, she shuffles back on her hands trying to get away from the carnage.

Standing over her, I look down and admire how much of a fucking warrior she is. Not just a warrior but a queen, with blood coating her face as the rain washes through it, running down her neck and down between her tits.

“Cara.” She’s trembling, her eyes locked on the fucker who was trying to take her, his body now a slumped heap on the asphalt, half his face blown off.

“Cara!” I demand, and she snaps out of it, her shocked steel gaze darting to mine. “Let’s go.” I reach out a hand, and her trembling one takes it, letting me pull her to her feet.

Engulfing her in my arms, I turn in time to see another nomad charging for me, and I get my shotgun raised just in time to blow his head clean off his shoulders.

Cara squeals again, and flinches into me, not used to the loud crack of guns, but it’s a sound she needs to get used to. She’s in my world now, and shit like this is inevitable.

Pulling my handgun from the back of my jeans, I nudge her back and offer it to her.

“Here. You know the drill, Killer. Point and shoot.”

Even though she trembles, she takes the gun and nods, her gaze locking with mine.

“No one touches what’s mine,” I tell her and it’s like my words are a blanket of courage for her as she stands taller and rolls her shoulders back, giving me a nod.

There she is.

“No one touches what’s mine either.” She rasps huskily, and pride fills my fucking chest.

Fuck, I want to kiss her, but not with that fucker’s blood all over her face. That will have to wait.

Side by side, we turn and face the foray, stepping into it together as we help my crew put an end to this.

By the time we are done, everyone is dead except for the one asshole Grayson is pummeling over and over, and Gunner has to wrestle Gray off the guy so we can get some answers.

“Start talking asshole,” I snap just as Cain appears wearing a grin.

Jesus, he loves this stuff way too much.

“They were here for the Diamond with a teardrop tattoo.” He tells me and I see fucking red.

My fucking wife.

What the actual fuck.

The nomad on the ground peers up through his swelling eyelids, blinking against the rain with a groan.

“What club are you from?”

Since they are on motorcycles, and wearing cuts, although no logo is displayed, they are clearly from an MC.

“Fuck you,” he hisses, and Gray leans down, bitch slapping him before pulling back his cut and tugging down the torn neck of his shirt.

“I saw that he had ink,” Gray mutters as he shows us the tattoo.

It’s a skull, with the name, Cali Reapers, above it.

Fuck. I’ve heard about them. Causing havoc all up the coast.

“Why are you in Santa Cruz?” I hiss and the fucker chuckles and then coughs.

“Haven’t you heard?” he wheezes. “We are bidding for this territory.”

Frowning, my eyes meet Cain’s who shrugs.

“What do you mean?” I ask the Reaper. “This territory is already claimed.”

Slowly, the Reaper laughs like he’s about to tell a fucking joke. But nothing about this is a joke.

“The territory is getting divided up, and Santa Cruz is up for grabs.” He sneers before jabbing a finger toward me. “And when it becomes *ours*, you fuckers are through.”

“Here’s what we think of that.” Aiming my shotgun at his knee, I blow it to shreds.

The Reaper briefly screams before passing the fuck out.

“Make sure he doesn’t bleed out and make sure he gets back to his leader.” I point down at him directing the order to Gunner and Grayson. “I want to make sure this message is loud and fucking clear. They come for my wife, or fuck with our people, then they fucking die.”

Gray and Gunner get to work on stopping the bleeding and I turn to Cain.

“What do you need me to do?”

He waves me off. “Get your wife home and cleaned up. We got this.”

Nodding, I step in closer, speaking quietly. “Cara’s mom has obviously outsourced to try to steal her daughter back. Can you let Dante know?”

Cain nods, and we clap each other’s shoulders before I turn to Cara and sweep her up in my arms.

The drive home is quick, since I only live down the road from the club, and I hurry since all I can hear is Cara shivering and her teeth chattering.

Skidding to a stop in my driveway, I leap from my truck, rounding it to open her door and sweep her into my arms again.

Like me, she is absolutely saturated, both with water and blood.

“I need to shower you.” I rush out as I swing the door open, stepping inside the house. “I need to get you cleaned and warmed up.”

Still trembling in my arms, mainly from the cold rain, she stiffens and starts to struggle in my hold when she realizes that I’m carrying her toward my bathroom.

“N-no.” She chatters and I growl.

“Cara, there’s no debate about this. The outside shower is freezing. You need to warm up in a hot shower.”

“No,” she says with demand laced in her tone, but I ignore it, shoving the bathroom door open, but I don’t go in.

No. I need to wait for her to agree. I won’t force this on her.

“Yes, Cara. Come on now.” I insist. “Trust me, please. Just close your eyes if you must and trust that I will keep you safe in there.”

“But.”

“No buts. You know I need to get you into a hot shower. Please don’t fight me on this.”

She’s quiet for a long beat, shivering in my arms as we both drip pink stained rain onto the floor in the hallway.

“I can shut my eyes?” she asks and I nod.

“Yes. Shut them and let me tend to you.”

Slowly she nods.

Fuck. I know it must have taken a lot for her to agree with this. To trust me.

Waiting until she squeezes her eyes shut, I step inside my bathroom to my tub, and awkwardly lean over to turn on the shower stream, trying not to drop her.

“I need you to put your feet down.” I start guiding her feet down, but she recoils, holding her feet up, her hands gripping my shoulders.

“Not on the tiles.” She whimpers, and I frown. Maybe she doesn’t want to feel the cold from the tiles?

“Okay, Killer. Not on the tiles. On the bathmat.” I scoot the bathmat in place with the toe of my boot and ease her feet down to rest on the fluffy mat, happy that she lets me do that.

Keeping an arm around her and her trembling body pressed to my chest, I lean in and test the water, making sure it’s not too hot, before I start peeling her clothes off, and then work on mine.

“Okay. I’m going to lift you over the edge of the tub.” I explain, and she nods into my chest, her eyes still shut tight as I lift her in and follow behind her.

Slowly, I guide her under the spray, and watch as she keeps her lids shut, completely trusting me to make sure she’s safe.

Fuck, that does something to me.

Inside my chest, the cold organ that beats starts to warm. It’s like her trust is thawing it, and for the first time, I feel the impact of its beat.

This is what she does to me. Cara King. My wife.

Feeling unusually emotional, I’m glad she can’t see me right now, and I turn my focus to her as I start my task at washing the blood from her skin.

The convulsing trembles from the cold slowly ease as my hands glide over her warming skin, and I will my dick not to get hard, because now isn’t the time. Now it’s the time for me to show her that I am trustworthy. That she can rely on me to take care of her. Of us.

After my hands run gently over her skin to make sure it's completely clean, I shampoo her hair, and then wash down her body with soap.

I've never done this to another person before, so I'm a bit fumbly, but she looks at ease as I wash her hair, her head tilting into the touch of my fingers like she enjoys my touch.

"You like that?" I ask quietly, and she nods against my fingers, grazing against her scalp.

"So much."

Jesus. Her voice has that husk to it again. It's a fucking turn on, and my dick stirs a little.

Down, boy.

"Let's rinse it out." I suggest, turning her a little as I take the handheld showerhead off and start rinsing the suds from her long hair.

Fuck, the way the water and suds stream down over her nipples is a temptation of its own, and I force my gaze away and focus on her hair only until it's completely rinsed and then I rehang the showerhead.

Chicks use conditioner, something I've never had to worry about, so not only have I never conditioned someone's hair before, but I've never used the product before.

Trying to avoid looking like a dumb prick, I quickly read the fine print instructions on the back of the bottle, glad I stocked up with different brands before she came to live with me, not knowing which one she would prefer, so not only is my shower stocked, but so is the outside shower.

“Sorry, I’m new to this part.” I admit as I squirt some into my palm, and a small smile spreads across her face.

“Just concentrate most of the conditioner to the mid-lengths and ends and comb it through with your fingers.”

“Okay,” I rasp quietly near her ear, and I love the way it makes a shiver run down her spine.

Doing as she instructed, I lather the ends of her hair, working the slimy product up higher before using my fingers as a comb. I do this for a minute or so before rinsing it out and quickly washing myself while she stands waiting with her eyes closed.

Once I’m done, I pull her to my chest, looking down at her as she angles her head up but keeps her eyes closed.

“Can you tell me why bathrooms are such an issue for you?” I ask, and she frowns, her lids still sealed.

“I...” she shakes her head. “I’m not ready.”

“Okay. How about my truth for yours?” I ask, and the moment I do, anxiety twists my gut. Maybe I’m not ready either.

Slowly, Cara cracks one lid slightly to look up at me.

“Will you tell me why you got so pissy about me asking why you didn’t learn Spanish in school?”

I nod. “I will if you tell me your issue with bathrooms right after.”

Grinning, she nods, and closes her eyes tight again. “Deal.”

Shit. Where do I start?

“Uh...” I say feeling clueless on how to explain myself. I’m not used to talking about my feelings like this, but I want her to trust me, so I need to level the playing field. “I guess your question made me feel dumb, because I... uhhh...”

She cracks her lid open again. “You can tell me. I promise I’ll never use it against you or think any less of you.”

I’m meant to be this big bad tough guy, yet all I am is a street thug pretending to be more. She says she won’t think less of me, but it’s inevitable. The truth will show her exactly who I am.

The question is, does it matter? Do I think she’ll look at me differently?

Even as I think it, I don’t believe it. Cara is not a trivial person. She doesn’t care for social standards or norms. The only thing she was raised to do is support her husband, so let’s hope she still has that part inside her.

Shit. I need to tell her. It’s the only way to move things forward.

“Can you look at me while I tell you?” I ask as she peers up through the minuscule crack of her lid. “With both eyes.”

Slowly she nods. “I’ll look at you and nothing else.” She breathes and I feel pride bloom inside me.

She’s so strong.

Prying both lids open wider, she looks up at me as droplets of the shower spray around us.

“I... uh... never learned any languages because I didn’t go to school much after my tenth birthday.”

Her brows shoot up. “Homeschool?” she asks and I shake my head.

“No, I... lived on the streets.”

Her eyes round with pity, but she doesn’t insult me by telling me how sorry she is or saying you poor thing. No. She keeps asking questions.

“So you were homeless?” When I nod, she asks. “Were you alone on the streets or with a parent?”

“It was just me. I don’t have parents.” I sigh, feeling a little more at ease with telling her this now that I’m finally doing it. “I’m an orphan.”

She nods. “Foster carers?”

“Only abusive ones.” I admit, and her brows hitch high. “I managed to get away eventually, and I never went back. For most of those years after, the other street kids knew me only as Rocco. No one knew my full name, and it wasn’t until I was fourteen that I came across Dante, Luke, and Baz. At the time they were living it up as surfers, and they made sure I never went hungry. When Dante was twenty-one Luke got killed, and he transformed into a vigilante who stuck up for those who couldn’t stick up for themselves. That’s when he formed the Diamond Crew, and I never looked back.”

She nods, her steel gaze roaming my face like she’s making sure every inch is locked in her memory.

“What sort of abuse did you suffer?”

I tense at her words. I never expected her to ask that. I'm not sure why. She is a curious woman. Probably because she has so much to learn since her background was a lie.

Cara has been through some horrific abuses of her own. Her scars tell that story. But I've never spoken the words of my abuse out loud to anyone.

I can never...

I shake my head, flashes of a time I want to forget bombarding my brain.

"I can't," I whisper and her eyes turn glassy.

"Were you... Did they..." She struggles to finish, but that doesn't matter because I know what she's trying to ask.

"Please don't ask me to say the words out loud, hermosa." I plead, because if I do, I think I will break. And if I break, I don't think I'll ever be able to be put back together.

The burning at the back of my eyes is an unfamiliar sensation. I've not felt it since the day I ran, and never looked back.

Cara's gentle hand comes up to cup my cheek, "Rocco. I won't ask you to say it, but it will help me if I can confirm it."

I gulp, the lump in my throat the size of a melon, as I struggle to stay put and not pull away.

"I think I understand. They took something from you. Something they had no right to take. They raped you, didn't they?"

My breathing is rapid and my skin prickles with humiliation at admitting this, for the first time, and then, I slowly move my head in a nod.

“Shit.” She cringes, shaking her head like she is disgusted, but not at me. At herself.

“What is it?” I ask as she squeezes her lids shut again.

“I... feel worse now about what I did to you. Forcing myself on you without your consent.”

“No, Killer.” I cup her face right back. “Look at me.” When her gray eyes lock with mine again, I continue. “That’s different. Please don’t compare what we have with the monsters from my past.”

A fat tear tumbles from one of her eyes as she stares up at me. “Are they still alive? The people who abused you.”

I shake my head. “No. Dante and I made sure they were dead years later. He never knew exactly what happened, but he understood enough to know they were scum abusing children.”

“Damn. I wanted to kill them for you,” she says, her tone laced with disappointment. “Their entrails would make for a beautiful trophy.”

I smile at that.

“I have no doubt they would have suffered immensely by your hand.”

She nods in my hands. “Too fucking right.”

I chuckle.

“Your turn, Killer.” I urge, hoping she will open up to me.
“Please tell me why you can’t bear to enter a bathroom?”

Her smile drops, and her gray stare falls to my chest.

“Blood,” she whispers, and I release her face and run my hands through the spray of water, down her back.

“Blood?”

She nods. “There was so much.”

“Whose blood?”

“J-Julietta’s.”

My brows shoot up. “Your sister’s blood?”

She nods. “Sometimes, I can still smell it. Feel it as my feet slipped in its thickness on the...”

“On the what, Cara?” I ask, pressing my fingers under her chin to tilt her head up to me.

“On the tiled floor,” she whispers, before squeezing her eyes tight.

Frowning, I run her words through my head before my eyes dart to the tiled floor of my bathroom, and then my mind wanders to the shower room at Dirty Diamonds. Shit. The floor was tiled there, too.

“Do you see it? The blood, every time you look at the tiles on a bathroom floor?”

She nods frantically before burying her head into my bare chest.

Damn. It all makes sense now.

“I don’t want to be like this. But I can’t stop the images flashing before my eyes.” She admits, and I nod as I press my lips to her wet hair, knowing exactly what she means.

An idea comes to my mind as I remember how she didn’t want to put her feet on the tiled floor before. She doesn’t have a problem in my shower, most likely because it’s a smooth bathtub, so I ease her back and notice her eyes are squeezed tight again.

“Cara, I need you to stay right here for a minute or two so I can do something. Okay?”

Slowly she nods, reaching her hand out blindly to find the metal shelf that holds the soap, shampoo and conditioner.

Once I know she’s steady, I climb out of the tub and dart from the room, dripping water onto the carpet of the hall as I rummage through the linen closet. I get every towel I can, and hurry back into the bathroom before laying out the towels on the floor, making sure there is no sign of the tiles underneath.

Once done, I step back into the tub, reaching out to my wife.

“I’m back.”

“Where did you go?” she asks, still with closed eyes.

“Open your eyes again for me,” I ask, and she reaches out, running her hands over my pecks until she’s pressed to my front, and only then does she crack her lids.

“I need you to trust me, Cara. Trust that I have your back. That I will keep you safe. That I am here to care for and

protect you.” I give her a little squeeze. “I need you to look at the bathroom floor.”

Immediately, she shakes her head and squeezes her eyes tight.

“Cara please. I promise it’s okay. Just take a look for me, please.”

Honestly, I have no idea if this will work, but I need to at least try.

If it works, then great. I know what I have to do to make her feel comfortable in my home. Our home. And if it doesn’t work, then I will think of a new solution. I’ll think of a thousand until one sticks.

“I’m not sure if I can,” she whispers, and I give her a reassuring squeeze.

“You can. You’re the bravest person I know. You can do it.”

Slowly, she nods and cracks her lids again to look at me.

“Good girl.”

Her eyes widen before a repulsed expression crosses her face. “Seriously? Good girl? Say that again and I’ll cut you.”

A laugh bubbles up my throat, and I throw my head back as I let it take over, welcoming its lightness.

“I have no fucking doubt you’ll cut me. And noted.” I grin, trying to compose myself.

It makes sense that she’s not into praise kink. Not that she necessarily knows what that is. She’s finally free of the rules

her family tried to brainwash her with, and given she was forced into submission, I can see that Cara will probably never be a submissive woman. Sure, she's submitted to me a few times, giving me the control, but that was her trusting me to teach her how sex should be. I don't doubt that in the future we are going to butt heads in the bedroom. I can already see her dominant nature coming through.

“Good. Don't forget.” She snaps sternly and I chuckle even as I draw a promise cross over my heart.

“Now, Killer. Stop stalling and take a look at the floor.”

She blinks a few times, and I can see she's fighting against her instincts, but then slowly, she turns her head and eyes the floor.

Even though she's stiff in my arms and her breathing quickens, she keeps her eyes trained on the towed floor.

“Talk to me. Is it better? Worse?”

“Better,” she whispers before turning back to me. “Thank you.”

My smile is small as I take her in, brushing my thumb over the teardrop tattoo just under her eye.

“When your twelve-month parole period is up, and you have the right to decide how your future looks, I really hope you'll consider staying here with me. As my wife.”

For a moment I'm looking back into the eyes of the sixteen-year-old girl that was given no choice. She was just as scared as the woman is in front of me now, but both versions

never let anyone see. But I do. I feel like I can see into her soul.

“I’ll consider it,” she whispers, and fuck. That’s all I can ask for at this point.

I want her to stay, but I won’t force her. I won’t take her decisions away from her.

“That’s all I ask.”

CHAPTER 11

Cara

Like most nights, I'm back in the prison, my sister lying on the floor with her head in my lap.

"It's okay, Cara," she whispers, with a smile on her lips. "I'll be free soon."

"No," I cry. "Don't leave me. Quedate por favor."

Even though I know she can't, I beg for her to stay with me.

"No one can keep someone like you down, Cara. Give them hell and then get the fuck out of there. Promise me you'll find a way to be happy."

The shiv in my hand clanks as it falls onto the floor. It's covered in Julietta's blood, and her body is covered in stab wounds.

Her beautiful eyes are bloodshot, and her breathing is garbled wheezing.

"Forgive me," I beg. "Please say you forgive me."

She takes a shuddering breath. "T-there's nothing to f-forgive."

Fat tears roll down my cheeks, but I swallow down the sob lodged in my throat. I need to be strong for Julietta.

Using her last strength, Julietta places her hand on top of mine. "I-I f-forgive Mateo, t-too," she stutters

as tremors tear through her. “W-we’ll all m-meet again.”

*Her hands fall limp, and despite knowing she’s dead,
I shake her and cry out her name. “Julietta!”*

I’m ripped from the nightmare so suddenly I feel my head spin.

“Shh,” Rocco coos. “You’re safe, hermosa. Please wake up.”

I blink, and it takes me a moment to realize I’m safely in Rocco’s bed, and not sitting on the dirty, tiled floor from my nightmare. As my eyes get used to the darkness in the bedroom, his concerned face comes into view.

“Rocco?” I gasp his name, not quite able to believe he’s here. “You’re here...”

As he shifts, I realize he’s learned his lesson about waking me up from a nightmare. He isn’t anywhere near my legs. Instead of being behind me like he was when we fell asleep, he’s crouching on the floor, next to my side of the bed.

Can’t say I blame him. I’ve kicked him at least four times, and he’s still carrying the marks to prove it.

“Of course I’m here,” he rasps. “I’ll always be here.”

His words cause sobs to tear through me, and I’m unable to stop them. I drag my knees up, curling in on myself as I cry into the pillow.

It’s been almost a week since he told me what he suffered when he lived on the street, and the condemning words broke

something inside me. Opened the floodgates, and I don't know how to stop them. Every night it's the same nightmare, and every night he wakes me. Then comes the uncontrollable sobbing.

"Fuck. Tell me how I can help you," Rocco pleads.

It cuts me to hear him sounding so helpless, but I don't think there's anything he can do. My tears aren't just for me and Julietta, they're for him as well. For what he went through, and the shame I saw in his eyes when he told me his secret.

And... and if I'm being completely honest, they're also for Mateo. Once upon a time, my twin was my best friend. We shared a womb together, entered this world together, and learned to walk together. When one of us fell down, the other was always there to help. Just because life later dealt us completely opposite hands doesn't mean he isn't hurting, too.

In fact, I know he is. The look in his eyes when he pressed all those cigarettes to my skin was half the reason I stopped fighting and screaming. It broke something in him, and I felt the snap reverberating in my soul.

"Say something," Rocco urges, gently moving strands of hair from my face. "Anything. Scream at me. Or better yet, take your pain out on me. I can take it, Cara. But I can't stand seeing you like this." His voice takes on a gravelly quality, and I know he's feeling my hurt like it's his own.

"I-I don't know how to s-stop," I hiccup.

The mattress dips as he climbs in behind me, spooning me until I'm no longer shaking with pent-up emotions. He continues to hold me, pressing his lips to my shoulder until I'm able to breathe normally again.

"You were dreaming about your sister again," he says. It's not a question which means I must have called out her name.

"Not a dream," I mutter. "Always a nightmare."

Rocco remains silent, and I know why. He wants to know what it was about, but he doesn't want to ask me. Just like I didn't want to ask him what happened before he lived on the street. I did it anyway, though. Pushed for answers I had no right to.

"You said she was killed in jail by a monster. Was it an inmate?"

I nod.

"Someone she had issues with?"

This time I shake my head. While I was feared and maybe begrudgingly respected, Julietta was actually liked. Despite the different cliques, people showed her kindness and never bothered her. That's the kind of person she was. Somehow, she always brought the best out in the people around her.

"No," I croak. "In fact, she loved her killer very much."

I feel the exact moment Rocco figures the truth out for himself. His hold on me tightens as he rasps, "Fucking hell. No wonder you're trapped in that nightmare. Why did you do it?"

Fighting more tears I squeeze my eyes shut. “It was my gift to her. Julietta’s spirit was slowly dying. She’d been through so much... and... and...” I swallow down the lump in my throat. “The fucker she was married to broke her, and she wanted to die. But she asked me to do it.”

Rocco exhales audibly, but remains quiet.

“At first I said no, but then I realized that was selfish of me. She wasn’t happy, and I don’t think she could ever find happiness again.”

“Why didn’t she do it herself?” As soon as he’s asked the question, Rocco curses. “Fuck, I shouldn’t have asked that.”

I place my hand on top of his to let him know I understand. “Even though I already knew the answer, I asked her the same thing. Julietta was religious and believed that she couldn’t get into heaven if she committed suicide.”

My hand closes around the cross dangling from my necklace. It makes me feel closer to her when I touch it, like I can almost imagine hearing her voice.

“One of the women agreed to help me, and she fashioned a shiv. Two stood guard as Julietta and I went into the... the...”

“You don’t have to say it.”

Ignoring Rocco, I finish. “Shower.”

“Fuck,” he hisses. “And I locked you in the bathroom. I literally fucking locked you in your worst nightmare.”

The irony that we’ve both made the other suffer their personal nightmare isn’t lost on me. Yeah, Rocco locked me in

the bathroom, but I also took his choice from him and lost my virginity on his cock without his input.

Yet, we're still here. Still together, and I like the change he's brought out in me. Through his actions, he's showing me a life I never even dared to dream of—one where I matter and have a voice.

“And I took something from you,” I remind him as shame burns through me.

Fuck. I still can't believe I did that.

Okay, the thing I'm having the hardest time coming to terms with is that I don't fully regret it. Because that was the moment things changed between us, which has brought us here. To the moment where I realize I need Rocco's help.

“Rocco,” I say, turning in his hold so we're face-to-face. “Will you help with something?” Nerves make my voice sound formal like I'm about to pitch a business proposal rather than ask him to try something with me.

“Of course, Killer,” he replies immediately. “Name it.”

The eagerness in his tone makes my heart skip a beat and my breath hitches. “Rocco.”

Unable to express the way he makes me feel, I slant my lips to his. His surprised intake of air spurs me on, and I deepen the kiss as I hoist my leg around his hip and move us so he's on his back and I straddle him.

Rocco's hands immediately seek out my ass, and he isn't gentle in the way he squeezes the globes. “Fuck. Cara,” he rasps into my mouth.

As I feel him harden between us, I rock my hips, seeking friction on my clit. My thong and his boxers do nothing to diminish the feel of his cock rubbing against my bundle of nerves.

“Is this what you need help with?” he chuckles when we come up for air.

The words I want to speak stay lodged in my throat, so I whimper and reclaim his lips. Our tongues battle, teeth clashing, and I fucking love every second of it.

Rocco wraps my long hair around his fist and eases my head back. I growl, annoyed he’s putting a stop to our kissing.

“Answer me,” he demands in a harsh tone.

Shaking my head, I say, “No.” Then I lick my lips and take a shuddering breath. “There’s something I want to try. But I… I can’t do it alone.”

His gaze softens. “Anything.”

As I look into his dark eyes, I find that I don’t just believe him. In my heart I know he’s the only one who can help me—the only one I trust and want to help me.

“I want to have another bath,” I admit. A shudder runs through me at the mere thought of going back into the tiled bathroom, but I have to try. “Will you come with me?”

To his credit, Rocco doesn’t ask any questions. He simply rolls out of bed and goes to fill the bathtub.

My legs feel like lead as I slowly place one foot in front of the other. The small walk to the bathroom feels like miles

rather than feet, and when I reach the door, my legs are shaking so badly I can barely stand up.

Leaning against the door frame, I force one foot onto the tiled floor. The towels are still there, but I swear I can feel the tiles beneath them. Rocco looks at me over his shoulder. His brows are furrowed and his lips pressed into a thin line, but he doesn't try to stop me.

Okay, I can do this.

That's what I'm telling myself as I tentatively move my foot further into the dreaded room. The other is still on the threshold and for some reason it makes me feel better to know I literally have a foot in each room.

"You can do it, hermosa," Rocco rasps.

I'm not sure I can.

Yes, I must.

No, I can't.

"I-I..." I bite down on my bottom lip as I trail off.

Tilting my head to the side I try to guesstimate the distance between us. It's not as much as my mind keeps telling me, that much I know. Two or three strides, that's it. I can do it.

With a yelp, I kick off the floor and very awkwardly spread my legs as much as possible to make my steps as big as possible.

"One more, Killer," Rocco encourages me.

I look into his dark eyes, and the moment our gazes lock, I no longer feel the tiles under my feet. Instead, I feel the fire in

his orbs lick across my skin, making it feel like my body is aflame.

“Rocco,” I half-sob as I close the distance between us and jump into his arms.

Not fully ready for me, he stumbles back, and before I know it, we fall into the tub, sloshing the warm water everywhere.

“Oh my God.” My voice is caught somewhere between a cry and laughter.

“A little warning next time,” Rocco laughs.

Rather than making empty promises, I press my lips to his. It starts out as a slow, close-mouthed kiss, much like the one we shared on our wedding day. Though, this time I welcome it, and I’m intimately familiar with the feeling he stirs in my chest.

“Why aren’t I naked yet?” I huff as I pull back.

Rocco quickly rips the shirt from my body. His movements make the fabric tear, and I fucking love that he’s as eager for me as I am for him.

Impatiently, I snake my hand into the slit in his boxers, and fist his length. His breath hitches as I apply more pressure than usual, but from the way his eyes roll back in his head I’m not worried.

“Fucking hell, Killer,” he growls, the sound tinted with lust.

“I’m still not naked,” I gripe.

He nips my bottom lip, continuing to kiss across my cheek to my neck, licking and nipping the skin all the way down to my shoulder. His hands find my heavy tits, squeezing them to the point it hurts. But fuck, it hurts so good.

“Rocco,” I moan.

“Patience,” he rasps.

I shake my head. “No. Make me feel good. I... oh!” Throwing my head back, I moan as he pinches and rolls my nipples between his thumb and index finger.

Rocco moves his hand between my legs and cups my pussy. “Stand up,” he rasps.

Untangling myself from him proves harder than I first thought. We landed sideways in the tub, so we’re neither sitting nor standing, but caught somewhere in between.

While giggling in an almost crazed way, I shakily stand up. Rocco is quick to slide my thong down my legs, kissing my thighs as he goes. Once I’ve stepped out of my underwear and he’s flung them to the side, he gets up as well.

Though the tub isn’t small, it feels it as we’re both standing here.

I frown when Rocco slides his hands under the waistband of his boxers. “I want to do it,” I say resolutely, slapping his hands away.

“Have at it,” he says, unleashing a devilish smirk.

After lowering myself to my knees, I tug at his black boxers. I moan with anticipation and lick my lips as his cock

springs free, almost slapping me on the cheek.

Can a cock be beautiful? If so, Rocco's should win best in show. It's long, thick, and the red head glistens in the light. Probably a mix of the bathwater and pre-cum.

"See something you like?" Rocco rasps.

I nod. "Yes," I say, wrapping my hand around the base. "Can I kiss it?"

The primal growl coming from deep in his throat is all the answer I need. I press my lips to the smooth head. Unsure exactly what to do, I move my hand up and down his length a few times. Then I lick the head, spearing the tip of my tongue into the slit.

"Fuck, Killer," he groans. "Just like that."

Since Rocco's the only guy I've ever been with, I've never done this before. Courtesy of my mom, I technically know what to do. Hers isn't the voice I want in my head though, so I peer up at Rocco through my lashes.

"Tell me what to do," I implore.

Rocco swallows thickly, and I stare transfixed at his Adam's apple as it bobs in his throat. "Wrap your lips around the head," he says, his tone gravelly with lust. "Move your hand up and down and suck."

Doing as he says, I hollow my cheeks, creating suction while I move my hand up and down the shaft. Rocco's raw sounds spur me on, and I let them guide me into finding a rhythm he likes.

Feeling bolder, I move my hands to his ass. I dig my nails in as I take him deeper into my mouth. He stiffens for a moment, and his breathing turns shallow as I part his cheeks.

“Cara,” he groans, and it almost sounds like he’s in pain.

Shit, I didn’t mean to do that. It just... happened.

I let go and pull back, scared I’ve crossed a line. “I’m sorry,” I rush out. “I didn’t mean to, and... I’m so sorry.”

Leaning down, he cups my jaw, shaking his head. “Do it again,” he demands.

I take him back into my mouth and move my hands to his ass again.

“Just like before,” he rasps, and I part his cheeks again as I slowly work him further into my mouth.

Rocco’s length is no joke, and I can safely say I now know why it’s called a blowjob—emphasis on the job.

I look up at him, and I hate the anguish on his face. His eyes are squeezed shut. Wanting to make him feel better, I take him all the way to the back of my throat. I don’t pull back until my eyes water and I gag around his dick.

A tremor runs through him, but he still doesn’t ask me to remove my hands. Though he hasn’t specifically said it, I feel like I know what he wants—maybe even needs. With him, I’ve faced my fears, and I think that’s what he needs right now.

As I gag around him again, I slide my hand into the crevice of his ass, making sure the tips of my fingers graze his opening.

“Cara,” he hisses through clenched teeth.

I pause, waiting to see if he’s going to tell me to stop. But he doesn’t. He gives me a barely perceptible nod, and I take that as permission to do what I think he needs.

My eyes won’t leave his face. I’m desperate to capture the look of pain and pleasure flickering across his features as I press a wet finger against his opening. He shudders, but instead of pulling away, he pushes back against me.

Seeing him like this, so tense, and clearly caught in a dark place in his mind is damn near breaking my heart. I don’t know if I should stop or continue, only that I can’t stand the look on his face.

I pull back until his cock falls from my mouth. “Rocco,” I sob, and he finally opens his eyes. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

His breath saws out of him, and the look he gives me can only be described as lost. “I don’t know,” he admits.

I know it’s taking a lot for him to be this vulnerable, just like it does for me. But when I’ve been in his position, he’s been the strong one. Guiding me through it until I got to a place where I felt better. I decide that’s exactly what I’m going to do for him.

Needing him to relax, I fist his cock, slowly moving my hand up and down as I cup his balls and gently massage them. When I don’t go anywhere near his ass, he finally relaxes. Even moans as I stroke his length.

I take him back inside my mouth. With a better idea of what he likes, I swirl my tongue around the head and use my thumb to add pressure to the angry vein on the side of his shaft.

“Fuck. Killer. Fuck.” His groans are like music to my ears, and I eagerly keep up the momentum.

I slowly move my hands up his thighs, grazing his skin with my nails. I move all the way up to his toned stomach, where I dig my nails into his skin for good measure.

“Cara,” he warns, but it’s a warning I don’t want to heed.

I want Rocco to lose control instead of being this closed off.

“Give it to me,” I moan around his cock.

“What?” he rasps.

I wrap one hand around the base, moving it up and down as fast as I can. “Let go,” I murmur. “Let it all fucking go and give it to me.”

With a sharp nod, he groans, which I know is his way of answering. He’s going to do it, or at the very least, try. That’s more than I expected, and it makes me feel special.

“Do you want me to try?” I ask, needing his confirmation.

He nods again.

“Okay,” I murmur.

I want to do this. Not just for Rocco, but also for me. I don’t like that there’s a side of him that isn’t mine. I know it

makes no sense, and that's okay. It doesn't need to be understood for me to act on it.

Rocco's gaze is burning against my skin, and his shallow breathing is almost like music. But his cock is still hard, telling me he wants this.

I lick my lips and look up at him. "Okay," I repeat, my voice more steadfast this time. "I promise to make it feel good for you."

His gaze softens a little. "I know you will," he rasps. "I trust you."

Rocco wordlessly hands me a bottle of body oil that he grabs from the shelf next to the bath. Done with taking it slow, I squirt some more of the oil into my hand and rub it so it coats all my fingers. Then I take him back into my mouth, alternating between creating suction and licking down the length. Meanwhile, I move my hands back to his ass, and press a slick finger against his puckered hole.

"Fuck!"

This time it isn't pain edged into his features, but pure, barely contained lust.

"Keep going," he rasps, and I do.

I press my finger against the opening until the tip slides inside. When I gag on his cock at the same time, he tangles his fingers into my hair, something it must have taken all his self-control not to do until now.

Tightening his grip on my strands, he begins to fuck my mouth while I slowly slide my finger further into his ass.

“Killer,” he growls. “That feels so fucking good.”

The admission causes my pussy to throb, and even though this is about him, I wish he was touching me.

I time the thrusts of my finger with his fucking my mouth, and it doesn't take long before he growls out my name and forces his cock all the way to the back of my throat. As I curl the finger in his ass, he lets out a groaned string of curses and throws his head back.

“Yes. Fuck. Cara... so fucking good...” With a throaty groan, he pulls out of my mouth. “But I want to shoot my load deep inside your cunt.”

The promise of what's to come has me moaning as I ease my finger out of him.

As I try to stand, Rocco grabs my arm and hauls me up against him. Without a word, he claims my lips. His tongue slides into my mouth, warring with mine.

I'm painfully aware of his hard cock between us, so I shimmy a little, trying to get it angled against my pussy.

Rocco chuckles. “Do you want something, Killer?” he taunts. “Because if you want something, you have to ask for it.”

He spins me around so my back is against his chest. I feel his dick nudging against my drenched opening, and I push back against him, but he retreats with a tisk.

“Fuck me,” I hiss. Rocco brings his thumb to my clit, circling the needy bud until I'm panting with need. “Please.”

“Anything for you,” he rasps.

He pushes the tip inside my opening, but instead of slamming all the way inside me, he eases his way. It’s infuriatingly slow, and I’m quickly losing patience.

“Fucking do it already,” I gripe. “I need you inside me, mi rey.”

The endearment which is the same as his last name falls from my lips before I can stop it, but when he finally sheathes himself inside me I’m glad I didn’t.

Rocco withdraws almost completely before slamming all the way inside me, fucking me hard while his hands are on my hips in a bruising hold. It’s so delicious my eyes flutter closed as pleasure unfurls inside me.

Remembering why we’re out here, I force my eyes open, and deliberately look at the tiled floor. Nope, can’t do it. I clench my teeth together as my legs begin to shake. It’s not from pleasure, but fear.

Is this how Rocco felt when I pushed my finger against his ass? If so, he’s a lot stronger than I am, because I’m ready to beg him to carry me out of here.

“Come back to me,” Rocco rasps as he moves his hands from my hips to my tits. “Focus on my cock inside you. Can you feel it stretching you?”

I moan. “Yes.”

“And feel the way I’m hitting your G-spot?”

How the hell does he know?

“M-maybe... I think so.”

Without warning, Rocco pulls me back up and spins me around so we're chest to chest. My nipples rub against his chest with every inhale, and the coarse hair creates a delectable friction.

“Look at me, Killer,” he demands on a rasp. “We took care of my trauma, so look at me while I fuck yours out of you.”

I want to retort that I don't think it's that simple, but I press my lips into a thin line instead.

“Hold on to my shoulders.”

My hands are barely clasped around the muscles before he hoists my leg up, and angles his cock against my drenched opening.

“Eyes on me,” he implores.

His eyes are darker than normal, lust making them almost clouded. I feel as though his irises are seeing beyond the flesh and bone, seeing my soul.

“Don't close your eyes,” he groans as he thrusts into me. “Keep looking at me.”

Every time he pistons his hips it becomes increasingly harder to keep my gaze on him, but I refuse to budge. Even as my orgasm builds, I don't waver. But as I come around him, my pussy squeezing his dick like a vise, my eyes flutter closed.

Rocco pounds into me once, twice, and on the third thrust he roars his release.

I sag against him, feeling beyond spent. Yawning, I move my arms around his neck and kiss him above his heart.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“What for?”

I’m not sure I can put it into words, so I just say, “Everything.” I take a deep breath, loving the way his smell lingers in my nostrils. “For trusting me. For helping me, and... just for everything.”

How the hell can I ever thank him for everything he’s done for me? It’s too much to put into words. The Rocco I’m getting to know is the most amazing guy, one I could maybe see myself being married to for longer than I have to be.

We rinse off in the shower, and I watch regretfully as the bathwater disappears down the drain. I did actually want a bath, but that will have to wait until tomorrow. I’m too tired now.

Afterward, Rocco wraps one of his beach towels around me while placing two on the tiled floor. It’s such a small gesture, yet it speaks volumes.

As we get into bed, I wonder if the Rocco I know is the same man everyone else sees. Somehow I doubt that they know how he looks when he’s vulnerable, or how much he actually allows me to get away with.

Though I can’t claim to know much about the guy the others know, I’ve heard enough to know they respect him, and some even fear him. As I drift off to sleep in his arms, my

brain struggles to connect the two. My Rocco, and the world's Rocco are two very different people.

A smile plays on my lips at the thought that I have a version that's just mine, because I think the same can be said about me. Despite fighting him as much as I do, I've also opened up about things I thought I'd take with me to the grave.

CHAPTER 12

Rocco

Something has shifted inside me over the past few weeks since Cara and I opened up to each other, both emotionally and physically. Cara has turned my life upside down. In a good fucking way. I'd never thought much about actually having a wife other than doing my duty to protect her. But now, it's so much more. She's so much more, and in turn, she's made *me* so much more.

"Make sure your phone is off or on silent, Killer." I remind her, watching her nod and quickly un-pocketing the phone I got her last week so we can communicate when we are apart. She powers it down, shooting me a sinful fucking wink before hiding it away again.

Fuck. She's still affected by our fuck session, and if I'm being honest, so am I. It's hard to switch my mind off to the way she's evolved in the bedroom. She's more assertive. Dominant. Which can be tricky since I'm that way too, but we've worked out a rhythm. Sometimes I make her yield and submit to me, and I make fucking sure she enjoys it, and other times she doesn't back down, so I know it's my turn to let go and give her the control.

Like when I let her slip her fingers into my ass. That takes a lot of fucking effort for me to let go. There's always a moment of panic, but the flashbacks are getting less, and my killer always ensures it feels so good I forget my fucking name.

I made sure we had the opportunity to get lost in each other before we came out on this job tonight. It's going to be a tough one, but I promised her I'd show her what it is we do, aside from run a fucking strip club.

I hope she realizes that when I purchased her, I was actually trying to save her, and maybe after she sees for herself the kind of things we do she might understand that I, we, the Diamond Crew, are the good guys. Or at least, the better of the evils.

Aside from being fucking proud of the vigilante work we do, I've seen into Cara's soul. She's strong. Badass. And she's protective. Just like me. So this world we live in is now *her* world, and I know if she sees what we do, that she'll want to help. Want to be a part of it.

"Ready to get this party started?" Cain asks as he swaggers up like we aren't about to step into a vile, crude scene.

To be fair, he's probably not thinking about anything but the part where he gets to kill.

Woods Lagoon is dotted with moored boats that look like they are floating on a sea of black. There is no moon tonight, which helps us stay out of sight, but also means we can't see shit.

Munroe, an ex-marine, is the only one wearing night vision goggles, and he quietly breaks open the gate that is meant to provide security for the dock.

"You ready, Killer?" I whisper, tugging her to my chest, and she nods frantically, her eyes wide with excitement to see

what it is we do.

Quietly, we move into single file, stepping onto the dock. I turn back to Cara and press my finger to my lips, signaling to stay quiet, and she gives me a nod, taking my gestured instruction easily.

Most of the boats at this end of the marina are smaller, except for the one our targets are on.

The vessel sticks out like a sore thumb, owned by a pompous banker from San Francisco. And tonight, he's entertaining two of his old college buddies, while their wives tend to their children back in the city.

If only the pompous banker knew that his wife was on to him after hiring a private investigator. And well, once they figured out the truth, she asked her investigator to take care of it and make sure he suffers.

Naturally, they reached out to us to take care of that part.

Creeping onto the boat at the end of the dock, we move carefully to make sure the vessel doesn't rock too much as we step on and alert them to our presence.

After helping Cara onboard, I keep one hand linked with hers and the other holding my gun as I survey the empty cabin. The lights are off up here, but light filters from below deck, and as soon as I crack open the glass sliding door we hear music, male laughter and female sobbing coming up the stairwell.

"Me and Munroe will go to the bow," Cain whispers, any hint of mischief gone from his face. I nod, knowing after we

studied the plans for the boat, that there is below deck access from each end.

Cara shuffles from side to side, most likely from nerves, and once I see Cain and Munroe round the corner at the bow, I nod at Stretch.

“Gun ready,” I whisper before turning my sights to Cara. “Stay behind us, and don’t do anything unless we give you permission. Got it?”

She nods, cheeks flushed with both excitement and anger at the noises coming from below deck. She’s not stupid. She knows those noises. She knows exactly what’s being done to that poor girl.

One by one we storm down the stairs, timing it well as Cain and Munroe enter at the other end, and the overweight fuckers with round bellies and not a stitch of clothing, still, like a deer caught in headlights.

The girl, probably no older than fourteen, sobs, her wrists and ankles bound to a daybed, her body completely bare and exposed with one of those sick cunts, who’s at least in his fifties, still buried inside her.

“Get out!” he yells, and as I drag my gaze over the three men, he is definitely our intended target.

The other two men are collateral, since we can’t leave them alive for this crime.

I hear Cara move before I see her try to barge past me, and I whip my arm out to stop her.

“Don’t forget my orders, Killer.” I growl low, not wanting to draw attention to her. “You stay behind us until I give you permission.”

“Give me permission now.” She snarls through clenched teeth, her eyes trained on the scene before us.

“Not yet.”

Her heated gaze is locked on the man buried inside the girl, and I get it. She wants to save her. Wants to make this man suffer. And she will, in good time.

“While love bug and his woman argue, how about you sick fuckers tell us who you purchased tonight’s entertainment from?” Cain suggests, twirling his shotgun around like he’s in a fucking parade twirling a baton.

“None of your business.” The old fart slipping his now limp dick from the girl snaps, and even though I shouldn’t be looking, I notice the oozing white substance tinged with blood that follows his dick out. “This is my boat, and I demand you leave!”

I chuckle. “Did you hear that Cain? He *demand*s we leave.”

“I fucking heard it.” Cain does a spin on the spot, still fucking twirling his shotgun.

“What do you think, Killer?” I glance down at my wife. “Should we leave because he demanded it?”

“Well, I mean, if he demanded it then...” Cara smirks sinisterly, falling into the role like a fucking queen.

I glance back at our target and let my grin fall from my face. “I don’t think so, asshole.”

“You have no right to be here.” One of his buddies cuts in, and I shake my head.

“Oh, we are definitely trespassing. Maybe you should call the cops. Let them come here and decide who the real criminals are.”

The man pales, and number three tries to make a run for it, but Cain slips his foot out, tripping the man, who then face plants with a thud as he cries out.

“Whoops. My bad.” Cain shrugs as Munroe fists the man’s graying hair and drags him into the center of the room.

The sobbing of the young girl has quieted as she sucks in shuddering breaths, hopefully realizing we aren’t here to hurt her.

“I’m ready.” Cara hisses, facing me, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

Reaching out, I brush her dark hair back over her ear. “I know you are, but first, can you help get the girl free? I think she will feel more comfortable with you doing that.”

Cara nods, as Cain and Stretch scuffle with the other two men, subduing them and forcing the three men to their knees in a line.

Knowing the men can’t get to her, Cara darts across the space to untie the poor girl, while Cain binds the assholes’ wrists and ankles with zip ties, and throws a few punches into each man’s gut before Cara speaks up.

“The girl has something to say.”

Turning back, I see that the young girl is now sitting on the daybed, a blanket wrapped around her as she trembles.

“T-these m-men, they b-bought m-me from some other m-men who c-call themselves the C-cali Reapers. They ride m-motorbikes and they k-killed my gran,” a loud sob escapes as her face contorts with the internal pain she is suffering from that loss. “A-and when my m-mom tried to save me from them, they beat her up and t-took me.”

Fuck. The Cali Reapers again. They are becoming a bigger fucking issue than we originally thought.

“How long have you been with them?” I ask, and her tear-filled eyes shift to me.

“A f-few weeks I g-guess.” She shrugs. “When I m-met Tina, I t-thought I’d be okay. That she’d t-try to protect me,” she sobs again, but this time, there’s anger in it. “But that w-woman is worse than the m-men. She made s-sure I was clean and p-pretty looking, before she brought men i-into the room they kept me in, a-and made me...” She cringes, and a shiver of revulsion makes her shudder. “S-she made me suck t-them. She t-told me it was p-practice for the big event, when I’d m-meet my new owners.” She sobs again and Cara turns her glassy eyes to me.

“Tina?” she asks, looking back at the girl. “As in Martina?”

Fuck. Cara’s mom.

The girl nods, tugging the blanket tighter around her naked body. “Y-yes. How did you know?”

Cara shakes her head, dropping her chin to her chest briefly as her breathing quickens. I want to step up and hug her and tell her that everything will be okay, but it’s not what she needs, and I know I’m right about that a moment later when Cara lifts her head and stands tall before rolling her shoulders back.

There is no sign of the young girl she once was. She’s nowhere to be seen. This person in front of me is all woman.

A warrior.

“It doesn’t matter how I know.” Cara finally answers as she steps toward the girl. “Was the big event tonight?”

The girl starts to sob again, nodding. “Y-yes. They took my v-virginity.”

All five of us growl in unison, turning our eyes to the three men who look nowhere near as cocky as they did when we entered before.

“She’s of age.” The pompous banker pipes up. “Dolly is legal. I have the paperwork to say as such.”

I scoff right as the girl screams.

“I am fourteen! And stop calling me Dolly! My name is Rose!”

Cara’s top lip twitches with the urge to slay, something I know she needs. Not just to take out her anger on the type of

people that she was meant to be sold to, and not just because she knows that her mom is involved, as well as the Reapers.

There's something carnal brewing inside her. It's dark and consuming and something I'm all too familiar with.

She needs to punish.

Unsheathing my blade from my boot, I step up to my wife and offer it to her.

“Make them suffer, Killer.”

The courage and resolution in her nod nearly sits me on my ass. She's never done anything like this before, yet she faces it with determination, not letting any fears she has get in the way.

“Little one, you may want to avert your eyes. This ain't gonna be pretty.” Cain suggests to Rose, but she shakes her head, refusing to miss the downfall of her abusers.

Standing before the three naked men who are now looking very fucking panicked on their knees, Cara glares at them, taking the time to stare each man in the eye as they look up at their punisher pleadingly. They won't find any mercy from anyone here. Not from me, my men, and certainly, not from Cara.

They should be very fucking scared.

Pacing in front of them, Cara eyes each one before looking at the blade, a frown crinkling her brow.

“Want me to walk you through it, mi pequeño salvaje?” Cain asks, stepping up beside her and she nods.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“It would be an honor.” He gives her a bow, before setting his shotgun aside and pulling out his own blade.

Then he starts to instruct her. He goes over what parts of the body hurt the most to be slashed, or stabbed, and before we know it, as red starts to paint the light blue carpet under the men’s knees, Cara needs no more instruction as she doles out her first punishment. And fuck, I just know it won’t be her last.

The men’s cries are drowned out by Cain’s singing. It’s not even a real song, but something he makes up as he goes, singing about their demise and Cara’s reign.

When Cara has had enough of slashing and stabbing, she leans in close to each trembling man, ignoring their sobs and apologies for being scum, as she starts carving something into their chests. One by one, she drags the sharp tip of the knife over each man’s flesh, spelling out a word on each.

Rapist.

Paedo.

Pervert.

“Haha yes!” Cain sing-songs, clapping like he’s giving a standing ovation at a fucking Broadway show. “A masterpiece if I ever saw it.”

“Is it bad that I agree?” Stretch asks, tilting his head to look at the angry bleeding letters.

“Not at all. I think we are all on the same page right now.” I admit, feeling my cock stir at the sight of Cara painted in the metallic crimson of their blood.

Turning to me, she looks thoughtful. “Husband, I’m sorry, but I have to do this last part, and if you don’t want to see me touch another man’s dick, then you should turn away.”

My brows shoot up as Cain cheers and Munroe mutters, “Fuck me, we’ve created a monster.”

As much as I never want to see her hand wrapped around another man’s cock, this is different.

“I’m not turning around, Killer. Do your worst.”

Slowly, her plump lips spread wide, her white teeth flashing as she gives me a nod and turns back to the pleading men, who we all fucking ignore.

Flexing her gloved hand, Cara bends, coming eye to eye with the first old college buddy.

“Say goodbye to your puny dick.”

Then she wraps her hand around the limp member and starts sawing the blade through it.

His screams are piercing, and he passes out slumping to the side before she’s even halfway through, but she keeps going until it’s cut free.

“You look hungry.” She tells the unconscious man, stepping over his body to pry his lips apart before shoving his dick in his mouth.

“Fuck. No, please.” Old college buddy number two cries with mortification, eyeing his friend in his humiliated state before he starts pissing himself.

“Oh now, that’s uncalled for.” Cara announces, straightening to glare down at him.

“P-please don’t.”

Cara turns a raised brow to us, but looks past us men, and focuses on Rose, who is now standing as she watches quietly.

“What do you think, Rose? Should he keep his dick?”

Rose is shaking her head before Cara even finishes.

“Oh well,” she turns back to the two men. “Karma’s a bitch.”

Even as he tries to struggle away, with nowhere to go, Cara wraps her gloved hand around his dick and repeats the process. He too passes out before it’s even done, and this time she simply drops his dick to the floor before dicing it up.

Obviously a little squeamish at seeing a dick diced, Stretch sits down looking rather fucking green, but he doesn’t stop watching Cara’s punishment. None of us can stop watching. It’s a sight to behold.

“How m-much?” the pompous guy stammers. “H-how much to p-put an end to t-this? I can h-have the m-money to you within m-minutes.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” Cara pouts dramatically. “There isn’t enough money in existence to end your suffering. Not after the crimes you have committed against children.” She

punches him in the face then, surprising all of us, before she sets to work on his flaccid dick.

“You’re a fool,” she sneers as she saws the blade through his flesh. “People like *you* think you won’t get caught. And maybe the cops won’t get you, which would be a mercy, wouldn’t it?” She tilts her head, sneering in his face as he pants and screams. “But what sick fuckers like *you* don’t consider, is people like *me*. Like *us*.” She gestures her head backward toward us, finally sawing through the last bit of skin. The pompus prick nearly topples backward as blood pisses out everywhere from where his dick once hung. “Because one way or another,” she slaps him across the face with his own dick, “I’m gonna get ya.”

And fuck me, as she rains down her wrath, carving them up until each man no longer breaths, I swear I hear the song in my head.

One way or another.

I’ve never been fucking prouder.

Turning to me with wide excited eyes, I can see Cara’s desire thrumming through her veins.

Fuck. She’s beautiful. Stunning. And she needs to fuck bad.

“Shower.” I insist, pointing to the door off to the side where a small bathroom is attached.

“But—”

“No buts.” I shake my head, hardening my gaze as I stare at her so she understands that right now, I am still in fucking

charge. “Shower. Dump your clothes on the floor in the middle of this room while we prepare the boat for a good old fashion cremation ceremony.”

“But I have nothing else to put on.” She frowns, and I grin.

“All you need is a towel, hermosa. And let me fucking tell you, it won’t be on for long.”

Her nostrils flare, and her breathing increases as we stare each other down.

She wants to fuck right now. I can see it in her eyes. I can feel the fucking *want* radiating off her body, even from the six feet between us.

I wonder if she’d actually do it, if I allowed it. Fuck me in front of my men. Take what she needs despite all the eyes on us.

I have a feeling the answer is yes.

“Go on. We don’t have long.” I insist, and she nods, handing me her phone before brushing past me and closing herself in the small room.

The floor inside the bathroom doesn’t have tiles, so I know she’ll be alright, and I turn my attention to what needs to be done now.

Turning to Rose, I offer her a pitying look, hoping she knows she is safe with us.

“Do you have anywhere to go?” I ask. “Back to your mom?”

She shakes her head. “N-no. A-after they beat her u-up, she kinda went nuts trying to find m-me, and the last I heard she got arrested for trying to kill a police officer who she thought was in the Reapers’ pocket.”

Nodding, the story sounds familiar. Not about the Reapers, but I did catch the news a couple of weeks back where a crazy woman had been arrested for assaulting a police officer.

“Well, Rose. I know we don’t seem like the most well-behaved citizens, but we have some girls that work for us at Dirty Diamonds. I’m sure they can take you under their wings and look after you. Unless you’d rather me take you to the police station?”

She shakes her head frantically. “No please, no police. Not after my mom...”

I nod. “Fair enough.” I turn to Stretch since he is the least fucking scary of us.

“Stretch will take you back to Dirty Diamonds. It’s a strip club, but we won’t ever ask you to do that sort of work, okay? The women there are nurturing. They will take care of you.”

“Okay.” She agrees, still wrapped in the blanket, her eyes landing on Stretch, who gestures to the staircase where they both depart.

“That was a brilliant fucking show mi pequeño salvaje gave.” Cain snickers and I glare at him. I don’t know why, but it pisses me off when he calls her his little savage. Cain grins like he knows how much it annoys me, shouldering past me in

a playful way. “Now, if you will excuse me, Munroe and I have a dance to perform.”

“It’s not a fucking dance.” Munroe complains, throwing his arms up like this has been something they have been arguing about for a while.

“Oh really? Just watch me then.”

And just like that, Cain dances around, phone in hand as he snaps pictures as requested by the pompous banker’s wife, before he drags Munroe up the stairs, going in search of Gunner and Grayson.

They are only sixteen, so we try not to involve them too much in the gruesome part of what we do. That will come in a couple of years, but for now, they are our lookouts, and have the job of torching the boat and keeping watch from a distance to see which authorities turn up so we know who to pay off, and who we are going to have trouble with.

Grayson and Gunner work silently as they douse the interior of the boat with accelerant, dumping a heap on the three bodies, and when Cara steps out of the bathroom, clothes balled up and only a towel wrapped around her, I have to smack both Gray and Gunner for fucking ogling her.

“Eyes fucking off.” I snap, pointing to the floor for Cara to dump the clothes. “Just here, Killer. The boys will make sure they burn.”

“You wouldn’t survive a night with me.” Cara shoots Gray and Gunner a sly smile before shooting me a sinful fucking wink.

She's calmed a little from before. I can see she's not on edge ready to pounce on me at any second.

"Are you ready?" I ask, and she bites her plump lip, nodding.

Taking her hand, I start leading her up the stairs, glancing back to see Gunner dousing Cara's clothes before the two boys follow behind.

Moving quietly off the boat and up the dock, I lead Cara up to my truck, opening the door and helping her in since she's only wrapped in a towel.

"Will they be alright?" she asks, looking over my shoulder to where Grayson and Gunner lurk near the boat.

"Yep." I nod. "They are good at this part."

I close the door as a sinister smile spreads across her face, and through the glass of the window, I see her skin light up with an orange glow, as I hear the whoosh of the fire engulfing the boat behind me.

After a quick word with my men, I get in my truck and drive us away, heading toward the main beach.

Cara is quiet as I drive, but she shifts in her seat a few times, and I can tell she's rubbing her legs together. She's so fucking horny right now, which is good, because my dick is fucking hard as stone.

"You okay over there?" I ask, and she groans, tipping her head back and squeezing her eyes shut.

"I'm not sure. Is it wrong that I'm so... so..."

“Horny?” I ask and her lids snap open before she glances at me.

“Yes. I shouldn’t be right? That’s... sick.”

My hands grip the steering wheel as I shake my head.

“Hell fucking no, it’s not sick. You’re riding a high from your kills. It’s not about the blood and gore of it. It’s about the power you held while doing it, and now, you need a release.”

Without being able to help it, she moans and presses both hands to the towel, parting her legs to hit the right spot.

“Cara. Not yet.”

“But... I can’t wait.” She rubs again, and I hiss.

“Pull your fucking hands away right fucking now.”

“But...” she breathes before she moans.

“Stop,” I hiss, and she finally drags her hands away.

“I can’t wait until we get home.” She complains and I chuckle.

“It’s a good thing we aren’t going home then.”

Not that home is far. It’s literally a four-minute drive, but I wasn’t planning on going home, and when I flick my indicator on, Cara’s eyes widen as she looks out the window to see where we are going.

“What are we doing here?” she asks, as I turn into the parking lot of Cowell Beach. “Skinny dipping?”

I chuckle. “Not today, but you will be naked.”

She doesn't even hesitate as I park the truck. She gets out, her feet bare with only a towel wrapped around her.

I can't wipe the grin off my face as I quickly get my shoes off before joining Cara and lead her down to the beach. It's dark down here, so I use the flashlight on my phone to guide us until we hit the sand, and then Cara grins sheepishly at me, before she drops the fucking towel and runs off giggling.

"Look out for the crabs." I chuckle, but she has no cares in the world right now, and I fucking love that.

Even though it's dark, I can see enough to see her kicking her feet in the water, like a child that rarely gets to go to the beach.

"Move down this way." I call to her, and she follows my order, kicking the small waves as she skips along toward the wharf until she's finally under the structure trying to kick water at me as she hides behind the posts.

We laugh, and play a bit of tag around the posts under the wharf, splashing in the shallow water until I can't take not having my hands on her any longer, and I catch her before we tumble onto the sand as waves splash over us.

Like magnets, our lips collide, tongues clash, and our hands roam. She's completely fucking naked while I'm still fully dressed, and it's a form of torture having the fabric barrier in the way.

"Get these off." She pants against my lips as she grinds herself over the hard bulge in my jeans.

I make quick work of tearing my shirt off. The moment it's gone her teeth are biting my nipples while we both work on my fucking jeans.

I flip us around in the small waves, surprising my killer before standing and finishing the job at removing my fucking pants, before lowering myself back down to the sand.

Sharp nails dig into my shoulders as I press my aching cock against her heat, and she arches into me, even as she tries to flip us again.

“Uh-uh, hermosa. You've had your control tonight. Now it's my turn.”

She doesn't argue, instead answers with her lips against mine as she kisses me hungrily.

The water is cold, but not cold enough to douse the fire burning between us, and I reach down and grip my hard length, before lining it up and surging in.

“Yes.” She cries as I fill her cunt, her back arching again as the waves lap at us under the wharf.

“I need to apologize now, for how fucking quick this is going to be.” I rasp against her lips as I thrust over and over.

“The boat...” she pants, “was the foreplay,” she moans. “I'm already...”

Her words drop off as she starts fucking me right back, two bodies in the sand and waves pistoning together in a frenzy, completely and utterly united as one.

I pound into her as she slams her cunt over me, and even though our hearts are pounding like we've been running a marathon, I know we have only been here connected like this for a matter of minutes.

But it doesn't matter. Nothing fucking matters when I'm with Cara like this. Nothing is even comparable.

"I'm... I'm..." She squeezes around my cock, and a scream rips from her lungs as she comes apart, kneading my dick with her tight walls and milking a dizzying climax from me.

A roar flies from my lips as I surge one last time inside her, the muscles in my back coiling as I go still, feeling the hot spurts of my cum shoot into her tight hot heat.

Cara King, is my fucking paradise.

CHAPTER 13

“I’ve got an hour before my nieces pester Lily to call me. So let’s get started.” Dante orders from across the table as his Aussie mate, Baz, relaxes back in the chair looking like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

Since Baz had business over here in the US and Dante was concerned with the increasing Reaper situation, they flew over together from the UK in the Marx family’s private jet and got here an hour ago.

The fact that Baz came with Dante to see us is significant. It means there’s cause for real concern. Dante may want his advice or even access to his associates, should we need it.

“If they call, let Uncle Cain handle it. They love me.” Cain beams from next to me and Dante frowns.

“They don’t even fucking know you. They think it’s Santa, and the Easter Bunny and whatever else I can come up with to hide who is really sending all the fucking candy and extravagant gifts, half of which I have to fucking send back. You’re not fucking taking that call.” Dante growls and Cain snickers.

“And why don’t they know me? Huh?” Cain raises his brows. “Because you’re fucking greedy and won’t share them with me. I’m a good uncle, and when I speak to them, you will see how wrong you are.”

“Jesus Christ.” Dante pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Tell us about the Reapers?” Baz asks, directing the conversation to business.

“The Reapers are a problem, but so is Cara’s mom,” I tell them, knowing they have already been updated on last night’s events.

“So it seems.” Dante frowns. “She’s been a ghost for so long, but with Cara being released from prison, she’s taking risks. Coming out of hiding. It’s a good thing because we have a better chance at catching her, but why does she want Cara so bad?”

“At first, I think she originally wanted her because she thought Cara was still a virgin when she got out of prison.” I state, hating saying those words about my wife out loud. But I trust these men. They only want what’s best.

“I take it by the way you had her pressed against the wall before we came in here that you have taken care of that?” Dante smirks.

“It’s been well and truly taken care of.” I smirk back, knowing that details aren’t required, because that’s not the way any of us roll.

Wait.

I take that back.

Cain rolls that way, but the rest of us like to keep our intimate moments to ourselves.

Cara is out in the club, sitting and chatting with Rose while the other Diamonds and Tex prepare for a busy night. I can see Cara feels almost responsible for the poor girl. Not in the blame way, but in the way that Rose is now alone, and Cara wants to make sure she doesn’t feel that way, so she is

devoting time to the girl, talking her through the assault she endured.

“So what’s Cara’s appeal to her mom now?” Baz asks and I shrug.

“I assume a big part is so she can have control over her daughter again. When she showed up on my doorstep, there was mention of getting Cara hooked on drugs so that she’ll comply and be a high earning whore for them.”

“But the Reapers are involved too? Who are these men? Why haven’t we heard of them before this?” Dante asks.

“The Reapers are a nomad club, causing havoc everywhere they go. For some reason, they’ve set their sights on this area after hearing the territory could be up for grabs. They are bad news. Dealing in the skin trade, and probably various other nefarious things.” I slam my fist on the tabletop in frustration. “We can’t let them take over our area.”

Dante and Baz share a look, before Dante speaks.

“Our crew is big, but we are just that. A crew. Not a fucking motorcycle club. Their business dealings are different to ours. Morals too.”

I nod, knowing all of this.

“Then what do we do? Just sit by and let them destroy the peace we’ve brought to the area?” I ask, clenching my fists on the tabletop. “Gang crime is down because of us. Most of them move on over the mountains rather than go up against us. We can’t lose that.”

“I don’t want to lose that either but short of finding another club willing to relocate and take over the area so the Reapers can’t, I don’t know what to do.” Dante admits, and we all fall silent before I speak up.

“They’re buying little girls, Dante. Reselling them. Helping Cara’s mom keep her fucking sick empire going. We can’t sit on this.”

“He’s right.” Baz agrees, sharing another look with Dante. “The only way to keep this region safe is to fill the gap.”

“But we aren’t a fucking MC.” Dante hisses and Baz nods.

“So start one. It’s not like you don’t have men to spare. Start a fucking MC right here in Santa Cruz. Bid for the territory and keep this place yours.”

Dante frowns, staring at the tabletop. “We know nothing about running an MC. They deal with Cartels and Mafia and powerful men with too much money and God complexes.” He shrugs.

“Like you?” Cain interjects with a laugh, but Dante ignores him.

“Who would I even get to run a fucking MC?”

“I will,” I say before I even realize the words are slipping from my mouth.

Baz grins pleased while Dante continues to frown.

“You’re only twenty-two.” He tries to use it as an excuse, and I shake my head.

“The same fucking age you were when you started the Diamond Crew, as well as the same fucking age Cain is right now, running the DC over here. Don’t you think I can do it? Lead?”

Dante leans closer to the table, staring me straight in the eye.

“I have no fucking doubt you can lead, Rochus. You are a born leader. My reservation comes from losing you.”

I relax back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. “Are you gonna miss me?”

“Shut the fuck up. I already miss all of you. I hate being so far away from my OG crew.” Dante admits and Cain swoons.

“Awww, he loves us.”

We all chuckle before falling silent again, deep in thought about the prospect of starting an MC.

Honestly, I had thought about it briefly, but like everything to do with this life, I needed to discuss it with my crew. Baz bringing it up made it easier for two reasons.

The first, because I didn’t want Dante to think I’d ever desert him.

And secondly, Baz bringing it up means it’s not a ridiculous notion.

Next to me, Cain glances at his phone, reading a message before showing it to me. It’s from Gunner.

Gunner: Have you seen Gray? He was gone when I woke up.

“I haven’t seen him.” I offer, remembering how they checked in at sunrise to give an update on the boat bonfire before going to bed for the day.

“He’s probably buried deep in pussy. He’s been sniffing around one of the new Diamond recruits lately.”

I chuckle. “Well, he deserves a few extra hours off before he starts his shift helping Tex.”

Grinning, Cain shoots Gunner a text back and I glance up to see Baz and Dante talking quietly. I sit and wait, wondering if he’ll take me seriously.

I know I’m young, but with Cara by my side, and some help from the crew, I have no doubt I can form an MC and make sure the Reapers don’t get access to our fucking territory.

“Okay, let’s talk more about creating an MC.” Dante states, shooting me a look of absolute respect.

Both Cain and I sit taller in our seats, more than ready to have this conversation.

“It’ll take a bit of setting up.” Dante continues, “You’ll need to recruit for the MC. You can take some of the crew with you if they are willing, just don’t take them all.” Dante grins, and we all chuckle before we sink into a strategy session on how the fuck one starts an outlaw MC.

CHAPTER 14

Cara

I yawn, stretching while I try to make myself more comfortable on the couch I'm sitting on with Rose, Sasha, and Alana.

"Ha! I win again," Rose exclaims, throwing down her cards with a sly smile on her lips.

"What a surprise," Sasha laughs.

"Okay, you have to be cheating. There's no way you keep winning by accident," Alana says with a mock frown.

Both she and Sasha act like they don't know me and Rose are trading cards so she can keep winning. Hell, both of them have discreetly shuffled the deck, so Rose keeps getting winning hands.

"How long do we have to stay here?" Rose asks.

She doesn't sound perturbed or like she wants to leave. In fact, she seems to really enjoy the endless supply of soda and peanuts. Or maybe it's the attention she's enjoying. All I know is that against all odds, Rose seems fine. More than fine.

"Do I get a knife as well?" she asks so suddenly I choke on my water.

"W-what?" I gasp.

She nods eagerly. "You have one. So do I get one as well?"

Sasha throws her head back and laughs. "Savage little thing, aren't you?"

My phone lights up with an incoming text, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my smile at bay.

Rocco: I don't know how long this is going to take.

Me: Take your time, mi rey. I'll be waiting for you.

Rocco: I'm your king?

Me: Well, it's your last name, isn't it?

Took him long enough to work that one out. I know he probably used an online translator rather than just ask Cain or any of the others that speak Spanish around here. That's Rocco, stubborn, proud, and so mine.

Rocco: I want you to say it again while I'm fucking you. Hard.

My breath hitches as I read the message.

Me: Hurry the fuck up then!

“What did Rocco want?” Alana asks with a knowing smirk, and I flip her off.

“None of your business,” I grin as I pick up my cigarettes and get off of the couch. “I'm going out for a cigarette.”

Technically, I can smoke inside if I want to. But I like the fresh air, and I don't really want to accidentally blow smoke into Rose's face.

As I lean against the wall outside, I can't stop thinking about the girl. Rose. She's the epitome of strength. She isn't cowering, crying, or anything like that. Instead, she seems to have moved on. I don't know whether to applaud it or dread it,

since I know better than most that trauma isn't something you can just shirk off.

Now that I've seen Rocco in action, I want to be part of what they do. I want to punish the guilty and help the innocent. While it sounds like the slogan of do-gooders united, that's not what it's about.

I want to do my part to ensure people like Rose, like Julietta, and, yes, like me, can have a normal childhood—whatever that is. But mostly, I want to feel the rush from yesterday, again. The exhilaration of punishing those men was all-consuming, addictive even.

My phone rings, and I smile as I accept the call without checking the number.

“Rocco,” I breathe. “Are you already done?”

The voice that greets me isn't who I expected. “Cara Rodríguez?”

I frown and look at the caller ID. Unknown number.

“Yes, that's me,” I say hesitantly after putting the phone back to my ear.

“Listen up, cunt,” the voice barks, and my back becomes ramrod straight. “You took someone that belongs to us, so we took someone who belongs to you.”

“W-what?”

Without missing a beat, the guy on the other end carries on. “In two minutes, a white van is going to park outside Dirty

Diamonds. If you don't get inside without warning any of your friends, Grayson Black is going to pay the price.”

Before I can ask any questions, the stranger ends the call.

Shit, what the fuck do I do?

After we left the boat yesterday, Gray and Gunner burned it the fuck down. Cain told them both to stay low, and not return to Dirty Diamonds until tonight. So how the hell do I know if he's really missing, or if the caller is bluffing?

My phone pings with an incoming text, and as though the stranger has a direct line to my thoughts, there's a picture of Gray bound and gagged. His left eye is swollen, and there's blood at the corner of his mouth.

Fuck. Okay, so the threat isn't empty.

My phone beeps again, but this time it isn't a picture of Gray, it's of... “Mateo,” I gasp as I look at the picture of my twin, who looks just as bad as Gray.

Scratch that, there's a cut on his forehead and another on his cheek, so he looks worse. A lot worse.

I shake so hard I drop my phone, but before I can pick it up, the van arrives. I can barely believe it's only been two minutes, because to me, it feels like a lifetime.

I look between the two doors I have to choose between. One will take me to safety, to backup—to Rocco. The other to uncertainty, but probably pain, and possibly even my death.

A guy with a black mask opens the van door and points at me, making it clear they're here for me. I swallow, and before

I'm aware I've decided, my feet carry me to the vehicle.

"Blindfold the cunt," I guy spits as soon as I reach them.

"And don't fucking forget to tie her up. I can still feel her fucking kick."

Someone laughs at that, and scathingly teases him about being soft if he thinks I can hurt them. Though it's hard, I bite down on my bottom lip to stop myself from retorting.

Another guy, also wearing a mask, hauls me into the back of the van and slams the door closed. The tires screech as we speed away. The guy back here with me, fastens my hands behind my back before he ties my legs together. I sit still through it all. Then he forces a blindfold over my eyes. I don't know why he bothers when I can't see their faces, and there aren't any windows in the back.

I don't put up a fight, I just sit there as we drive. With each swing or turn in the road, I'm thrown against the van, much to the amusement of the guy watching me. I bare my teeth and hiss at him, not that it does me any good. If anything, it makes him laugh harder.

"Think Tina is going to let me fuck this one once she's done with her?" one of the guys asks.

My blood runs cold as I realize they're taking me to my mom.

The words from the call reverberate in my brain. "*You took someone that belongs to us.*"

Rose... we took Rose and killed the men.

Even though I know it's horror-movie stupid that I gave myself over to the men, I don't regret my decision. Gray's started to turn his life around, and he's less angry. He deserves another chance at life. And Mateo... fuck. My tortured twin, I can't turn my back on him either.

The van comes to a crashing halt, which makes one guy grumble about the driver's abilities. As they get out, I listen intently, trying to pick up on any clues as to where we are. But all I can hear are their muttered voices, and the gravel they walk on.

“Get her inside. Tina said she wants her in the basement.”

I hate the way my heart sinks and my hands tremble at my back at the mention of coming face-to-face with my mom. Fuck, since she showed up on Rocco's doorstep, I've regretted that I didn't kill her all those years ago.

Back then, I mistakenly thought her to be pathetic, weak even. Now, I'm pretty fucking sure I had everything backwards. I'm not saying my dad was innocent, and I never will. But I am questioning who really pulled the strings behind the scenes.

I startle, letting out a yelp as someone picks me up and throws me over their shoulder.

“Did you hear that?” he chuckles. “The cunt is finally making some noise.” He slaps my ass, hard.

As the sounds of gravel stop, I'm hit in the head with a wall of cold air. I realize we must be inside, a place where the AC is working overtime.

The room, or whatever we're in, smells dank. And the smells don't get better as we get further into the building. The air is heavy with the stench of piss, vomit, and... blood.

"Why the fuck does Tina want this one, anyway?" one asks. "She isn't even that pretty. And I doubt she's untouched after living with that Diamond Crew fucker."

I swallow down a whimper as I'm jostled, and the guy's shoulder digs into my ribcage.

Wait... what did he just say? Well, it wasn't as much what he said as it was the way. Do these guys not know Martina is my mom?

Their chatter turns to what they want to do to me, so I tune out their vile words, instead preparing myself for a range of scenarios. One being that Gray and Mateo are already dead. Another being that my mom tries to force me to be with Gray, which would be just as wrong as if it was my actual brother.

I already know that whatever she has in store for me won't be good, and... fuck, I might as well stop guessing. It won't do me any good. And even if I somehow magically guess her plan, I'm not in any position to stop it.

Doors open and close around us, and I no longer feel the cold air blasting me in my face. As the guy carrying me unceremoniously drops me to the floor, I let out an oomph and pain shoots up my ankle as I land. With my hands and legs still tied, there was no way for me to soften the blow, and now it seems my poor ankle is paying for it.

The sound of struggles and metal clanking intensifies, and even though I'm still blindfolded, I instinctively swing my head in all directions as I try to hone in on the sound. Wait... it's coming from two places. That and the... it sounds like muffled cries or shouts.

"Gray," I gasp. "Mateo... is that you?"

The muffled noises grow louder but not clearer.

Heels sound on the concrete floor, click-clacking their way to me. Then the blindfold is ripped from my face. The luminescent light seems much too bright, and I squint against it.

"Welcome home my dear daughter." My mom's words are followed by a cackle. "It's been so long."

"Daughter?" one of the men wonders out loud. "Fucking hell. She's your daughter?"

My mom tilts her head to the side and looks up at the man who spoke. "Got a problem with that?"

He immediately shakes his head, though he can't hide the disgust on his face.

"Are you sure?" mom asks, and I'm pretty sure she noticed his grimace as well. "Don't be shy. If you have any problem, all you have to do is say so."

The guy looks to the others, and if I were to guess, I'd say these are the men from the van. "Nope," he confirms. "No problem at all."

Mom nods. "That's what I thought."

He may not have anything else to say, but I have plenty. It's physically hurting me to stop myself from hurling insults and accusations at the woman who birthed me. But I can't succumb to my fears, hatred, and anger. Not when I don't see Gray and Mateo.

As soon as I think that, my mom moves the light, so it's not shining right into my face. I blink a few times, and as soon as my vision clears, I see them. The two men are bound and gagged, but otherwise they look just like they did in the pictures I received.

Thank God they haven't been harmed further!

"Now, daughter," my mom taunts as she pats Gray's cheek. Then she walks over to Mateo, repeating the motion. "You have a choice to make."

No! She can't mean...

My blood turns to ice, and my eyes widen as a gasp slips past my lips.

"Oh, yes." Her laugh is a deranged sound. "The look on your face is priceless. Exactly what I wanted. It's nice to see you're not always a disappointment."

"You can't be serious." It's hard forcing the words out. There's a lump in my throat, and my eyes burn with unshed tears. "You want me to choose which one you kill?" My voice is barely audible.

"No, no, no," she laughs coquettishly. "You misunderstand me, dear daughter."

Her eyes are filled with mirth as she walks over to me, swinging her hips in a way that makes her look more ridiculous than powerful. It's only now, when it's too late, that I realize the costume my mom has worn so much it's basically a part of her.

All my life she's been acting meek, even asked me not to piss off my dad. I've seen the bruises he left on her body in the past. Except... maybe he was never the one to hurt her. Or, if he did, maybe she wanted it. After all, it helped perfect the façade she's hidden behind.

"It hurts me that you think so little of me," my mom says with a pout.

"I-I..." There are no words to describe what I want to say, so instead of trying, I simply stop without finishing the sentence.

My eyes trail to Gray, who's slumping against the guy holding him up. His eyes are open, and I don't like the look in them. He looks resigned, like he's given up. Mateo, on the other hand, has a fire in his eyes I recognize from looking in the mirror. He hasn't given up at all, he's ready to fight.

Mom snaps her fingers in my face. "Here's the thing," she says when I finally look at her. "You deserve to be punished, mija. You're an insolent, ungrateful, and hateful cunt. It's like you've been raised by a pack of wolves and not a loving family."

Shock reverberates through me, and my jaw becomes slack as I glare at her. Is she for fucking real? Ungrateful? Loving family? What world is she living in?

“You can’t be serious,” I snap.

Mom makes a tsking sound before she slaps me across the face. Despite the sound following, I know her hit wasn’t meant to hurt, but to silence and belittle me.

“Always with the interruptions,” she says. “Watch your temper, mija. I won’t let you spoil my fun again. Do you know how hard it’s been to establish myself without your dad?”

“You never cared about him, did you? Just like it wasn’t him that wanted this life. It’s always been you, hasn’t it?”

She shakes her head. “That’s the thing with you, Cara. You think you know the truth, but you never care to ask the right questions. So let me give you the answers you really want.”

What the hell does that even mean?

“Your dad bought me. Not as his wife, but as his entertainment for the weekend.”

I unthinkingly look at Mateo, who just nods. I guess this isn’t news to him.

“Do you know how hard it was to convince your dad to keep me around? To see me as anything more than his whore? In time, I succeeded, of course. He made me his wife, and I helped him expand his business.”

The woman in front of me is cold, completely void of all emotions. Her eyes are like an abyss, there’s nothing there.

“Your dad never could see the big picture, but I could. So I used my body to garner favors and influence with the right

people. When Julietta was born, her future husband was the first to hold her. And—”

Unable to stop myself, I interrupt her. “And let me guess, it was the same for me?”

I already know that can’t be true. Not only is Rocco only three years older than me, but I also know that the Diamond Crew aren’t the kind of people who play the long game. They intercede as soon as possible, because they don’t want people to suffer unnecessarily.

Besides, I know in my heart that Rocco would never do anything that vile. To hold a baby, claiming it as your future wife, or cum dumpster, is a special kind of evil.

“What about the auction?” I ask, confused as to why there even was an auction for Julietta if she was already sold.

My mom waves her hand in the air. “Julietta’s auction was... necessary.”

“Necessary?” I ask, horrified.

She nods. “Yes, mija. Julietta’s intended died when she was twelve. At the time, it seemed like a stroke of luck really. And I convinced your dad that we should allow people to buy her for the night. It was a good way to have a steady income.”

“Why did she get married then?” I ask, not able to make sense of it at all.

Mom turns and looks at Mateo. “Your brother is soft,” she sneers before turning back to me. “He convinced your dad that it was best to find another husband for Julietta. *My* darling husband bought your twin’s reasoning, but I knew better. I

knew he only came up with the idea to save her from having new men all the time.”

My stomach churns, and acidic bile creeps up the back of my throat.

“Since your sister wasn’t a virgin, we didn’t get much for her. It was laughable, really. At least we got it right with you. Even if your husband turned out to be a soft bastard unworthy of one of my kids, you still earned me a lot of money.”

Anger lances through me. “How the fuck can you even get those words across your lips? What the fuck’s the matter with you?” I scream as I pull against my restraints.

Mom taps a finger against her chin, narrowing her eyes as she studies me like I’m a fucking exotic animal at the zoo. “That husband of yours really doesn’t know how to handle you, does he? The mouth you have on you now shows how weak he is.”

Before I can stop myself, I throw up. I lean to the side, but I still throw up over myself. As I retch, mom barks orders to one guy, who’s quick to get a bucket of water that he throws at me.

“The fuck,” I shout as the ice-cold liquid hits me.

“Get her some clean clothes as well,” my mom snaps. Then she turns her icy-glare on me. “Disgusting.”

My teeth chatter and my entire body shakes as cold seeps through my bones and all the way into my marrow. Chunks of my last meal are stuck in my hair, and the burning smell assaults my nostrils.

“Now, where was I? Oh yeah.” Mom snaps her fingers. “Really, all you need to know is that your dad was weak, and so is your brother. You and Julietta were my best hopes, but you took her from me. I know it was you who killed her. So it’s only fair you work for the both of you.”

My head is spinning with the overload of information. Some of it I knew, or suspected. But mostly, she’s ripped the carpet from under me, and now I’m not sure of anything. Maybe I heard her wrong, or maybe some of the things I’ve been told while growing up were lies.

It doesn’t matter, though. All that matters is that we’re here, and I need to find a way to kill her.

The guy who went to get me some clothes returns, but I don’t get a chance to see what he’s carrying before another comes closer. There’s a black hose in his hand, and I know what’s coming a second before water spurts out. The pressure is cruel, and it hurts as he points it straight at me.

“Make sure she’s clean,” mom says, coldly. “I have plans for her, and I can’t have her smell and look like she’s been living on the street.”

I scream as the hose is pointed at my face. It feels like I’m being attacked with ice, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

The guy lowers the hose and grunts something to another guy. I can’t hear the words, but as he walks right up to me and cuts my clothes from my body, it doesn’t matter. The knife knicks me a few times, and every time he sneers at me to keep still, which is fucking impossible with the way I’m shivering.

Once I'm naked, he cuts the binds from my hands and legs. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tight against him as I'm hosed down once more. I don't know which is the biggest torture, the icy blast of water, or the erection digging into my back.

I scream and thrash, to no avail. All it does is make my mom laugh scornfully, repeating what a pathetic disappointment I am.

A grunt has me looking up from the floor, and I notice Mateo and Gray now standing next to each other. Both of them try to break free from the person holding them, but they don't fare any better than I do.

"Stop!" I cry out when the guy holding Gray punches him in the stomach.

Mom rolls her eyes and throws a towel at me. I do my best to cover my body while drying, but it's a waste, really. Everyone in the room has seen my naked body, so why worry about it now.

Once I'm as dry as I can get, mom hands me a black, see-through babydoll dress. "Here. Put it on," she commands.

I arch my brow. "No underwear?"

"No," she says, shaking her head. "You haven't earned that privilege."

I swallow down more bile, and hurry to put on the dress that covers absolutely nothing.

"Now, where were we?" mom says, sounding way too eager for my liking. "Yes. I asked you to choose, and you

thought I was asking you to pick who I'll kill. But that's not exactly right. I won't be doing the killing, mija. You will."

"W-what?" I stammer, sure I didn't hear her correctly.

"That's right," she says gleefully. "Who will you kill? Your brother or this Gray guy?"

My eyes fill with tears again as I look between the two men. How can I ever pick between them? Gray is... Gray is my kin—we may not share blood, but that doesn't matter. I recognize the darkness inside him. Mateo is my relative, and my twin. How the fuck can I pick?

The longer I look between them, the more it feels like I'm choosing between my future and my past. Gray belongs in my future, hopefully. But Mateo can only ever be part of my past. Even if I save him, there's too much bad blood between us to have any kind of relationship in the future.

I'm barely aware that one of the goons presses a gun into my trembling hands, but it's there. I feel the steel. He stays at my back, and his hands are hovering just over mine. The message is clear; don't do anything stupid like aim the firearm at my mom.

Fuck!

"Choose," my mom sing-songs.

I take a shuddering breath. "N-no."

She nods like my answer is exactly what she expected. "If you don't, I will kill them both. This is your chance for one of them to live."

As I look into Mateo's gray eyes, I feel like our twin-bond snaps back into place. I feel the pain, anguish, and regret I see in his orbs. It slams into me like a wrecking ball.

Unable to look at him any longer, I meet Gray's dark gaze. He nods, and I know he's telling me it's okay to kill him. There's understanding in his eyes, and it breaks my heart that this guy is willing to sacrifice himself.

Fuck, I've only just gotten to know him, yet he's in my heart. There's a bond between us, one I couldn't shake even if I wanted to.

"Choose, daughter." My mom's cold voice rings out again. "Now," she demands.

I look back at my brother and mouth, 'I forgive you.' Then I look at Gray, and mouth, 'I'm sorry.'

My heart breaks, the shattered pieces are jagged, and I can feel them cutting my insides. Tears make my eyes blurry, and my hand is shaking so hard it's difficult to hold the gun.

"Please," I beg, not caring about being strong. "Please don't make me do this. I'll do anything you want. Just... not this..." I want to keep begging, but hiccups steal my voice.

Mom laughs, and it's a hard and cruel sound that hurts my ears. "You'll do anything I want soon enough, daughter. This was your test. A chance for me to see if you were strong enough to one day be my equal, but you're not."

She isn't wrong. If she views what she's doing as being strong, I want to be so weak the wind can blow me away. I

want no part in this sick game. Apart from... I want to be the one to end it.

While chanting those words over and over in my head, I lift the gun, aim, and pull the trigger.

CHAPTER 15

Rocco

A scream from out in the club has us out of our seats before Tex has a chance to come barging in, and we nearly crash into him as we go to inspect what the fuck is happening now.

“Help!” The scream comes from the entrance, and my gun is in my hand in an instant as I quickly survey the area in search of Cara.

Where the fuck is she?

“It’s Grayson!” Sasha comes charging in looking frantic, blood smeared across her palms. “Help him! Someone help him!”

I push past her, flying out the door before skidding to a stop at the body laying on the ground before us.

“Fuck.” I hiss, momentarily stunned.

“The fuck!” Dante roars barging past, kicking me in motion.

“Gray!” I shout, dropping to my knees by the sixteen-year-old kid. Or who I think is Grayson.

“Gray!” Gunner’s voice comes from behind us, and I hear Tex stop him.

“Hold back, kid. Let them check him.”

Accessing the battered boy, I can see past the blood and swelling that it is Gray. It fucking is him.

“Who the fuck did this!” I roar as my eyes spot something sticking out of the pocket in his shirt.

“Call a fucking ambulance!” Dante calls to anyone who will listen as he kneels on Grayson’s other side.

“Already on it.” Baz informs him while I tug what looks like a photo from Gray’s pocket.

“Fuck,” I whisper as I wipe the blood smeared on it to see familiar gray eyes. “FUCK!” I roar, shooting to my feet.

“What is it?” Dante asks with urgency, snatching the photo from my hand.

“Where the fuck is Cara?!” I roar, pushing through the wall of people as I go back inside the club, in search of my wife. “CARA!”

“She’s not in h-here.” Rose cowers as my angry glare shoots her way. “S-she went out for a smoke b-before and never came back in.”

“WHY THE FUCK DIDN’T ANYONE SAY ANYTHING?!”

“Rocco, man. Calm down.” Dante’s hand clasps my shoulder from behind, but I wrench myself away.

“Calm down? Are you fucking serious? My wife goes fucking missing, and no one thinks to go fucking looking for her or fuck, at least tell me?”

Sobs sound from nearby and I snarl at Rose’s tear-stained face.

“There’s a message on the back of the photo.” Baz hurries to me and shows me the back.

IF YOU WANT YOUR PRECIOUS WIFE BACK

THEN COME AND GET HER

MOTHERFUCKER!

Warehouse 7 – Industrial Road.

“Ahhhhhhh!” I scream, turning and flipping the closest table over.

Pain slices through my chest like someone has cranked my chest cavity open and is attempting to pull my heart out.

I heave, anger controlling each fucking breath as I look down at the photo again.

Cara is in the middle of a few Reapers, her hair dripping, and her body barely covered as one Reaper grabs her fucking tit, and another Reaper is in the frozen motion of wanking, his cock angled toward my wife.

By Cara’s feet are two people. One is her brother. He lies lifeless, a bullet wound right in the center of his forehead, his eyes open but they’re nothing but cold pits of emptiness, and next to him, on her haunches, is Martina Rodríguez.

Smiling.

Fucking cunt!

I glance at Cara again and notice the gun in her hand by her side, and my fucking gut twists.

Did she kill her brother?

Even as I think it, I know it to be true by the look in her eyes.

She's done.

Not with life. Not that sort of done.

It's the sort of done when tolerating people, or being treated a certain way, is no longer possible.

She's the sort of done that her mom is in no way prepared for, and all I know is that I have to go to her, and make sure she finishes this. Today.

As the siren of the ambulance distracts everyone, I spin on my heel and go to the elevator. I rarely go down to the basement level. It's like a fucking bunker down there, and I prefer to see the motherfucking sky, but today, it holds what I need.

"Rocco," Cain calls, rushing to my side. "What are we doing?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm going to get my wife."

"I was hoping you would say something like that." He grins as my eyes dart to him.

Why is this fucking elevator taking so long to arrive?

"You don't have to risk your life, Cain. She's my wife. I can't ask you to risk yourself."

He scoffs. "You think she only belongs to you? My man, you are mistaken. Mi pequeño salvaje is mine too. She may not be my betrothed, but she's my family. And we fight for our family, no matter what."

“Exactly.”

The voice comes from behind me, and I glance over my shoulder as the elevator doors open to see Dante, Baz, Munroe, Stretch, and Tex.

Fuck. My eyes burn. I can't cry in front of these fuckers... can I?

“Let's weapon up.” Dante nods at me, stepping past and onto the elevator, and each of them do the same.”

“Who's with Grayson?” I ask as I step in the elevator too and the doors close.

“Gunner and the Diamonds. They will stay with him and keep us posted.” Dante advises and I nod, staring at the numbers as they descend to the basement where we load and strap as many guns, bullets and knives as we can onto our bodies before piling into two trucks and heading to the warehouse.

I drive like a crazy motherfucker through the streets, Cain holding on and laughing as he bounces in the seat like he's on a fucking ride.

“Take the next right.” Baz directs, looking down at his phone map, trying to get us there quicker.

“Hold on,” I hiss, giving them a warning as I yank the wheel and we slide in a loud screech around the corner.

“You're going to kill yourself before you even get there!” Dante's voice comes through the speaker, our open line still connected as him and Baz talk attack strategies.

“Nothing will stop me from getting to my wife!” I snap, and Cain claps.

“I like this version of you. I’d fuck you if I were gay.” He admits, and I frown, shooting him a confused look. “You know what. I’d legit just fuck you, anyway. You’re so sexy when you’re angry.” He purrs the last part and I shake my fucking head.

“Touch me and my wife will dice you up.”

He bounces in his seat again. “Ohhhh she’ll make it hurt so good.”

“Left!” Baz barks, and again, I jerk on the wheel, the back end of my truck snaking out and nearly taking out a parked car.

“We are approaching from the north. You’ll get there before us, but we won’t be far. Just go in guns blazing. They are likely waiting,” Dante informs.

“Do not kill Martina Rodríguez!” I yell, just having her name fall from my lips sending me into a red fucking rage. “Subdue her but leave her for Cara. Martina is *her* kill.”

“Noted.” Dante agrees and I relax a little.

That bitch is going to wish she was never fucking born.

“Industrial Road is your next left.” Baz notifies me, and I nod, my hands gripping the wheel tighter as nervous energy pulses through me.

I need to get to Cara.

I need to keep her safe.

Our next left isn't as fucking violent as the others before it, finally turning onto the dark street and looking at the warehouse numbers.

“There it is!” Cain yells and points as he jigs around in his seat like he has fucking ants in his pants.

Killing the headlights and slowing the truck, I veer off the road and up the short driveway, bursting through the wire gates that were closed but not locked.

As soon as we are through, bullets start spraying my truck, and while Baz ducks in the back seat because that's the fucking smart thing to do, Cain lets out a war cry, puts the window down and starts firing back.

“You're gonna get yourself killed,” I hiss, and he laughs.

“I am invincible!”

“Jesus Christ.” Baz mutters from the back, as I slow the truck, looking for the entrance.

There's a small entrance door, and there's a garage type of roller door.

I choose the roller door.

“Hold on!” I yell, planting my foot down before my truck shoots forward toward the warehouse.

“Oh fuck.” Baz hisses as Cain laughs manically.

I love my truck. I worked hard to earn money to get it. But it's expendable, and my wife isn't.

We all yell, vicious sounding roars right before we slam into the door, the hard body of my old truck stronger than the

door, peeling it open like a can opener.

Coming to a bumpy abrupt stop as my truck slams into the back of a white van, we are thrown forward, and I brace for pain, but it never comes.

“Onward we ride!” Cain cries, shoving his door open and leaping from the truck even as he sprays bullets toward a group of men running in the other direction.

“Why the fuck did Dante leave that guy in charge?” Baz mutters and I chuckle.

“Don’t be fooled by the craziness. He’s the smartest man you’ll ever meet, and always the guy you want watching your back.” I check my gun and open my door too.

As gunfire pierces the air, a masculine whimper draws my attention to a stack of crates next to my truck, and with my gun raised, I round the stack to find a guy, probably not even in his twenties yet, curled in on himself, trying to hide.

I press the barrel of my gun to his head.

“Are you ready to die?” I ask him, and he stiffens, lifting his head from his arms to stare wide eyed at me. A quick glance down and I see he’s wearing a leather vest. A cut. And the badge on it says Prospect.

His trembling body quivers, but the shake of his head is clear enough, so I kneel down to get eye level with him.

“You have two choices here. The first is, you can continue to support the Reapers and not cooperate with me, in which case, I will pull the trigger. Or, you can choose to live, tell me where the girl is that they brought in not long ago, and I’ll let

you go, but you have to leave this behind,” I fist his cut, and his nostrils flare as he heaves in panicked breaths, “and choose a new fucking path in life.”

“She-she’s down in the b-basement level.”

“Show me.” I snarl and he balks.

“B-but you said if I t-tell you where she is t-that you’ll let me go.”

“I will let you go. Once I have my wife.”

“Your w-wife?” His brows shoot high. “N-no one said s-she was married.”

With my fist still in his cut, I drag him closer. Nose to nose.

“That’s because you are taking orders from motherfuckers who only care about money. And even if she wasn’t married, it still wouldn’t be alright!” I scream the last part of my sentence in his face, and the smell of piss meets my nose.

“Get the fuck up and take me to her.” I hiss, dragging him up before shoving him deeper into the warehouse.

As Cain covers us, Baz follows behind me, watching my back, as I force the kid to lead the way. He hurries along. Not wanting to drag it out, which I’m fucking grateful for, because every fucking second that I’m not with my wife, is a second too long that they are with Cara, possibly doing heinous things to her.

As we walk, Baz shoots anyone trying to come at us from behind, and I end about three Reapers on the first level, and

another two on the lower level, before we reach the basement steps.

“They are down there.” The kid trembles at the top of the steps, and for a moment, I feel fucking guilty for what I’m about to do.

Shooting Baz a look over my shoulder, I prepare to shut my morals down, knowing the only way I can get to Cara is by leaving them up here.

“I have to do what I have to do,” I tell Baz, and his eyes dart to the kid before meeting mine again.

He nods. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Nodding, I turn my eyes to the stairs and suck in a deep breath before grabbing the boy by the scruff of his neck.

“Hey. What are you doing?” he cries, but I ignore it.

“Move.” I demand, shoving him forward, but not letting go of him as we start our descent.

The kid whimpers as we hurry down the steps, and at the bottom, we turn into a room, and are immediately assaulted by gunfire.

Holding the kid in front of me, I use him as a shield, wrapping an arm around him as I point and shoot with my other hand. His body is peppered with bullets, and his limbs fall lifeless as I hold him up, moving further into the room as I shoot two of the Reapers, and Baz takes care of another two.

“Come back!” a woman screams in frustration as we move deeper in the room, her eyes trained on an open door in the

back corner.

“They’ve run like cowards,” I tell Martina, gaining her cold glare. “I hope you weren’t paying them too much. It’s a pity you won’t be alive to ask for a refund.”

“You son of a bitch!” she snarls, storming closer to me. “You’ve ruined everything!”

I chuckle dryly. “If you didn’t want me showing up here, then why send the photo with the address on the back when you had Grayson dumped at our doorstep?”

Her brows shoot up. “What? There was an address on the back of the photo?”

This time it’s my eyes that shoot up. “You didn’t ask them to do that?”

“No,” she hisses. “They were meant to dump the boy with the photo only, to show you that you lost.”

“That’s what you get for hiring thugs,” Baz tells her, strolling past her to the door on the side wall and gesturing his head to it. “Is she in there?”

“Get the fuck away from there!” Martina cries, lunging for Baz, who raises a lazy brow and clocks her in the head with the butt of his gun, sending her crashing to the floor.

“Watch her,” I tell Baz, marching past him as the gunfire above increases, and I know Dante and the others have arrived.

The heavy metal door is latched shut from this side, so I jimmy the lock until it pops free, and then heave the door

open.

My breath catches as I come face to face with my wife, but by the dark expression she's wearing, I don't make an attempt to move into the room.

"Move."

Her tone is laced with dark intent, and I know the killer in her is here with me right now. The punisher.

Giving her a curt nod, I step aside, allowing her the space she needs, and her sinister gaze scans the area as she steps out of the room where her dead brother still lies in a pool of blood.

"Cara." Martina pleads. "You know I only did it because I love you. I just wanted the best for you."

Slowly stalking toward her mother, Cara scoffs. "What a crock of shit. You wanted me to make money for you. End of discussion. There's nothing more to it." As she moves closer, Martina tries to scurry backward, still on the floor. "There was never any love involved."

Holding her hand out, Cara demands. "Knife." Even while her eyes remain locked on her mom.

I unsheathe my knife, stepping up behind her and placing it in her open palm, and Martina starts to shriek.

"What are you doing?" She springs to her feet, but she has nowhere to go.

On one side Baz blocks her path, and I block the other. And since her daughter is directly in front of her and there's a wall at her back, she realizes she's trapped.

“Please, mija. Don’t do this.”

“I should have done this three years ago.” Cara snarls before lunging forward and slamming her mom hard against the wall, the blade at her throat. “Julietta and Mateo were mercy killings. Because of what you put Julietta through, she wanted an end to her suffering, so I gave her that. I granted her wish. Let her leave this life on her terms.” Cara knicks the skin at her mom’s neck, making Martina hiss in a breath. “Mateo was different. His suffering was never going to end, so I put him out of his misery.”

Cara pushes off her mom and slams the blade into her shoulder. Martina screams like a banshee, the noise echoing off the metal walls, blocking out the sounds of war from above.

“You and dad, however.” Cara reefs the blade free, and Martina nearly collapses to the ground, but somehow manages to stay standing. “There is no mercy for you. You and he were, are, monsters. The absolute scum of the earth. There’s nothing you can ever do to make up for the vile things you’ve done to me, to Mateo, to Julietta, to Rose...” She slams the blade into her mom’s gut this time, and Martina collapses with a cry. Standing over her, Cara presses her bare foot to her mom’s hand when she tries to reach for the handle of the knife protruding from her abdomen. “Or to the countless other girls you have abused over the years.”

“C-Cara... p-please.” Martina gargles in pain, but her daughter doesn’t falter. Not even for a millisecond.

Dropping to her knees, Cara tugs the knife free, holding it up over her mom's face.

“Look at your blood. You're dying mom. Your life source is oozing out of you, and you're going to die here on this filthy floor of this shitty room, knowing you were betrayed by the men you hired for protection. How does that make you feel?”

Martina whimpers, and Cara shrugs. “Not that I care. I hope this is excruciating for you. I hope you suffer as you watch my face, knowing I'm the one who killed you, because you're nothing but a fucking oxygen thief.”

“C-Ca—”

“Don't say my fucking name!” Cara roars, slamming the blade back into her mom's gut. “You are not fucking worthy!”

And then, as Martina watches the monster she created at work, my beautiful killer starts stabbing her mom over and over as she screams.

Blood sprays and splatters as Cara plunges the knife repeatedly into her mother's torso, before she moves to her face, her mom already gone, and she stabs her face until she's unrecognizable.

A rumble from above snaps me and Baz from our hypnotized state, and while he moves, gun raised to check the stairwell, I approach my wife like she's a wild lioness.

“Killer.” I rasp from next to her, my voice snapping her attention to me, and I gesture my head to Baz. “We have to go, hermosa. I need to get you to safety.”

With her chest heaving from her explosive assault on her mom, Cara slowly stands, knife still in hand and gives me a nod.

“We have to go.” Baz calls out, and we hurry forward, as we step over the dead Reapers, and the kid that I sacrificed, and make our way back up the stairs.

All the action is still happening on ground level, so when we step out, we see a couple of Reapers with their backs to us, firing into the main space where I abandoned my truck.

With swift and fluid action, Baz shoots the two Reapers with precision, and we keep moving.

As we step out into the foray, a body slams into me, and we roll, crashing into the wall as Cara cries out.

“You fucking cunts! You have ruined everything!” The asshole snarls in my face as he presses his forearm to my throat. His brown eyes are wild, and his sparse beard is singed, and as I buck him off successfully, the fight turns to fists.

We roll around, grunting and punching, and I can't take my fucking eyes off him for a second to see where Cara is and if she's okay.

My fist lands a crunching blow into his nose, blood spraying out everywhere as he lurches away, and I see the patch on his vest says President, with the name Rusty underneath.

A cry from my left snaps my attention in time to see Cara in a fucking knife fight with a Reaper.

Pain explodes down my cheek before warm blood rushes over my skin.

Shocked, my gaze catches back onto the Reapers' President, and the shard of glass in his hand.

“Did you just fucking cut me?” I snarl and he grins.

“I fucking did. What the fuck are you gonna do about it?”

I lurch for him, copping another slash on my arm, but the shard tumbles from his hand as we thud to the ground, and I start laying blow after blow into him.

A loud explosion booms through the warehouse, throwing me off the Reaper, my hearing vanishing momentarily before it's replaced with yelling and fucking annoying ringing.

“Come on, let's go!” Dante's voice bounces off the walls as he pulls me up off the ground, but I try to pull out of his grip.

“Cara!” I yell, and Dante slaps my chest.

“Over here, man.” When I turn to him, he points to a man running out of the warehouse carrying a woman. “Cain has her.”

“Cara!” I yell, pushing past Dante as he and Baz run at my heels, and we manage to get outside right before the structure collapses in on my fucking truck.

“That was close.” Baz mutters, and I want to agree, but my mind is on my wife.

Cain was carrying her.

Is she hurt?

“Cara!” I yell, needing to have my hands on her. See if she’s fucking okay.

Did I fail to protect her?

Am I even worthy of being her husband if I can’t fucking do that?

“Mi rey!”

Her voice, so strong and determined, snaps my head to the side, to see her running for me.

“My queen!” I yell back, closing the distance in time to catch her as she leaps on me and wraps her legs around my waist.

Our lips slam together, our fingers claw each other like we can’t get close enough.

“Nothing to see here.” Cain chuckles as he walks by, and we both grin against each other’s lips.

“Fuck. I thought I’d lost you.” I admit against her lips, and she squeezes me tighter.

“Nothing on this earth can keep me away from you,” she mumbles back before deepening the kiss.

Our tongues clash with want, the metallic salt of blood mixed in as our bodies stay glued together, and I wish there was no one around right now so I could strip my wife bare and claim her right fucking here.

“They got away.” Munroe pants from nearby, and I break the kiss to glance at Dante and Baz talking with the men.

“How many got away? Do we know?” Dante asks and Stretch answers as he swipes the sweat from his brow.

“There were at least six. Maybe eight. The rest are dead.”

“Did their President get away?” I ask, stepping toward their huddle while I carry Cara. I’m not fucking letting her go. It’s okay, though, because she makes no move to get down, and I feel her gaze on me as I await a response.

“Yeah it looked like they were protecting him as they went. They had a truck, and some motorcycles stashed in the tree line at the back of the yard.” Munroe offers and Dante curses.

“It would have been an end to our MC problem if we had killed them all.”

“Until the next club tries to bid for the territory.” Baz points out and Dante nods.

“You’re right. There’s still a gap there that needs to be filled.”

Turning his eyes to me I give him a nod.

“I’m still prepared to do that. Especially with this one by my side.” I give Cara’s ass a squeeze but then realize it’s hanging out the bottom of that skimpy bit of fabric her mother had her dressed in. “Shit.” I try to cover her and the guys chuckle before Dante tears off his shirt and tosses it at us, and I make quick work of tugging it over her head and helping her into it, covering her up better.

“Does that mean Cara will be your Old Lady or whatever it is a President of an MC calls their woman?” Cain asks and

Cara's eyes go wide.

She's shaking her head before I can even respond.

“No fucking way am I being an Old Lady. I'm your fucking wife.”

The men laugh and I grin, looking into her fiery gray eyes.

“Of course, Killer. I wouldn't want it any other way.”

She grips my jaw roughly and bares her teeth. “I'm glad we are on the same page.”

I chuckle and try to kiss her, but she pulls back, still glaring.

“Who did that to your face?”

My brows shoot up, and like she's flipped a switch, I feel the throbbing pain that runs down my face.

“The Reapers' President.”

I tell her, and her brows knit.

“I'm not sure if I should thank him or sever his dick.”

“What?” I laugh and I watch as her eyes travel the length of the gash on my face. “Why would you thank him?”

“Well, it looks kinda badass.” She grins wickedly and leans in closer, “It's kinda making me wet.”

I growl low, squeezing her ass again and grinding my hard length between her legs to let her know I'm right there with her.

“I think it's very befitting of a President of a motorcycle club.” She grins and my brows shoot up.

“How do you know?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not stupid. I have ears. I listen, and I’m pretty sure that’s what you and them,” she gestures her head back toward Dante and the others who are still talking shop, “were talking about.”

“So you’re on board with it?” I ask, hope filling my gut at the prospect of this actually working.

“Hell yes. But I do hope you will involve me in more than just being the pussy you go home to at night. If you do this, I want to do it with you. We have the opportunity to create something great. Fill a gap for more than one reason.”

I smile down at my fierce wife, “I meant what I said before. I want you by my side, Cara. I can’t do this without you.”

She grins and agrees, “I’ll be right there with you.”

“Fuck.” I press my forehead to hers, my eyes locked onto her gray pools as I squeeze her impossibly close. “I fucking love you.”

Those gray eyes, normally so confident, and well, angry, soften as they turn glassy. “I love you too, mi rey.”

“You do?” I ask as my heart does a fucking triple somersault in my chest.

“Yes. I really do.”

Our lips slam together again, claiming each other in the wake of our declarations, and I know without a doubt that

although there's a tough road ahead of us, we will navigate it together and come out the other side so much fucking stronger.

* * *

Are you ready to get to know the rest of the **Cruz Kings MC**?

Then grab the next book, [Tempted by a King](#).

<https://blybaekauthor.com/>

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* * *

Newsletter

[B. Lybaek's Newsletter](#)

[Sarah JD's Newsletter](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

B. LYBAEK

Bibi is a dark romance author who is addicted to coffee, Piña coladas, and chocolate... all the beautiful things that make life go around.

She loves talking about herself in third person, it makes her feel special. She lives in the North East of England, in a small town no one has ever heard of. Her household (herself and her boyfriend of 10 years) is ruled by their feline mistress who puts the 'tude in Tortitude.

Bibi recently changed her pen name from Ren Blakely to B. Lybaek. A pure vanity move as she wanted to see her real name on her books #NamesMatters

You can find Bibi all over the internet... probably procrastinating.

SARAH JD

Sarah JD, also known as Sarah Jane Duncan, is a dark romance author living in Australia with Mr Duncan who stole her off the market back in high school.

Sarah can be found in her writing room plotting out her next smut filled romance filled with angst, violence, and themes so dark you should probably question why you love it so much.

Sarah writes about strong females who have to fight against the odds to find their power, their voice, and their truth. Her heroines possess the strength that only comes from being a survivor, and through their trauma, battles and struggles, they learn to trust again, and find love.

There's nothing easy about their stories. They are hard, gritty, and painfully heartbreaking at times. But what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, right? And when you throw in a swoon worthy guy, or an alphahole that you just want to slap, but also fall to your knees and obey, it's the recipe for a rollercoaster ride.

So buckle up. Read the warnings. And let yourself get lost in the dark stories Sarah creates.

Read More from B. Lybaek & Sarah JD

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**ABSOLUTION
TL REEVE AND MICHELE
RYAN**

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ABSOLUTION

Five men, a club, and a serial killer...

Erin Harper has a secret. She's not who she says she is. As the daughter of a drug mule looking to sell her out, Erin would do anything to disappear, including working for a club notorious for sheltering all kinds of criminals—*Absolution*.

Jacolbi Stewart has spent much of his life alone. After leaving SRT, he spent time between Los Angeles and Texas, however when a call comes in from a friend of his, Luca Trapani, he leaves everything in L.A. to help his friend.

The Rebel Kings rule over El Paso. Anything that happens there, they know about it. However, when a beautiful woman with curves for days and a mysterious past shows up at *Absolution*, all four of them want her for themselves. Nothing will stand in their way.

Only when they learn the truth about Erin, it might be too late.

In a game of cat and mouse, time is fleeting. Can Erin trust her men to protect her, or will she be the killer's next victim?

Content Warning: This story contains a why choose relationship where the heroine is the center of attraction. It also features a main male character openly expressing his attraction to men.

Rules for Absolution

1. Anonymity - All members rely on it.
2. No fighting within the club, unless it is done within the ring.
3. No contract hits within the club.
4. What happens in the club, stays in the club.
5. Law Enforcement isn't allowed in the club. (Not even alphabet agencies)
6. No means no.
7. Rape equals death - there will be no sexual assaults on Absolution's property. Anyone who has been found to have committed the act of rape or sexual assault in anyway including sodomy will instantly be killed.
8. Do not touch the property of someone else. (This pertains to Doms and subs within the club. Automatic fines for first offense. If it is found a member of the club has violated this rule more than twice, their membership will be revoked immediately.)
9. All fighters must submit to drug testing - though Absolution caters to all manner of exhibition/recreation, drug use for the fighters is a no-no. Any violators will have their membership revoked and their name turned in for doping.
10. No underage patrons, unless expressly permitted by the ownership of Absolution.
11. MC's must wear their colors at all times unless given expressed consent from the ownership of Absolution to not wear their Kutties.

CHAPTER 1

Jacolbi

Six months ago...

I stepped out of the apartment in East Los Angeles into the sweltering late-summer afternoon sun to take a call. The name on the screen was one I knew too well over the years. Luca Trapani. I grinned, hitting the green button. “What’s up, man? It’s been a while.” One of Axel’s guys caught my attention by waving, and I nodded as he hooked his thumb at the empty truck. We’d finished moving a mom and kid who’d needed Chaos MC’s help.

Felt fucking good for a change.

“Are you busy?” Luca asked, his voice somber and tired. Nothing like the man I knew for over a decade. The first time I’d met the enigmatic man, I was a snot-nosed twenty-two-year-old kid who thought I knew everything.

I was wrong. Learned that lesson the hard way.

Like always.

“Never when you’re concerned, Mr. Trapani,” I said, taking the proffered water bottle from Handsome, my Chaos MC brother. Guy was gorgeous. Big blue eyes rimmed in dark lashes that framed his sharp, angular features. He had perfectly tanned skin covered in intricate tattoos. He earned that fucking name for sure, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit we fucked a few times, too. “What’s going on?”

“I know this is short notice, but I was wondering if you could come to El Paso and help me at the club. There’s a situation I believe your expertise could be of some use helping me sort out. Obviously, you’ll be compensated.” Luca’s words dripped with indecency and double meaning.

I smirked.

We’d never had sex, but I’d seen him in all his glory. There was something innately erotic when a man of a certain age fucked like a champ and enthralled the small gathering of his peers. Freeing, too. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever take him up on the offer of playing together, but I’d become accustomed to never saying never.

“Sure,” I replied. “Can you give me a couple of days? I’ve been working a job for Axel.”

“Of course,” Luca said. “Tell Axel I send my regards.”

In the years since I had left GIP (Gang Intervention Program) and SRT (Strategic Reinforcement Team), I’d gone home to start my life over. I knew my father would never accept me. I learned a long time ago my old man had meant for me to take the fall that day DEA caught me couriering drugs. Had an inkling the job was a trap the second I picked up the bag and drove out to the meet spot. The fact no one from Vagos MC had my back was another indicator of how my life would turn out.

Family didn’t mean shit to me. Family could stab you in the back just as quick as your enemy. I’d gotten good at discernment over the years. The only people I let my guard down with, let me down the minute I needed them most. Even

if I took responsibility for my actions. It wasn't even the fact they drop kicked me out of the closet either.

Instead of understanding, there were accusations. They teased me. Tempted me. Yeah, maybe I had been down to fuck if they asked me to join them. But I also saw myself as a vulnerable person in a messed-up situation, searching for replacement love. I did things I wasn't proud of. I'll always regret kissing Alex like I did. What I regret more is not using my voice and shutting down on everyone.

I was ashamed.

Embarrassed.

The whole situation brought me back to when I was ten years old, asking my dad why it was gross seeing two men kiss, since my dad enjoyed the fuck out of watching women eat each other's pussies. That's when he started calling me the F-slur. Even now, thinking about that moment, my stomach tightened and pitched at the disgusting term.

Stop picking at old wounds, dumbass.

It hadn't all been bad, though. Once I got out of prison, I had the chance to try again. In the last ten years, I'd been all over the world helping people of all ages, ethnicities, and religions. I was there for the elation of bringing a family member home and again when someone sought vengeance—the right way—through the courts. The one thing I'd never done, unlike everyone else, was settle down.

Bex, Alé, and Bronx were a happy family of five now, with another baby on the way. Alex and Eito were content

with Sergio. The entire team didn't need my single morose, jealous ass around them. So, when Asher and the federal government signed off on my GIP release and pardon, I was out of there.

Freedom never tasted so fucking good.

Obviously, if Asher ever needed me for anything, I was there, ready to work, but at my age, fitting in with teenagers didn't work anymore. "I will. I'll call you when I'm on the way. Is my apartment still available?"

Luca chuckled. "Silly boy. I've told you this several times, now. You've always had a home here. I'll air your apartment out before you arrive and change the linens on your bed."

I grinned. "You pamper me too much, Luca. I appreciate you."

"Yes, I know," he murmured. "You can show me how much you do later, when you're working this case."

There was the duality again, but I kept my mouth shut, instead, focusing on the area surrounding the apartments where we were helping the mom and her son. They were my priority right now, not Luca and his libido.

Even if I couldn't quite put my finger on our relationship.

We were more than work buddies. Luca understood me better sometimes than I did. Where I might've shut down with Mateo and Noah, Luca opened his arms wide to me. Luca afforded the opportunity to explore myself without feeling the guilt or shame I'd always experienced days after doing

something crazy—at the time—like sleeping with two guys and a girl or two girls and a guy.

I'd even had a brief relationship with a trans man.

He was incredible.

Unfortunately, for me, my job meant keeping secrets and if any of us learned anything from Jake, it was this: keeping your loved ones out of the loop killed any chemistry you could have with your partner. After about a year together, I knew it wasn't fair to my partner anymore. Sneaking around at weird hours of the day and night. Pretending to be people I wasn't. So, I broke things off before they got too deep. Then I disappeared into the night. It was also the same day I went to back to California for a handful of years to work with Axel and Chaos MC.

“Thanks, man,” I said. “See you when I get there.”

I hung up as the others joined me by the truck. The mother and son were good. Better than good. Between the help of Chaos MC getting her into the apartment, and maybe a smidge more from me roughing her ex-husband up, they'd be safe in their new home.

“Sounded kind of important,” Handsome said, lifting his chin toward my phone as I slipped it into my kutte pocket.

I cracked open the bottle he'd given me and drank down half before I answered, “It was. Looks like I'm out of here for a bit. Gotta let Axel know.”

“You know,” Justice, one of the older members of Chaos, said, “you've always been so secretive, even when you were a

little shit.”

Secrets protect those who mean something to you.

I snickered. “Had to be. You guys are worse than a bunch of old ladies gossiping about the new girl.” Problem was, I never could tell anyone about my past because of the contract I signed with the Gang Intervention Program. Those same rules carried over when I joined Asher, too. Loose lips sink ships and all that. If my old man taught me anything, it was keeping my mouth shut. Too bad it took me twenty-one years to figure that shit out.

“All right,” Handsome said, giving me one long last look, “let’s get this truck back and grab a beer at *Duce’s*.”

I went to my bike and started it up. It was better if I was out of there by the time the others showed up. As it was, I had a twelve-hour drive to El Paso—that was if I pissed on the side of the road, didn’t stop to eat, or drink anything, and didn’t get caught in traffic going through Arizona and New Mexico, especially near the weigh stations. If I left now, did a quick check out with Axel, I could be to Luca by the time the sun came up.

Be exhausted too.

When I pulled up to the back door of *Duce’s*, the guys nor the truck had arrived. I went straight to Axel’s office, where I knew the old man liked to hang out. I knocked once and stepped inside, unfazed by the sweet butt on the floor between Axel’s spread thighs, giving him head.

“You finish up already?” Axel glanced up at me while directing her head over his crotch.

“Yep. All good. Hey, Luca called,” I said. “Looks like I’m needed.”

Axel grinned. “You can take the man out of being a hired mercenary, but you can never take the mercenary out of the man, or whatever it is you do.”

I chuckled, ignoring the comment. “He said to say hello, by the way.”

“Did it sound important?” Axel cocked a brow. Over the years, he’d slowly asked me what I really did when I’d taken off for parts unknown to the rest of them. Over time, I opened up to Axel as much as I could, trusting my friend and the only person I could say was a true father figure to me, to not say a word.

“Very. He sounded kind of despondent.”

“That’s not very Luca-like.” Axel frowned. He’d only met the man a handful of times, but when he did, he got Luca the charmer. The man who wanted to make a deal. The boisterous man and the guy who didn’t have a care in the world. I knew better. Luca could gut a man while smiling and laughing and plying the dying person with such sweet words it made my teeth ache.

“No,” I agreed.

“Then you better not keep him waiting.” Axel groaned, flexing his hips, holding the girl in place with one hand while

he extended the other to me. “Should you need anything, we’re only a phone call away.”

I remembered. “Thanks. See you on the flip.”

Shaking my head, once I was back outside, I chuckled. Crazy bastard didn’t have an ounce of humility in his body. Axel was the kind of man who worked hard and played that much harder. He was the walking cliché for an MC, no doubt about it. However, he was loyal, protective, and would give a stranger the shirt off his back if they needed it.

I was going to miss him while I was gone.

The drive out of Los Angeles took a little longer than expected. *Fucking traffic accidents*. By the time I hit Palm Springs, it’d been smooth sailing. I opted for three or four stops at gas stations to fill up along the way, then I’d hit a dirt patch should I need it. I also didn’t stop to grab anything from my apartment near Echo Park, either. Everything I could want for was in El Paso, which made traveling so much easier for me.

Halfway between Gila Bend and Benson, my ass was numb, and my muscles ached. I pulled into a dirt lot in outside of Lordsburg where a taco truck vendor was serving up street tacos to their patrons. It was probably a bad idea to get off my bike so close to my destination, but the picnic table was calling my name, as was the bathroom not more than fifty feet from the truck. I could take an hour.

It wasn’t a big deal.

After scarfing down three birria tacos, I used the facilities, got a refill for my drink, and headed out as the remaining daylight faded away into the western sky. The rest of the ride was solitary. It was a little after two am by the time I pulled up to the gate surrounding *Absolution*, Luca's home, and the club. The brick and tile circular driveway were a welcome sight.

It'd been too long since I'd last been there. I swiped my badge across the sensor and waited for the electrified wrought-iron gates to open before driving in. As I came around the cobblestone circular drive, the door opened and there he stood, Vicente Lucero, the manager of *Absolution*, and a much scarier man than Luca could ever be.

Dude straight up gave me chills.

"Mr. Stewart, buenas noches," Vicente said, descending the stairs at the front of the club. "Mr. Trapani was expecting you in the morning, so he is otherwise involved for the evening."

"No worries, Vicente," I said. "If it's all right with you, I'd rather catch some sleep. Start fresh in the morning."

The manager smiled indulgently. "Of course. Of course. Would you like some company for the evening? Something to help you unwind from your long drive in? Perhaps a massage?"

I shook my head. With the way my muscles were feeling and the way my ass hurt, I didn't feel too up to fucking around and a massage would only make some of it worse. "No thank you. I appreciate the offer. Sleep is all I need."

“Very well.” Vicente handed me the hex key for my apartment, an interesting way to keep people from prying where they didn’t belong. “Que descanses, Mr. Stewart.”

“Thank you, Vicente. Good night.”

The next morning, I woke early, well rested but still tight from helping the mom move and the ride. I slipped out of bed and groaned, stretching out all the kinks and my joints, then made my way to the shower. Hadn’t been kidding when I told Vicente all I wanted was sleep. I collapsed face first into bed, and I swore I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Once I showered and dressed, I made my way across the property to the main building of the club where I knew Luca would be. The mini mansion sat on fifty acres with several attractions on the inside. There was also a small “base” underground and a getaway tunnel that would lead across the border should the feds snoop too hard. Out there, in the middle of the desert, butted up against the small foothill area of El Paso. We were alone and I kind of liked it that way.

Vicente was there to greet me at the door with a cup of coffee and a tray of breakfast. The man took too good of care of me. He anticipated my needs before I ever had to utter them. I thanked the man, taking the cup of coffee off the tray, then follow Vicente to Luca’s office where my friend and part-time boss waited. The door opened before we got there and Luca stepped out, looking every bit the syndicate boss, he pretended to be.

Maybe.

See, in our line of work, illusions were everything. People thought I'd been a legit high school student a couple of times while on the job, because I looked younger than I was. To others, I was a stone-cold killer. I even fronted a chop shop for a mission for Asher. Luca... He was something else. I could say with certainty the man was more than just a CIA asset or Station Chief for Mexico City. If I heeded AJ's words, Luca was certifiably crazy. No, he wasn't clinically insane. Luca was charming and calculating. The man had a plan, and he never deviated.

“Good morning,” Luca said, holding his arms wide in greeting. “Vicente told me you arrived late last night. You should have taken your time.”

“I did.” I shook Luca's hand as the man led me into his office. The place was amazing. Dark walls, masculine furniture, all leather. His office screamed importance and confidence without really trying. The window behind Luca's desk overlooked the apartments on the estate and the pool. To the west was the hedge maze used for kink parties. To the east, the larger pool and grotto.

Vicente placed my breakfast in front of me, along with my coffee. Then exited the space so we could talk. Luca took his seat. He wore jeans and a button-up shirt, business casual—not his every day-attire. Once he was on the floor of the club, Luca was debonaire and suave, though deadly.

“You look well,” Luca said. “We've missed you here.” He took a sip of his coffee, staring over the rim of his cup, giving me a lascivious once over. “I've missed you.”

Heat licked at my spine. “I had shit to figure out. You know how it goes.” Not a complete lie. Over the years, the itch to run became an insatiable burden. I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere. The trauma of my past always picked undesirable times to rear its disgusting face. A person could only be told they didn’t belong or weren’t worth it enough times before that little voice took over. “Hadn’t realized I’d been gone so long until you called, if we’re being honest.”

“Well,” Luca murmured, “you’re here now.” He sat forward, placing his cup on the saucer sitting on his desk. “I need your help.”

I tucked into my breakfast, starving after only eating once yesterday. “You said as much on the phone. What’s going on?”

“Girls are going missing from the club.”

My hand stilled, inches from my mouth, as the realization of what Luca said registered in my mind. “How long?” I took the bite, then put the fork on my plate.

“A few months. Maybe a little longer. There’s no pattern. Only the method of abuse and killing is the same and they either worked here or were ex-employees.” Luca handed me the file. “I didn’t want to call anyone in to help. However, the situation is becoming an issue and unless we figure it out, we’re going to have to bring the police in.”

The rules were simple for *Absolution*. No murdering people on the property. Contract hits were a no-no on the grounds. If Luca was right, someone in the club had a death wish or we had a serial killer on our hands. Which meant the

killer could be out in the desert somewhere or coming across the border from Juarez at night.

I opened the file Luca gave me and stared down at the face of a younger woman, throat slashed, body naked and abused. She had long brown hair with blonde highlights. A glitter body paint butterfly adorned her temple. She had those long acrylic nails like Iliana liked, painted black with rubies placed in the middle of her middle fingernail. The others thrashed, snapped off as she struggled. Whoever attacked her had to be cut up. That was our first clue. There were bruises on her torso, thighs, pubic area. Her face was pristine though, like the killer couldn't stand the idea of destroying her beauty. Her body was fair game.

Autopsy showed trauma to her vagina, rectum, and throat—in that order. There were semen samples taken from each orifice, but none were a match for any of the databases. I flipped through the remaining reports. Cause of death: exsanguination. Which meant where they found the women wasn't where the suspect killed them. Since the crime scenes didn't have a speck of blood at them.

“He's not killing them here,” I murmured, flipping through each of the photos. The glossy paper snicked as they slid across one another. “Is there an amount of time between the girls?”

“No,” Luca replied, sitting back to fold his hands on his lap. A practiced movement. Emotive.

“Can't say he doesn't have a type,” I said. “They all almost look alike. Dark hair, lightly tanned skin. Take care of their

bodies. Have you ever heard about the theory of serial killers?”

Luca nodded. “I have. It’s looking like we have one, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said, then hurried to add, “I know it’s not the answer you want right now, but I can’t, *not*, put the idea out on the table. We might need help even if we don’t want it.”

Luca sighed, staring out the window toward the desert. “Please investigate further. If the situation becomes dire, I will make the call.”

He scrubbed his chin and nodded. “Of course. I’ll start today. There are a few things I want to look in on. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you, Jacolbi. Now, tell me about all your adventures and about this ex-husband piece of shit you’ve been taking care of.” Luca grinned. “I love juicy stories when you’re the one telling them.

CHAPTER 2

Erin

Present day...

“What’s your name, sweetheart? I haven’t ever seen you here before.” The fettered breath of another drunken slob had me shivering with revolt. Why in the hell had I agreed to go out with Hannah, again? “Don’t be such a frost bitch. Come on baby give me a name.”

Come to the club with me Erin. It’ll be so much fun, Erin. Yeah... Pay backs are a bitch, Hannah. I only agreed to come with my bestie because we’d both had a shit week with work and at the end of said shit week, we remained poor. However, I’d rather be poor than go back home.

“Don’t be so shy, girl.” His slurred speech sent a bolt of anxiety to my stomach. I didn’t like sloppy drunks. Matter of fact, I didn’t like falling-down drunk people anywhere near me. It was part of the reason I got yelled at by my boss at the end of my shift yesterday. According to him, I was cutting off paying customers way too soon and if I didn’t stop, I wouldn’t have a job at that fucked up little bar close to our shitty little apartment.

Why did I let Hannah talk me into this?

I huddled against the bar, trapped between sweaty bodies and the putrid man behind me. I thought if I kept my gaze fixed on the polish teak, and my seltzer water in front of me he’d get the picture I wasn’t in the mood to deal with messy.

“Hey!” He snatched my arm, tugging me toward his chest. He smelled like sweaty cheese and things I didn’t even want to contemplate. This close the odor of his boozy breath was worse, and I swallowed the urge to retch while my eyes burned, tearing up. “I said wha—”

“I believe the lady told you she wasn’t interested,” a man shouted, grabbing the guy by the bicep. “Now apologize for touching her without permission, before you make me cause an even bigger scene.”

My gaze traveled from the tattooed hand gripping the man’s arm, holding the disgusting guy in place, to my savior’s face. The colored lights filling the club strobed across his hard features, obscuring his eyes, but not the stern set of his powerful jaw or the vicious scowl tugging at his brow, locking his features into a determined mien. He was gorgeous and way out of my league, also way older than me.

Awareness and arousal spread through me the second our gazes latched onto each other, like wildfire consuming every bit of my innocence. Standing there, I would have given him anything he wanted, for saving me. Including the one thing my mother had been trying to sell since I turned fourteen—my virginity.

Lifting my chin, I stared into the creep’s eyes, and exhaled, feeling a bit more emboldened since I had help. The drunken fool’s gaze was glassy and unfocused. Even with my protector holding him, he swayed like a buoy in an ocean current. “I said, no.”

“Well, there you go, friend,” my protector snapped. “She said, no. Where I’m from, when a woman uses those two letters, it means back the fuck off and don’t harass her.” He shoved the guy into the crowd where two of the bouncers were already waiting for him.

The throng of people spread wide, allowing the asshole to be carried out of the club where he began to resist. The music consumed their huddled conversations as their glances darted in my direction then to the man at my side. As much as I wanted to feel embarrassed, I didn’t have the ability to be anymore. My mother made sure of that a long time ago.

“Jacolbi,” he said placing his hand to his chest, drawing my attention back to my savior and away from the sight of the man being dragged from the club.

“Erin,” I replied with a smile. “Thank you for the help, Jacolbi.”

The salacious grin tugging at his mouth twisted his features in a deviously delightful way had another spark of excitement rushing through me. I should have left. Should have said see you around or something innocuous and ran for the safety of my shitty apartment. Yet I didn’t move. If anyone found out I used a fake ID to get in, and Hannah helped me, I’d be in so much trouble. That wasn’t what I needed in my life right now. Not when I was supposed to be laying low in El Paso, working my ass off to move away from this godawful state. The second my mother found me; my life was forfeit. I was her meal ticket. *Her* chance to get out of the life she built. Running away like I had, fucked her over.

Denied *her* absolution.

“So, I was thinking of grabbing a drink before heading out,” Jacolbi said, hitching his thumb toward the VIP section. “Wanna join me?”

What in the Tom Ford is going on here?

Had he been talking to me this whole time, and I spaced out?

Jacolbi was a beast of a man standing at least six inches taller than me—more when I didn’t have heels on. He wore an expensive suit, sans the jacket. I took a moment to appreciate his aesthetic. His shirt sleeves were rolled up exposing the corded power of his forearms that were covered in tattoos to the V of his collar, revealing his tanned, ink-covered skin. His throat was a colorful display of a blooming lotus and dripping blood. Below were a myriad of other tattoos gracing his flesh that played peek-a-boo as the light undulated, casting us in shadow ever few seconds.

But it was his face that held me spellbound. His topaz blue eyes glittered with intent. His mouth kicked up a notch as if he knew I was weighing my options while also checking him out. There was dent in his nose where he’d broken it one too many times and a scar under his left eye. Jacolbi’s hollow cheeks were sharp enough to cut glass and his full lips were the kind Hannah said were made for sucking cock. She loved watching gay porn, so I had to take her word for it.

I dipped my gaze, and my mouth went bone dry, parched from lack of hydration. I was going to need more than one drink with him. The bulge in his trousers, dared anyone to

grind against him, or palm him, just to cop a feel. He had a proper package, not flat or poking out at a weird angle. Or worse, the dreaded peen-head outline—a moose knuckle if you will. No, this was all cock and balls sitting in a nice position for all to admire if they chose to. Which I seemed to be doing.

A lot.

He cleared his throat, startling me.

Heat filled my cheeks as I worked my mouth several times to form the words to say no thank you, but nothing came out. I was fixated on how good he looked and how his waist was so baby girl, yet there was this dominant streak that cut through his softness, especially when the harshness in his eyes dissipated.

This man was pure intimidation, and he knew it. How he turned off the heated intensity with a blink of his eyes, left me even more discombobulated. I'd seen men like him before, in my mother's trailer, making deals with her. Sharing hits of the drug de jour. They were slimy, slithering snakes, dirty in ways incomprehensible to most. They were worse than tainted. Everything they touched turned black with evil.

I didn't want that miasma of darkness to ruin me.

This man, however, I'd willingly let him corrupt me. Instinctually, I knew he could bring a person pleasure or pain, depending on what they did or what he wanted from them. Was it weird I craved experiencing both by his hands? I wanted to scream in pleasure and sob in pain so blissful, even after the physical plain subsided, I'd mentally ache afterward.

I yearned for him to consume me.

No one had ever made me feel like that before. It should have sent me running for the nearest exit. Yet, there I stood.

My answer uncovered the perilous danger I ran toward heedlessly.

“Yes, I would.” The reply rushed from me, before I could second guess my actions. If he was offering, I was taking. “I have a friend though. Hannah.”

He leaned in.

The scent of smoky oak with a hint of leather and a dash of citrus curled around me. “What?” This close, I could hear the growling edge of his voice, roughened after so much use, and I wondered if he whimpered during sex. If he did, was it one of those higher pitched sounds that could really make my blood sing with desire?

God, Erin, get your sex deprived mind out of the gutter. What the hell is wrong with you? You’re already a sex fiend and you haven’t even done it.

The short answer, ASMR audio files on those porn sites and audiobooks that made walking to work so much easier when Hannah took her car. I blamed her for my addiction to them, too. Especially *since* I’d never had sex before.

“Hannah,” I said a little louder this time. “My friend. She’s here too.” I motioned to the dance floor.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be okay and someone will bring her to us when she’s ready to leave.” His voice licked at my skin

causing goosebumps to form on the back of my neck and down my spine.

Jacolbi held his hand out to me. I noticed one thing right away. He might be covered in fine threads and expensive cologne, but his hands were working man's hands. The pads across his palms were calloused while his nails were manicured and kept tidy. Whatever he did, he had to have worn gloves because there wasn't an ounce of grease or dirt anywhere.

I slid my hand against his and electricity crackled across my skin, traveling up my arm, settling into the middle of my chest. I was in way over my head now, but I wanted to see where this would go. Even if Jacolbi led me straight into danger.

I was a lost puppy being guided behind my new master.

Jacolbi weaved his way through the crowd of club goers. The music thrummed over my senses, drowning out my inner voice, quieting my trepidations. This could be a trap. The whole night could've been some contrived machination my mother concocted to get me back into her clutches, so she could sell me to her dealers as payment for all the blow she'd snorted up her nose.

I pushed the thought aside, focusing instead on Jacolbi's tight ass, swaying with every step he took. Even his walk, though seductive, commanded attention and to follow without question. Whoever this man was, he'd either be my savior for the night or my capture for life. As much as my heart quickened at the notion of the alternative, my mind reminded

me to use caution. But, what if, for one night in my measly life, I wanted to be reckless?

Then what?

The second we stepped beyond the velvet rope, the music tempered. Smatterings of conversations filled the space along with laughter. Even the oppressive heat abated. We arrived at a small sitting area with only a loveseat and a low table. Jacolbi sat first, easing onto the leather cushion, adjusting his pants before spreading his legs in the most lascivious way. Like he knew I'd been staring at his crotch the whole time and was inviting me to get a better look. Then he leaned back, extending his arms along the edge of the furniture. He was open to me, enticing me to join him. A predator, luring me in, forcing down my walls by pacifying my overactive mind into a false sense of security before striking.

Obviously, my sense of self-preservation went out the window the second I went to him without hesitation, keeping mere inches between us. I was dumb. Not stupid. Later, I'd question my sanity. Later, I'd berate myself for acting foolish and not following the plan of flying under the radar.

"I've never seen you here before," Jacolbi said, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye while flagging down a server. "First time?"

"Something like that." I pulled my jacket off, overheated by his closeness and the mugginess of so many bodies piled into a small space, before sitting. "Like I said, my friend talked me into coming here."

He chuckled softly. "Friends, right?"

I rolled my eyes. “Are they worth it?” In the three minutes he’d introduced himself to me, I’d relaxed more than I had in the last eighteen years of my life. That wasn’t smart on my part. He could be a serial killer for all I knew.

If he’s a serial killer, I hope he chokes me out on his cock while wearing his hand as a necklace.

“Sometimes.” He ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip, and I swore my ovaries exploded in response. “Are you new to the area?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Been here all my life. You?”

He stared at me for a moment, as if he were trying to pry open my mind to figure out if I was lying or being honest with him. Truth was, I grew up in the shittiest part of El Paso near the border town of Juarez, Mexico. Closest to the tunnels beneath the divide, yet far enough away from the prying eyes of the BP agents and federales. It was how my mother was able to continue to be a mule for Centro without getting caught.

“Los Angeles,” he said. “I commute.”

I snorted, turning toward him, closing the space I’d given us. “You commute?”

He nodded, that sly grin was back in place while his gaze dazzled me with its brilliance. He was dangerous in a sexy-as-fuck could-strip-me-down-and-convince-me-to-give-up-my-virginity-for-him, way. “Why’s that hard to believe?”

I shrugged. “You’d be so much better off in Los Angeles.”

“Wouldn’t have met you if I stayed home.” He lifted his shoulder in the sexiest shrug I’d ever seen before. “Tradeoff is worth it.

Secretly, I pinched myself, sure I’d fallen asleep while listening to one of those books Hannah let me borrow from her. His words were too practiced. He’d said them too many times, I was sure of it. This was an act for him. I could see it. He wanted me to acknowledge this part of him while keeping the truth to himself. I should have walked away.

Said thanks, but no thanks.

However, my curiosity got the better of me, and I stayed. He hadn’t made a move or made me feel uncomfortable, even as I continued to eye fuck him, like some sex deprived hussy looking to score. Was that why he was interested? Had he been looking for the same thing? Couldn’t be because no one else was interested in him. He could have anyone in the club. “What are we doing here?”

He sat up a little straighter, exposing the tattoos on the side of his neck and crept up toward his scalp. I wanted to see more. *Are those feathers?* “Why don’t you tell me, Erin. What were you looking for when you came to *The Ministry?*”

Obviously not to have my soul saved.

He could snatch my soul from my body though... I gave my inner temptress major side eye as I contemplated his question.

“I’ll be a son of a bitch,” a man drawled, looming over us. He wore a suit fitted to him. His long, dark hair was tied back in a bun, exposing the tattoos on his neck. They were almost

identical to Jacolbi's only his were better. Black and white mandolin patterns and geometric shapes covered each of the man's hands. "When did you get here?"

Jacolbi's face transformed into a genuine expression of friendliness and warmth stealing my breath. He was gorgeous. We already established that, but this... He was beautiful. He stood in a fluid motion of power and grace, embracing the man with a laugh before facing me. "Balor, this is my new friend, Erin." He glanced at me before looking back at his friend. The man's smile was all perfectly straight, white teeth, wolfish, and reached his eyes. Not one of those fake, practiced smiles. The kind that enticed unsuspecting victims to their death. "Erin, this is Balor. He's one tough son of a bitch and a bit of a shark. He doesn't deserve his wi—"

Balor punched Jacolbi in the stomach as he chuckled. "Don't listen to him, Isobel adores me. If she heard him talking about her, she'd beat him with chancla." He extended his hand as his kindheartedness wrapped around me, making me feel as if I belonged, something I'd never experienced before. The spicy notes of his cologne mixed with Jacolbi's and my mouth watered. "It's a pleasure meeting you, Erin. Are you enjoying our club?"

I frowned, confused by what the man was saying while also uncomfortable with the way they were including me because I didn't know either of them. I was unsteady, even as I continued to sit. My gaze darted around the small area sure everyone stared at us. "Um... Your club?"

“Balor and Mort—Mortimer own this place.” Jacolbi winced as if uncomfortable from attention before patting Balor’s shoulder. “Where is the asshole anyway?”

“Right here, dickhead,” Mortimer stated, joining us. “You cause more trouble than you’re worth sometimes.”

Jacolbi snickered. “Mortimer meet Erin.”

“You, young lady,” Mortimer said, sitting beside me. “I have questions for you.”

Oh fuck. He knew. That’s it. This was the plan all along. They sent pretty boy in first. Then when I was relaxed and horny, thinking about losing my virginity, the owners of the club would swoop in to have me arrested for using a fake ID to get into their club.

I fell for it hook, line and sinker.

I swallowed hard, running my tongue over my dry bottom lip, unable to gather any saliva in my mouth. My heart pounded and my stomach knotted. I was going to jail. They were going to call my mother. I had to get out of there.

“Easy,” Mortimer murmured, his fingertips brushed my knee. My gaze rose to meet his gray eyes. “Can we talk about earlier? That guy? Did he hurt you? Threaten you?”

Shit. I pressed my hand to my chest. “Right, yes. Of course.” I exhaled and gave a nervous laugh. “No. None of that.”

“Jumpy Little Bunny you have here, man,” Mortimer said. “That’s okay. If I had to stare at Jacolbi’s ugly mug all day I’d be scared too.”

“What?” An indignant snort filled my throat. “He’s not ugly.”

“You tell him,” Jacolbi tease. “I’m pretty.”

Mortimer rolled his eyes. “Stop feeding his ego, sweetheart. He doesn’t need it.”

“Oh, she can feed my ego all night if she’d like,” Jacolbi said, winking at me. “I like the way she strokes it.”

“Okay, Casanova,” I muttered, huffing out a laugh, “take it down a notch.”

Mortimer grinned, transforming the harsh lines of his face into a handsome façade. He had an upside down rose from his temple to just below his cheekbone along with two carnations on either side of his neck. I’d have sworn I’d fallen into an inked men’s magazine layout fantasy; however, I’d already pinched myself and was wide awake.

These men were real.

“Why don’t you tell us what happened tonight. We have it on security footage, we just need your statement,” Mortimer said, drawing my attention back to him.

“Right, what happened.” I ran through everything while answering his questions. When he was finished, he stood did that weird bro hug thing with Jacolbi then Mortimer and Balor disappeared back into the club. As soon as they were gone, the cocoon surrounding us, snapped and it was as if the noise of the club rushed back in.

“Sorry about that,” Jacolbi mumbled once we were alone again. “I should have warned you.”

“They seem... Nice.” I cleared my throat. “How long have you known them?”

“Do you really want to talk about them and not about us?” He motioned between us with his index finger. “Because I think we’re on the same page here.”

My breath hitched. “You do?”

He nodded, tucking his bottom lip between his teeth. The sexy way. Not the awkward way I did it. He inched closer to me, the heat of his body ensnared me, drawing me into his chest. “What do you want, Little Bunny.”

The rumbled edge of his voice skirted across my flesh. The hairs on my arms stood on end as goosebumps trailed behind and my nipples pebbled into hard points, aching for Jacolbi’s attention. “I don’t troll clubs for one-night stands.” I blurted out the only answer I could come up with while his intense stare held me in place.

“I don’t either.” The naked truth in his words, swept me up. I was stupid. Ignorant. I shouldn’t agree to anything. The second he found out I was a virgin, he’d kick me out, yet instead of saying no—which was becoming a habit around him—I kissed him.

The second my lips crushed his, he whimpered. It started as a startled high-pitched sound, surprised by my initiative, deepened to a growl as he kissed me back, devouring me with his lips, tongue, and teeth. His hand wrapped around my throat, while the other went around my back, holding me steady and in place. He squeezed lightly and I moaned,

shocked by how excited I became at the thought of being choked.

The pad of his thumb traced a small path across my jaw reassuring me, while I swore, he was reaping my soul from my body with just one kiss. My hands went to his chest, fisting his shirt, anchoring me to him as I arched into his hold. I was shaky with adrenaline and expectation. I'd never experienced anything like this before.

Never really kissed a guy either.

I was floating into an unknown territory.

“You sure?” Jacolbi mouthed the words across my lips, his gaze steady on mine. I could see the lust and arousal swirling in those beautiful blue eyes of his. Like a storm just offshore, churning with energy.

“Yes.” I didn't give myself time to reconsider my options. If I did, I'd talk myself out of the one thing I wanted more than anything.

Two birds. One stone.

Lose my virginity and see Jacolbi naked.

“Thank fuck.” He pressed his forehead to mine and exhaled a tremulous breath. “Goddamn, I have never been this unsteady with someone. But you, Little Bunny, you got me in knots.”

That made two of us.

CHAPTER 3

Erin

“Do you want to get out of here?” Jacolbi stared at me with such intensity I couldn’t look away. Get out of here? Where would we go? I was at the club with Hannah, I couldn’t just leave her behind.

“Where?” I asked, trying to think with my brain and not my libido.

“Upstairs.” Again, he grinned. “There’s more to this club than you know about, Little Bunny.”

What did it say about me, that I enjoyed the nickname he gave me? “Show me.” *In for a penny. In for a pound.* As much as I should be running away, I also recognized the chance to break the last chain connecting me to my mother and her nefarious ways.

Jacolbi’s pace was unhurried. We strolled through the VIP section like we owned it, and perhaps, after meeting his friends, he did, too. At the end of the hall was a bank of elevators. He pulled a card from his pocket and placed it against the blacked-out screen and waited for the biometric pad to light up. Placing his palm to the display, his print showed up slowly then the doors opened.

So many questions sat on the tip of my tongue, pressing against my teeth to be set freed, yet I swallowed them down. He didn’t owe me an explanation. We weren’t in a relationship. To me, and I assumed him, this was all a transaction amongst two horny people looking for a good time.

The doors closed in front of us and the second the car began to move, Jacolbi had me pinned to the corner, kissing me again. The way he devoured me, stepping between my thighs, pressing that bulge of his to my pussy... I was dying. Drowning on the adrenaline. Consumed by his domineering way.

I moaned into the kiss, wrapping my arms around his neck while running my fingers through his short hair. His muffled grunt spurred me on as I rubbed against him. A spark of pleasure so great, shot through me, leaving me weak and lightheaded. I ached from head to toe because of this man.

When we came to a stop and the bell chimed, I thought he would step away from me, allowing me to gather my tattered wits. I was wrong. He palmed my ass, forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist as he carried me to wherever we were going. Once more the insistent questions sat on my tongue. How many times he'd done this? Where were we going?

"You're shaking like a leaf," he murmured against the curve of my ear. "You nervous?"

Excited. Nervous. Scared. "A little. Like I said, I don't do these sorts of things." I buried my face in the crook of his neck, biting my bottom lip as my clit rubbed against his groin in the best way possible. I was on fire. An exposed, pleasurable nerve ending. He squeezed my ass pressing me firmly to him, causing sparks of electricity to cascade over me. The burning coil of arousal tightened within me, and I swore if he didn't put me down, I was going to embarrass myself.

“You’re wet too. I can feel the heat of your pussy through my pants. How close are you, Little Bunny?” I quivered at his tone. “Tell me so I can watch you fall apart in my arms before I get my dick inside you.”

My eyes fluttered shut. My muscles tensed. “So close.” I’d gotten myself off plenty of times with toys and my fingers, but none of them compared to him.

“Fuck,” he grunted, putting my back to the wall on our left. “You’re going to come for me right here. I want to watch you. Feel you.” His hand went to my hips before the other one continued down, dipping between my thighs. When his knuckles brushed across my throbbing clit as he pushed my panties aside, I sobbed. “Poor Little Bunny, so hard and aching.

He licked the pad of his thumb before lowering it to my exposed clit. With each circle Jacolbi made, the building orgasm within me became brighter, invading every bit of my senses, until I cried out, flexing my hips, so close to the edge. The bliss had been so great, I physically hurt, straining for the right touch to get me off. He pressed his forehead to mine as a groan passed his lips and his eyes drifted shut.

I gasped his name as the thread within me snapped and I was coming hard. My vision whited out. My heart pounded so loud; I couldn’t hear anything but the whoosh of my blood in my ears. “Please...” I don’t know what I was begging for, him to stop or to keep going.

“I’ve got you. I’m going to make you feel so fucking good,” he murmured. “First a little taste of the sweetest

pussy.”

He went down on one knee leaving me to stand there on wobbly legs. I could admit now, he'd earned that cocky grin of his. Jacolbi inched closer, putting my right foot on his shoulder, while spreading my legs a bit more. “Here? Right here?”

“Yep.” He stared up at me with such hunger in his eyes. “No place else I'd rather be.”

He buried his face in my cunt and moaned. Heat filled my cheeks as I stared down at him. Jacolbi ate my pussy with a hungry passion I'd only read about and heard about within Hannah's books. I'd always thought it was just great authors with even better imaginations writing vivid exploits.

How. Wrong. I. Was.

Jacolbi pushed his tongue inside of me, probing my entrance, teasing me with the tip before taking my clit into his mouth and sucking. I cried out. My fingernails scored his scalp as I rode his face. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he made all these sexy little noises at the back of his throat while he continued to lick and suck on me. When he added two fingers and fucked me in long, powerful strokes, I thought I'd combust.

“Do it, bunny,” he moaned. “Give it to me. Come in my mouth.”

His libidinous words slid down my spine and settled behind my clit. He scored the tight bundle of nerves with his teeth, and I cried out, holding his face to me while my release

rushed from me. Now I understood why guys liked standing blow jobs, this view was amazing. His gaze clashed with mine. Excitement glowed in those brilliant blue eyes. His pupils were blown, wild with arousal. He didn't leave my pussy until I pushed his face away, unable to take how overly sensitive I was.

“Ohmigod,” I mumbled, breathing hard. “That was... That was...”

“Fucking amazing.” Jacolbi ripped my panties from me. “These are mine now.” Then he hoisted me over his shoulder as he stood and carried me the rest of the way down the hall.

He stopped momentarily to open the door then once we were inside, he carried me to the bed and tossed me onto the mattress and followed me down. Jacolbi kissed me again, this time allowing me to taste my orgasm on his tongue. The tangy spice mixed with a bit of alcohol and infused me with bliss, turned me on once more. He pushed up my skirt up before yanking open his pants with quick jerky motions.

“I can't wait any more. I need you.” From one breath to the next he positioned himself at my entrance. I was soaked. Throbbing for him in ways that scared the shit out of me. Jacolbi pushed forward, keeping his thumb on my clit as he thrust into me before pulling back and slamming home.

My back came off the bed as a cry of pain and pleasure fell from my lips. I clung to him, not sure if I was climaxing again or being ripped in two. His hiss then muttered curse as he strained against me, had me clawing at his back. The sensation was so intense I couldn't breathe.

“Fuck yes,” he groaned. “Goddamn, bunny. You got me wanting to come on the spot. You little pussy is so fucking tight.”

Jacolbi didn't move as I continued to pulse around him, stretching to accommodate the foreign object lodged within my untouched vagina. Tears slipped from the corners of my eyes and ran back to my ears. However, the longer he didn't move, the more restless I became. The sensitive throb became insistent, like an itch I couldn't scratch, but he could.

“Please...” I sounded like a broken record, except I didn't know what else to say to him, other than to beg for more while also being grateful for what he gave me at the same time. Eventually, he'd learn the truth, that he was my first. Hopefully, by then, I'd be long gone.

“I like the sound of your voice when you beg. You do it so pretty, like a good little slut.” I shivered, excited by his words. “Damn, Little Bunny your pussy went slick. Do you like being called, daddy's little slut?”

Holy shit.

My mind spun. My heart raced. Jacolbi sat back and pulled off his shirt before covering me again. His chest and stomach were a feast for the eyes. Every inch of his skin was covered by intricate tattoos over thick muscle, I couldn't stop looking, until he forced my eyes from his chest to his gaze. “Such a good girl, keeping my cock snug and warm. You deserve a reward.”

He guided my hands to his ass, pushing them into his loosened pants, to grab the rounded flesh. His harsh command

of keep them there, turned me into a simpering little bitch in heat. *Holy fuck. What the hell is going on here?* The slow drag of his cock across my sensitive walls, still hyped by the way he fucked into me, tingled with awareness.

I was in over my head.

Each thrust was stronger than the last. My nails dug into his skin, securing me to him as he set a punishing pace. His muffled moans and along with the rumble at the back of his throat were delicious and better than I could ever have imagined.

Better than those audio books and AMSR recordings.

It was lewd, laying in that bed with him, still wearing our clothes, sans a few garments. More depraved since he was fucking me bareback. Thank God I'd gotten the implant while still living with my mother. No way in hell I'd get raped and carry some cartel boss's baby.

He was the exception to that rule.

Jacolbi lifted the front of my dress, exposing my lace-covered breasts and groaned. He palmed the aching mounds, tugging them from their confines before teasing and playing with them. He pinched my nipples to the point of pain, causing fire to race through me as the delicious burn had me arching into his touch. "So fucking responsive." He bent his head, drawing the tight point into his mouth to suck on while shifting his hips, so he filled me deeper.

My eyes rolled up. The tension built within my belly once more as I clung to him, trying to catch a balance I was sure

disappeared. This was not what I was expecting. I thought my first time would've been in the back seat of some guy's car. Filled with fumbling hands and not mind-blowing orgasms.

The loud pop of him releasing my nipple accompanied the cool breeze of the room before he covered the neglected side to show the same attention, he'd given the right. I needed more though. I strained against him crying out as the tension increased, leaving me a whimpering mess.

"Please, Jacolbi. Make me come, please," I sobbed, desperate for the sweet release building behind my clit.

The vulgar, wet, squelching sounds my pussy made combined with the slap of our skin and the jingle of his belt hanging from his hips. I was on sensory overload, trying to memorize every bit of our moment together, so later when I'd undoubtedly be alone, I could use the memories to masturbate, because I was sure I'd never see this man again.

Jacolbi snatched my hands from his ass, pressing them together over my head where he held them in place while burying his face in my throat. His teeth scraped the sensitive skin there before biting down hard enough I knew he left a mark.

"I have a kink," he said with a groan. "I love fucking. I love breeding. I want to pump your pussy full of my cum."

I rippled around him as some of my juice slipped from my cunt. His hitched moan as he shuddered, ramped up my excitement. "That's so fucking hot."

“Holy shit, I knew you’d be into that. Getting my dick lodged into your sweet, perfect little cunt. Taking my loads one after the other while being my precious, baby girl.” He hissed as I clenched around him, his words stroking my arousal. “Damn it, Erin. You got me coming already.”

While he braced my hands in one of his meaty paws, he slipped his free hand between us, milking my clit, just like I knew he’d jack his dick. The minute he stroked the hard bundle of nerves I screamed, shattering in his arms. I locked around him, as pulse after pulse of my release rocked my mind and body.

Above me, Jacolbi’s pace faltered, his grunts and groans went from a low growl of pleasure to that of desperate sounds as he pounded into me. Then he cried out, thrusting twice more before stilling. Each throb of heat splashing within me, set off mini orgasms, keeping me twitchy and floating.

Holy shit.

That just happened.

Jacolbi continued to give small thrusts, extending both of our bliss. He draped my legs over his thighs and laid there, adjusting his weight off my chest, while also lodging his still hard cock inside me. “One time is never going to be enough for me, Erin. Never.”

I had to agree.

* * *

Erin

“That’s so gross!” Hannah whimpered from the bathroom as she closed the door behind her. It’d been two weeks since our night at *The Ministry*. I hadn’t gone back. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t. Bills wouldn’t get paid if I was slacking off. “Don’t go in there unless you’re willing to fight the roaches over their territory.” She shivered in disgust as she tied her hair up in a towel. “We def need to find a new place. This is getting out of hand.”

“On my list of things to do,” I said with a frown, as if our meager pay could afford much more than this shitty little apartment. “When I win the lottery.”

“Or one of us marries a sugar daddy,” Hannah said, giving one more shiver in repulsion then laughed. “That guy Mortimer was cute.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Jacolbi was right. Once wasn’t enough for either of us, however after the second time, we were interrupted by a knock at the door, and Mortimer’s arrival. Hannah had been ready to go home, even if I wasn’t. There was no way she didn’t know what happened between Jacolbi and me, so I told her the truth on the way home.

She’d then told me about Mortimer.

“I don’t know which is worse, a sugar daddy or the roaches.” Unless Jacolbi was the sugar daddy. He was fifteen years older than me, and I wouldn’t mind if he’d been the one to take care of me. *Do you like being called daddy’s little slut?* “Not sure I want to stare at wrinkly peen for the rest of my life.” I crinkled my nose. “Not my idea of a good time.”

“You’d look at wrinkly peen if it meant having a luxurious home away from society.” She wiggled her brows on the way to the kitchen. “And bugs.”

No. I wouldn’t.

Hannah didn’t know about the conditions I grew up in. Paranoia had led me to keep those aspects to myself. If she got kidnapped by the right-wrong person, after I confessed, and she’d blab, they’d come for me, forcing me to return to my bitch of a mother.

I never told her about locking my bedroom door and putting a chair in front of it at night because my mom bartered me for her drugs. My virginity for her bag of blow, or tabs, or meth, or weed. Whatever the drug of choice was that week. Or worse, to make money. Not to mention my sleazy uncles. At least that’s who she said were my uncles. Then there was the slew of boyfriends. To say she had bad taste was a given.

I’d been a commodity for my egg donor when she had nothing left to give.

In my book that was worse than having bad taste in men.

“I’d rather buy myself the luxurious mansion, thank you very much,” I stated, entering the bathroom. The first thing I noticed when I pushed the door too was the pigsty of a floor. Hannah hadn’t hung up her towels. She left the toothpaste on the sink ledge... Not to mention her face scrubs and lotions strewn about. Sometimes, being roomies with my bestie was like living with a younger sibling. Not that I ever lived with one or had one. “I can see why the roach was having fun in here.”

“What?”

“I said,” I yelled, “I don’t see a roach in here. Maybe you scared it away.”

Thankfully, I got my shower last night, so I didn’t need one. All I had to do was tie my hair back and finish getting ready to go. As it was, if we didn’t hurry the fuck up, we were going to be late for work and our boss already put us all on notice. The next employee who didn’t clock in on the dot, was getting the ax. I couldn’t be that person.

Not if I wanted to survive in El Paso on my own and eventually leave Texas.

I’d never willfully go back to that trailer park on the edge of town. The county could call me tomorrow to say my mom was dead and society would be better for it. That’s how bad my life with her had become.

“You could tell me we’re moving, even if it’s a lie,” Hannah muttered, crossing her arms. “I swear the landlord doesn’t do shit around here.”

My bestie wasn’t lying. The apartment was at least forty years old. There were cracks in the outer façade, paint was chipping and falling away from the walls. The windows had to be held open with broom sticks—if they had screens. The floors were warped by age and water damage over the years. The countertops were uneven too, and the laminate was peeling up. Even the dishwasher had been used more for holding castoffs than cleaning dishes. It seemed like the more we complained about the disrepair of our apartment, the more

our rent increased, taking almost every bit of our disposable income.

“I’ll pick up some traps on the way home, maybe figure out how much bombing the place will cost.” If there were roaches in the walls, which was probably the case, one of our next-door neighbors caused the infestation, not us. As much as I might complain about Hannah leaving shit out, she did clean. Maybe not as much as I did because we all had our idiosyncrasies but, she wasn’t to blame here. Unfortunately for us, bombing our apartment would only cure the situation for the time being. In six months, we’d be right back at square one.

“You’re a life saver,” Hannah said, hugging me. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Probably the same thing I would.

Waste away.

You know how psychologists say don’t blame your parents for how you turned out or whatever psychological mumbo jumbo they used? I disagreed. I’d always blame my mom. She could have done better. *Been* better. She chose not to. She stayed in her trailer. She took drugs. She enjoyed being high more than helping me. To the point, even if I wanted to go to college, I couldn’t because we didn’t have the money, nor could I fill out FAFSA forms or apply for loans. All those options required my mother signing the paperwork which she’d refuse to do.

Then I figured out she was trying to sell my virginity to the highest bidder for at least four years.

The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

“Look,” Hannah said while braiding her hair. “I wasn't going to say anything until I could scope out the place myself, but I think I found better jobs for us.”

Interest piqued, I sat on our ragged couch, waiting for the details. “Oh yeah? Where?”

“*Absolution*,” she replied. “Like I was saying, I wanted to get a feel for the place before I told you about the job offers. Unfortunately, the club is ultra-private. I'm talking requires membership just to drive up into the parking lot, kind of private.”

Couldn't say I wasn't at least curious, but “private” and “membership,” could mean a few things, including “strip club.” “I'm not a stripper, Hannah. Nor am I a prostitute. I draw the line at anything other than server.”

She grinned. “Then you're in luck. They only wanted hostesses.”

Why didn't that ease my trepidations? “I'm not so sure...”

“From what I was told,” she replied, putting on her makeup, “the pay is three times what we get at *Trigger's*. Plus, none of the sleazy customers.”

As much as my heart said take the offer and run, practically speaking, if we wanted to live somewhere better than this, we'd have to keep both jobs for right now. Even if it was only one night a week at *Trigger's*. “There's no guarantee we'll get the job, Hannah.”

“It’s a gamble for sure, but if this works out, in a year or two we could be out of here for good.” She knew about my plan to leave El Paso. She also knew how to use my wanting to run as the carrot to dangle in front of me.

“Fine,” I said. “We’ll apply. Just don’t get your hopes up. We’re lower than trailer trash right now, so I doubt they’ll want us.” Even as the words left my lips, I hoped I’d be eating crow once this was all over. “Now, hurry up. We needed to leave three minutes ago.”

Hannah finished applying her lipstick then stood. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 4

Erin

Work had been, well, work. From the moment we stepped into the bar until we clocked out, Hannah and I barely got a break. There must have been a biker convention in El Paso or something because *Trigger's*, though a biker haven, had never been that packed any day of the week.

“I’m so glad that’s over,” Hannah muttered, groaning as she got into her car. “Tomorrow morning, we’re going to *Absolution*. I don’t want to hear any arguments about it.”

She wouldn’t get any from me.

Hannah was right.

We were barely scraping by. Tonight, we made three hundred a piece, better than most nights, but still not enough to move. After talking about the conditions we were living in; I realized no amount of cleaning or fumigating or anything would change the current disrepair of our home. We were spending seven hundred a month on a two-bedroom place in an area way better than where the trailer park was located, but still in the shittiest part of El Paso.

I was still too close to my mother, as well. One of these days, she’d find me, then I’d be gone for good. “You won’t. After thinking about what you said, you’re right.”

“Did that hurt?” Hannah teased. “Sounded like it did.”

I rolled my eyes. “Bitch.”

Hannah laughed. “Come on, let’s splurge a little and get one of those chorizo breakfast burritos.”

My stomach rumbled. It was well after three am when we left the bar once we finished cleaning up and cashing out, which meant we’d only get a few hours’ sleep before heading to *Absolution*. “You’re on. I could eat a horse right about now.”

Once we grabbed breakfast, we went home. Just the thought of stepping over the threshold of our dingy place filled me with dread. It was as if I had opened my eyes after being blind for so long to the conditions we’d been living in. By the time we went to bed, it was well past five. I set two alarms, as did Hannah. Neither one of us were morning people. However, today, we’d make the exception.

Or not.

Ten-thirty came way too fast. I hit snooze on my alarm twice. By the third alarm Hannah set, we were groaning about getting up. While I grabbed a shower, Hannah made coffee. She handed me a cup as she passed me, entering the bathroom.

An hour later, we were coherent and had enough caffeine buzzing through our systems to at least make it through another three or four hours before crashing. The promise of a nap before our shift started was the only thing keeping me on my feet.

“Do you even know where you’re going?” I asked, clicking my seat belt into place.

“Put the address into my GPS.” She motioned to her phone now positioned in the deck on her dash. “Thankfully, we’re close to there.”

“This feels weird,” I said. “Shouldn’t we be filling out the application online or something?”

“I thought the same but there are only certain times they accept applications and it’s a first come, first serve basis.” She pulled out of the parking lot of the apartment and turned left. “I bet there’s going to be a line.”

If *Absolution* was as exclusive as Hannah said they were, I agreed. Which meant we had to stand out. I clutched my bag as we drove away from the center of El Paso and toward the foothills behind the city—the opposite direction of where I’d lived my whole life. Out there, were the million-dollar homes and upscale businesses only the select few knew about.

My stomach knotted. Maybe having such a heavy breakfast before bed hadn’t been the best idea we’d ever had. The closer we got to our destination, the more I worried we’d made a huge mistake going out there.

We were out of our element.

The roads changed as we turned off the major thoroughfare onto Fire Road. It was as if the county or the state came out every six months and paved the street, keeping the thoroughfare that fresh matte black color. Even the yellow and white lines were bright and filled with reflective glitter. A far cry from the dilapidated roads surrounding the gated community.

In the divider were streetlights placed every hundred feet, illuminating the road, unlike many of the country roads, once you drove past the city limits. Ahead was the club that looked more like a mansion surrounded by high walls and security. Of course, there were already several cars in front of us waiting to get in.

Hannah took my hand and gave a squeeze. “We can do this. Your ID has gotten you into a lot of places you shouldn’t have been. Trust the process to work again.”

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing hard. “We can do this.”

I didn’t want to say I was sizing up the competition once we were inside, but I did. All the women and the few men who joined us were gorgeous. We didn’t stand a chance. As much as this was a way out for us, we might have to stay in the muck a little longer.

Filling out the application hadn’t been the hard, even as we sat there with all those beautiful people. It was the wait that got to me.

In the hours, then days that followed, I checked my phone more times than I should have, waiting to hear back. Nibbling on my thumbnail, I scrolled through my messages while Hannah flipped a page of a book. I’d picked up at a secondhand store, totally oblivious to my nerves getting the better of me. Today was our four-hour shift at *Trigger’s*. We didn’t have to be in until ten, so being home made my anxiety worse.

It’d been three days since we sat in that room with all those beautiful people and filled out our applications. Three

days since my self-esteem had taken a major blow after I'd compared myself to the others. Three days since I'd taken a leap of faith, now I wish I hadn't.

"Would you relax over there?" Hannah muttered, thumbing the edge of the page, engrossed by what she was reading. To be fair, the book was fantastic, too. "I can feel your angst all the way over here."

"Sorry," I said, frowning. "I don't think we're getting a call back. Did you see the others? Why would they want us?"

Hannah snorted. "Speak for yourself. I know I can do the job. If you want to be a self-deprecating fool, then so be it. I won't help you spiral."

I flipped her off. "You know what I mean."

"No," she said, closing the book while holding her spot with her middle finger. "Why don't you explain it for me."

"They were hot," I said, as if that was explanation enough. "Their clothes and makeup... Those piercings and abs..." I scoffed. "They all had tattoos too. We don't have tattoos. In fact, I don't know if you noticed Hannah, but we're pretty plain. If we were going to get a call back, it would have happened —" My phone rang, cutting my tirade short. I glanced at the screen and tilted my head. I didn't recognize the number, but something in my gut said answer it, so I did. "Hello?"

"Is this Ms. Erin Harper?" The smooth honeyed voice was vaguely familiar.

"Yes," I replied. "How can I help you?"

“This is Mr. Lucero from *Absolution*. Mr. Trapani would like to interview with you on Friday afternoon if you are available and still interested in the position?”

My gaze snapped to Hannah whose phone rang. She stared back at me a small manic grin on her lips as she slid her finger across her screen.

“Ms. Harper?”

“Oh! Sorry.” I facepalmed myself for being such a dork. “Yes, what time should I be there?”

“How does twelve-thirty work for you?” There was a sensual coaxing in his tone, like a weighted blanket, calming me even though I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

“Perfect,” I answered. “Thank you so much. I really appreciate you giving me a moment of your time and consideration.” *Ew, what the fuck is wrong with you, girl?*

He chuckled, and I swore I felt it in the middle of my chest. “You’re welcome, Ms. Harper. See you on Friday at twelve-thirty. Please bring a clean medical physical when you show up and your license.”

Flabbergasted by the request, I stammered out an answer, “Sure, no-uh, no problem.”

“If you have any issues with obtaining a physical, we have a clinic we use. They will gladly help you out.”

“No!” I winced at the snap of my voice. “What I mean is, I use the public health department. No need to put anyone out.”

His soft chuff burned away some of my anxiousness. “It’s no trouble. I’ll text you the information, so if you should change your mind, you’ll know where to go.”

I sagged into my chair. “Thank you. Again.”

“Not a problem. Have a good rest of your afternoon, Ms. Harper. We’ll talk soon,” Mr. Lucero said before hanging up.

I waited until Hannah did the same, lowering her phone to her lap then staring at me with in wide-eyed shock. “Did that just happen?” I wouldn’t allow myself to get too excited about the prospect of finding a new job. As it was, we needed to get ready soon to start our shift at *Trigger’s*. “They gave us interview times, right? I didn’t hallucinate that, correct?”

She bobbed her head. “One pm, for me. What time for you?”

“Twelve-thirty,” I said, holding my hand out to her. Hannah was truly my best friend. In the year I’d been free of my mother, Hannah had been my rock. “Do you need a physical, too?”

“Yeah. Did they tell you about a place they use?” Hannah asked as our phones chimed with incoming text messages.

I glance down at my phone. There was a reconfirm on the interview time, along with the name and a link to directions, waiting for me. Holy shit. This was really happening. I was so sure we wouldn’t even get a second glance. Of course, I knew those who waited with us to fill out the forms would more than likely get calls too, this... This was a mini victory for us.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of fog and nervousness. At least being at *Trigger's* gave me something else to focus on instead of dwelling on the physical or the coming interview. By two am Friday morning, I was ready to collapse and quit my job. Obviously, I couldn't give up my job yet.

Absolution wasn't a shoo-in.

I'd only scored an interview, *not* an offer.

Since Hannah hadn't worked with me, I climbed into her car and drove home. Lucky bitch was probably sleeping well right about now. At least, that was what I expected when I opened the door to our shitty apartment. What I found was her hunched over the secondhand sewing machine she bought a few months back to alter our uniforms for *Trigger's*.

"Honey," I said, drawing her attention from where she'd been working. "I'm home."

Hannah pulled the pin from between her lips and secured two pieces of fabric together before standing. "How was work?" She hugged me tight, then wrinkled her nose as she pulled back. "Did you get beer poured on you?"

"Among other things," I said with a sigh. "One of the old ladies thought I was flirting with her old man. You know how that shit goes."

She rolled her eyes. "I swear Trigger needs to teach them some fucking manners in that place."

I agreed. "So, what have you been up to?"

“I went thrifting while you were gone,” she said, proud of herself. “I found us something to wear tomorrow.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “For this afternoon... Er... Tomorrow...” She sighed. “You know what I mean.”

I did. “Well, show me.” I was drop dead exhausted, but if Hannah was taking the time to make us stuff, I had a minute to appreciate her talents.

“First, you need to get naked. I have to hem this.” Hannah unfurled a pair of wool pants. “They’re vintage Yves St. Laurent. From the Rive Gauche collection.”

I stared at her, then the pants. “How?”

“I told the lady.” She shrugged. “Three bucks for a pair Yves St. Laurent pants that would easily go for over two hundred, if not more, since they’re vintage. She didn’t want to hear it. So, I took them for you.”

“I need a shower first.” No way those pants were touching my sticky, beer covered skin. Dropping everything I was carrying on the floor, I hurried to the bathroom and showered as quickly as I could, scrubbing myself extra, just to be sure I wouldn’t taint the pants Hannah bought me. I might be poor, but I knew fashion.

It was going to be my major in another life.

When I stepped out of the steam clouded bathroom, refreshed and squeaky clean, I went straight to Hannah so I could try on those pants. Sure, wool while it was still warm out was kind of stupid, but Yves Saint Laurent. Can’t say no. “Okay. Let’s hem me.”

I stepped into the pants, and I felt richer. Clothes really made the person, and these pants... Well, who should I make the autograph out to? I chuckled to myself as I held still, allowing my bestie to work her magic. “We should open a tailoring shop when we’re older.”

Hannah’s gaze kicked upward at me. “You’re joking, right?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I think we’d do good at it. Between your sewing abilities and my financial and marketing skills, we could make it work.”

“Maybe.” Hannah went back to pinning my pants. “Put it on the list of things to discuss over dinner.”

I grinned. Later, I’d look back at this moment and wish I could have changed everything about our lives. But right now, I was content and excited for what was to come.

Including the interview.

* * *

Erin

Twelve-thirty came fast.

I felt like I’d barely gotten to sleep, and my alarm was waking me up. Hannah was already moving around, probably getting ready. Nervous energy squirmed in my stomach and there was a fine tremble in my hands. What if they hated us? What if we weren’t club potential?

As it was, we used the clinic Mr. Lucero sent us directions for and even that place was expensive. Obviously, we didn’t

have to pay for anything, or else we would have walked right back out the door. The staff was kind. The physical wasn't very invasive.

It was a pleasant experience.

The interview, however, made my stomach churn. I'd been so caught up in the process I hadn't even thought about Jacolbi, *The Ministry*, or his promise one time wouldn't be enough. I couldn't even say if I felt different after losing my virginity. FYI: I didn't. I was still me, only not as useful to my mother anymore.

Get it together, girl. Stop letting your mind wander.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror of my vanity and frowned. I looked like shit. Purple, lack-of-sleep smudges marred the underneath of my eyes. I had a crease mark in my cheek from my pillow. I should just cancel the interview and

I curled my lip in disgust mostly at myself for being so, blah, about everything and got to work, making myself look halfway decent. By the time I was ready to go, I at least appeared to be bright eyed and ready for the day, even if on the inside I was dreading everything. I had a feeling, if all went well, *Absolution* could change mine and Hannah's lives forever. Even bought into at least a bit of her optimism.

If we got the job.

Now, here I sat, in an empty office with bold, masculine furniture, and walls painted a deep beautiful walnut color, waiting for Mr. Lucero to join me. His assistant, Tena, had showed me to his office only moments ago. For the richness of

the space, there weren't many decorations. It seemed the man in question was a minimalist. Everything was tidy and clean. There were a few knick-knacks around, but nothing that screamed, "personal" or "this is me."

The door to the right opened as I was giving the space a second look and there he stood. Tall, sexy in that silver fox kind of way. He had a trimmed beard, thick curly hair, and fuck-me amber eyes. His hands were enormous enough to strangle someone and covered in tattoos. Who knew I had a thing for inked up hands? Guess I'd have to blame Jacolbi for that too.

"You must be Ms. Harper," he said, crossing to me with one of those tattooed hands extended in greeting. "It's a pleasure to meet you." His cultured voice was richer than it'd been on the phone.

I stood and slipped my hand into his. Warmth surged up my arm and into my chest. Not sexually either, but in a familiar, I should know him, but I'd never seen him before in my life, kind of way. "The pleasure is mine, Mr. Lucero. Thank you for taking the time to see me today."

"Not at all," he said, then motioned to the chair where I'd been waiting. "Sit. Did Tena offer you a beverage?"

"She did. I declined. I'm way too nervous." A nervous laugh passed my lips. "Best way to break off an interview is by spilling a drink or puking. I'd say my chances right now are fifty-fifty for doing both."

Mr. Lucero laughed. The full-body sound wrapped me in a delectable blanket of comfort along with a decidedly

dangerous edge there too. Like he'd happily protect someone or kill them while finding humor in the situation.

It was chilling and intriguing.

"I understand," he said, sitting at his desk across from me. He folded his hands on the polished oak and sat forward, engaging in conversation with me. Not at me. "This process can be intimidating. Forget about the club for a moment, Ms. Harper. Tell me a bit about yourself."

So, I did. Obviously, I left out the most important details about my mother. While giving snippets of other parts of my life. "I thought about going to college, you know? Never looking back. Sometimes I think it would be a far cry better than how everything turned out."

Mr. Lucero's gaze softened. "If we select you for this position, would you like to go to college?"

His question caught me off guard. Did I want to? I'd always seen myself as someone who went to college and broke some cycle of destituteness in my life. However, I never had hope of it happening. Between the cartel and my mother, my life until recently, hadn't been my own. "In another life, I would have."

He exhaled, staring at me as if I'd answered the question, but not really. "Ms. Harper, we offer scholarships and plans for the local colleges. If you wish to go, it would be our pleasure to help you fulfill your goals and dreams."

"But..." I frowned. "Doesn't that mean your turnover is high? I mean, if all of your employees go to college..."

“We encourage it,” Mr. Lucero said. “This shouldn’t be a career for you or anyone who works for us.”

I frowned. I guess he had a point. “Then yes, if given the opportunity, I would take it.”

“Excellent,” he replied. “Now, let me tell you about the job.”

I leaned forward, curious about what they expected of the workers for *Absolution*. I’d be remiss if I hadn’t done my due diligence before even applying for the job. Unfortunately for me, the club was locked up tighter than Ft. Knox.

“We offer several services here, Ms. Harper. Our employees range from basic bartenders and servers to companions and attendants to strippers and escorts. This club only offers the best to our clientele, and we only accept the best. We take care of all our employees, no matter which position they fill, including a zero-tolerance policy.”

I tilted my head. “Zero-tolerance?”

“Yes,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “If a member forces you to do things you haven’t agreed to within the bounds of your contract with us, we remove the member.”

A shiver of dread ran down my spine. The way he said, “remove the member,” sounded more like elimination of the permanent variety. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. However, it was a change from how Trigger dealt with the bikers, because they were all a bunch of handsy, horny men. “Understood. That allays some of my worries.”

“Perfect,” Mr. Lucero said with a sharp grin, filled with intent. “Then would you like the job?”

Knocked stupid, I sat there for a moment. “Are you serious?”

He chuckled. The rich full-body sound washed over me, dislodging the stupefaction throwing me for a loop. “Very much so. We called *Trigger’s*.” He raised his hand when I opened my mouth. “Don’t worry, your job there is still yours. When we talked, he said you were a hard worker. One of his best employees and the guys do like you. He said, you never talked back, and you were always on time for your shifts. Things we appreciate at *Absolution*. This job is yours, Erin. If you want it.”

I didn’t hesitate. I knew Hannah might not get the job too, but I couldn’t allow that prospect to hold me back. “Yes. I want the job. I’ll do anything you ask.” Within reason, of course. Didn’t need to screw myself out of a better position before I’d even gotten started.

“Perfect! Tena will help you with the contract. You’ll start tomorrow afternoon.” Mr. Lucero extended his hand. “Welcome to *Absolution*, Ms. Harper.”

CHAPTER 5

Jacolbi

I could admit I'd done some stupid shit in my life, like walking through the desert in the middle of the night, with only a pen light to guide me. Tonight, however I was doing it for a good reason.

Erin.

Little Bunny.

Fuck. The night we spent at *The Ministry* together, rocked my fucking world. I couldn't stop thinking about her or wanting to fuck her all over again. She was perfect. So damn submissive. So soft and tight. The sounds she made at the back of her throat, still drove me wild. I probably fantasized about her five times a day and each time, I ended up rubbing one out, just to find some relief.

She had me so goddamn twisted, I hadn't used protection with her, and I never fucking forgot to wrap up. There was something about the idea of her walking out of the club with my cum in her pussy that sent a thrill of satisfaction down my spine. The only thing I wished I'd done differently, was getting her number. Because I'd been telling her truth. One time would never be enough.

I craved her.

Imagine my surprise, then, when Luca called me to his office about a job. I knew when I arrived in El Paso my talents would be used for more than just security. While with Asher and the team, I'd gotten pretty good at blending in and

investigating different types of crimes. The main reason I'd been at *The Ministry*, besides the fact I was a co-owner of the club—call it diversifying my portfolio—had been because of the missing girls Luca needed help tracking.

Getting with Erin was my reward for also being the head of security for *The Ministry*. I'd seen everything going on at the bar before I'd intervened. The club used the same program AJ and Scotty built with the help of Luca and a few others after a virus almost took out the base. Since I'd been trained on it and had the hook-up, I instructed the bouncers on the system along with Mortimer and Balor.

I had a suspicion about the person of interest I'd been tasked to find. Taking girls who only worked at Absolution would cause the suspect to mess up. There had to be others. If the person scoped out El Paso for his victims, *The Ministry* had to be on his list.

When Vicente and Luca brought me Erin's folder, the serious looks on their face put me on guard. Nothing that happened between her and me was up for discussion. My Little Bunny was a virgin and God damn if that didn't turn me on more. I claimed that pussy as mine, to hell with what anyone else wanted. However, it was what they said that had my hackles raising and a niggle of guilt building in my gut.

It was also why I'd agree to go tramping across the desert.

Erin Harper.

I hadn't even caught her last name the night we met at *The Ministry*. According to Vicente, she could also be his daughter, which meant Erin used a fake name. That part of the

conversation went over like a lead brick. I had so many questions, most of which couldn't be answered until both Luca and Vicente knew what was going on at the mother's house.

Didn't make sense to me, but if their tenuous demeanors were any indication, whatever happened between Vicente and Erin's egg donor wasn't good. Or worse, he hadn't known Erin existed. Which opened a whole other can of worms, I wasn't sure anyone wanted to examine.

There was also the problem of her mother being caught up in the disappearance of Luca's girls, along with several others I'd later found out about. I had snitches I could rely on all around El Paso. Those girls missing from the club were the tip of the iceberg. To say the information left me a bit off balance had been an understatement. I'd also be remiss if I didn't ask the hardest question of all, could Erin be tied to the disappearances as well?

The only things I knew for sure about Erin were written in her file, though sparse on details. I'd cased her shitty apartment complex that had zero security. Stopped by *Trigger's* to get some information from the guys. Being the demon of the Chaos MC afforded me some privileges between MCs as well as being one of Luca's right-hand men.

From all indications, Erin was a sweet girl in a fucked-up situation. If something should happen, Trigger trusted his business and his life in Erin's hands. If she knew how popular she was with the guys, well, she hadn't shown it. According to them, she was like their baby sister. A wounded bird who needed protecting.

Her mother, however...

I learned more from talking to the leader of the Reaper MC, Grinder, than I did anywhere else. The bitch of a mother, literally tried to sell Erin to the MC when she turned fourteen. Then again at sixteen her mother tried to start a bidding war between two rival gangs. Afterward, they lost track of Erin until she stepped into *Trigger's* looking for a job and living with a friend. The friend, I had a sneaky suspicion, was Hannah, someone else caught up in a different cartel fight.

A situation we wanted no part of.

Before I set out for the desert, I relayed all the information about Erin to Vicente and Luca. Gina or Gianna Graciela Hernandez—not Harper—had been engaged to Vicente twenty years ago, before he hooked up with Luca after a drug bust. Luca gave Vicente the chance to go straight and the man took it. His girl, on the other hand, stayed in the lifestyle and never told him about his daughter.

Bitch.

As I approached the small faded blue and white metal-sided trailer in the park, I spotted the blacked-out truck first and groaned. *Centro*. In fact, all the vehicles in the vicinity surrounding the rundown trailer not far from the gate on the south side of the grounds belonged to the cartel. Beside the trucks was a line of motorcycles as well with some of the guys rolling joints while they leaned against their rides.

Asesino MC. It appeared the gang had hooked up with Centro. For protection or moving drugs or bodies, I couldn't say yet. *Fuck*. Luca had known there was a new partner

transporting drugs and weapons over the border for the last few months, getting a straight answer on who it was, had been near impossible. As the owner of *Absolution*, Luca understood anonymity was key to learning anything about those who did business within the walls of his establishment.

Asesino MC hadn't become members of *Absolution*.

Centro was.

Hence why we were now ten steps behind.

The MC in my belief was a wild card none of us needed thrown in our direction.

Using the darkness to my advantage, I crept up on the trailer and crouched beneath one of the windows so I could listen in. A million different scenarios went through my head, most of which weren't good. Had Asesino infiltrated the club with Gina's help and been behind the missing girls?

"We need to move up delivery," a man said. "Can you get us the goods?"

"Of course," a husky voiced woman said. "As long as the other is still on the table."

"Say her name," the man stated.

"Erin, mother fucker," the woman spat. "That bitch owes me everything. Once you sell her, I want my payment."

"That's not her fucking name and you know it," the man yelled. "Say her real name."

"Bastards! All of you. Valentina Christen Hernandez Lucero."

I gritted my teeth as rage burned through my veins. The bitch would die before I allowed anyone to take Erin aka Valentina, especially some lowlife cartel member or some biker gang. Then the truth smacked me in my face—Vicente was Erin’s father. Her mother admitted it. *Son of a bitch!* I’d have to keep that information tucked away, until the situation with Erin’s mother was handled first.

“You’re only getting paid if she’s a virgin like you promised,” another man said, and I recognized him as Felipe Guerrero, one of the five leaders for Centro and the father of Tacito Guerrero and Seneca Guerrero. Seneca was one of Centro 5’s jefes while his brother had been his right-hand man.

Sucked to be all of them. I owned Erin’s virginity.

Tucking away the smug superiority, I continued to listen. There were supposed to be a couple of drops made over the next few weeks, but I had nothing that connected Centro, Asesino, or Gina to the missing girls. At least, for now. Didn’t mean we wouldn’t be disrupting their business dealing for the time being until we were sure Centro wasn’t behind the disappearances.

Interrupting their drug corridor for a few weeks was the least we could do.

“We have her schedule for *Trigger’s*,” another man said as people began to move around. “We’ll pay a few of the *weto* bikers off and grab her on her way out of work. Easy. Cunt won’t even know what happened to her.”

A few of the men chuckled. “We’ll take her to Mexico and sell her. Virgins like her go for serious money once they’re in

the system. Those bastards will be salivating at the thought of breaking her.”

“I don’t care what you do with her,” Gina said. “As long as I don’t ever have to see her face again.”

“I have one question,” Felipe stated, catching my attention. “What did your daughter do that was so wrong?”

“Be born,” Gina replied. “She was a parasite while she grew in me and sucked the life from me after her birth. She’s a plague. A stupid bitch who doesn’t deserve to live. You can fuck her, use her, then kill her for all I care. I just don’t want to see her fucking face in El Paso ever again.”

One of the men whistled low.

The only worthless bitch I saw in this whole situation was Gina and it would be a pleasure putting a bullet between her eyes. Thank fuck Erin was working for Luca and we had our connections. I’d make the call to Trigger later to keep an eye out. Same for *The Ministry*. Didn’t need Filipe’s assholes playing in our territory. Though, the idea of leaving a calling card as a reminder, did sound like fun to me.

When the slap of flesh along with grunts from the men inside and Gina’s feminine cries began to filter out the window I knelt below, I took it as my hint to get the fuck out of there and report back to Luca. We had tons of information to go through, plus planning the disruption of the shipments coming in through the tunnels near El Paso. Seemed old habits died hard, where Gina was concerned.

At least Balor and Mortimer would get a kick out of fucking with the cartels in the area.

Me? I was going to do everything in my power to protect Erin.

* * *

Indi

There was supposed to be a new student in my financial law class, I hadn't seen the name yet and only heard mention in passing by the professor, so I didn't think much about it. Thing about our class was, people came and went. Most of the time, it was low performing students or those who got bored quickly. Had I not needed the class for my degree, I wouldn't have been there either. But being a T.A. had its perks, too.

Like all the ass I could handle, especially when female students wanted extra credit.

Unfortunately, both of those things weren't important right now. The glaring issue stood about fifty feet from me. Tacito. The bastard knew not to sell in our territory, yet there he was at the hood of his car, passing around shit like it was candy and in plain view of the security cameras from the college.

Jorde would lose his shit when he found out.

It wasn't me most had to worry about, it'd been Jorde. Even when we were younger Jorde had a short temper and propensity for violence. One of the main reason Oz had gotten so good at hacking, besides being the son of one of the greatest hackers of all times, was the need to keep his unhinged brother out of trouble. That was his priority. Of course, he exceeded

his father's expectations and Jorde, well, truth be told, I think their father was even afraid of him.

Me? I was the unsuspecting person out of the group. The nerd. Top of the class, book smarts. Everyone saw me as unassuming. They learned very quickly letting down their guard around me, could get them killed. I'd more likely shank a person and laugh while they died, than I was to walk away. So, me seeing Tacito here, had been the equivalent to signing his death warrant.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" Max came up behind my left shoulder, staring in the same direction as I'd been. "Does Oz or Jorde know?"

"Is he still alive?" I cut my gaze to Max, whose brows were furrowed.

"Fuck."

"Said that, too. How do we want to handle this?" The rules were clear for all of us in this life. You don't step into another's territory and try to set up shop, even if you were the son of Felipe Guerrero leader of the Centro Cartel.

"Let's go talk to him," Max said. "Then we're going to have to let Oz know to scrub the security footage out here."

I grunted. "This is going to be a long fucking day."

As we strode across the parking lot to where Tacito stood, I spotted two of his guards in the distance. Those fucking bastards from Asesino MC were about as stupid as Tacito were. None of them had a brain cell to rub together between them. Nor did they have an ounce of self-preservation.

Max stepped around me then stopped right in front of Tacito, blocking his view of the petite blonde who'd caught his eye. "Hello, Tacito." The muscle in Max's jaw twitched as his hair fell into his eyes. "Interesting seeing you here."

Tacito leaned back against the hood of his Mercedes AMG SL-63. The luxury car screamed importance. Too bad he wouldn't have it long. Had a feeling someone would be stripping it down and selling it for parts soon. "Max..." Tacito grinned. "I was just telling the ladies how good of friends we were."

"We're not *that* good of friends," Max deadpanned.

The guy frowned before running his fingers through his short wavy hair. "Too bad. We could have a good thing here."

"There's already a good thing here," I said, keeping my eyes on Tacito's henchmen. "You're in our territory. Selling your shit."

Again, he smiled. "Same shit you're selling, no?"

"Difference is," Max said, taking step forward. "We're not poaching. You are. We had a deal, Tacito. Guess I need to call Seneca."

"Don't worry," I added. "Oz has probably seen you already. Which means Jorde knows you're here too."

Tacito laughed throwing his hands up as if he didn't want any trouble. Too bad, he already got it. "Guys, I came here as a friend. Nothing more."

"Selling on our turf isn't a friendly visit," Max spat. "You're asking for your ass to be kicked."

Tacito popped up, his dark-brown eyes narrowed as a snarl pulled at the corner of his mouth. “You better watch how you talk to me, *puto*. I can end you.”

Max smirked, elbowing me in the side. “Did you hear him, Indi. He thinks he could end us.” Max licked his bottom lip then stepped into Tacito’s space, his mouth right next to Tacito’s ear. “We own this state. It would be a shame if your father’s cartel was destroyed with one phone call.”

“There it is, *weto*,” Tacito muttered, tilting his head. “Always throwing around your money like you’re the only one who has it.” I caught the glint of a knife before he put it Max’s gut. “Mind your business, white boy. You sell where we tell you to sell. If we want to make sure the customers are happy, we’ll do so. This is our land, *ese*. We’re just allowing you to be here.”

Max chuckled. “You’re dead, Tacito. You just made the wrong move.” He stepped forward and a dot of blood bloomed on the front of his shirt. “You think we’re beholden to you? That you tell us what to do? Hmm... You fucked with the wrong people. You can use those intimidation tactics with anyone else but us. See, you got one thing wrong with your statement. This is our territory. You’re in our web now.”

Tacito’s eyes went wide before he stumbled back, taking the knife with him. “You’re fucking delusional. Psycho, motherfucker.”

Max shrugged. “Still not as crazy as Jorde. Pick up your men on the way out.” Said men lay in a pool of blood by the

exit of the of the parking lot. “Looks like Jorde was in a forgiving mood today. Can’t say what’ll happen later.”

“Tell Seneca we’ll be seeing him sooner rather than later,” I added.

We stood there and waited until Tacito was gone then turned to walk back to the business building. The small dot of blood on Max’s shirt had grown. How deep had the tip of Tacito’s knife gone?

“It’s not bad. No worse for wear,” Max said. “I’ve got some skin glue and a kit in the Jeep. Just get to class and act like nothing happened. We’ll talk later.”

I grunted. “Fine. See you in Financial Law.”

The rest of the morning was relatively quiet. All of us at some point had the same classes through the day. When I stepped into the lecture hall for Financial Law, I saw Professor Rubio talking to a student I didn’t know. Had to be the new addition.

Her long raven hair spilled down her back in loose curls, drawing my attention to her round ass cupped by a pair of skinny jeans. I’d never been jealous of clothing before, but those... I wanted to be the one molding her body and palming her ass and pussy. As she tucked a lock of her loose hair behind her ear... Fuck me. Just a side view of her breasts made my dick rock hard and dripping for her. I had to have her.

“Ah, Mr. Reuben,” Professor Rubio said. “I’m glad you’re here. Ms. Harper will be in your group today. She’s new here

and has joined the business tracked for her degree program. Make sure she has everything she needs to ensure she has a successful rest of the semester.” He flashed Ms. Harper a smile. “If you need anything, Erin, my door is open to you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, before glancing my way. She held out her hand, and like a greedy fuck, I took it. The bolt of recognition that smacked into me like a speeding freight train almost knocked me off my feet. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Reuben.”

“Please don’t call me that,” I hissed then cleared my throat. “My father is Mr. Reuben. I’m Indi.”

“Indi?” She grinned. “Dope name.”

“My mom loves Harrison Ford.” I rolled my eyes. Then wanted to smack myself for sounding like such an idiot. The door behind us opened and Oz stepped inside, making a beeline for us. “Anyway, I’m the TA for this class, so if you need anything, I’m here.”

“That’s why he assigned me to you,” she said with a small laugh. “Makes sense now.”

“Who do we have here,” Oz said, holding out his hand. “Are you making friends like a normal person, Indi?”

Asshole. “Don’t listen to him. He’s just being a dick.”

“I’m Erin,” she said, straightening her shoulders. “First day of class for me.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you Erin, first day of class.” Oz winked before giving me his attention. “Have you seen Max?”

Only earlier and only after Tacito stabbed him. “A few hours ago,” I replied. “Been kind of busy since.”

Oz nodded. “It was nice meeting you, Erin. See you soon.” He turned and left the class just as quickly and quietly as he arrived. If Oz was looking for Max, something had happened. Worse, the injury Max sustained could be more severe than I’d first imagined.

“So, where do I sit?”

I stared at her for a second. Really looked at her. She was gorgeous. Full, heart-shaped lips, crystal blue eyes, bordering on ice blue. Her round face was soft, yet strong and she had a septum and Medusa piercing, drawing my attention back to that lush mouth of hers. Everything about her scream sexy while she also put off this cuddle vibe. Fuck, that sounded stupid, right? What the fuck was a cuddle vibe? I didn’t know, but I wanted to do more with her than snuggle in some corner with her.

“We sit over here away from the others. Once everyone has arrived, we’ll begin.” I showed her to all corner of the room. “Did you have a chance to grab your books?”

She nodded. “And read the first three chapters and tried to catch up on assignments. Who knew finance law could be so interesting.”

“Guess so if you like the regulations and market watching and whatever,” I shrugged. “I like contract law myself.”

“Is that what you’re getting a degree in?” She took a seat then pulled the book and a tablet from her satchel.

“Something like that,” I said. “So, why do you want a business degree?”

“I want to be my own boss,” she replied. “I’d rather make money for myself than keep working for others, you know? My bestie is really good with fashion stuff, so we’re going to open a clothing boutique. Kind of like a secondhand store, but better. You’ll see.”

I smirked, placing my bag on the desk. “Show me what you’ve got.”

CHAPTER 6

Max

Next time I saw that little fucker, Tacito, I was going to carve my fucking initials across his forehead. I didn't care if his brother, Seneca, was there or not. Still couldn't believe that little asshole, fucking stabbed me. I swore that boy was a couple of cards short of a full house. If it wasn't for Seneca protecting him, Tacito would've been fish food by now.

I gritted my teeth, as pain radiated from where I tugged the needle and suture through my skin. I was forced to stitch my wound closed, like a fucking caveman. I also wasn't going to risk going to either Urgent Care or a local hospital, either.

I thought, stupidly, the second skin would close me up, I realized rather quickly the blade had gone deeper than I originally anticipated, causing the shitshow I'd been caught up in when I should have been in class. *Damn it.*

If I didn't clean myself up quickly, I'd attract the wrong kind of attention. Sure, we greased the right palms within the police department and those who didn't like kickbacks were blackmailed into doing our bidding anyways. Still, the scene hadn't been tidy. There was blood, mine and Tacito's bodyguards, coating the sidewalk at the gate along with the security footage of what happened. Should anyone decide to get squirrely security-wise, we'd have our work cut out for us.

Although it helped, we had a top-notch lawyer. The man represented several members of *Absolution* and was paid handsomely for his services. The man protected my ass like I

was his son. I grinned at myself in the mirror and took note of the strain around my eyes and paleness in my cheeks. I'd have to make a call to my doctor to get a prescription for antibiotics, maybe get Indie to hook me up with a bag of blood. Not that I lost a significant amount.

Tacito wasn't the smartest tack in a box. I doubt he kept his knife sterile or cleaned it after every use. And I wasn't doing all this, just to die from sepsis. Or worse. It also didn't help that I had to poke the needle through my skin nine times to close the wound.

I'd sure as shit be having words with Seneca later. He needed to get his baby brother under control. Or he was going to find Tacito dead in a ditch one morning. I wouldn't hesitate to put his brother there either, if Tacito didn't leave well enough alone.

Matter of fact, if Seneca had any brains, which I believe he did, he wouldn't hesitate to hand Tacito over to me for the beatdown the little pissant deserved. Just the thought of wrapping my hands around that little shit stain's neck sent a bolt of perverse pleasure through me and banked some of the pain throbbing from the wound.

I didn't know which hurt worse. The actual stab wound or stitching the shit up without anything to numb the area. *Both. Both is good.*

After cleaning up the mess I made on the sink, I held all the trash in my fist, before pulling the glove up and around it, making it a blue ball of latex. I dropped it into the trash then pulled out the antibiotic cream from the kit. It would have to

do for now until Doc gave me the right shit. After applying a generous amount, I covered the area temporary with gauze, before putting everything away.

When I had a clean shirt on, I grabbed the joint out of my pocket and lit it up. It only took a couple of minutes before I felt marginally better. The pain was only a dull ache and my anger subsided, allowing me to focus on the rest of my day.

I looked down at my watch, realizing my little incident meant I'd missed my class. *Son of a bitch*. I told Oz we'd meet up and strategize. This shit with Tacito couldn't go unpunished. Plus, I had plans of graduating in a couple of years. Couldn't do that if I was in a bathroom with our first aid kit, cleaning up a stab wound every time Tacito couldn't keep his nose clean. I was working toward a degree in business management, and I was serious as fuck about graduating.

In my line of business, it was better to have a finger on the pulse of the market and know where every penny went than allowing someone to steal from me. I wanted to know sooner rather than later if someone thought they could pull the wool over on me. Then I'd fucking make them wish they'd never came to work for me.

I cracked my knuckles as I exited the bathroom of the college and followed the hall to the walkway leading to the business department. If I was lucky, I'd arrive before the class was over, then Oz and I could join Indi for marketing.

My gaze was drawn to the local newspaper rack near the exit and the black-and-white picture on the cover. Yeah, I was old school and enjoyed getting my information from paper and

not online. It was something I'd learned from my dad, billionaire oil heir, Beckett Astor.

When my dad died, I was set to inherit the family business. Not that I wished him ill-will. He still had a lot of life left to live, and a lot more he needed to teach me. I wasn't like most rich assholes. I loved my dad. Respected him. He knew what my business dealings were. Knew it was drugs, and still didn't care. If I was making money and was happy, he was cool. He trusted my judgment. The only thing he'd stressed to me, was not to get wrapped up in my product.

And I didn't.

If the shit went up a nose or in a needle, I avoided it like the fucking plague. I also didn't use what I sold. Same went for my dealers. If I ever caught them taking the hard shit, or stealing from me, I wouldn't hesitate to drop them where they stood. A junkie was never good for business, and I had a reputation to uphold. Hence why it pissed me the fuck off to see Tacito spreading his brother's blow around on my turf. The only drug I distributed was high quality weed cultivated in facilities dedicated to hydroponics and hybrid germination.

The Emerald Triangle.

I supplied most, if not all, of the college and high school kids around El Paso with the highest quality weed for the best prices. My growers were some of the best in the world, who used old-school techniques with modern day technology. Best part, my growers were legal. They had all the proper paperwork and bullshit, so I never worried about losing my supply. Chances were if you bought or sold, or used, those

buds went through my hands first. I also had contracts with *Absolution*.

Both legal and illegal.

Another glance at my watch as I pinched off the joint, showed how late I'd been and if I didn't hurry the fuck up, I was going to be late for my next class. I was never late. In my mind, it set a precedent of being lazy or not giving a shit. That the importance of other peoples' time wasn't significant to you.

I gave a shit.

My phone pinged and the short message from Indi appeared. **Leaving now. Going to Absolution. Meeting in ten. Fuck.** All it took was one motherfucker to throw a wrench in our business. Tacito was a whole-ass toolbox. If we didn't nip this shit, Seneca or others might decide to push their luck as well.

That couldn't happen.

Instead of following the walkway to the business department, I turned around and started for the parking lot. As I hit the unlock on my Jaguar F-Pace P4 fob, Indi and Oz were the only two to join me.

“Jorde is taking care of the footage. He'll meet us at the club. Seneca called while you were cleaning up.” Indi rolled his eyes. “Tacito went squealing to his big bro.”

“Fuck him,” I muttered. “Bastard should be lucky if he lives past tonight.”

“How’s your stomach?” Oz asked as I pulled out of the parking lot. “Get the wound closed?”

“Nine goddammed stitches. I should stab Tacito for every fucking one of them too.” The nice little buzz I had going earlier was gone. Rage replaced the tranquility. Looked like for now, pain meds were going to be my friend. “Grab me the bottle out of the glove box.”

The bottle was over the counter ibuprofen. Like I said, I didn’t enjoy taking addictive drugs. When Indi handed me four of the oval pills, I swallowed them down dry, just needing the incessant ache to ease up for a couple of hours. Then I’d get high to dull my senses for the rest of the night.

When we pulled into the parking lot of *Absolution*, the throb had become a dull ache. If I moved too fast, the pull of skin reminded me not to be an idiot. I parked in our usual spot then got out. I went to the back of my vehicle for quick change of my shirt and jacket. I couldn’t go in there with blood on my clothes. Sophistication was the name of the game at *Absolution*.

“Tacito is here already,” Indi warned me. “Looks like they also got some of Asesino’s men parked outside doing guard duty.”

That was an interesting development.

Centro Cartel was known to use multiple MCs to help them move product. Asesino was new. Dangerous to boot. They were the darker side of MCs. The side most didn’t fuck with. They’d sooner take out rivals than they would strike deals. They were top tier. Sicario level. From what I heard,

truth or legend, the Pres was none other than Honey Boy, Chico Alejandro Guzman Ruiz, a runner for Pablo Escobar.

I grinned not at all surprised the little shit was showing all his cards. “Good. Now I won’t have to go hunt that fucker down and teach him a lesson in manners.”

Oz cocked a brow. “You okay?”

“Had to give myself nine fucking stiches, how the fuck do you think I feel?” Oz winced and I exhaled a breath. I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on him. The question was meant in concern. If one of us hurt, all of us did. We were more than friends. We were family. “Wonder if Seneca found out what a dumbfuck his baby brother is and is making a show of strength instead of a mea culpa.”

Indi snorted. “They’re fucking stupid if they do.”

“Let’s go,” I muttered. “Best not to draw any attention out here.”

Indi led and I followed with Oz taking up the rear. We were formidable this way as we cleared the checkpoint on the way in. The place reminded me of one of those palace retreats with several rooms and open areas to play in. Each space had servers and bars along with nooks and alcoves to sit and hangout. Today, we were heading for the bar. It was where most of the business took place and discrete for a reason. We weaved our way through the club until we came to the double doors leading to the exclusive section. The VIP area Luca usually kept for the type of business we were about to handle.

My gaze went right to Tacito, who was lounging against the bar like the piece of shit didn't have a care in the world. I ignored the group in the chairs around us and went right to him. His eyes went wide and his face paled. I leaned in and chuckled, the sound murderous even to my ears. "You're lucky you arrived first."

"My brother is young, Max," Seneca stated, putting his hand between us. "I'll deal with him later after this meeting."

"Your brother is lucky he isn't carrion, Seneca," I snarled, pointing a finger at him in a warning. "He sells in my territory again, he's dead. I'll make sure you never find the body. You got me?" If it had been anyone else, they'd have been less forgiving. How I kept my tone low and deceptively calm, I wasn't sure, but adrenaline coursed through my veins, numbing the aftereffects of taking Tacito's blade to the torso.

Seneca watched me before nodding. "I understand. I won't interfere if he starts anything. I wasn't aware of his transgression." His gaze narrowed on Tacito who flinched, curling into himself to make him smaller.

"He's also going to pay for the damage he caused." I started for a table in the private area of the bar, uncaring if they followed or not. Seneca knew the truth now; it was his turn to ante up to make amends. When I sat, I waved the waitress over.

Her gaze met mine and my dick went rigid behind the fly of my slacks. Fucking gorgeous. Tits that were a handful—each no doubt. Hourglass figure. She wore a silver dress that hugged her in all the right spots and accented her pretty, blue

eyes. She looked like a fucking doll. One I wanted fuck and make scream over and over again.

When she approached, she placed a napkin on the table in front of me. “Good afternoon, sir. What can I get you?” Even her voice was sexy and sultry too. Goddamn she was a wet dream come to fruition.

“I’ll have a Don Armadillos on the rocks,” I said. Then motioned to the guys coming this way. “Whatever they want too.” I didn’t need to hear her name to know I wanted to fuck her. My gaze rolled over her body, taking note of both her tits and her ass. She tensed under my stare but continued to take the orders of everyone who joined me.

If the view from the front was specular, the view from behind was perfection. That round, juicy ass of hers was made to wear my handprint and my mark. I wanted to kiss her soft skin and fuck her little asshole until we were both screaming with pleasure.

My dick jerk behind the confines my pants and a wet spot formed at my tip. I needed to get my head in the game and focus on work first. Getting my dick sucked and fucked would have to wait.

Seneca took a seat last while two of his men stood behind him. A power move used to intimidate. I ignored them, choosing to concentrate on him instead.

“With all the college kids returning to campus, demand will go up,” I said. “What happened today can never happen again. We don’t deal in the hard shit. You keep that to your side of town, and we’ll supply all the weed you could handle.

Now, unfortunately, your brother has set a new precedence. One I'm worried will cause a ripple effect in our territory."

Seneca leaned forward. "You don't know that for sure."

I wasn't finished though. "Then I show up to this little meeting after your brother dared to draw a knife on me in my territory while selling his blow, only to find Asesino men lurking outside the gates. How do you think I'm feeling right now, Seneca?" I tilted my head.

"He's fucking lying," Tacito muttered. "He's just mad, I could do his job better."

I arched a brow at Seneca.

The new girl returned, placing our drinks down on the table in front of us. When she bent over, I got a tantalizing view of full tear-shaped breasts. I inhaled and was rewarded with the fragrant scent of crisp apples and spice. My mouth watered.

"You're new around here," I said, grabbing my drink. "Never met you before. What's your name, Princess?"

She jerked. Her wide, startled eyes clashed with mine as she swallowed hard. "Erin." She nibbled on her bottom lip then cut her gaze to Indi first who smirked then Oz. "Hey, Indi. Oz." She nodded.

Oh. My. God. She was too fucking sweet. Too cute for this place. I wanted to wrap her up and protect her while also fucking her like the naughty bitch I knew she had lurking within the shell of sweetness insulating her.

Indi smirked and finger waved to her while Oz grinned.

“Hey yourself, Beautiful,” Indi said. “Getting along all right here?”

She inclined her chin. “First day, but I really like it. Everyone has been very nice to me. Is there anything else you need? Food or...”

I mentally chuckled. None of us were nice. We weren't caring or friendly. We dealt in commodities. Money, humans, drugs, sex, and guns. There were hitmen, outlaws, and cartel members who called this place their home away from home. There was nothing even remotely redeeming about us.

But this chick thought we were nice.

Fuck me.

Patting the lush cushion next beside me, I motioned for her to sit. “Join me.” More like us.

Erin hesitated for a second, before stepping around one of Seneca's men and sat beside me. Her back was stiff, and tension radiated off her. Almost like she'd been afraid to relax around us. Can't say I blamed her. We weren't model citizens.

“Erin is in a couple of our classes,” Oz said, giving me the rundown since I'd been otherwise indisposed. His gaze ate up every bit of Erin and a hint of jealous wriggled through my gut or was it the stitches? The muscle in my jaw twitched as I tried to get comfortable.

The guys and me shared before. Several times. It was our thing. We had a rule though. Don't fall for the girl. The minute we did, we broke it off. I wouldn't have my brothers fighting over a piece of ass because of jealousy. Nothing worse than a

woman coming between us because someone couldn't keep their feelings in check. Shit like that could get us killed.

I smiled around the rim of my glass. "That so? Too bad I missed the opportunity to meet you earlier." I cocked a brow as I placed my drink on the table in front of us. "Anyone explain the rules here to you?"

"Yep. Mums the word." She mimed zipping her lips and throwing away the key.

Goddammit, my fucking back teeth ached from just how sweet she was and innocent to boot. There was a bit of wariness in her eyes, but I chalked that up to her being new and the setting being intimidating. Once she had a few days or a couple of weeks under her belt, I bet she'd come right out of that shell of hers.

So, we continue to discuss our business, including the compensation Centro 5 were going to owe us for Tacito's little stunt. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of Erin out of the corner of my eye. If anything we were talking about fazed her, she didn't show it, which was a good thing.

At some point, that little prick Tacito tried to join the conversation. One look from his brother, and he slinked back into the shadow of the other men with them.

He kept his distance, staying behind his older brother. It wasn't until the conversation changed subjects that he spoke. It was no surprise everyone was reminiscing about some of the older girls. Or their first experience at Absolution.

Indi, like me, often kept his finger on the pulse of his surroundings and said, “Speaking of people we miss... Heard a rumor about old school security expert returning. Word on the street is, he’s been back for a while now.”

I cocked a brow. “Old security?”

“Yeah,” Indi said. “Someone you know too.”

I knew everyone who came through *Absolution’s doors* over the years. It was a perk of being a legacy. My old man had been coming to the club for as long as I could remember. I started hanging out and coming inside by the time I was sixteen. The look but don’t touch age. Even got to know Luca and Vicente too. I had tons of respect for them.

My dad even hooked me up with one of the ladies when it was time for me to lose my virginity. Sounds kind of fucked up now that I thought about it, like I couldn’t score on my own. Not that I didn’t appreciate my father’s help. Kind of made life easier. Janet had been an excellent teacher. Fuck I missed her. She’d been the first one I’d noticed had gone missing.

Never said anything, though.

Instead of playing a guessing game with Indi, which I hated, and he knew it, I threw out a name, “Jacolbi?”

Erin gasped. A small one, but I’d caught it, nonetheless. I also noticed how she leaned forward at the mention of Jacolbi’s name.

Interesting.

“Get the fuck outta here with that. He’s not back working at *Absolution*.” If Jacolbi was back in town, I’d have found out. Someone would have blabbed the information. The fact he’d been here a while and Indi played the guess who game with me, piqued my curiosity.

Indi nodded. “I’m not fuckin’ with you, Max. I saw him in passing. The other day when I was here handling some business.”

Jacolbi hadn’t been around the club in a good year or more. Maybe two. Dude was jacked. Not much frightened me, but if I saw that fucker in a dark alley, chances were, I’d run the other way. Hunting him down, just to find the connection to the woman sitting next to me, might be worth my time and effort.

Not long after the small talk dwindled, Centro 5 left, taking Tacito with them. Yes, we resolved our issues and came to an understanding. However, it didn’t mean I wouldn’t have a conversation with Luca about Asesino men being in the area now. Luca had his fingers in more pie than I could keep up with, so if he wasn’t letting them in, it was for a good reason.

Until I could meet with Luca it was just me and the guys.

Erin, too.

I had a vested interest in her. I wanted to peel back her layers and figure out why she’d had such a reaction to Jacolbi’s name. Sure, I could try to pry it out of her, but from the interaction I’d had with her since she sat down, she seemed to be the type of girl to keep her problems to herself. So, if he

ever hurt her, I didn't care how dark the fucking alley was or how big Jacolbi might be, I'd kill him.

Taking her hand in mine, I threaded our fingers together. "What a day, huh?"

She stared at me for a moment, her gaze cloudy almost like I'd interrupted her thoughts or perhaps a memory of some sort. She grinned in that passive though cute way and said, "Yeah, it sure has been. Can I get you anything else to drink?"

Even though I wanted to know everything about her. Her likes or dislikes. Her favorite food. If she slept naked, or if she wore a pair of sweats to bed each night. Maybe one of those sexy little nighties during the height of summer in El Paso. I groaned to myself, damn, I was getting to wrapped up in her. I needed to get my head on straight.

"We'll take a couple of bottles of water." I winked at her.

"Coming right up." She stood then and headed for the bar.

Definitely sweatpants and tank tops.

CHAPTER 7

Erin

If someone asked me what being eye fucked felt like, I would say hot. Like someone put warm compresses on my skin and moved them up and down my body following whoever decided to stare at me so intently. A little unnerving because I was afraid, I had something on my face or worse spinach between my teeth. Every time Indi's gaze raked over my flesh, searing heat filled my cheeks and my gaze automatically fell to my tablet—the one Mr. Lucero and Mr. Trapani bought for me as a gift for my first day of school.

That wasn't all.

He also had a fuck me gaze.

Those swirling mischievous whiskey-hued eyes of his ensnared me more than my fair share of times, entrancing me. I memorized his features. They were strong and bold. Chiseled. His rectangle jaw framed hollow cheeks, full pouty lips—the kind I wanted to feel all over my body. On my breasts and nipples. I wanted to know just how soft they were when he kissed me and what they'd do to me if he went down on me. His curly brown hair fell into his eyes whenever he raked his fingers through the mess of curls, giving him an all-American preppy look. More than a few of the girls in our class flirted with him while others squirmed in their seats.

Yet, he only had eyes for me.

Still, even hours later, Indi kept his focus on me, even as Max and the others—Centro 5—the ones I knew by name for

as long as I could remember, never paid attention to me. Why they hadn't call me out, I wasn't sure. Maybe it was because I box dyed my hair and called myself Erin. Or perhaps it was the septum piercing or my philtrum piercing—that was Hannah's birthday present to me.

When I adjusted myself on the couch, the corner of Indi's mouth cocked into a smirk. He stared at me over the rims of his glasses, tempting me. Turning me on by the second and I worried if I stayed there any longer, I'd do something stupid.

I'd done a lot of stupid things to myself lately.

I glanced away, pretending to be disinterested in the conversation like a good little companion while listening in. Even though I'd only been an official employee for a few days, today was the first time I was learning anything about *Absolution* and the types of membership clientele. There had to be more going on here. Something I couldn't see. There was no outside security. No police to patrol the area. Even the bouncers and bodyguards were scarce unless something happened.

Business was business however, and according to the contract I signed, nothing that happened within the halls of *Absolution*, could be spoken outside of the property. Did that mean I was safe? If Seneca and Tacito went back to their father, would he come here to grab me, fulfilling what my mother wanted—me to disappear? Then again, if they tried to bring me back to my mother, when I disappeared, would Luca punish them? Could he? The rules were in place for a reason, right?

Just thinking about my mother made my head spin.

Instead of focusing on what I couldn't control, I listened to the conversations happening around me. Strippers danced on small stages, while others gave personal dances. Some women wore collars and leashes and were guided around by members. I didn't believe I'd ever be comfortable with that. In between taking in the scenes playing out around me, I refilled drinks and was attentive to Max when he touched me or asked a question. I did everything asked of me and settled into my shift without a hitch.

Some things about my job were the same at *Absolution* as they'd been at *Trigger's*. Serve the customers. Take the shot they bought for you and smile. I knew there were others who had sex with their customers. Even seen a couple of them giving head to a member while I learned the areas of the establishment from my trainer. It was part of the deal we made with Luca. Above everything we had free agency. If we said no, the members had to abide by our decision.

“Jacolbi,” Max said.

Jacolbi.

My body flushed then went super cold a second later. As my heart thundered, images of what Jacolbi and I did that night at *The Ministry* flooded through my mind, and I tried to rub my thighs together discreetly to alleviate some of the ache there. Indi, ever the most astute guy he was, cocked a brow, pinching his bottom lip. Curiosity filled those dangerous eyes of his and deep down, if he ever got me alone, I'd be in trouble.

If Max noticed the interplay between us, he didn't say a word, rather he continued his conversation with Indi as if the moment I was having with Indi wasn't happening. "Get the fuck outta here with that. He's not back working at *Absolution*."

Indi nodded. "I'm not fuckin' with you, Max. I saw him in passing. The other day when I was here handling some business."

Seemed like only yesterday I'd met Jacolbi on accident then had sex with him within hours of meeting him. (FYI: totally out of character for me.) The upheaval that was my life the last couple of weeks, had made it nearly impossible for me to get a spare second to call Jacolbi. However, I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact he also worked here, at *Absolution*. I swallowed down all my questions. It was better to be silent than appear inquisitive.

Or worse, piss someone off.

Yet, there wasn't a hint of anger in their tones. If anything, it was as if Max and Indi at least were their friends with Jacolbi. Still for all my trying to act as though I weren't there I gasped at an inopportune time, like an idiot.

I strived to be the best at keeping an empty mind when I sat with members. The information they dealt in was a commodity that in some instances could be killed for. If they thought I might know something or tucking those tidbits away, I could wind up getting hurt or worse. It was bad enough I knew everything about the Centro Cartel. Centro 5 too. The

fact Seneca and Roberto were still acting like they didn't know me, gave me peace of mind.

When Seneca left along with his brother who was still mad dogging Max, the air surrounding us lightened. I felt like I was able to take my first deep breath since I'd sat down. I stood then, gathering up everyone's empty glass to return them to the bartender to be washed and asked before I left what everyone wanted.

After taking their order, I went to the bar to put in the order and dump the glasses to be washed. I also learned something else as the new girl. Those who'd been with Luca for a while, tended to be standoffish with the new people. I'd already gotten a few stank eyes and looks of disgust as I was eyed up. Jealousy and fear were two motivators I swore I'd never use to advance my place within *Absolution*. I was just happy to have a job and to be able to finish my education.

However, as I passed a small cluster of older women, at least in their thirties, I overheard them talking about missing girls. I slowed my pace. It was the second time I'd heard the rumor. Janet and Heather were two of the names thrown around the small group. *Left one night and never came back*. When I'd been getting ready, I overheard one of the other women crying on the shoulder of a guy who worked with us about her friend. Her sobs were so thick with emotion I could only pick out every third word she wept. From what I understood, it wasn't looking like there would be a happy ending for them. She'd been missing for too long.

So, when those three women murmured between each other than glanced my way, I couldn't help but listen in. Three girls were missing. No one knew where they'd gone. Although, according to Mr. Lucero, some of the girls left organically. Most didn't say goodbye because what was the point? Yes, everyone there was treated like gold, but leaving when no one was looking meant not having to say goodbye. At least that's what he said.

Mr. Trapani, however, never enjoyed firing staff. According to the gossip, he'd only ever fired two girls. One for trapping a cartel leader by getting pregnant. The other for stealing from him, because she'd gotten addicted to the drugs he supposedly sold in different areas of the club. The majority stayed long enough to obtain what they needed and continued along the path they created for themselves.

I grabbed the three bottles of water I'd put in for, determined to not allow their conversations to breed doubt within my mind. I was going to make bank here and get an education. If I could stick out this job, in four years, if not sooner, Hannah and I could open the shop we always wanted.

Away from El Paso.

When I returned to the sitting area, Max ran his tongue over his bottom lip. His keen gaze blazed across my flesh and settled on the V of my dress. Unlike Indi who gave off golden retriever energy with a boost, Max reeked of rich playboy. He was cocky. Arrogant, too. A hundred percent confident. Not conceded though. Max had an air of leadership that surrounded him. While Indi and Oz watched the others, Max

kept his focus where it belonged—whichever sat across from him. Though Indi and Oz might've seemed relaxed, I had a feeling if anyone made a move toward Max, they'd be dead before they even attempted to hurt Max.

Those were the kinds of friends I'd always wanted.

Max had ash-blond hair with an undercut. The ends of his bangs fell into his face giving him a roguish look which was delectable as fuck. His light-gray eyes sparked as he continued to talk to his friends yet kept an eye on me. He also had aristocratic features and a square jaw. Preppy with a hint of dangerous. It was like an undercurrent for all three of them. I'd felt it when I'd been in class with Indi. The sensation made my senses buzz and my skin tingle. He bent forward slightly to brace himself against his knee, and I caught a glimpse of his tattooed wrist.

Syrupy arousal poured over me.

These three didn't even have to touch me, and I was excited and wet. I was horny for three tattooed bad guys, what the fuck did that say about me? *Probably that you should stop listening to Hannah's books, duh. It's all her fault you find them yummy.*

Max took my hand after I placed the unopened water bottle in front of him then did the same for Oz and Indi. "How about I offer you double your wages, tips included, to spend a couple of more hours with us."

I'd only been on the job two hours when Max came through the door and sat in my section. In that time, I'd made four hundred bucks. Doubling earnings, could go a long way

for a down payment on better apartment. “Sure.” I winced when I sounded a little eager. I didn’t want them to think I was money hungry or desperate. I mean sure, I had plans, but I also couldn’t allow my fervor to turn customers off to my presence either.

“Erin wants to open a boutique with her friend Hannah,” Indi said before taking a sip of his water. “She’s pretty savvy and way more engaged than some of my students.” Every time he swallowed; I watched his throat bob. That shouldn’t be a hot button for me. Yet, being close to all three of them was a heavy dose of testosterone and sex appeal.

I wanted to lick his Adam’s apple.

Hell, lick all three of them, in fact.

Everywhere.

No. I wanted him to spit the water he held in his mouth for a second before gulped into mine. *Jesus*. What the hell was wrong with me? I had sex for the first time, and now I was acting like some sex-fiend porn star, who liked having someone spit in their mouth while being fucked *and* had a fetish for throats? *Tattooed hands too*. Which included all three of them. I had it bad for no other reason than they were unattainable, covered in tattoos, and sexy as hell to boot.

“Oh yeah?” Max said, cutting his gaze back to me. “What kind of boutique?”

“Clothing. Repurposed.” At least I could talk without shoving my foot in my mouth—so far. “My friend Hannah made this dress for me.” I spun in a slow circle, showing it off.

“She’s got an eye for what goes together and flows.” The material was two-toned. Metallic gray and dove gray. The plunging neckline gathered where the darker shade started allowing the eye to flow to the skirt. I wouldn’t consider the dress to be a micro-mini, but it was close and clung to my hips and ass.

“My props to her,” a new arrival said, startling me. “I’m jealous. My name’s Jorde. What’s your name, Kitten?”

The guy nodded to Max then sat beside Oz. *Twins*. Holy shit. Where Oz had this rocker vibe going for him, his twin fit the gang member or maybe mafia enforce genre-type. He had an upside down cross at the corner of his right eye and a spade at his left eye. Like Jacolbi, his neck tattoos wrapped around his throat to his nape and went into his hair line. The top three buttons of his shirt had been undone, exposing his tattooed flesh to my perusal. Instead of wearing a jacket, he sported suspenders that rested at his hips.

There was also a wildness to his chartreuse eyes that churned with an unhinged quality. Like he’d snap at any moment. Probably belong in some institution. Or had already been in one and escaped. Again, I couldn’t say what got to me the most about being in their presence, other than they were hot as fuck and each of them knew it, too.

“Erin,” Jacolbi’s voice pulled my attention from the guy who just sat down with them and over to the man who rocked my world. “Holy fuck it is you.”

“Hi, Jacolbi,” I said, trying to keep my tone neutral. “How are you?”

He snorted wrapping his arms around me then chuckled.
“Good. You, Little Bunny?”

“Better since I started working here, even if it’s my first night,” I replied.

“Should have told me, I would have put in a word for you,” he said then leaned in, his breathe brushing across the curve of her ear. “You got my dick in a bind right now. Fuck, that dress should be illegal.”

I fanned my face while he fist bumped everyone in the sitting area. It was then I noticed how torn up Jorde’s knuckles were. Blood oozed and gathered at his split and broken open knuckles. I don’t know what possessed me to go to him, stepping around Jacolbi when I did. Other than, his hands looked painful, even if he acted unfazed. Even the area around the affected skin was discolored, purple and red from use.

“Oh shit. Let me get you cleaned up.” I had Jorde’s hand in mine before I even thought about what I was doing.

He glanced at me then smirked before pulling his hand back to lick the cracked and damaged flesh. His chartreuse stare dared me to look away, or watch him completely until he was finished. I complied. My breath hitched in my throat. My heart fluttered. Something so disgusting had no right being so damn attractive or make me wet. I swore my panties were ruined by now and it was all their faults.

The manic swirl in his eyes had my heart pounding. I probably looked like an idiot leaning in front of him like I did. But I couldn’t help it. My instincts kicked in. “All good, Kitten. Don’t worry your pretty, little head.” Patting his lap, he

added, “Come sit with me. Maybe later I’ll let you kiss all my aches away.”

A shiver of unabashed bliss spread through me, setting me on fire.

It was official. My panties were destroyed.

I still had three more hours until my shift was over.

Jorde stretched out his legs and spread them wide, giving me a nice view of his package. He rubbed the inside of his left thigh, tempting me further. My palms itched to touch him. To smell his cologne. I’d been so struck by his looks, I’d done little more than stare. I climbed up into his lap and sat on his thigh, marveling on how deceptively muscular he was. His arm snaked around my middle, holding me in place, urging me to relax while warming my middle. His fingers splayed across my stomach in a possessive fashion while he watched Jacolbi.

Had I missed something between them?

“When did you get here, Jacolbi,” Max said, watching all of us.

“I’ve been here for a couple of weeks now. Luca called. He needed my help and it’s been a while since I came home.” He shrugged taking a seat next to Jorde, running his fingertips up and down my inner thigh. “You worried?” He quirked a brow.

“No way man,” Max chuckled.

“Good.” He gave Jorde his full attention. “I was actually looking for you.”

Jorde tensed under me. His breath came in shallow pants as he vibrated. *Is this how a caged animal feels before they fight for their lives?* The tension in his hand never changed though. If anyone saw him, he'd look placid as his gaze became heavy and uncaring. "Oh yeah? What about?"

"Seems we owe each other a rematch." The pure glee in Jacolbi's features as he stared at Jorde didn't surprise me. I'd felt what this man could do to a body. If his skills in the ring were anything like his in the bedroom, the fight would be fun.

"Fuck," Jorde muttered. "I've been waiting for this moment since you left." Against my hip I could feel his cock thickening. "When? Tell me it's today. I can't wait."

Jacolbi laughed. "Wish I could, man. Have to work the next couple of nights. Next Friday night. Nine o'clock, your ass is mine."

The steely determination in Jacolbi's voice coupled with something else, I couldn't quite put my finger on. Whatever it was, both men were hyped and the energy brewing there, intrigued me. I glanced between them, both wearing identical crazed expressions. Tension radiated off them, like they enjoyed beating the shit out of each other.

"What do you say, Kitten," Jorde whispered, his warm breath caressed my neck as the spice of his cologne spellbound me. "Want to see me kick this old man's ass in the ring?"

Jacolbi flipped him off, but he wasn't pissed, if anything he seemed excited by the good-natured ribbing. "Fuck off. I'm not an old man."

No, but he had to be almost twenty years older than us. “Yeah, I think so. Maybe. I might be working that night.”

“Don’t worry, Doll,” Oz said, “we’ve got you covered. We’ll pay for your services for the night. Show you everything *Absolution* has to offer. Our treat.”

I cut my gaze to Jacolbi while I tucked my bottom lip between my teeth. If he didn’t like their plan, he wasn’t going say anything to me. However, a night of spending all my time with them, did sound like fun. “Wait, there’s a boxing ring on this property?”

Max smiled. “Octagon, Princess. Luc and Vicente are a fully licensed and sanction facility for the UFC.”

I blinked. Had I heard him, right?

“There’s a state-of-the-art training facility here too. If you ever decide you want to learn a few moves, I could teach you,” Jacolbi said, earning a growl from Jorde.

“Or you could learn how to scrap with me.” Jorde’s voice rumbled across my senses, causing me to shiver. “Teach you all the dirty tricks I’ve perfected over the years.”

Their offers had merit. “Can I learn from both of you?”

Jorde glanced at Jacolbi who shrugged. “Sure, why not. Maybe together we could teach the old dog new tricks.” He pressed his lips to my throat.

I gasped, surprised how forward he was while sparks of pleasure cascaded through me.

“Little Bunny,” Jacolbi said, forcing my eyes to open. “Are you going to let him call me old?”

I couldn't speak. I couldn't even breathe. Surrounded by the five of them, I felt like a live wire waiting for the right spark to consume me. My breath came in soft pants.

“Don't listen to him,” Jorde said. “He's just horny.”

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “C-Could say the same for you.”

He hummed. “You're right. Want to know a little secret about us—all of us?”

I nodded afraid to speak for fear of what might come out of my mouth.

“We like to share. Every. Single. One. Of. Us.” Jorde bit my ear lobe and groaned.

I was on sensation overload. I felt like I'd die if I didn't get any relief, but moving also seemed impossible. “As in your partner? Sexually?”

“Yep,” he replied, popping his P.

“That's hot,” I murmured and was rewarded by a chorus of masculine groans.

“Oh, Kitten, you don't know how happy that makes all of us.”

What did it say about me that being surrounded by five men I'd only ever read about in dark romance novels, turned me on, in real life, and made me want to get naked with them? I knew some of this was all about the job and satisfying the

customer, but in that moment, staring at each of the men encircling me, it didn't feel like a transaction.

No, this felt personal, and I was about to jump in feet first.

CHAPTER 8

Jacolbi

I rolled my neck. The tense muscles pulled then relaxed as the vertebrae popped, releasing the pent-up stiffness. It felt fucking good. An immediately stress reliever after the last couple of days. I'd come to realize, my job, though it had been named several different things over the years, could be paired down to, fixer. Fuck knows, everyone got their money's worth out of me.

But the one thing I was good at, was cleaning up messes and making things right for those in need. Kind of like now.

For some reason, I was still sitting in my car. Staring at the club. Had no idea why, either. Nothing was stopping me. Except myself. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely loved my job. I was exceptional at it. I learned from the best over the years, and I knew I could count on them should I need their help. Yet, even as I sat in my car, staring up at the window to Luca's office, I couldn't help but wonder if we were doing the right thing here.

Fuck...

I scrubbed my face.

This had more to do with Erin than anything else. I knew that. I'd been fucked in the head since crouching under the window of her mother's dilapidated trailer, listening to the depraved things the bitch wanted done to her daughter.

I needed to get my head on right. Shit was happening around the club that could destroy everything Luca built and

could also blow his cover—though, sometimes I wondered if the Luca who ran *Absolution*, was the real man not the CIA Station Chief who wore expensive suits.

Slipping out of my car, I started for the entrance. Like always Vicente met me at the door. The man with a keen amber gaze and vicious scowl on his face, hid his true nature behind etiquette and submissive behaviors. Luca said he caught Vicente running drugs. Personally, I believed it was more nefarious than that. If I had to guess, I'd say in a different life, he'd been a sicario.

“Vicente,” I said with a nod as I stepped inside the club. “How’s it going.”

“As expected,” he replied. “Luca is waiting for you in his office.”

Figured as much. I'd much rather take a nice leisurely stroll through the club and look to see if a certain Little Bunny was working than hurry upstairs to Luca's office. Sure, I could've have memorized her schedule and put myself in her way every chance I got, but I wasn't a stalker.

Yet.

I mean, I was a lot of things. However, I learned some powerful lessons in my life. Still licked some of those wounds, all because I couldn't figure myself out. Now that I was in a better headspace, I recognized my unhealthy habit of forming attachments.

I chuckled mentally, slightly amused at my thoughts.

Still, if I didn't keep myself in check, I'd become a regular David McCall. If you catch my drift.

A couple of the regulars milled around the club, looking for a little fun before heading back to the office to finish their day. This was a sex club, but more went on inside than just fucking. I knew for a fact every deal finalized within the walls of *Absolution*, was recorded and used later should Luca need blackmail material or if he'd been building a case against that particular person.

Disappointment filled when I didn't see my little raven-haired beauty. The carnivorous part of my psyche wanted to chase her down and eat her up. I craved her screams and her pussy, and I'd stop at nothing to have another taste.

I clenched my teeth at the thought of her servicing one of the Rebel Kings or a member of *Absolution*. Not that I had anything against them or the people who used the club for business. If she had to choose someone else to fuck, I didn't worry about Max and the guys—much. They were a group of rich kids who had permissive parents that didn't give a shit if they got into trouble. Consequences had no meaning for them, especially when Oz and Jorde's father taught them how to cover their trails.

Plus, it was my cock covered in her innocent blood when I fucked her. Not theirs. Erin also didn't seem like the type of girl to run head long into getting her ass spanked or taking a stranger's dick up her ass, even if it was part of the contract she signed.

I mean, I wasn't blind. I could see her attraction to Max and his motley crew. Also didn't have a selfish bone in my body. I could share her with them. Even remind them every so often, I was the first to make her scream, especially if it meant sharing Erin's tight little snatch. After our little gathering the other night, seemed she was down to play with all of us. Still, I had a feeling if we pushed her too hard, she run. So, we had to play this a hand at a time.

Right now, though, I needed to get my head outta of my ass and focus on my meeting with Luca. Erin was the reward for successfully completely it as far as I'd been concerned.

The door was Luca's office was shut. No surprise there. If the man wasn't out on the floor, he was holed up, working on whatever case he'd been given. There was never a time when Luca hadn't been scheming. Either for himself or the government.

Vicente knocked then opened the door, allowing me to enter first. Luca sat in his favorite chair in the little area in front of the big window overlooking the club below. Vicente closed and locked the door behind us. It was all done for precaution, including the dampener Luca used to make sure no one could tap in and listen to our conversations. Asher had the same technology at the base, only his was a bit more sophisticated and created by the government. Luca's was made by Oz and Jorde's father. Cost a pretty penny too. "Have a seat."

I sat adjacent from him while Vicente perched on the arm of the couch across from us. His gaze was intense. The set of

his shoulders radiated the tension I'd been feeling since the moment he met me at the door. Something happened and whatever it was, had gotten under Vicente's skin.

"Can I get you anything?" Luca asked, motioning to bar near his desk. The man kept the shelves full of all the best liquor. The top shelf alcohol was for pleasure and show. I'd learned that early on too.

As much as I could use a shot of anything or a beer, I declined. Between the information I'd learned and what I suspected they'd learned, I had to keep a clear head. Plus, I had plans for Erin and me. "I'm good."

"Suit yourself," Vicente remarked before pouring himself two fingers of Luca's favorite scotch. "I have information for you."

I grunted, lifting my leg so my ankle rested on my left knee. "Figured. Are you going to make me guess?"

Luca chuckled. "Heard a rumor you're going to fight Jorde Friday night."

I shrugged, watching Vicente as he gulped down the alcohol. Whatever he knew about Erin, pissed him off and perhaps worried him. I couldn't say with certainty, yet. Glancing at Luca I took the moment so the other man could gather his thoughts. "Yep. Friday night. Should be fun."

"Just leave him in one piece," Luca said with a sigh.

My reputation proceeded me. After that first night at Duces with Axel, I'd gone back several times when missions permitted and fought. My record was twelve one and one. The

only reason I lost my last match was due to taking a bullet to my quad muscle and thinking I was invincible. Learned real quick, I wasn't. "Won't make any promises." I grinned. Jorde was a handful. The fucker was like a damn spider monkey. He grappled and used his lower body strength for takedowns. Then there were times he just wanted to beat the shit out of a person. Swore he got off on it too. "We'll make the club money for sure, though."

"My bet's on you," Luca replied.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." That was the thing with us, we were easy friends. Had been for more than ten years now. I think I saw a bit of myself in Luca. Helped he gave me a place I could call home when shit got too tough.

Vicente rejoined us with a fresh drink in his hand. The haggard expression on his face replaced the hard-nosed man who had a penchant for violence. He took a swallow of his drink then stared down into the liquid. Neither Luca nor I would push Vicente to speak. "Her mother is a fucking piece of work. As you know, she bartered Erin's virginity to the cartel for drugs or money. She's done so for several years. None of them were interested until now." Vicente leaned forward, placing his now half empty drink on the table. "Her mother's games have finally caught up to her. According to my source, Centro is done playing with her. Seems that happened almost twenty years too late."

Wait. What? "She's twenty-one Vicente."

He gave a derisive laugh. "She's eighteen. Sorry, nineteen. If my calculations are correct." He pulled a photo from the

inside of his jacket and placed it on the table in front of me. “This is the only photo I have been able to find with my ex-girlfriend and Erin when she was a baby. Mi familia.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” The fact Vicente was convinced Erin was his child, left me speechless. Not to mention I’d taken his daughter’s virginity.

“Obviously, I can’t be hundred percent sure without a paternity test, but yes.” He retrieved the photo and put it back into his inner breast pocket. “There is more. Have you noticed anything about the woman who have been taken?”

I had. All were about the same age. Height. Similar features and hair. The realization of what he was saying smacked me right in the chest, knocking the air from me. “Erin fits the profile.”

“So does her friend, Hannah,” Luca added. “We also have a common denominator for movement before their disappearance,” Vicente said. “The Rebel Kings.”

I snorted. “You don’t believe they had anything to do with this, do you?”

Luca lifted his shoulder. “Maybe. Maybe not. That’s why I asked you here this afternoon. I want you to immerse yourself into their life. Watch them. Be their lookout, if need be. Help them pass around their drugs and do their dirty work for them. You have clearance. Our friends know what you’ll be doing.

“All of them?” I quirked a brow.

Luca nodded. “You have permission to use deadly force.”

I ran my hands down my thighs. It'd been a long time since I took on that role. Bex had been our sniper and Bronx was her lookout. Alex and Eito, they were the heavy. Alé and me... We killed. We were good at it. Efficient. Our close combat skills made us deadly. Over the years, we honed those skills, learning largely from Asher, Jake, and Maggie, how to contain, restrict, then eliminate our targets without anyone knowing we'd been there.

“Fuck... Do you understand what you're asking of me?” I'd protect Erin with my life. Always. She was young. Naïve too. I bet her situational awareness was shit, though she'd been keeping herself hidden in plain sight without getting caught.

“Our friends,” Luca stressed the last word, “are always willing to help with any additional personnel, if needed. We've also tagged Erin. To be on the safe side.”

Which meant Asher already knew what was going on. I didn't know if I was grateful, or disgruntled. I had my reasons for walking away from the organization, though I stuck with Luca. Having those people, some still my friends, back in my life, didn't sit well with me. “If it's all the same, I'd like to keep this in house.”

Luca inclined his chin. “Of course.”

“However, if this matter gets out of hand, I will take the assistance,” I stated. Even I wasn't stupid enough to believe I could handle the whole of the case should something happen.

“I will let them know,” Luca replied. “As for the other...”

“I'll take care of it,” I answered, standing up.

I left Luca's office; the scent of cigars and aged scotch still clinging to the air and went in search of the one person I'd been looking forward to seeing since entering the property—Erin. Just because I couldn't put eyes on her the second, I walked in didn't mean she wasn't there. I passed by some of the occupied rooms and the alcoves designed for the workers when they took their breaks. Past the playrooms and high roller areas until I came upon the small kitchen where the extra alcohol and snacks were kept.

There she was, bent over, searching through the bottles of bourbon and whiskey. My hands curled into fists as my mouth watered. Her perfect heart shaped ass was in my face and all I wanted to do was saddle up to her and fuck her right then and there. Biting back a groan of need, I cleared my throat. I fell back on what I knew worked. I hopped up on the counter, taking a seat.

“You're a sight for sore eyes,” I said, surprising her.

She stood up, her cheeks flushed. Her wide-eyed gaze sparkled with excitement. “You're here.”

“Well, I do work here,” I said, inching closer to her. “How's your shift going? I didn't see you when I came in.”

“Just got here,” she replied, pulling out a few of the bottle then placing them into the milk crate she had with her. “When did you arrive?”

“About an hour ago. I had a meeting.” I shrugged. “So, how do you feel about joining me at the fight Friday night?”

Erin stilled. “You're serious?”

“Very. I meant what I said, Little Bunny.” A lock of her hair slipped over her shoulder as she continued to stare at me, and I twirled the end around my finger. “Once is never going to be enough for me.”

“Why do you have to do that croon-y thing with your voice?” She sighed. “It does stupid stuff to my insides.”

“Explain,” I replied, tilting my head.

“You get this deep gravelly intonation to your voice but covered in syrup. It should be illegal.”

I laughed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

Tugging on her hair before letting it go, I hopped off the counter. “So, that a, yes?”

She rolled her eyes before dragging her plush bottom lip between her teeth. “What if Jorde asks me to be on his team?”

“Has he?”

She laughed. “Not yet. I was throwing hypotheticals out there. I like knowing where I stand.”

“Well,” I crowded her, “if he asks, tell him you’re mine, but I’ll share with him.” Her cognac-colored eyes darkened as she exhaled a shuddered breath. “Oh, Little Bunny, I like it when that imagination of yours starts churning.” Tipping her chin up, I pressed my lips to hers and groaned. The glossy lipstick she wore tasted like peaches and cream. I brushed my lips across her ear, the heat of her body seeped into mine. I needed to get her under me again. “Is it good, Bunny? That

image? Am I fucking you or is Jorde? Both of us? Is your pretty, little pussy creamy for us?”

“Ohmigod,” she whimpered. “How do you do that?”

“What?” I couldn’t move. She enthralled me. My feet were rooted to the floor as I inhaled her intoxicating scent. “Tell me, sweetheart.”

“You just say whatever you want, and it comes out all sexy,” she said. “If I tried saying those things, I’d sound like an idiot.”

“I doubt it,” I replied. “Say it. I want to hear every explicit idea you have. Maybe Jorde and I can make those fantasies come true.”

“I want to fuck both of you.” Her breath hitched and her voice quivered. “At the same time.”

I groaned. “See, you sounded so fucking hot, Little Bunny. Where do you want me?”

“Where do I want you?”

I nodded. “Mmhmm...”

“Inside my, um,” she gulped, “my pussy. I want you in my pussy while Jorde’s dick is in my mouth.”

A harsh groan filled my chest as I hissed out a breath. “Fuck.”

“Where does he come, Erin?” I was pushing my luck, but I wanted to hear what she’d conjured up in her head. What she imagined it would be like with two of us fucking her. “Where does he come, Bunny?”

A whimper fell from her lips as she trembled in my arms, not because she was afraid, but because the longer we stood here, the more excited she became and so did I. “Down my throat, while you fill me up.”

I couldn't wait. In an instant, I had her up on the counter, and I fit myself between her thighs. The heat of her pussy seared my lower stomach as I gripped her hips. “Does your lipstick smear?”

She shook her head. Her cognac eyes drooped while her pupils almost dotted out the color as she parted her lips, and her cheeks glowed with arousal. “N-No. Smudge proof.”

“Thank fuck.” I wasn't proud of the way I attacked her mouth. Still there was this spark between us. A magnetism. Whenever I was around her, I struggled to keep my hands to myself.

She moaned into the kiss, arching to me. Her breasts brushed across my chest and my head went light. The dizzying tingle of pleasure spilled through my body as my cock jerked behind the confines of my jeans. I needed inside her so damn bad. “Jacolbi...”

“I love it when you say my name, Bunny,” I mumbled kissing her again. “Tell me to fuck you.”

“Fuck me,” she murmured.

Hell yes. As much as I wanted to spin her around and sink deep inside her tight cunt, we were both on the clock. I wouldn't get her into trouble. Not yet anyway. Maybe later.

“Text me when you get off work. I want to see you tonight. I’ll be here until closing. You can spend the night with me.”

“Okay,” she said, kissing me again. The tentative swipe of her tongue added to the arousal pooling in my gut.

“Fuck it!” I snarled, going to one knee. I pushed her sequined skirt up her thighs and buried my face in her pussy. Inhaling deep, I growled. “So fucking ripe and sweet.” Pushing aside her panties, I admired the small stripe of hair guiding my gaze to her opening and her hard clit. “Come on my tongue, Bunny.”

Wrapping my hands around her hips, I held her right where I wanted her and licked her from clit to ass. Her soft cry was music to my ears as I devoured her, licking and sucking on her pussy while tonguing her entrance. Drawing the hard bead between my lips I sucked and hummed. Her hips flexed forward while her hand pushed my face deeper into the V of her thighs.

“Holy shit, Jacolbi,” she sobbed. “Holy shit.”

I groaned, continuing to feast on the best pussy I’d ever tasted. If we weren’t on such a time crunch, I’d spend hours between her legs, eating her out. I wanted to hear her cries and watch her writhe. “Come for me, Little Bunny. I want to drink you down.”

She bit her knuckle as she went taut. The second I sucked on her clit again, she bucked, riding my face. Her muffled cry of release followed the drip of her cream sliding across my taste buds. Sweet with a hint of tang, I buried my tongue in

her, craving her flavor. A possessiveness I couldn't explain filled my mind along with a lightness I hadn't ever felt before.

Erin was mine.

When we finally stepped from the small kitchen, Erin wobbled, unsteady on her feet. I would've chuckled, but I wasn't that big of an asshole, even though my chest puffed up at the idea of my mouth being on her pussy, making her come minutes before. However, I contained the feeling when I caught sight of Max and the guys.

I had information for them too.

Seemed Centro 5 were selling in a territory they shouldn't be in. Also appeared Tacito didn't get the message the last time Centro 5 was called to task. Lifting my chin in their direction, I left Erin at the bar and pointed to where Max and the others were. "I need to handle some business. Text me late, Bunny."

"S-Sure," she said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Thanks for you know..."

"The orgasm?" I chuckled. "You're welcome, Bunny."

I could feel Max's glare digging into the back of my neck along with Jorde and Oz's gazes. Seemed Indi wasn't with them today, interesting. I headed for their table, uncaring if I still had Erin's cum on my lips or on my breath. If they were going to share with me, they'd have to get used to the idea of me eating out her pussy or fucking her whenever the mood struck.

"We should talk," I said, sitting across from Max.

“Oh?” Max murmured, tapping the curve of his top lip.
“About what?”

I wiped my mouth and smirked when a hint of purple streaked my fingertip. *So much for it being smudge proof.* “I found some shit out for you that you’re not going to like.”

Jorde sat forward, his gaze narrowed, and his jaw clenched. “Spit it out.”

The double entendre wasn’t lost on me. Though I’d always swallow Erin’s release. She was too good to waste. “I’ve been doing a little snooping for a job. While I was out, I caught a fish on my line.”

Max sat back folding his hands on his lap. “Why do I get the distinct feeling, I’m not going to like this.”

“You’re not,” I agreed. “Tacito is still selling in your area. Making double what you are.”

Oz hissed while Max’s lip curled and Jorde sat up, ready find the little asshole to string him up. “The fuck?”

I nodded. “Yeah, thought the same. So, I went to the guy who bought. Took a bit of his stash had it tested.” Best part about being me, I had every test known to man and if I couldn’t figure out a substance, I knew people who could—quickly. “His coke is laced with Fentanyl. They’re going to end up killing somebody because that little asshole is trying to prove himself to daddy.”

“We don’t want that shit in our city,” Oz said, nibbling on his thumbnail.

“We don’t deal in heavy shit,” Max spat. “Weed is the hardest drug we’ll deal.”

I held up my hands. “None of my business, man. I just know after the other day, you were pretty fucking clear.”

“What are you getting out of this?” Oz asked, quirking a brow. “We like you well enough, but you’re not a Rebel. You’re Chaos.”

I nodded. “True. However, we are friends. You were clear about where you stood and if it was me, I wouldn’t want someone stepping into my territory to sell their shit. That coke is going to ruin your rep should someone die.”

“He’s right,” Max said. “Fuck. Thanks, Jacolbi. We appreciate you.”

“Not a problem. If you need help crushing the problem, let me know. I’ve got some ruthless aggression pent-up, and I’d hate to mess up Jorde’s pretty face come Friday.” I smirked.

Max chuckled. “Cocky bastard. You’re on. If we find anything, we’ll text you.”

“Sounds good. Have a good evening, gentlemen. I have shit here to take care of then a training session.” I cut my gaze to Jorde. “You’re welcome to join me.”

“You know,” he said, “I just might.”

CHAPTER 9

Jorde

Neon signs and dingy smoke-coated lights cast shadows around the stained bar, concealing my position. As many times as I'd been to *Trigger's* over the years, I hadn't seen her there before.

What an interesting turn of events.

I watched her from the darkened table where I sat. The smoky haze of cigarettes and weed permeated the air, making it even harder to see. Why was she here? *Absolution* took care of Erin—we'd take care of her. Fuck, Jacolbi would take care of her. She didn't need this place. Yet, as she sashayed that perfect ass of hers around the tables and booths delivering drinks, I was glad I had some entertainment for the night.

When those short shorts rode up every time she bent over, giving me a glimpse of her round ass and a hint of her little pussy, I groaned, adjusting myself. I licked my bottom lip while my cock strained against my jeans. I knew if I could see her sumptuous flesh so could everyone else in the bar and that made my blood boil. I wanted to gouge the eyes out of every one of those old, wrinkled dick bastards who stared at her tits and ass. Her body belonged to us. No one else. Even sharing with Jacolbi was pushing it, but at least we knew the guy.

When she came by again, I snatched her, pulling her down onto my lap, allowing her to feel the outline of my hard cock. She'd done this to me. She needed to pay. "Hello, Kitten. Have you missed me? I've missed you."

She gasped. Tension filled her frame then she relaxed, melting into me as though we were old friends catching up. “Jorde. What are you doing here?”

“Business,” I replied, tracing her full lips with my gaze. “Didn’t know you worked here, until I saw that pretty ass of yours bent over. Were you trying to tease me?”

Confusion filled her gaze as she searched mine. “I work here.”

She didn’t sound so confident in her answer. “I see.” I brushed my lips across her neck, reveling in the flutter of her pulse. “Are we not taking care of you well enough?” I tugged a wad of cash out of my pocket and threw it on the table. “Better?”

Erin whimpered and shook her head. “You pay me better than I am here, but I owe Trigger.”

I stilled, my lips inches from her skin as I inhaled her sweet perfume. “Owe Trigger? How much?”

“Not like that.” She shook her head. “He gave me a job when no one else would and he let me stay on, even after Mr. Trapani called for references.”

I relaxed then, understanding what she meant. Loyalty went a long way even with us. “Then I should thank him?”

She lifted her shoulder. “If you want.”

“What I want is you to spend some time with me.” I kissed her neck then. “I want to dress you up. Fuck you. Share you. I want to hear you scream when you come on my dick. I want to ink my mark on you—a little spade at the top of your bare

pussy, so every time we fuck you, they'll remember I own you."

"Possessive much?" Erin exhaled a shaky breath even as she wiggled on my lap.

"You have no idea, Kitten."

"I'm not sure how I feel about being owned," she said, a hint of fear or perhaps something darker, filled her words. "No, I definitely don't want to be owned."

I frowned. I'd pushed too hard. "Then how about for tonight, you're mine?"

"I have to work, Jorde," she said, trying to stand up.

"Yes, you do. You have all the old men drooling over you."

"Jealous?" She glanced over her shoulder.

"Of course. I'm a jealous person by nature. I see what I want, I take it. I don't care what the price is or who I have to steal it from." She broke free of my hold and stood.

"Well, I'm not property. You can't own me." Erin lifted her stubborn chin, and she turned me on more. She might not think she wanted to be owned by me or the guys, but we'd make her see reason.

"Oh, Kitten. That's where you're wrong." I climbed out of the booth, and I leaned in close, fisting my hand in her long hair, holding her still. "We will own you. Mind, body, and soul. I can't wait to hear you scream for me."

Her nipples peaked against the tight material of her tank top, and I bet if I slipped my hand down the front of her shorts,

I'd find her pussy soaked. I groaned, just imagining how sugary sweet she'd taste. "You're crazy."

"I've been called worse," I replied. "Psycho fits better."

She shivered. "You don't scare me, Jorde."

Did I mean to scare her? Should I have tried? "Is that a dare?"

She spun to face me. "What is wrong with you?"

Oh, so many things. Daddy and mommy didn't love me enough. Oz took up too much room in the womb. I watched daddy fuck all his assistants in the ass, and mommy cock gobble the pool boys. Take your pick. "Rhetorical question? Or were you looking for an answer?"

She narrowed those beautiful cognac eyes of hers at me. "You're doing this on purpose to frustrate me."

"Is it working?" I quirked a brow.

She huffed crossing her arms, pushing those perfect tits closer to my mouth. "You're an asshole."

"I am." Wrapping my arms around her waist, I palmed her ass, giving a squeeze. "That didn't answer my question, Kitten."

She cut her gaze away from mine, her mouth pulled into a pouted mien. "Yes."

"Good girl," I murmured. "Now, give me your mouth."

She gasped and I reacted, crushing my lips to hers in a searing kiss. Branding her for everyone to see in the dirty, biker bar. If anyone in this place touched her or eye fucked

her, they were dead. I'd see to it. I swallowed down her moan as she melted into my embrace, pressing her tits to my chest. Given half the chance, I'd have fucked her right there, where everyone could see.

Unfortunately, I was on the clock. I couldn't be caught with my pants down right now, especially after what Jacolbi told us about Centro 5. Fucking bastards. Still, I didn't release Erin. I sipped from her lips, breaking down those walls around her with each swipe of my tongue over hers. She tasted of cherry cola and desperation. Smelled like wildflowers and peach blossoms in bloom.

My favorite.

Erin clung to me as I took my fill of her and when I finally pulled back, the dazed, heaviness in her eyes had pride filling my chest. I sat back down and smirked as she tried to compose herself. Even in the low light of the bar, I could see the crimson tinge in her cheeks and the flush across her chest. Fuck, I couldn't wait to get my dick inside of her.

Soon. I had to remind myself.

She shook her head and cleared her throat. "Did you want something to drink while you waited?" The husky quality of her voice went straight to my gut, twisting my insides with arousal.

"Beer," I said. "Shouldn't have much longer to wait." Though, I wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

"I be right back," she said before walking away.

I don't know why I did it. Put my claim on her in front of a bunch of asshole bikers, but the itch at the back of my neck wouldn't ease until I did. Now, all I wanted to do was to get inside of her and leave my mark there too. I wouldn't stop until every hole in her body was filled with my cum. Even then, I didn't think I'd be satisfied. She was right. I was obsessed.

Consumed by her.

After Erin deposited my beer on the table, she disappeared into the haze hanging low in the space. I didn't see much of her once my buyer arrived. Which was fine with me. I could use the time to clear my head. I had a few questions for him, anyway, seeing as Centro 5 had taken up distribution in our town and our territory.

"Let me ask you a question, Lex," I said, before taking a pull from my beer. Hated the stuff. I'd rather drink top shelf bourbon than drink this swill. "How far into our area does Tacito travel?"

Lex stared at me. Surprise and fear flickered through his shit brown eyes as he glanced down at his hands. *The answers aren't there, fuck face.* "Not sure. It just kind of happened. One day it was only Rebels and the next, Centro 5. Their shit..." He licked his lips, as if bracing himself for whatever came next. Good. At least he knew to be afraid. "I've heard bad things, King."

So had we. "It's laced with fentanyl."

Lex grunted. "Fuck. I'll let my people know."

“No,” I said. “Don’t be so hasty. If we’re going to catch the fox, we have to lay a few traps around the henhouse first.”

“Sir?”

“Keep selling. When you need more let me know. As for Centro 5 and Tacito, have your people purchase a few bags and bring it back to me.” If we were going to destroy the Five, we had to do it with proof.

“Understood,” Lex answered. “Anything else?”

I contemplated the question for a second. “Yeah, a sale. Start with the colleges. Hang out at the parties. Make it irresistible. Keep them coming back for more.” That would piss off Tacito. He had impulse control issues, which made baiting him easier.

“I’m going to need more product,” Lex said. “I’ll go through what you’re giving me within a few hours.”

“Don’t worry. Send me your location when you begin, and I’ll make sure someone is there to refill your supply.”

He nodded. “Fine. This weekend then. There’s a huge frat party on campus. I’ll start at nine. Be ready.”

A satisfying grin tugged at my mouth. “We will be.”

Once business was handled, I lurked within the bar, watching. Waiting. Bikers came and went. None so much as touched Erin. Then they arrived. The pricks. Frat boys looking for a new experience. Their rowdy display and over the top antics put a snarl of disdain on my face as I curled into the darkness. If any of them touched my kitten, they were dead.

Though we all came from the same circle of society, we weren't the same. They were the precocious snobs, and we were the dark underbelly. With the click of a few keys, Oz could destroy all their lives. I wouldn't feel bad about it either. My gaze tracked each of them as they filled two tables, ordering pitchers of beers and shots.

Uncouth swine.

They stuck out like sore thumbs, begging to be robbed. They did this shit to "slum it," and throw around their names. Like anyone in the bar gave a rat's ass who their daddies were.

When Erin stepped up to the table to drop off their order, the guy at the head of the table—I didn't know his name, ran his hand over her ass and I saw red. The knife was out of my pocket and flicked open as I closed the distance on my first victim of the night.

"Get your hands off of me!"

Erin slapped him then poured the pitcher of beer over his head while three others of the burly bikers stood up and crowded the table of unwanted guests. I backed off, allowing those whose territory I was in take care of the trash while I went in search of my kitten.

"Stupid fucking frat boys," she snapped, fuming with anger as she stormed toward the back of the bar. "I should have kicked him in the balls!"

"I could deball them for you," I said. "It'd be a pleasure."

She whipped around on me, anger churned in her gaze turning them black with need for vengeance. "You're violent!"

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. She had no idea how close to the truth she was about me. I excelled and reveled in my bloody proclivities. “I love it when my kitten hisses and spits at me. Show me your claws, Erin. I want to feel them flay me.” The manic glee filling me bubbled over, and she was the cause.

“You seriously should see a therapist,” she mumbled, lowering her gaze.

“I do. Twice a week.” Wouldn’t tell her I’d fucked them too, occasionally. That would ruin the mood. “*They* say I’m a psychopath.”

She flinched but didn’t step away from me. “Stop messing with me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said, tugging on the loop of her shorts, so she was closer to me as I lowered my voice. “There are so many things you don’t know about us.”

“I have to get back to work. There’s a table of assholes who need a new pitcher.” She rolled her eyes before trying to step around me.

“Bikers are dealing with them,” I said. “Give them a minute to clean up the mess.”

“One night a week is all I ask for to not have to deal with this shit.” I wasn’t sure if she meant to say as much out loud, or if they’d upset her. “If Trigger catches you back here—”

“He won’t say anything,” I replied. “Tell me why you stay here for real.”

“Like I said,” she muttered. “I owe him everything. I can’t just walk away.”

“I think he’d understand if you did.”

“Look I should get back to work. You should leave before you kill someone.” Was that teasing I heard? Caught off guard, I let go allowing her to return to the main area of the bar.

I passed behind her. “Not leaving you here alone.” Then continued back to the booth I’d occupied before I’d seen her.

The rest of her shift I watched her. Her gaze never met mine. Didn’t matter, I knew she was interested. I could smell the need on her. If I decided to fuck her right now, she’d beg me for it. Prey and Predator was one of my favorite games, and I had more patience than most believed I did.

When Trigger started shutting the bar down, I went to find my kitten. She was cashing out for the night along with the other two servers Trigger employed. Her back was toward me, allowing me to take in her beauty. She was so damn small. Yet feisty as fuck. I wanted to protect her in one second and in the next watch her scrap.

“Hey, kitten,” I murmured when she started my way. “Can I give you a lift home?”

“I only live around the corner. I don’t have far to go,” she answered, not waiting. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

“I don’t mind,” I added. “Just want to know you’re safe.”

She stopped then, placing both of her hands on my shoulders. A groan filled my chest. I liked when she touched me. “I’m safe, Jorde. I can do this.”

Yeah, well, I'd be the judge of that. All things considered; I didn't like the idea of a woman walking home in the dark. Things lurked in the shadow. People like me waited for unsuspecting victims. "I know you can, but I'd still like to take you." I motioned to my car in the parking lot. "She's a wet dream to ride in."

"There you go with your double entendres again," she said with a small breathy chuckle. "I'll be fine. Besides, there's no one out this late anyway."

There were more creatures lurking at two am, than she knew about. My skin crawled at the notion she felt safer away from me than with me. Although, it was probably for the best. "Fine. Get your fine ass home and don't talk to strangers."

"That I can promise," she said kissing my cheek. "You know, you're not anything I thought you'd be."

"Oh yeah?"

She grinned. "I thought you were certifiable."

"Oh, Kitten, I am. I haven't let my monsters out to play with you, yet." I stood there as she walked away, watching the sway of her ass.

The enticing roll of her hips had my semi-hard dick stirring once more. I had to follow her. No way I couldn't. I'd been telling the truth. People like me lurked around every corner. Now that she hit our radar, someone—namely Tacito—would try to use her as leverage. If the bastard was smart, he'd take what was coming to him and never show his face again.

Then again, he was a stupid fucker.

Erin turned up the block where all the shitty match box apartments were located on the west side of El Paso. Three buildings down from the stop sign, she turned up the walkway and opened the wrought iron door leading to the enclosed courtyard of the apartment. There were two staircases one on the left and one to the right. I didn't know where she lived but when she went up the right side, I waited for a light to come on in one of the darkened windows.

Thankfully, my intuition was right. The soft amber glow emanated from the fourth window from the stairs. Now I knew where she lived. Doubling back, I grabbed my car. Oz and Indi were out taking care of the high schools in the neighborhood and all the fucking football kids while I dealt with the adults. Which meant once we were done, we'd head straight to *Absolution*. Tonight, however, I'd been detained.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, I called Oz. I wanted a full background of Erin. I didn't care how stalkerish that made me. I needed to know everything about her.

"Where the fuck are you, asshole?" Awe, my twin missed me.

"Shit came up. Figured out where Tacito is selling, and I know what he's selling, but that's not why I'm calling," I said, hitting the main strip back to our house.

"You going to tell me the most important parts first, or am I going to have to wait?" Asshole. Sometimes Oz reminded me of myself. Other times, the cold, calculating bastard could be as ruthless as our father.

“Look, I need you to do a full workup of Erin. I want to know where she came from. Who her parents are. The works. Don’t give me any shit, either. She’s still working for *Trigger’s*.”

“The fuck?” Oz muttered. “Why the fuck is she there?”

“Don’t know. This is her address. 1616 Sage Lane. Not sure on the apartment number.”

“That’s the fucked-up part of town,” Oz said. “Fine. I’ll do it. Now about the other.”

“Toxicology say it’s coke laced with fentanyl,” I spat. “According to Lex, he’s under cutting us and peddling that shit in our territory.”

“Son of a bitch,” Oz hissed. “What did you tell him to do?”

“Sit on it. See if he can score some of that shit from Tacito and deliver it to us.” I wasn’t stupid. The more evidence we had the farther we could bury him and Centro 5.

“We gave Seneca a chance,” Oz said. “Max won’t be happy when he hears the truth.”

No, he wouldn’t. “We should come up with a plan to end them.”

“I agree. I’ll let Max know. Get your ass home. We still have shit to deal with.”

I grunted. “On my way.”

CHAPTER 10

Oz

Jorde was right.

There was more to Erin than any of us could imagine, let alone suspect of the doe-eyed beauty. It took me a bit to track her down. She wasn't using her real name. Used a fake ID. Erin Harper appeared on the map and paper two years ago, down by the border of Juarez and El Paso.

The whys were thrones in my side, until I found her mother. Then it all made sense. Gianna Graciela Hernandez or Gina, as most knew her was a mule for the Centro Cartel. Had been for years. Even after she got pregnant, she continued to transport drugs across the border for Felipe—Seneca and Tacito's father.

There wasn't anything on who her father was though. No recorded name or even an inkling of where he might be. It was almost as if Erin's birth certificate had been sanitized. Giving the important information and nothing else.

Then I figured out why. Hence why we were on the elevator headed to the gym and the practice ring where Jorde was training for the coming fight. The nugget of information I'd found on a dark web site where hits and other contract work could be found, made my blood run cold and anger spike within me.

When the doors opened, we stepped out. Music poured through the system, the heavy bass vibrated in my chest, pushing adrenaline through my system. Jorde wasn't far away.

He was fighting with one of the trainers, dancing around the ring, completely focused on his task.

When his trainer called the match, he scrubbed Jorde's head and left the ring, leaving my twin to catch his breath. He grabbed the water bottle beside him and wet his face before taking a drink. We approached. I wouldn't say what I found until we were all together, that way I didn't have to say it more than once.

"How long you been down here?" Max asked, as Jorde climbed out of the ring.

"About three hours give or take. I had some built-up energy to burn off." Jorde was covered in sweat. His tank was drench. So was the band of his shorts. His hair was also plastered to his head. "What's up? Why are you three down here?"

"I did the search like you said," I replied.

"We did a little digging of our own too," Max added. "It's worse than you even said."

Jorde's features were impassive. It was as though everything inside of him shut down the minute he heard the news, and we hadn't even begun to tell him what we'd found. "Oh. Well, spit it out."

"Go grab a shower," Max said. "We can wait. We're not going anywhere."

Jorde grunted. "Sure. Give me ten and I'll be ready."

When he was out of earshot, Max cut his gaze toward me. "You sure this is a good idea?"

I shrugged. “He asked for the intel on her. If he didn’t think it was important, he wouldn’t have asked.”

Indi stood with us, quiet. Assessing. He had an uncanny way of being unseen. He blended so well with different groups, making him more valuable than most. He also knew the ins and outs of most of the cartels from Sinaloa to Medellín. His family also facilitated the buying and selling of most of the cocaine in the US. The shit with Tacito introducing fentanyl to the area, wasn’t going fly once his father found out. The temptation was there to tell him where it came from. However, we had a plan, and we were going to stick to it.

When Jorde came back he was dressed and freshly showered. He was rolling the sleeves up on his shirt as he cocked a brow. “Well, tell me.” The natural aggression that always rolled off my brother, tripled as we waited for the elevator.

“We found Erin’s mother and it’s not good, bro.”

He flexed his hands; hands I knew he’d thrashed more times than not in bare knuckle brawls. The skin around his knuckles whitened. The red tint dulling before crimson rushed back across the skin. “How bad?”

“She’s a fucking mule for Centro Cartel. Has been for fucking years,” Max spat. “Bitch is also trying to sell her daughter for her virginity.”

“I don’t think her name is Erin either. She uses the name as a cover. The name I got when I pulled her records, is, Valentina Christen Hernandez. And Valentina isn’t twenty-one, she’s nineteen.” I showed Jorde the paper from the

county. “She changed it to Erin Harper when she tried to escape her mother.”

“Don’t fucking blame her. Even her real name is a wet dream.” Jorde handed the paper back. “What else did you find?”

“Not much else to find,” I answered. “Everything about her is an unknown. Where Erin begins, Valentina ends.”

He nodded. “Keep it that way. No need to disturb her past, especially with the kind of mother she has. Any word on whose put feelers out to claim the bounty on her?”

“Asesino,” Indi muttered. “Makes sense why those rat bastards are with Centro and Centro 5.”

“Then we have our work cut out for us,” Jorde said, shoving his hands into his pockets “We know where she lives and where she works. We need to put a guy on her. No way in fuck I’ll let some Asesino bastard try to abduct her.”

“Speaking of, why is she still at *Trigger’s*?” Indi asked. “She’s making good money at *Absolution*. She doesn’t need that horrible biker bar over her head.”

“I said the same thing,” Jorde muttered. “But I also saw the shit box she calls home, and I have a feeling it’s to get her out of that place, quicker. She doesn’t even have a car.”

“Fuck off,” Max grumbled. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” Jorde said pressing the button on the elevator so we could head back up to the main floor of the club. “She had to have left home with nothing and just took whatever job landed in her lap.”

“Fuck,” Indi said, shaking his head. “Her mother shouldn’t be living the high life being a fucking mule.”

“Unless nothing is as it seems.” Max scrubbed his brow. “For now, we keep an eye on Erin. We don’t reveal we know her name, nor do we say a word about this information.”

“What about Jacolbi?” Jorde grumbled. “Have a feeling the guy has been doing shit on the sly to protect Erin too.” The name didn’t sit well with me, since we knew her true name, Valentina.

“We let him. Five of us instead of one or four, is better odds. She’ll always have someone protecting her without us looking like fucking stalkers,” I replied. “Question is, why does she matter to you man. I’ve seen you OCD over women before, but not like this.”

Jorde shrugged. “Because. She’s special.”

CHAPTER 11

Erin

Heading into class, I spotted Indi, resting against the exterior brick wall by the door to business track of classes. He looked bored, but his gaze flickered in each direction like he was waiting for someone. Or nervous? I couldn't tell.

Either way, it wasn't any of my business. Yet, as much as I told myself to turn around and head to class, I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was hot. Sexy in that preppy nerd kind of way. No matter what he talked about, he had a way of drawing me in.

Then there'd been the way he stared at me. If Jorde wanted to possess me, Indi undressed me with his gaze and eye fucked me in front of everyone. Didn't matter if I was at work or in class. Although, I couldn't say I hadn't done the same to him or, well, any of them. However, Indi he made it an artform.

Because he has the hots for you, dumb ass.

For so long I made it a point to stay a virgin and avoid my mother at all costs, being with Jacolbi opened my eyes to what I'd been denying myself. I slept with one guy, and now I was creaming for a handful of others. What did that say about me? Was I no different than my egg donor? Willing to spread for any guy that showed an interest in me, or I had an interest in.

So far, I hadn't acted on my desires with the others, except for kissing two of them, but I worried working at *Absolution*, it was going to happen. When it did, not if, what then? Did I even have to worry about scenarios that hadn't happened yet?

Did it matter?

Yup. I was having some deep, troubling thoughts.

The devil on my shoulder, had convinced myself that I was young and free. I deserved to break out. Loosen up and have fun without worrying about all the what ifs or what could bes.

Right?

As I glanced back over to where Indi stood waiting, his whiskey-colored eyes locked on me and his whole disposition changed. He pushed off the way in a languid motion, crossing to me without hesitation. The corner of his mouth kicked up, changing his boyish good looks feral.

For what though, I didn't know, and after what I'd overheard at the club, I wasn't sure I wanted to even dip my toes into in the first place.

“Hey, Erin,” Indi called out, lifting his hand.

“Morning, Indi,” I replied, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear.

Without even asking me, he placed his hand on my lower back and guided me to the door of our class. Warmth bloomed where he touched me. I wasn't sure if I should move away or stay where I'd been. “Have a good night?”

I craved affection. I wasn't above admitting the lack of love in my life, most specifically from my mother, left me grasping for any thread of attention. These guys, Max, Jacolbi, Oz, Indi, and Jorde were giving me all the attentiveness I needed and then some. I soaked them up like a dried-out sponge.

My belly did that little flip-flop of excitement as the heat spread through my body igniting every inch of me. I wanted to feel his lips against mine. Hear the sounds he made when he kissed or when I'd finally worked up the nerve to touch him as openly as he touched me.

He guided me to my seat then stepped away to prepare for his part of the lessons. Beside me sat Oz and again I was grateful. He eyed me, his gaze caressing every inch of me, turning the blaze into an out-of-control inferno whipping through me, singeing my senses, and destroying my ability to think.

I was never more grateful for the fact the teacher posted their notes online so I would be able to pull them later. I wouldn't be able to focus with them sitting so close. "Morning, Oz." Ignoring the stares of the other girls in our class, I pulled out my book and tablet from my bag.

He gave me a slow, seductive grin. I didn't miss the flare of desire I saw in his gaze. It was the same one I'd seen in Indi's when he called out to me. I was dressed conservatively today since the weather was a bit chilly. A pair of boyfriend jeans complimented my oversized thin flannel t-shirt, with a white tank on under it. I'd left several of the buttons open to complete the look I was going for. Rounding off my attire were a pair of kicks I hardly wore anywhere.

If nothing else, these men were good for stroking my tattered confidence.

"Hey, Bunny," he said. His dark, broody voice was wicked like a siren's call, luring me to my death. Only, his version of

death, was plying me with as many orgasms as I could handle if not more. “Did you miss us?”

No sat on the tip of my tongue. Didn’t want to seem too eager. Yet, his piercing blue eyes bore into me with such intensity, I nodded. “Yes.” They’d all taken to calling me either Little Bunny or Bunny, thanks to Jacolbi letting the intimate pet name he’d taken to calling me, slip. Or Kitten.

I liked it.

A fucking lot.

I couldn’t stop the smile from forming on my lips.

“Fuck me hard,” Indi muttered under his breath as he took his seat beside us then adjusted himself.

I bated my eyes at him, playing the innocent girl and asked. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

Indi cleared his throat before answering. “Everything is fine, other than I wished I’d known about the smile you just gave Oz for calling you Bunny.” He paused, watching me intently. “I’d have done it myself if I’d known.”

I couldn’t help myself. I giggled, before flashing him the same smile I’d bestowed on Oz.

“God damn,” Indi hissed. “I want to see that smile while you take my dick. Especially when I call you my good girl.”

My eyes widen, and I flushed from head to toe, because I’d been imaging doing just that. I couldn’t respond because the professor was in the room and calling for attention so he could begin.

Under an hour later, the cursor on my table continued to blink on an empty page. I was mesmerized by the men sitting to the left and right of me. We hadn't spoken the entire class. Both Oz and Indi had been busy typing away.

"Sent you something," Oz murmured a second before the chime for an incoming email notified me.

Notes.

Oz had sent me the class notes he'd had been taking.

"Thank you," I said, giving him another smile.

"Fuck," Oz muttered under his breath. "Indi was right, I want to see that smile on your face while you ride my dick."

My gaze flicked around, not wanting any of the other students to hear or notice my interaction with either Oz or Indi. It wasn't worry that drove me to be concerned. It was because I'd realized I was a jealous bitch and didn't want anyone else overhearing what we said. Nor did I want any other woman getting ideas about trying to take one of my guys.

Indi chuckled. He leaned in close and whispered across my ear, "We're all good. The people behind left the second class was over."

"Why?" I muttered, suddenly wanting... No, needing to know why these men were into me. Jacolbi, I got. We had sex. It'd been a mind-blowing experience. At least for me. The little incident in the kitchen also blew my mind. I hadn't come so hard ever. Between the thought of getting caught and the

excitement of being ate out, I'd been on a natural high for hours afterward.

Oz snickered.

“You're new, and we know it can't be easy being alone, starting at a new school, having not one, but two jobs. To be honest, more than wanting to fuck us, because it's written all over your face, baby, you looked like you could use a friend.”

“Or five,” Oz interjected. “Don't listen to other people, and their assumptions about us, Erin. We're not all that bad.”

I chuckled. “I never judge a book by its cover, Oz. I learned a long time ago; people tend to talk out their ass. It may be a hokey, but in my book, actions speak louder than words.”

Oz grinned at Indi. Their non-verbal conversation intrigued me. “You working tonight?” Oz placed his hand on my lower back, like Indi had done earlier.

I nodded. “No classes tomorrow, so I have a late shift. I'm going to go home, take a quick nap, grab a shower, and then head over.”

Indi glanced around. “You got a ride?”

I laughed. “Yeah, it's called public transportation. You should try it sometime.”

Oz gave me a sexy little grin, followed by a smack on the ass. It wasn't soft, but it didn't exactly hurt either. “Wise ass.”

“It's part of my charm,” I said as we walked to the bus stop.

Where Jorde didn't relent, Indi and Oz kept me company at the bus stop not far from the business department. At least I didn't have to wait alone like I did most days.

"Will I see any of you tonight?" I probed as the hydraulics on the bus lowered it to match the height of the curb.

"Not tonight," Indi said.

"We have business," Oz murmured with a frown.

I waved at them and stepped onto the bus. "Then I guess I'll see you when I see you." Was it odd, they waited until the bus pulled back away from the curb?

Exhaling as the bus turned the corner, I leaned my head against the window. I had it bad for them. I also couldn't stop the welling of disappointment for not seeing them again until our next class.

When bus pulled up at my destination, I begrudgingly got up and exited. My apartment was only a block away. I needed a moment to clear my head before I started getting ready.

One of the things I didn't add to my list of shit I needed to do before going into work tonight... Masturbating. I needed a release bad. All during class, images of Oz and Indi having their wicked way with me, while the others watched, filled my head. My panties were soaked, my clit throbbed so bad that every time the seam of my jeans rubbed the right way, I thought I was going to combust in front of the guys.

Thankfully, Hannah wasn't home when I stepped inside, and I could take care of my little problem while I showered without worrying about being interrupted or someone hearing

me. Yet, even as I sobbed through my third orgasm, it wasn't enough.

Damn it, they ruined me.

Maybe I should have let them take me home. At least then I'd have been satisfied. Now, I was achy and pissed off. Not a good combo when I had to be chipper and approachable at work.

A couple hours later, I clocked in at *Absolution* and got ready for my shift. I'd been warned the club was having a couple demonstrations tonight. One on pet play. I had zero clue what that was but knew if I was interested in what I saw during the puppy play demonstration, I'd be looking that up. Wax play had been the second, and if I was intrigued by the idea of a puppy demonstration, wax got my blood pumping, and made my panties damp.

I also thought it was cool to dip my finger in the hot wax, and then wait for it to cool before peeling it off. I suspected whatever was going to happen on stage tonight involve more than a finger or two. Or allowing the submissive to dip their finger in the hot wax.

When the first demonstration was over, sometime later, I'd been a little disappointed in the puppy play one. I could see the demonstration was for beginners, so they didn't deep dive into the topic. I had questions about their outfits? Was that the right word? Costumes? Or maybe I liked it, because it was two men, and well, Hannah and her damn books.

"Hey, Erin," one of the mangers said, as I walked to the bar to fill my latest order. "You've been requested in the VIP

area. Section four.”

“What about my tables?” I asked.

“Not to worry, we’ll have someone take over. Any open tabs, you’ll split tips with whoever takes over.” I nodded. “Jeff —” the manager gestured to the security guard behind her that I hadn’t seen— “will escort you there.”

I handed off orders to the manager and followed Jeff, until we reached section four. “Here you are, Erin.” Jeff’s deep voice shocked me.

“Thank you, Jeff,” Luca said.

“Mr. Trapani?” I cocked my head to the side, watching him a second before glancing around to make sure I was in the correct area.

I was. *What the heck?*

“Have a seat, Erin,” he stated, motioning to the spot across from him.

He was seated at one of the u-shaped tables, dead center. I sat on the edge, tucking my legs under the table. A waitress appeared and placed down a glass.

“It’s water,” he said. A short glass sat in front of him. He wasn’t drinking water. Then again, bosses didn’t have to follow the rules they put in place. “Rules are rules, and employees aren’t supposed to drink while working.”

But they did. In the short time I’d been there, I’d seen several employees taking shots behind the scenes. I ignored it

because I wasn't a snitch. And I didn't need to make any more enemies than I already had.

I picked up the cold glass, ready to take a sip before I remembered my manners. "Thank you." I took a sip, and carefully placed the glass back down on the small napkin. "Have I done something wrong?"

Luca chuckled. "No. I just wanted to talk. A check in of sorts. Believe it or not, I do this with all the employees. I believe your mental health is just as important to me as your physical health, and I get that any job at *Absolution* can be stressful."

I rubbed my damp hands on my stocking covered legs and wondered if I should be worried. "Seems kind of odd you'd be doing the check in, and not one of my direct managers. Like Mr. Lucero."

I shifted in my seat. Wondering if I was about to be called to task for not engaging with any of the clients in a sexual way. I knew when I started working here, it wasn't necessarily a requirement or an expectation. Barbie, one of the servers who worked three days a week, had trained me in how to accept or deny a members request for more than just drinks or food. She had a hard and fast rule. She didn't have sex with anyone.

Still, *Absolution* was a sex club, and those who visited it, had expectations. So, I did worry I was about to be called to task. Luca surprised me when he finally spoke after taking a drink from his glass.

“True. But sometimes those same managers can often be the cause of employee stress. It’s important everyone, including my employees understood I was always available to them. No matter what.” Wow, he was smooth, and sweet at the same time. “So, are you holding up okay, Erin?”

I blinked a couple of times. I worked some shitty ass jobs. I never had a boss worried about either my physical or mental well-being. It was refreshing. “I’m good.” Confidence filled my tone. It was the truth. “I haven’t been in a good place mentally or physically for a long time.” I don’t know why I admitted that to my boss. “But here, I not only feel good in what I’m doing, but I also feel safe.”

Luca nodded. “I’m glad to hear that.” He leaned forward. I got the feeling he wanted to touch me, but he didn’t. “I want you to know, if at any time you don’t feel safe, *Absolution*, particularly Vicente or myself will protect you. Do you understand, Erin?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, ignoring his grin at my formality.

“How are you doing with school?” I jerked back, surprised at his question. *Absolution* was one thing, and I got why Luca was concerned with his employees. But school... Well, it was school. I nodded and he continued. “How about your grades? Are you able to keep them up with the hours you’re working here?”

Smiling, I answered, “So far, all my grades are sitting at A’s.”

Luca nodded, and I saw a flash of pride filter across his features before he blanked them out once more. “Good. If you

need time to study, or to get a project done, don't hesitate to let me know. Work will always be here. Your education is a priority."

Tears welled up in my eyes. My mom... It wasn't a secret that she was a shit parent. She didn't care about my grades, or if I ever attended school. She sure as hell never told me school was important or asked me about my grades. The fact that my boss did, blew my mind. School was significant to me, because I knew it was the only way out of the life my mom stuck me in. I'd eventually get there. Get that coveted diploma I craved, while my mother craved her next fix. Even if it took me three or four times longer than another student I'd walk across that stage.

"And thanks to *Absolution*, I'm able to easily afford my schooling now."

Luca nodded.

We talked for another few minutes before the bar manager interrupted us with an issue Luca needed to handle. "Forgive me," he said as he got out of the booth.

I smiled up at him. "Nothing to forgive. Duty calls. I understand." I glanced down at the watch on my wrist. "I need to get back to work too!"

He chuckled. "You're good, being the boss has its privileges."

After Luca left, I slipped from the booth and made my way back to the floor. No surprise all my tables were taken care of, and only one tab had closed. The girl that took over my tables

tried to give me the split, but I waved her off. She had to take care of my tables and hers. Giving her the whole three hundred and fifty dollars seemed like the right thing to do.

My back was aching, my feel was throbbing by the time I cashed out my last customer, but my wallet was full of tips, and I was ready to go home and go right to sleep. I slipped on my fur lined slippers after finishing my closing chores and gathered my stuff to head home.

“Hey Erin, done for the night?” I came to an abrupt stop when Vicente stepped in front of the door.

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Mind if I walk you out to your car?”

My eyes widen. Like I had a choice. “Sure,” I croaked, desperate for the water I tucked into my purse for the ride home.

Whereas Luca was chatty, Vicente was surprisingly silent the whole way to my car. “This is me,” I gestured toward Hannah’s beat-up sedan that was parked under the light.

Not sure what to do, I got busy depositing my stuff in the back seat, and then once I shut the door, I opened the driver’s side and slid in. When Vicente said my name, I paused in closing the driver side door and looked up at him.

In his hand was a key. A hex key, I think it was called. Some of the employees used them in the club to open playrooms or party rooms. Why he gave me one didn’t make sense.

Oh shit, did Vicente want me in a sexual way? He was hot and all, but he was a bit old for her tastes.

The silence was uncomfortable as I stared at him, unsure if I should take what he offered. He finally broke our stalemate. “Take it.”

“What’s it for?” I asked, not making any attempt to follow through with his order.

“The key is for you. If there is ever a time when you don’t want to go home, there is always a space available for you, within the Manor. This key will give you access to an apartment.” I still didn’t pick it up, and Vicente chuckled. “It’s Luca’s wishes, Erin. He wants you to feel safe and cared for.”

I cocked my head. “Is this the procedure for all the employees who work for *Absolution*?”

He gave me an indulging look. “Not all. But those in need of help, will always find it here. Both Luca and I see to that.” He moved his hand closer, and I couldn’t tell you why I did it, but I grabbed the key from his palm.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t lose it. Put it on your key chain so that you always have it,” he ordered before closing the driver’s door.

I did as he asked, then started the car and backed out. When I glanced in my rearview window, Vicente was still standing there, watching me pull away from the club.

What the heck was that all about?

CHAPTER 12

Erin

I'd barely made it out of the parking lot when my phone rang. The unfamiliar phone number on the screen took me by surprise and like a dumbass, I answered it. "Hello?"

"Erin..." The dark croon of Jacolbi's voice lit up my insides, turning me to mush without even trying. "Where you going, Little Bunny?"

"Home?" I answered, pulling off to the side of the road, not far from the gate. "Why? Got something better in mind?"

His rough chuckle sent a thrill down my spine. "Baby girl, I always have something better in mind. Why don't you turn around and come meet me in the gym then we'll hit *The Ministry* for a night cap."

That velvety murmur of his could get me into trouble. Often. "Sure. I can do that." Hannah was still working anyway, and would be there until two, so I'd have to come back anyway.

"Good girl."

Why did I want to scream and vomit and bounce around like a five-year-old whenever he praised me? His approval sent a rush of acceptance and happiness through me. I wanted to hear those words as much as possible. "I'll see you in a little bit."

"I'll tell Vicente you're on the way back." He hung up, and I made the U-turn in the middle of the road.

Once I found a parking spot, I sent Hannah a text to let her know the keys to the car would be in the “place,” where we left them when we shared the vehicle and started for the door. Like always, whenever I was around, Vicente held the employee door open for me and nodded as though he knew I’d be back.

“Sorry about the confusion,” I murmured, a bit embarrassed. “Last minute plan change.”

He smirked. “Be safe, mija.”

“I will,” I replied. “Buenas noches, Vicente.”

“Que duermas como una, mija,” he replied before stepping into the elevator to go up to his office.

Warmth bloomed in my chest. It’d been a long time since anyone had wished me sweet dreams, let alone an adult. I pushed the down button on the remaining car and waited for the doors to open then stepped inside. The gym was in the basement along with the regulation fighting octagon. Besides the Olympic sized pool outside, there was a smaller, training pool inside behind the gym with a suspended quarter-mile track above it.

My heart fluttered in my chest, and my palms were sweaty as I waited for the elevator to stop. I shouldn’t be nervous. The first night I met Jacolbi, I slept with him. Yet, the longer I was with him, the more I liked him, which meant I had to tell him about Jorde and Max. Indi too, though we hadn’t done much, yet.

I groaned. I was talking like a horny woman left unsatisfied. What the hell was my problem? I lifted my gaze as the elevator stopped and the doors opened. The blast of heavy, chaotic music forced me back a step startling me momentarily. The smell of leather, medical grade disinfectant, and sweat assailed me, enticing me to step inside the hedonistic lair.

Exiting the elevator into the gym, I surveyed my surroundings. The lights were dim, giving a focused quality to the layout. The clank of metal and the pat of feet hitting a tread mill, drew my attention to the area off to the right where a few guys worked out. In the distance there was a pattern of hits then a grunt. I stepped farther into the area, taking in everything. When Jacolbi said the place was a sanctioned MMA center, I hadn't realized this was what he meant.

As I came around a section of punching bags, I saw him. *Jacolbi*. He stood in the middle of the ring, his arms up in a weird kind of stance, his hands were covered by gloves and half closed. His gaze trained on whoever stood across from him. Sweat glistened on his body, rolling down his tattoo-covered chest as his breath came in a hard pant. Honestly, what he looked like to me, was a red panda. They were so adorable when they made themselves look bigger.

The other man joining Jacolbi in the ring bounced toward him and the fight was back on. There was a rhythm with the way Jacolbi swayed while the other guy danced, rocking on the balls of his feet. They circled around each other, Jacolbi laser focused. When the guy stepped into him, Jacolbi threw a right punch and kicked the inside of the guy's left leg. Both blows were brutal. I cringed at the teeth rattling impact.

The bell rang and Jacolbi disengaged, relaxing as he put his hands on his hips and made a small circuit of the ring, cooling down. It was then his gaze met mine. Like he knew I'd been standing there, but didn't acknowledge me until the threat was neutralized. *Damn it, I need to stop talking to Jorde.* Jacolbi's blue eyes swirled with dominance and excitement.

My stomach did a happy little flip-flop as nervous anticipation spread through me. He was gorgeous. A god among men. I'd been so caught up in watching him, I didn't appreciate the sight of him. From his neck to the waist band of his shorts was nothing but ink. All different types of designs and details. Some were colored, others were black and white. They even surrounded his nipples. The few on his sides, contoured his muscles, causing them to stand out in relief.

I wiped the side of my mouth discreetly afraid I'd been drooling while appreciating his impressive body. Why did it turn me on to see his trainer pulling the gloves off his hands? Or watching Jacolbi flex his fingers still covered in gauze and tape?

Rather than wait for someone to cut the stuff off him, he climbed out of the ring and strode toward me. His swagger ate up the distance between us as he smirked, knowing damn well I'd been a panting bitch in heat for him. *Cocky bastard.*

Before I could say hi, he lifted me into his arms and kissed me silly. He groaned against my lips when I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Whistles and cat calls rang out around us. Jacolbi didn't care. He deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue into my mouth, forcing me to

take him while demanding I give back what I received. I moaned, rubbing against him knowing my outfit would be full of sweat, and I didn't care.

Jacolbi palmed my ass eliminating any distance between us and the scent of his spicy cologne and perspiration enveloped me. I was weak for him. I wanted to lick him all over. Have him fuck me in the ring or against one of the walls. I squirmed against him, aching for him when he set me on my feet.

“Little Bunny,” he murmured, running his tape-covered thumb across my bottom lip. “What am I going to do with you.”

The hunger in his gaze along with the deep, resonating arousal in his voice, left me dripping. Who knew I had a thing for tapped up hands, tattoos, and fighters. “Whatever you like?” The words slipped free, and I knew I made a mistake. I'd waved that red flag in a bull's face.

“Good answer,” he said. “Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be ready to go.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Or you could join me,” he growled, holding out his hand. “What do you say, Bunny? Wanna live a little dangerously?”

I couldn't believe I hesitated. Like I had to seriously think about Jacolbi fucking me or waiting out there with a bunch of sweaty guys who just watched me make-out with him. “You.” I took his hand.

“Good girl,” he said, threading his fingers with mine. “I can’t wait to get inside you. It’s been too fucking long. I ache for you, Bunny.”

I exhaled on a shudder of need. My heart pounded. My panties were destroyed. I itched to touch him. To taste him. I wanted to experience the moment he pushed inside me all over again. The stretch to accommodate his girth, edging on pain. I shivered in anticipation. Wherever he was taking me, I hoped he’d hurry up. I was going insane.

“Easy, Bunny,” he whispered, tugging us into a room I hadn’t even seen. “I’ve got you.”

Jacolbi closed the door behind him, locking us in. Without the lights on, he was a giant massive man of power. He loomed over me, causing me to tremble. He obliterated my senses. His hands went to hem of my dress, and he pushed the clingy material up. The cool air of the space caressed my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind.

“Jacolbi...” I whimpered his name, not sure if I wanted to turn on a light or keep us in the dark. There was an anonymity there. The shadows lent a sort of mysterious air between us.

“I’ve got what you need Bunny,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “All you have to do is show me your pretty little pussy.”

Even as my hands shook, I wrapped my fingers around the band of my panties and removed them. They were wet with my desire. The scent of my arousal hung between us. He took them from me and though I couldn’t see him very well, I knew

he brought them to his nose and inhaled. The erotic groan he let loose with, twisted my insides.

I didn't know what he did with the silky material, nor did I get a chance to ask, he flipped me around, crowding me to the door. His chest pressed to my back. Jacolbi's hot breath caressed my sensitized skin and I shivered. The rustle of material caught my attention a second before he filled me on a single stroke. A scream lodged in my throat as pleasure cascaded through me. I couldn't make a sound. Couldn't breathe. I hung between orgasming and dying. My lungs ached for oxygen. My body tensed. Jacolbi's harsh curse as he slid his middle finger along my slit before pressing on my clit, set me on fire.

"Damn it, Bunny," he groaned. "You've got my balls throbbing for relief."

His thrusts were short. Measured. The head of his cock continued to rub the spot within me that left me a whimpering slut for him. Overwhelmed, I laced my fingers with his, trying to ground myself in the moment, while he'd been determined to see me fly. I gasped his name on the second stroke of my clit, shuddering as the dam of my orgasm broke, and I was coming hard.

"Fuck yes," he muttered, rutting inside of me, keeping at me until he shouted and shoved deep. "My pussy. My bunny." His mouth went to my neck where he placed a kiss while catching his breathe.

My body was liquid. Limp and well used. I pressed my forehead to the door and exhaled a choppy breath. Jacolbi

hadn't moved either. He kept his arm around me, holding me in place. "We should have done that sooner." The husky, sex-addled quality of my voice surprised me.

"Yes," he agreed and began to move again. "Now I can take my time and fuck you properly."

I gasped as he lifted me and carried me deeper into the room. Since he continued to keep the lights off, I couldn't see where he took me, but felt the table as soon as he placed me on the pleather material. I laid back as he pulled me to the edge then placed my legs against his torso and shoulders.

My eyes rolled up as he pushed into me again. Jacolbi kissed the inside of my knees and the arch of my feet. His fingertips skimmed across my flesh, teasing me. I squirmed, writhing for him. It was as if he touched me everywhere at one time. The slow drag of his cock along with the shift of his hips kept me on edge.

Sweat beaded at my brow and the back of my neck. My skin flushed, heating to the point I felt as though I were on fire. I'd never met anyone like Jacolbi before. He spread my legs, fitting his shoulders and upper body between them before covering me.

When he kissed me, there was a hitch in his inhale and a curl to his lip. He fed off me, dragging his tongue across mine. Tempting me. He kissed like he fucked. Wild and unhinged. I ran my fingers through his wet, sweaty hair and clung to him. He moaned my name, slamming his hips against mine twice before quickening his pace.

“Fuck,” he murmured. “You’ve got me all fucked up, Erin.”

I could say the same for him. One minute I told myself to keep my distance from Jacolbi, and the next I couldn’t keep my hands off him. The guys—Jorde, Max, Oz, and Indi also. The magnetic pull between us was palpable, but it couldn’t work. I’d have to choose.

Shaking the thought off, I clung to Jacolbi as his pace picked up. His hips pistoned. Digging my nails into his biceps for purchase, I cried out. The pleasure was too much. The knot of arousal tightened to the point of pain and tears escaped the corners of my eyes. I was going to die here if I didn’t find some kind of relief.

A sob tore from my throat as I screamed, locking my legs around his waist. I needed this. Wanted this for so long. When I finally shattered, climaxing around him in hard, gut clenching spasms, his roughened *fuck*, was the only warning I had before he shoved deep, throbbing within me once more.

Jacolbi’s forehead pressed to mine as we both shook. I wish I could see the expression on his face. Trace the lines of his features. In those few seconds while we gathered ourselves and our wildly beating hearts slowed, I found myself falling a little deeper for him.

I wasn’t sure if that scared me, or turned me on, again.

* * *

Erin

Once Jacolbi showered, and I'd been given time to clean up as well, we headed out a backway to a different parking lot on the property. Jacolbi gave a sheepish grin, as he unlocked his flat black Camaro and held the door for me. "Perks of being security," he'd murmured as I slipped into his car. I had a feeling he wasn't tell me the whole truth.

"How was work tonight?" he asked, once we were on the road. "Have any issues?"

"Are you asking as a friend or as a work colleague?" I quirked a brow, tucking my bottom lip between my teeth so not to smile.

"Oh, I'm more than just a friend or a work buddy, Little Bunny," he murmured, sending a thrill down my spine. "Let's just say, I'm curious."

I laughed. "Everything was fine. Made enough money to make rent for the month and didn't get manhandled either. I'd call it a win-win situation."

As much as I loathed to agree with Jorde, being at *Absolution* was eye opening. Trigger let so much shit slide because he had a reputation to uphold. Which meant being groped and touched inappropriately.

"Give me a name," Jacolbi muttered so low I thought I misheard him.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Bunny," he stated a little gruffer this time. "I want a fucking name."

Heat suffused me. “Jorde already took care of it and the bikers.”

He grunted. “Good. But I’ll still be taking his name.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “He was some frat guy from the college. Thought he could get handsy with me. I slapped him and dumped a pitcher of beer over his head.”

“That’s my girl,” Jacolbi said, pride filling his voice. “I’ll talk to Jorde and pay our little friend a visit.”

“You really don’t have to,” I stated. “I think the bikers beat the shit out of him.”

“Good,” he grunted. “I’m not taking no for an answer, though.”

“I swear I’ve attracted crazy to me,” I mumbled on an exhale. First Jorde now Jacolbi. “You don’t like being told no, do you?”

Jacolbi laughed. “No, I don’t. The word no complicates things. This is an easy situation. Call it a transaction of sorts.” His demeanor became serious as he took my hand. “Your body is yours, Erin. No one has the right to touch you without consent. I don’t care if we’re having fun or you’re working. When someone breaks that rule, they have to pay.”

“Noble of you,” I answered, swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

“What can I say, I’m a noble kind of guy.” He lifted his shoulder.

Something told me that was a lie. Jacolbi might act like the sweet, tender type and follow through with the act, but like Jorde, a killer lurked just below the surface. I was sure of it. I'd seen it in the way he prowled around the club. A deadly grace that differed when he was in a playful mood. He watched people too. I'd only picked up in his ticks recently. Not that I was stalking him or anything.

My job dictated I used discernment skills. Body language told the whole story of the mood a customer was in. Also helped when regulars came in and they weren't in the best of head spaces. People watching was another of my useless, though handy talents. I'd gotten so good at it, I could pick out a random couple and learn everything about them within an hour's time or less, depending on the situation.

"You know, the Rebel Kings are good guys," Jacolbi hedged. "They'd protect you as well, should something happen."

I glanced at Jacolbi, curious where he was going with the conversation, knowing full well, my confession was seared into the tip of my tongue. "Oh?"

"I've known them for a while now," he said, like his admission meant nothing. "If you like them..."

"I like you," I said.

He smirked. "Bunny, we're also past the like stage. I'm here to possess you."

I choked. "Possess me?"

“If it means sharing with Max and the guys, I’m not going anywhere,” he replied. “I know Max and Jorde kissed you. Same with Oz and Indi. They want you too.”

Too much info. Not enough alcohol.

“How are any of you fine with this?” I hissed, frustrated with myself more than Jacolbi. “You should be pissed. All of you should hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” he said. “Sometimes it is what it is.”

“But five of you and me?” I shook my head. “You’re talking like it’s a done deal and no one else has said a word.” Though they’d all kissed me.

“Trust me,” he said. “They want you. They’re just waiting for you to say the word.”

I ruminated over what he said the rest of the way to *The Ministry*. When we pulled up to the valet, the porter opened the door for me then held out his hand. I took it, but Jacolbi was there, wrapping his arm around me while scowling at the guy. He handed him the keys carrying on a wordless conversation I was sure had been more grunts and caveman noises than a true discussion.

“I didn’t know so much could be said without words,” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

“Getting too carried away with his job,” Jacolbi grumbled.

I laughed. “He was being polite.” I tucked into his side, rubbing his back. “So are your friends here tonight?”

“They’re here every night.” Jacolbi smirked. “Have to be when they’re the owners.”

“What about you, Mister Head of Security?”

“I check in all the time,” he replied. “When you don’t see me at *Absolution*, I’m here.”

“Interesting.”

“I’ll show you interesting,” he muttered, dragging me toward the bar.

The night was a blur from there.

I remembered dancing with Jacolbi, spending time with Mort and Balor. Though the alcohol flowed, I didn’t get drunk nor did Jacolbi and when he led me back to his apartment, the same place we’d had sex for the first time, the arousal still simmering low in my belly came back to life.

Especially when Max, Jorde, Oz, and Indi joined.

CHAPTER 13

Jacolbi

Luca's ring tone brought me out of my sleep. The warmth of Erin's body pressed to mine accompanied by Jorde's and Max's had a smirk tugging at my lips. All the guys wanted to stay with her last night, but this... This was easier to manage for her, for now. There was so much we wanted to show her. Experience with her.

My phone rang again, and I hated the fact I'd be the one breaking the bubble around us, even if it was momentary. I slipped out of bed and hit the answer button before slipping out of the room. In the living room, Oz and Indi had crashed on the couch and were still dead to the world.

I opened the sliding glass door on my balcony and stepped outside, closing the door behind me. "Sorry about that. What's up, Luca."

"From what I understand you and the boys," Luca teased. *Asshole*. "I know Vicente is happy you and they have claimed her."

I cleared my throat. "Not sure how I feel about her possible father knowing we're fucking her. But here we are." I knew us sleeping with Erin isn't the real reason he was calling. Luca didn't give a shit about my proclivities or the members of his club. No, something happened, and we weren't going to like it.

"Another body," Luca said. "This time, not anywhere near the club." Luca didn't have to say the *thankful* part out loud. I

understood. “I think our friend got tired of waiting.”

It struck me then what he was saying without using the words. “Her mom? Are you sure?” I glanced over my shoulder, none of the guys had stirred yet. Probably wouldn’t for a couple of more hours.

“I’ll know when you arrive the Medical Examiner’s office. The Justice of The Peace are at the scene still, as well as a friend.” I frowned. “I’m not sure what happened so keep Erin close. It might have been a deal gone bad or...”

He didn’t have to finish his sentence, I understood. “Right. I’ll text you when I get there.”

Hanging up with Luca, I went back into the apartment. Oz sat up first, eyes narrowed, filled with sleep. His hand went to his back before he recognized where he was and relaxed. “I have to head out. Business.”

Oz nodded. “We got Erin.”

I grunted. “Don’t take your eyes off of her.”

After grabbing a shower, I dressed and headed out forgoing my usual routine. Instead of focusing on the case as I drove to the ME’s office, I couldn’t stop the images of Erin spread out on my bed, like a decadent treat for us while we each took turns fucking and eating her pussy. The sounds she made caused the ache in my balls to double.

She was fucking perfect.

And mine.

Ours.

Fuck, I needed to clear my head and get into the right space for the meeting. Thankfully, I didn't have far to go not even five miles from *Absolution* ten from *The Ministry*. I pulled into the parking lot and tilted my head as a man I hadn't seen in years got out of his vehicle—Thomas Kaine.

Holy shit.

When Luca said he had friends coming to help, Thomas was *not* the person I imagined would be meeting me here. I parked next to him then got out. He was greying now, his hair more salt than pepper. His eyes were still as bright and sharp as ever. The serious expression on his face—all FBI agent all the time—melted away as soon as I approached.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered. “This is where you’ve been?”

“Off and on for a while now,” I said, taking his hand then accepting his hug. “Missed you too, man.”

“Nasty scene you’ve gotten yourself into,” Thomas muttered against my ear. “How sure are you of Luca and his *business*?”

I knew the history between Luca and AJ, Thomas' partner, and her not trusting him. In the ten years we'd all been together, she never once wavered from her conviction. However, in the years I'd spent with the man, he wasn't anything AJ had concocted in her head or thought she saw on that video. “Hundred percent sure. It's not him, Thomas. There's so much I need to catch you up on.”

“Then let’s go inside and get this over with. Afterwards you can tell me everything.” Thomas led the way. He might not be FBI anymore but the respect he’d garnered over the years was impressive. More so after he exposed the corruption at the very top of the agency.

“How’s AJ and Scotty?” I asked. Even after all these years, seeing their dynamic, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be as comfortable as they’d been. Seeing how I was now in that type of relationship, I figured I’d bend his ear a little.

“Good. Ryder and Olivia are going into the third grade now, so we’ve been busy at home.” Thomas opened his phone then handed it to me. There they stood, the girl, Olivia, almost a perfect likeness to AJ, and the boy looked like a younger version of Thomas. They were happy. “Took some time, Jacolbi, but we all figured out our rolls in our relationship. If that’s what you’re curious about.”

“Nice family,” I replied. “Good to see it all worked out.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking the phone back. “So, how about you? Anyone in particular?”

Thomas had been right there when everything imploded in our group. I was to blame for a lot of it. I tried to play my feelings off when it came to them. In the end, all I’d done was create a rift I couldn’t close. Doubted I could now that we were older. “Her name is Erin.”

“Congratulations,” he replied. “Does she know what you do?”

I shrugged. “She knows I work in security.”

Thomas groaned.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I shrugged the sentiment off. “When you meet her, you’ll understand why.”

“I’ll hold you to it, then.” Thomas opened the door to the office, and we stepped inside. The receptionist behind the desk strode forward. “Hello, we’re here to meet with Dr. Carlos, please.”

“Your name,” she replied giving Thomas a small smile.

“Mr. Kaine and this is Mr. Stewart.”

Weird not hearing him say Agent Kaine. “We’re about the Jane Doe.”

“Ah, right. Sorry. It’s been a busy morning for us,” she murmured. “I’ll let the ME know you’re here, if you’d like to take a seat.”

“Thank you,” Thomas replied as we went to the waiting area. “Can you tell me anything of what’s been happening here?”

“Dead bodies keep popping up,” I said, keeping my voice low. “First out near Luca’s club, now it seems this could be my girl’s mother.”

Thomas quirked a brow.

“She’s in deep with a bunch of bad shit, including trying to sell her daughter’s virginity to the highest bidder, and a mule for Centro Cartel.”

The stern expression on Thomas’ face would have cause a weaker man to wither under his attention. “I’m assuming there

is more to this story than just those two pieces of information.”

“Always,” I replied. “I’d feel better if we weren’t here when I gave you the rest of the details.”

Thomas nodded. “Understood.” The door opened a second later and Dr. Carlos stepped into the waiting area. “Sorry for the wait. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to the body.”

We took the elevator down to the morgue. The room was cold, chiller than I expected, then again, this wasn’t part of my normal duties. The space smelled like death, formaldehyde, and hospital grade cleaner. The scent would stick with me forever. Dr. Carlos handed Thomas the file on the victim before he stopped in front of the wall of refrigerators.

“She was found outside a trailer fire on the west side of El Paso, near the border of Mexico. Looks like she’d been beat and tortured before she’d been set on fire and left to burn.” He opened the drawer and slid the slab with the body on it out. “On what skin I could examine, I found bruises the size of footprints, which I photographed, stab wounds from a pocketknife, and other lacerations. Cause of death, however, wasn’t from being burned.” He pulled a small evidence bag with a mangled slug inside. “Shot in the head. The bullet was lodged at the top of the spine.”

He pulled back the sheet just enough to show the entry wound. I swallowed hard. The grotesque site of a burned body was *not* something anyone ever got used to. Nor the fact a burned body smelled like barbecue. Weird but true. My stomach churned. Staring at the mangled remains of the body, I couldn’t tell if it was Gianna Hernandez or not.

“Can I see her left arm? She has a tattoo in the middle of her forearm, just a couple of words,” I said sure he’d tell me there was nothing left. “The tattoo would have been there.”

Thomas flipped open the file and thumbed through to the photos. “This one?”

I glanced at the picture, taking it from him. Yep. It was Gianna. “Fuck. It’s her. Her name is Gianna Hernandez.”

The Medical Examiner nodded. “I’ll add her name to the file. Do you happen to know any next of kin I could contact for her remains?”

“Not the best idea, Doc,” I said. “Gianna has been in the middle of an ongoing trafficking investigation and under suspicion of trying to sell her daughter. We’re going to need you to keep a lid of everything you know.”

“I can give you two weeks, maybe six depending on how quickly toxicology comes back. Once I have those, even the police will want the whole story,” Dr. Carlos said.

“Not a problem,” Thomas replied. “Here is my card. Should you find anything else, please don’t hesitate to call us.”

Dr. Carlos took the information Thomas gave him then showed us out. Once we were out of the building, I glanced at the man I’d called friend for more than ten years. “She’s not part of the other girls. This hit was personal.”

“I agree. Wherever we’re going to talk, I’ll follow,” Thomas said. “Lead the way.”

* * *

Erin

I stretched then curled myself back into the warmth of Jacolbi's bed, not wanting to move. Last night had been interesting to say the least. Everything had changed between us—all of us. The idea of being in a relationship with these men, was daunting to say the least. They were all demanding in their ways. Each knew exactly what they wanted from me and how they wanted it. And me, like the deprived woman I'd been for so long, soaked up every bit of their praises and affection.

“Morning, Kitten,” Jorde murmured then groaned. “Did you sleep well?” His lips pressed to my throat over the hickey he left there, showing his ownership of me.

I nodded, rubbing my ass across his groin. “Yes.”

His hand wrapped around my throat as the other slipped inside my panties. He groaned. The unhinged sound vibrated over my sleep addled senses. “Still so fucking wet for us. Naughty girl.”

My breath hitched as he circled my clit with his index finger. “Do you want to play with me again, Kitten?”

I nodded pursing my lips, to styme the moan building in my throat.

“Good girl. Wake Max up with a blow job while I fuck this sweet, tight little pussy.”

He pushed my panties aside then shoved into me with a single stroke. Sparks glittered in front of my eyes as a scream lodged in my chest. I was at the right position to take Max's

cock into my mouth, and I did on a moan. My eyes rolled up as Jorde stroked me in just the right spots. I was floating between them. Arousal replaced the sleepiness.

“Fucking hell,” Max said on a groan. His palm pressed to the back of my head. “I want to be woke up like this every morning.”

I glanced up at him. His eyes were still heavy from sleep. His lips were parted on a shuddered exhale. Max was beautiful. I swallowed around him and whimpered as Jorde ground his groin against my ass while playing with my clit.

“You like that, Kitten? Yeah, you do,” he muttered. “You’re creaming my cock.”

Max fisted my hair and pulled me off his cock. “I want a taste of you, Princess.” He kissed her then. His tongue danced over mine, coaxing me to take from him. He licked my lips then pressed his lips to my jaw and down my neck. “Shit, hurry up, Jorde. I want back inside her.”

Jorde chuckled. “Impatient much?”

Max rolled his eyes. “She needs both of us, bro.”

Jorde turned my face, forcing me to look up at him. His wild chartreuse eyes enthralled me. Excitement spilled through my veins. His pupils were blown. His lips were pulled into that cruel smirk he always wore while he arched a brow. “Does my Kitten need more?”

I licked my bottom lip. “Yes, please.”

Max went to his knees in front of me while Jorde rolled us up, so I was on all fours in front of Max. “Take me back into

your mouth, Princess.” I ran my tongue up his shaft before swiping through his slit. My gaze locked with his, the whole time, even as I took him into my mouth. His harsh groan as he pushed on the back of my head. “Holy shit.”

“Well, if they weren’t awake before, they are now,” Jorde said. “Thanks for waking the kids, asshole.”

Max chuckled then choked on a groan. “Fuck. They were bound to find out and join us.”

My mind spun out of control. With Max’s dick in my mouth and Jorde fucking me, I could think only feel. The door to the bedroom opened moments later and Oz and Indi’s combined curses lit me up. I clenched around Jorde, and he smacked my ass with a grunt.

“Kitten...”

I hummed, matching his pace as I sucked Max’s cock. “Do that again.” He tugged at my hair. The pinpricks of pain and pleasure swept over me. I shuddered, soaking up both of their attention. It was too much and not enough.

“Damn,” Oz murmured. “Look at you, Baby girl. Take those cocks. Make them come, sweetheart.”

“Shut up man,” Max said. “Fuck. She’s got me on edge already.”

“Not the only one,” Indi muttered. “Jorde looks like he’s ready to bust.”

Power. That’s what the thread spreading through me was. These men craved me. The knowledge swelled within me,

shifting me away from the darkness. The sensation was addictive. I wanted to always feel it.

“Whatever she’s thinking about, made her suck harder on my cock. Fuck, Princess.” He eased me off his cock then tipped my chin up. “What are you thinking about, Erin?”

I tried to form the words, but the pleasure swam through my lower belly, taking my ability to form any words. Excitement bubbled within me and swirled with the bliss knotting my stomach. Tension filled every inch of me. I was right on the edge. When Jorde manipulated my clit, I shattered, crying out as I climaxed hard around him and shook through the force.

Behind me, Jorde groaned. His pace increased then he stiffed before letting loose with a low groan. “Take it all, Erin. Don’t drip.”

“Look at you,” Max whispered, taking that cum like a good girl. He stroked himself. The lascivious expression on his face accentuated the anticipation filling him. “My turn.” Max took Jorde’s place when he rolled to the side with a grunt.

My head fell forward the second Max filled me. He was forceful. Demanding. He changed our position, so we sat on our haunches. His thrusts were short but deep. *Oh fuck*. Max wrapped his arms around me, holding me to him. I could feel him everywhere. There was something erotic about being with Max, like there was a deeper meaning to this than just sex.

A stupid thought.

Obviously.

“You’re ours,” Max whispered, pressing his lips to my throat then behind my ear. “All of ours.”

I shivered.

The idea of having all of them turned me on and scared the crap out of me. I’d gone from no one but Hannah, to now Jacolbi, Max, Jorde, Oz, and Indi within a matter of weeks. *What is my life?* I was drowning in the best way possible.

“More,” I sobbed. “I want more.”

“Yeah, you do,” Max muttered. “Indi’s going to take you too. Then Oz. You’re going to spend the day with our cum inside you so every time you sit down you know it’s us who own you.”

My eyes rolled up as I placed my head on Max’s shoulder. “Yes...” I dug my fingernails in his ass, holding him to me.

“That’s it, Princess,” he whispered, his voice hitching. “Take it. Take it all.”

I shattered in his arms as he shouted. The heated rush of his release consumed me. I sagged in his embrace. My heart thundered. My breath came in soft pants. What a way to wake up in the morning. The only person missing was Jacolbi. Before I could even think anything else about him, Indi was there, pushing into me.

I don’t know how long we stayed in bed, but when my phone rang, I had to reach around all the bodies surrounding me to grab it. Oz groaned and muttered something about breaking the alarm. I chuckled to myself then frowned when I saw the manager of my apartment calling.

“Mr. Frances,” I said answering the call. “What can I do for you?” Rent was still a week away. We didn’t complain or make any noise, so I was confused as to why he’d be calling me.

“Are you at the apartment?” he snapped.

“No,” I answered, sitting up a little straighter, catching Max’s light-gray gaze. “I’ve been at work, why?”

“I’ve gotten several complaints over night about the noise coming from your apartment! Seems someone in your place was having a party. Surprised the police didn’t come! I can’t have that ruckus going on in my apartments, Ms. Harper.”

“O-Okay,” I said. “But Hannah and I worked last night. In fact, I worked a double.” I wouldn’t tell him where I’d really been. It was bad enough he thought I’d thrown some kind of bash. “Hannah wouldn’t have been home until after two.”

“I’m calling the police now,” Mr. Frances said, before hanging up.

I pushed my hair from my face. I had to get home. A different urgency overtook me.

“Easy baby,” Indi murmured. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know, but I think I’m getting kicked out of my apartment. Supposedly someone had a party at my place.” I had to get dressed. Needed to get out of there so I could breathe. Then I remembered, I drove with Jacolbi, and Hannah had the car. “Goddamn it!”

“Whoa,” Oz said holding up his hands. “Breathe, Sweetheart. We’ll get you there. Don’t worry.”

“You go get dressed and we’ll let Jacolbi know and Luca too,” Indi added. “Don’t worry. We’ve got this.”

Problem was, I didn’t know if I was happy to be kicked out so I could move into the apartment Luca gave me, or pissed Hannah threw a party without telling me and now I had to deal with the shit. I checked my phone and frowned when my message about the car and keys went unread. *What the heck Hannah?*

“Right. Get dressed.” I closed my phone then grabbed my things and went to the bathroom to get ready to leave. When I came back out, all the guys were ready, and Indi handed me a to-go cup of coffee. “Thanks.”

“Thank Jacolbi and his machine.” Right. I needed to tell him what was going on. But I waited. I didn’t want to worry him when it could be nothing.

“We’re going together,” Max said, guiding me out of Jacolbi’s apartment overlooking *Absolution*.

The white Escalade started as Indi held his arm up, pushing the button the fob in his hand. He opened the passenger door for me then closed it when I put my seat belt on. Max got behind the wheel while the others piled into the back.

“All right,” Max said, “where do you live?”

Uneasiness snaked through me the closer to my apartment we got. I texted Hannah again to let her know that Mr. Frances called me. If it was her, then I expected the place to be cleaned up. When we pulled up to the apartment, unfortunately, there

were several police vehicles surrounded the complex, and dread pooled in my stomach.

“What the fuck happened here?” Max said as we pulled into an open spot.

“Guess we should find out,” I muttered, not even remotely ready for what was to come.

CHAPTER 14

Erin

I slipped out of the passenger seat, taking Jorde's proffered hand to steady myself. When Mr. Frances called, I hadn't expected all this. There were cop cars as far as I could see along with two pickup trucks with utility boxes on the back along with two crime scene command unit vehicles. By the gruffness of our conversation, I thought for sure, he just found a mess. Now, I wasn't so sure.

"It's a no go," Max said. "They got the place taped up better than Fort Knox."

"But... I'm a resident here. Shouldn't I be able to go up?" I asked, glancing at the guys. Who'd have guessed they'd fucked my brains out only an hour before and now we were standing outside the perimeter of a crime scene.

I walked over to one of the officers while pulling my license out of my bag as I went. I had to see the damages. Had to know what happened in my apartment last night, especially since I wasn't there. "Excuse me, officer?"

"It's Detective," the man said. He had striking heterochromia eyes. One a brilliant shade of seafoam green and the other a dark shade of umber. His scruffy beard though intentional was neat. He couldn't be a day over thirty at most and had the fullest lips I'd ever seen on a man. "How can I help you, Miss?"

Right. Help me. I shook my head then chuckled. "Sorry. It's still too early. I live in 6G. The manager called me about

fifteen-twenty minutes ago. He said there were complaints about noise and a party or something. I-I don't know. I wasn't here all night." I handed over my license. "Can I go up?"

He took my license then frowned. "I'm going to need to ask you a few questions." He motioned for me to step over to an unmarked car. "Like I said before, my name is Detective Orosco. Can you tell me where you were last night, Ms. Harper." He glanced at me then over to where Max and the others waited.

I could feel all their gazes on me. Even with the distance between us they comforted me. I also knew all it would take was one word and they'd get me out of there. I couldn't leave though. Not yet. "Work until midnight then I went on a date until two and I stayed with my boyfriend last night." Better to keep it simple than try to explain our arrangement, especially when I didn't know what to call us.

"You have an alibi for all of that?" Detective Orosco quirked a brow.

"Yep," I said grabbing my phone. Weird how Hannah still hadn't replied to me. "I have everything on a calendar, and you can ask Jorde over there where we were afterwards since he was with me all night." I glanced over my shoulder pointing at the man in question while handing the detective my phone.

"Do you have a number for your boss so we can confirm the schedule?" he pressed.

I took the phone back from him and scrolled through the contacts. Luca and Vicente had given me an all-access break-glass-in-case-of-an-emergency-type number I could call all

hours of the day and night. I dialed it and put the device on speaker. On the second ring, Vicente answered.

“This is Vicente Lucero. How may I help you?” Vicente’s cultured accent wrapped around me, giving me the boost, I needed to get through the conversation with the detective.

“This is Detective Orosco with El Paso PD. I have Erin Harper with me at her apartment, and I need to verify her whereabouts last night.”

“Of course, Detective Orosco,” Vicente said. “First, Erin, are you safe?” The calmness in his tone eased the worry building in me.

“I’m good, Vicente. ¡Buenas Mañanas!” I answered, trying to lighten the mood.

“Good morning to you too,” Vicente said. “Yes, Detective Orosco, Ms. Harper was working last night. She came back at twelve-ten am after one of our employees requested her presence then left again at one am with said person. Of course, if you need any of that in writing or any video evidence, we’ll need a warrant.” The way Vicente sounded so cheerful and ready to help held an undercurrent of violence and politeness, leaving me dumbfounded.

“Won’t be necessary for now,” Detective Orosco stated. “Though it may come up again.”

“Of course, Detective,” Vicente replied. “Whatever you need. Erin, please call when you’re finished there so we know you’re safe.”

“I will,” I said, feeling all warm and tingly. Special even.
“Thank you, Vicente.”

“You’re welcome, mija.”

The call ended and Detective Orosco handed over my phone. “As of right now, you can’t go in. We have the crime lab taking photos of your place. Is there anything about last night that stood out to you more so than say any other night you worked?”

I frowned. “No, except, I have a roommate. She worked until two am last night. I sent her a text to tell her where the car keys were so she could drive home since I was out with friends and my boyfriend.” I pulled up the message to Hannah. “She never read it, nor did she reply. Hannah might be flaky when it comes to a lot of things, but our safety is not one of them.”

“When did you meet or how long have you been roommates?” He pulled the small notepad from the inside of his coat and for a second all I could think about was how cops did that in the movies too. Stupid thing to think about when someone broke into my apartment, and I couldn’t get ahold of Hannah.

“Last summer,” I said. “We met at work. We both work—worked for Trigger over at *Trigger’s*. She trained me. Anyway, after we got to know each other, she said she was looking for a roommate, so I said sure. This is where we live.”

“And you share a vehicle?” he asked.

“Yep,” I replied, glancing around the parking lot. “It’s not here though and it wasn’t at the club either this morning.” I coughed, feeling my skin flush. “There are apartments at *Absolution*, Detective. I have the key to one in case I didn’t want to come home or needed a safe place to go.”

“You have some generous friends in high places,” he murmured. “So, the car wasn’t there this morning and it’s not here now.”

“No. Our spot number is the same as our apartment number.” I pointed to the general vicinity of where her beat-up car should be. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m going to need you to come with me. I don’t care if your boyfriend and his... Companions, join us.” The stern though apologetic look on his face confused me as I nodded.

“Sure,” I answered. “I’ll let them know.”

My steps were measured as I joined Max and the guys. “I don’t know what’s going on but we—I have to go with Detective Orosco. He said you’re all welcome to follow if you chose to, but this is important.”

“Don’t worry, Princess, we’re right behind you,” Max pressed his lips to my forehead.

“I’ll call Jacolbi and Luca,” Indi said. “Let them know what’s going on. Did he tell you anything?”

I shook my head. “Mostly asked where I was and who I’d been with. When he got confirmation, I was with you and at work, he backed down a little.”

“I’ll bring my lawyer in on the loop too, just in case,” Max said. “He’s local so he can meet us there.”

“Do you think I’ll need one?” I questioned. I felt like we were going ninety to nothing with only a simple request to go by.

“Never talk to the police without one,” Jorde spat. “They’ll twist everything you say.”

He sounded like he spoke from experience. “Right. Okay. I have to go. See you there.”

“Right behind you, Kitten.”

I walked back to Detective Orosco who held the door of his car open for me. Once I was situated, he closed it then came around the hood to get behind the wheel. “They seem pretty intense.”

I glanced out the tinted window and shrugged. “They’re good people. Protective of their friends. I’m sure you understand that, Detective.”

“I do,” he agreed. “I’m sorry we’re having to meet this way, Ms. Harper.”

“Same.”

The rest of the way to the station was quiet. A niggler at the back of my mind said this had to do with Hannah and why she never called me back. Or my mother. She would do anything to get me back into her clutches, given the circumstances. Heck wouldn’t surprise me in the least if one of the Centro 5 told my mom where I’d been hiding.

When we arrived, two things stood out. One, Jacolbi pulled in seconds after us in his black primer Camaro and two, a nice-looking Bentley was parked in a handicapped spot and a man in a wheelchair was getting out with the assistance of a sliding seat and suicide doors. That was kind of awesome to witness.

“Ah, Charlie,” the man pressing a button on his Bentley key fob said. “Good to see you this morning.”

“Lewis,” Detective Orosco said, “here on business or did you want to spend the day with us?”

The man chuckled wheeling himself over to Charlie. “Business I’m afraid. Got an interesting phone call on the way here. Wouldn’t you know while I was on the way here to pick up a client was arrested last night, I was asked to help a friend out with some council. I thought it must be fortuitous when I saw you pull up.” He glanced around the detective. “Name is Lewis Varian. You must be Erin Harper.”

I grinned. He wasn’t much older than the detective or Jacolbi for that matter. “Good morning, Mr. Varian.”

“Please,” he said, “Call me Lewis.” His heated gaze gave me a once over. “I can understand why the boys were concerned. I’ll be with you every step of the way Ms. Harper.”

“Well, if I’m calling you Lewis, you can call me Erin,” I said, feeling marginally better.

“Now we’re one big happy family,” Lewis said. Then waved off Oz and Jorde. “Boys, you all know the drill. I’ll be with Ms. Harper. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“I’d like to also sit in on this conversation,” Jacolbi said holding up a badge. “I have a case you might be interested in.”

“I’m not sure I can—”

“If you try to pull rank on me or jurisdiction, you won’t like what happens. It’s easier to cooperate,” Jacolbi added.

I stared at Max who was just as confused as I was. When I looked at Jacolbi, he wouldn’t meet my gaze. He said he worked security, who the hell was he really? Had he lied to all of us?

I cut my gaze to Lewis who nodded. “I don’t mind if Jacolbi is there. Seems we all have friends in inner circles.”

Another man, taller and gruffer than Jacolbi stepped inside the building and went straight to Max and the others. What the hell? What had I missed? I was so stupid. We all were.

We stepped into the interrogation room and when the door closed behind us, I swear it was like the lock engaging in a jail cell. I didn’t know how I knew the noise the mechanism made, but I was sure they sounded alike.

“Please,” Detective Orosco said, “have a seat.”

I sat across from him and Jacolbi, my gaze going to the man I’d fallen for over the last few weeks, mentally pleading with him to explain what the hell was going on and who he really was. When he still didn’t say anything, I shook my head, crossing my arms.

Asshole couldn’t even tell me the truth.

“Why don’t we get the formalities out of the way first,” Lewis said, drawing my attention. “From now on, I’ll be representing Ms. Harper. Any questions you have for her can come straight to me. This meeting will be off the record and any information about her whereabouts will need a warrant. Now, this is the part where each of you explain why she is here and not trying to salvage what is left of her apartment.”

“Erin,” Jacolbi’s voice was strained, filled with exhaustion. “I have to be honest with you. As of nine this morning I was reactivated. I work for the government. My team’s name is S.R.T.—Strategic Reinforcement Team. We go in undercover to infiltrate gangs, drug rings, and sex trade organization. I’ve been with S.R.T. since I was twenty-two.”

Stunned, I stared at him, completely in shock by what he had to say. “So, this whole time you were using me to get—”

“Nope,” Jacolbi said. “I got a call from our friend, which I can’t divulge in present company about a string of murders happening in the El Paso desert. After this morning, I was reinstated to my former position.” He glanced at Detective Orosco. “This morning I also happened to find out you’re the man I was supposed to give intel to about the case once it was solved. Can’t be coincidence you’ve been brought on for a B and E.”

“That’s the thing,” Detective Orosco muttered. “My case isn’t a simple B and E. It’s a homicide.”

* * *

Jacolbi

Four hours ago...

After telling Oz and Indi I had some shit to take care of, I drove out to the trailer park then stopped by the ME's office. Once I'd made the positive ID on Gianna, and had a copy of her folder, I went back to the club so I could debrief with Luca.

Vicente met me at the door, then made the trek to Luca's office. There was a chip in Luca's armor. A bit dazed and exhausted in the eyes. This wasn't the Luca I knew. Not by a long shot.

"What's happened?" I asked, taking a seat across from him.

"There's another body. Not here. The call came in from our inside person. She's at Erin's apartment." Luca grabbed the tumbler off his desk and swallowed down the remaining contents before resting his head against his leather wing-back chair.

"Hannah?"

Luca peeked at me. "Perceptive. I need you to go out there and find out what happened. Police are already on scene, so you'll need access." Which meant making the one phone call I hadn't made in ten years.

"Shit." I scrubbed my face. "You know he'll want to send the team."

"Yes, but we have you covered here," Luca said. "Take Thomas with you."

I grunted. "Then I'll be on my way."

On the way out the door, I pulled my phone from my pocket and scrolled through the contacts until I found his name—not that it was hard to do. It'd been a while since I spoke to him. After my original stint with the Gang Intervention Program then SRT, well, there wasn't much to say. The team kicked on without me. They'd all formed a tighter squad and I'd still been the odd man out until now.

“As I fucking live and breathe. You finally called home,” Asher's gruff tone held a note of relief. “What's going on, kid?”

It'd been ten years and the way he said kid still rankled my nerves. “I need to be reactivated.” I tilted my head back closing my eyes momentarily. “I'm with Luca. Some shit has gone down and things are getting a bit hairy.”

“When aren't they with that asshole,” Asher muttered on a sigh. “Are you in trouble?”

“Nope. Keeping my nose clean,” I replied. “However, to finish out the case, I need an in. Things don't work the same without an FBI agent on the books or police in my back pocket.”

“I hear ya,” Asher stated. “Perks of being retired. Not having to worry about those things anymore.” The new leader, Oliver Pless, had been a hard ass if the rumors I heard were correct.

“One of these days I'll retire too.” Until then I had to keep going. Had to keep helping where I could make a difference, which included protecting Erin.

“Look,” Asher said as we stepped out into the mid-morning sun. “As far as I was concerned you’ve never left SRT. Your credentials, backgrounds, and clearances are still active. Once a member, always a member is our motto. You should know that.”

I sagged. “Thank you.”

“If you should need the team, text me the details, I’ll have them on the next flight out,” Asher said. “They miss you too.”

Yeah, well, I didn’t want to talk about them. Probably never would either. “Thanks. I’ll keep you posted.” Hitting the end button on the call, I glanced at Thomas. “I’m guessing Luca already knew the truth before I called Asher?”

He smothered a grin. “Maybe. But you had to find out for yourself.”

We drove to the apartment in silence. I couldn’t say I was surprised by Gianna’s death or the fact it could’ve been her greed that got her killed. She’d been playing chicken with the wrong people for too long. But Hannah? As we pulled up to the scene one thing struck me as odd. Hannah’s vehicle wasn’t parked in her spot.

I parked behind a police vehicle and pulled my wallet from my back pocket. Our federal agency badges, ones we earned after putting our lives on the line time after time over the years, sat tucked away in the agency wallet I used, though no one noticed. I showed the officer my badge then pointed to Thomas. “He’s with me.”

“For someone who didn’t want to go back, you’ve kept your badge with you,” Thomas murmured while following the law enforcement officers over to the Detectives.

“Old habits. I worked damn hard for my badge. I wasn’t going to give it back.” I showed the badge again to one of the detectives standing outside the apartment talking to a forensic officer. “Agent Stewart, SRT-OGA.”

“What does the SRT and OGA want on this case, Agent Stewart?” The balding white guy with a muted brown gaze, and an expression on his face like he’d seen or done too many things over the years, asked.

“I’m working a case I think is connected to this one,” I said. “I just have a few questions. I was hoping I could see the body. I believe I can identify the body

“Oh yeah?” The detective quirked a brow. “How do you know the victim?”

I lifted my chin. “She works for the club I work security for.”

“Fine. The victim we suspect is Hannah Lopez. Twenty-one. There was a struggle we believe, but the why’s and how’s, aren’t known as of yet,” the detective said. “If you believe you can identify her, we’d be grateful.”

CHAPTER 15

Jacolbi

Four hours later...

I sat across from Erin, staring at her as disbelief filled her gaze. It was serendipitous when Luca got the call about Erin's apartment. I could easily go from one case to the other without anyone seeing me.

Yet.

Thank fuck they had the forethought to get their lawyer for Erin. We all knew where she'd been the night before, but this didn't look good. Her estranged mother showed turned up dead. The best friend's car was at the scene. Then the disturbance at her apartment.

The whole situation was fucked up.

"I don't understand what is happening here," she whispered. "You have my alibi."

"I'll also confirm her whereabouts," I said. "She's not a suspect, though she is a victim as well."

"Yes," Detective Orosco said. "About that. Ms. Harper, I didn't bring you here because you're a suspect, but to give you some grave information. It appears, your friend, Hannah Lopez, was found murdered in your apartment this morning."

Erin gasped, sagging into her chair. "What?" Her voice wobbled. "How? When? We were at work together last night. I-I-I called her, texted looking for her. I got mad at her for not answering. I-I thought she was being flaky." She shook her

head as a tear escaped the corner of her eye. “No. We were supposed to open a boutique together. She was going to sew everything, and I’d work my marketing mojo.”

“That’s not the only thing,” I said. “This can’t wait either. Sweetheart, your mother was killed.”

Her gaze met mine and pure fear dripped from though cognac irises. “I have to go. I can’t stay here. They’ll come for me next.”

She pushed away from the table and stood, her gaze flitting to every corner and nook in the room before she settled on the door. Instinct kicked into high gear, and I grabbed her.

She was going to run.

“Don’t do it, Little Bunny,” I whispered against her ear. “I can protect you. That’s my number one job. Same with the boys. I’ll take that bullet. Not you. Don’t leave.”

“You lied to me,” she muttered. “How do I trust anything you’ve said.”

“I didn’t lie,” I said, knowing that a lie by omission was still a lie. “I didn’t tell you everything about me.” I exhaled, relaxing marginally. “I have so much to tell you, but if you walk out that door, you and I both know who’s coming for you.”

A sob tore from her throat as she wilted in my arms. “You’re an asshole, and I hate you.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard that,” I answered, wincing.

“We have it on authority that the Asesino MC has set up operations in El Paso. There are a few suspects I am tracing at the moment. However, you should know Erin’s cunt of a mother had put a bounty on Erin’s virginity.”

Her cheeks flushed the brightest shade of pink as more tears tracked down her cheeks. “The last I heard, Tino T-T Morales was into Hannah, but the guy is pretty good people. I’d trust him,” I said.

“You government guys come in here and just think you can take over like you own the place,” Detective Orosco grumbled.

“Hey man,” I muttered, “I’m not here to dick you around. I’m here to solve a string of murders and protect Erin. That’s my priority. Her mother being killed, fucks up my investigation and mission. Just like it’s messing with your Friday morning.”

“Erin,” Lewis said, “Is there anything you can tell us about Tino?”

She shook her head. “Hannah and I have been out of sync lately. Our shifts have been opposite. Being at *Absolution* at the same time is a rarity for each of us. Throw in *Trigger’s*, and I’m sleeping while she’s getting ready to go in. Or I’m in school, thanks to Mr. Trapani’s scholarship program.”

I internally smirked. He helped the girls who wanted it most, but Erin was special. She might not have put the pieces together, but Vicente was her father. A man who, from what I’d witnessed, wanted to be her father. In fact, he’d been the one to personally buy everything Erin needed for school, so she’d didn’t have to worry about the money issue. “Luca’s

good like that. When he likes a person, he'll do everything in his power to make sure they're taken care of."

"I'm not a kept pet," she snapped. "As much as I like the idea of being pampered, I also enjoy working."

"No, you're absolutely right. You're not a kept pet," I agreed. "Retract those claws for me, sweetheart."

"Are there any other questions you have for her, Detective Orosco?" Lewis asked. "Because as you can see, my client has been placed in a distressing situation. She not only mourns for her best friend, but her mother is also dead."

"All I need, is for Ms. Harper to confirm Hannah Lopez's identity." Detective Orosco gave a small smile. "We don't even have to go to the morgue. I have a polaroid." He slid the photo across the table face down, at least he wasn't too big of an asshole. Cocky. Kind of a dick with a chip on his shoulder. "When you're ready flip the photo over and tell me if you see your friend. We have all the time you need."

Erin's hands trembled as she balanced on the photo. She stared at the black photo paper sniffing. The tip of her nose was red, and her face was beginning to swell from holding back her cries for her dead friend. She wiped a stray tear from her cheek as she sniffed then let out a shaky exhale. When she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth, her chin wobbled. "I don't know if I can do this."

I took her hand in mine. My heart broke for her. I understood her more than what she knew. Obviously, I'd have to rectify that. Good thing I kept my file in the glove compartment of my car. I looked at it at least once a day as a

reminder of where I came from and where I'd gone in my life. Now, I'd have to re-earn her trust. "Do you want me to do it, sweetheart?"

She gave a sharp twist of her head. "No. I can do it. I just don't want this—any of this to be real." I understood. Fucking sucked not only to be betrayed by a parent, but to lose a friend or friends, sucked even more. Erin closed her eyes before flipping the picture over. There in shitty lighting and in the horrible quality of an instant photo, was Hannah's face. Whoever took her picture had closed her eyes and it appeared, cleaned her up a little. I nodded at Orosco, affirming it was Hannah, and that I was grateful someone had a little sympathy and respect for the girls.

"Take your time, Erin," Lewis said, patting her hand. "We're not going anywhere."

When she finally opened her eyes, the scream she let loose with, was one I'd heard several times over the years from victims' families. It's not something a person ever forgot. "Hannah. Oh God. Hannah."

Shouting outside the interrogation had me pushing out of my chair. "I'll deal with them. They're concerned about Erin."

Detective Orosco nodded while Lewis carried on a gentle conversation with Erin, though I wasn't sure she heard it. Stepping out of the office, I closed the door behind me. There they stood, Jorde in front, his eyes wild—crazed, a viper ready to strike at whoever hurt their girl.

Tension vibrated off the others as they stared at the door separating them from Erin. Each of them wore identical

expression while concern twined with the rage. I held up my hand. “She’s okay. Or, well, she will be. I have so much shit to tell you, but not here. All you need to know is that Hannah is dead and so is Erin’s mother.”

The starch bled from them as sorrow and anxiousness replaced the anger. “What the fuck?” Max breathed. “When? How?”

“Not sure on Hannah yet, Gianna,” I said, “Sometime last night after Erin and I left Absolution. Hannah’s car was found at the scene of Gianna’s murder.”

“Fuck,” Oz spat. “So, they could be connected. I’ll start digging.”

Jorde chewed on the corner of his thumbnail as he continued to stare at the door separating him from Erin. “Whoever the fuck it was, they’re dead. Give me a name and I’ll end them.”

“Easy,” I murmured, placing my hand on his chest. “Remember where you are, man. They’ve got cameras everywhere and I bet you listening devices. Don’t do something stupid. Not when Erin needs us most.”

“Us?” Max quirked a brow. “Who are you really, Jacolbi?”

“Can we talk about it later? I promise I’ll answer everyone’s questions once we get Erin back to the apartments.”

“We’re taking her to apartment across town,” Indi said. “You can meet us there.”

I grunted. “Fine. Give me ten to get her out of here.”

“You have five,” Jorde said, violence flashing in his blue eyes.

“Fine. Whatever.” I threw my hands up before putting my hand back on the knob. “Look, I need you four to keep a low profile for a while until I can get this case locked up. Keep your noses clean.”

“Sure, dad,” Max replied. “We’ll get right on that.”

I was going to strangle all of them. I already knew it. “I’ll be right back.”

Stepping back into the space, Erin sat beside Lewis, head bowed, her hair shielding her face from anyone who looked at her. Detective Orosco added notes to his paperwork along with the photo of Hannah. When I closed the door, he glanced up. “We’re done here, Agent Stewart. If you’d like to take Erin someplace safe. She won’t be able to enter her apartment until the forensic team is finished. Even then she’ll have to make an appointment with us to enter the premises.”

Fucker. He could have made the whole situation easier on us. “Fine. She’ll be staying with friends for now. I’ll have them call you when she is ready. Until then, direct all inquiries to her lawyer, Mr. Varian.”

Lewis inclined his chin. “All appointments will be set up through my office and one of our assistants will be accompanying Ms. Harper to her apartment to ensure she isn’t hurried or harassed. Also, I am asking that the manager of the apartment complex be served with a no entry notice as well.”

“Of course,” Detective Orosco said. “That won’t be a problem.”

I opened the door again and ushered the guys inside. “Take Erin home, Jorde. Keep her safe. I have a few more things I need to do before I can join you.”

“Aye, aye,” Jorde said, flipping me off as he went straight to Erin. He bent low and whispered something into her ear before lifting her gently into his arms. “Good to see you again, Lewis.”

“You too Mr. De Mevius. Boys.” Lewis’ gaze followed each of them out of the room. Once they were out of ear shot, he pinned Orosco and me with a glare. “I’m not sure what is exactly going on here with these two cases, but they don’t include those kids. Whatever you need from Erin you’ll get the rest of it, find it on your own gentlemen.”

I grunted. “I wasn’t here for Erin. She’s been a happy bonus. I’ve always been here for the murders.”

“Keep it that way,” Lewis snapped.

I liked him. He didn’t deal in bullshit and wanted everything on the level. I could appreciate that. “Can do. Although, you know them as well as I do. They won’t let what happened lie.”

Lewis exhaled. “Stubborn. All of them. Like their fathers.”

I snorted. Spoken like a man who’d known each of the families for longer than he wanted to. “You have my number Detective.”

“One more question,” Detective Orosco said, halting my progression toward the door.

“All right,” I said crossing my arms. “What is it?”

“What OGA group are you with?” he asked.

I laughed. “Man, if I told you that, I’d have to kill you.” I hoped I pulled off the serious scowl Asher gave every time he spoke to someone he didn’t like. Mostly us. Again, I laughed to myself. “See you soon, Detective.”

As I stepped out of the interrogation room, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out. I slid my finger across the screen and tapped the message from Luca then smirked as I read it.

Luca: I miss Manic. Let him play for a while.

Jacolbi: You sure you want the mess on your hands?

Luca: Oh, you’ll be cleaning up after yourself. We need him to sniff out our rat.”

Jacolbi: Did you find something?

Luca: Potentially. Thomas and I are working on it. Go be with Erin. See me later.

Jacolbi: Understood.

* * *

Erin

Jorde held me the whole way back to their apartment. None of us talked and I was grateful. There was no way I couldn’t tell them the truth now. I had one less problem in my life,

however, I also lost my best friend in the whole world. I'd been shitty when I thought she'd just flaked out on me. I could never take that back. What kind of a friend was I? Hannah died in our apartment. I wouldn't think about who it could be or why they'd do it. If I did, then it would mean no one was safe around me and I didn't want to be alone.

Not right now.

"Come on, Kitten," Jorde whispered. "I'll carry you up."

I hadn't even realized we'd arrived until I opened my eyes, and we were outside a posh looking apartment in the middle of El Paso aka the rich side of town. I curled into his embrace as he stepped into the elevator with Indi.

"We'll grab you some clothes," Max said, Oz right beside him.

I nodded. "Sure." Not like I could go home and grab any. When the doors closed, Indi pressed his lips to my temple. "My mom is dead. I should be relieved." I don't know why I said as much out loud.

"Feel however you want to, sweetheart," Indi said. "Sounds like your mom was a real piece of work if you're relieved, she's dead."

"You don't know half of it," I muttered. "She tried to sell my virginity like it was a bounty."

Jorde's hold tightened. "What?"

"Yep. Since I was fourteen." I sighed. "I knew it was her or me in the end. Guess she pissed someone off."

“Sounds like she got what she deserved,” Indi said as the doors opened inside their apartment. “Welcome home, sweetheart.”

“Want to take a bath?” Jorde quirked a brow. “You look like you could use about a hundred of them with all that tension running through you.”

I chuckled a little then cried. Hannah was dead. How did I not know? How could I be so callus?

“Hey,” Jorde said. “None of us knew. There was no way to prevent her death. If you would have been with her, you’d be dead too. Don’t do this to yourself, okay? We’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“I thought she was brushing me off,” I said, angry now. “She was in trouble, and I thought... I haven’t even checked in with her lately because we’ve been so busy.”

“Don’t do this to yourself, Kitten. The what ifs and what could’ve been, will eat you alive. You want to honor your best friend, you keep fighting, and we’ll help Jacolbi and Luca find her killer.” He pressed his lips to mine.

“You trust him still, Jacolbi?” I asked, as Jorde put me on the side of the tub.

“Yeah,” he said. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“He lied about who he is,” I grumbled.

“While I admit, he surprised me,” Jorde said, “it makes sense. I’ve always known he was different. Plus, his security experience is a dead giveaway. He’s got too keen of a sense

about him to be some simple thug in a suit. He's way beyond us, that's for sure."

"My head's all messed up," I said, scrubbing my face. "I don't know what to think."

"Then don't think of anything. Get in this tub with me and we'll relax. When Max gets back and Jacolbi is here, we'll figure shit out." He pulled off his shirt, exposing his tattooed torso and chest before walking over to the medicine cabinet. "Get naked for me, Kitten."

I did then slipped into the warm water and groaned. When Jorde joined me, he had a joint between his lips. "What's that?"

"Something to help you relax." He got in behind me before passing me the joint. "It's only weed, Erin. We don't fuck with our shit, and we definitely don't lace it."

What the hell. I took it from him and put the joint to my lips. The smell of sweet skunk enveloped me as I inhaled. By the third drag, I was relaxing back against Jorde while he washed me. "Holy fuck, that's good."

"I like it when my Kitten is all soft and sexy." He kissed my neck while fondling my breasts with the washcloth as he continued to wash me. He inhaled then turned my face and kissed me, sharing the hit with me. I moaned, sinking into the blissed-out sensation. He was really good at the whole relaxing thing.

"Hey," Indi said stepping into the bathroom then groaned. "Asshole, you could have shared with me."

He handed over the joint while controlling our kiss.
“Kitten needed it more. Are they back?”

“Yeah,” Indi said on an exhale after taking a hit. “It’s why I’m here. Max left some clothes for you, sweetheart. They’re in his bedroom whenever you’re ready.”

Ready was a relative term. I knew the minute I was dressed, and Jacolbi showed up, I was going to have to explain to everyone who I was and how I ended up at *Absolution*, it was inevitable. “I don’t want to move yet.”

Jorde glanced at Indi who pulled his shirt off. “You heard her. She doesn’t want to move yet.”

“Then I guess they’re all going to have to wait for us,” Indi said, placing the joint between my lips.

Five more minutes, that’s all I needed.

Then I’d face reality.

CHAPTER 16

Erin

I wasn't ready. Stepping into Max's room with the towel wrapped around me so I could get dressed, I wasn't sure exactly what I'd say to any of them. Like, hey guys, my real name is Valentina Christen Hernandez. I'm nineteen years old and for the last five years my mom has tried to sell me to every Cartel bastard west of the Mississippi. But it's all good now, she's dead.

Like...

My thoughts sluggishly pumped through my brain thanks to the weed Jorde gave me. For a few minutes there, I could forget about all my worries nestled between Jorde and Indi. Regrettably, I had to face reality. So I put on the hoodie that looked like it came from one of the guys closets (smelled like Oz's) and donned the leggings and fluffy socks that were beside it. The panties and bra were brand new—thankfully.

When I stepped out into the living room, Jacolbi sat in one of the chairs, his arms wide and an expectant look on his face. I was torn. He lied to us, but he'd also protected me. How did I reconcile this man? How did I punish him for his omission, when I too carried secrets?

I went to him then, curling up in his massive lap and allowed him to hold me close. His lips brushed against my temple as his gentle voice pushed back some of the disquiet within me. "I should have told you the truth from the

beginning. There's so much about me I want you to know. After this is all over, I'll tell you everything. I promise."

I nodded, placing my head to his chest. The hard beat of his heart alerted me to how nervous he was. "I know you will. I'm sorry, too."

"Nothing to apologize for, Erin. I'm here to help you. All you have to do is let me in." He kissed the top of my head then cleared his throat when Max and the others joined us. "Should we start from the beginning, then?"

"Sounds about right," Max said, placing a bottle of water in front of me.

"I'll go first," I stated, rushing to get the words out before Jacolbi could. If I had to wait any longer, I feared I'd never tell them anything. I'd continue to pretend to be someone else for the rest of my life. "My name isn't Erin Harper, it's Valentina Christina Hernandez and I'm not twenty-one. I'm nineteen. My mother is Gianna Graciela Hernandez and a mule for Centro Cartel. Or, I should say, was a mule for Centro. She's dead. Someone killed her."

The living room was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. I waited for the guys to question me and my motives but when no one said anything, I swallowed hard and continued with my story.

"I left home a little over a year ago, because my mother has been trying to sell me since I turned fourteen. At least I think fourteen. Could have been sooner. You know, puberty and all that." I twisted the hem of the sweatshirt around my fingers. An anxious habit I had. "I'd taken to locking my door

at night, putting heavy stuff in front of it so no one could get in. I met Hannah at *Trigger's* and we just clicked." My bottom lip trembled. "Now she's gone too."

"The day in the club when Seneca kept looking at you," Oz said, "it's because he recognized you."

I lifted my shoulder, biting my bottom lip. "Maybe. I dyed my hair. Lost some weight. Changed myself so no one would know who I was."

"Why didn't you run farther away?" Indi hedged. "Across the state? Anywhere?"

"How? I didn't have anything. I just ran the day of graduation. I saw *Trigger's*, and I met Hannah. I thought as long as my mother didn't see me, I'd be fine. Plus, who walks into a biker bar to start shit?"

Jorde snorted. "Everybody. Did you really think the old man would call the cops if something happened? He'd have been more inclined to deal with the bullshit than get some asshole arrested."

I glanced up at Jacolbi who'd gone eerily still. When his gaze met mine, death stared back at me. I couldn't rightly say who the intension was aimed at, but I also knew it wasn't at me. "My turn. You're all going to listen. You're not going to interrupt me." His dark gaze matched the deadness in his voice.

"We won't," I said, squeezing his hand. "We won't say a word."

“I’m the heir to the Vagos MC,” Jacolbi said then deflated. “Or I was until the job went south and I was left holding the bag. My old man called the police on me, who in turn got the DEA involved. I was fucked. I’d only turned eighteen the day I agreed to make the run for my pop. Biggest fucking mistake of my life.”

The anguish in his voice tore at my soul. I understood him on a level most others might not. Betrayal by a parent destroyed a child. There were no two ways about it. “Holy shit.”

“My street name is “Manic,”” he added. “I’ve had the name since I was thirteen. Because I was always doing crazy shit. Even though my father was a bastard, I did learn a thing or two while under his roof. My trade is a custom painter. Everything from prosthetics to cars to motorcycles to trucks. You have the idea; I’ve got the time and patience. Then, after all the shit went down, I was given a choice. Either stay in prison for the next twenty years of my life or renounce the Vagos and help the government in the Gang Intervention Program.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Max said. “The organization is pretty good. Help a lot of people.”

“I am the embodiment of the program. Went to work for a government agency, learned a bunch of shit about security, which I figured out fast I was good at and learned how to fight.” The light dimmed in his eyes. There was more to his story about the government team, but I wasn’t going to push him. He’d tell us that part when he was ready. “I left the team

ten years ago, after our last mission together. We were going to age out of the program anyway, and I didn't fit in anymore. The team was more them than them and me, if that makes sense.”

“But you kept the badge,” Indi said. “This whole time?”

“Yeah,” Jacolbi said. “Ten years of being undercover. Ten years of traveling around the world. I couldn't give it all up and not keep something.”

“You said you were reactivated this morning,” I murmured. “What did you mean by that?”

Max's phone rang and he answered it, his eyes narrowed as he listened. “Send him up.” He hit the red button on his phone, cutting his gaze toward Jacolbi. “You have a visitor. Said his name is Kaine.”

He smirked. “My old partner. His name is Thomas Kaine. Ex-FBI. Pervert. He's in a relationship with two people. He's a friend. Not the enemy.”

When the elevator binged and the doors opened, Thomas stood at the threshold of the hallway leading to the living room. “Come on in.” Max stood. “Guess there's room for an old man in here.”

Jacolbi chuckled. “That old man will kick your ass if you're not careful. I was just getting to the good part, Thomas.”

“Then I got here right on time.” He took a seat in one of the available chairs at the wet bar behind them. “But have you gotten to the good part, yet?”

“The good part?” I said, confused by the turn of the conversation.

“I was just getting there,” Jacolbi murmured. “I was waiting on your slow, old ass.”

Thomas laughed. “Impertinent child.”

Jacolbi glanced down at me and grinned. “Always.”

* * *

Two weeks later...

We were supposed to play this off like I was mourning the loss of my mother and my best friend. Missing Hannah was easy. My mother? Well, I was glad she was gone. However, after Jacolbi and Thomas, who turned out to be a pretty cool guy, started digging into Hannah’s murder, my days of going to college and work, stopped.

I stayed either with Max at the penthouse apartment or they were with me at my new apartment within *Absolution’s* compound. It appeared, whoever killed my best friend and my mother, thought they’d killed me and her not Hannah. That itch at the back of my neck—the feeling of being watched I’d never told anyone about—because I never wanted to raise a ruckus or cause a scene, turned out to be a stalker.

Murderer, more specific.

According to the timeline Thomas and Jacolbi put together, he must have been at *Absolution* and saw me. Since Hannah and I shared a vehicle, he also knew which one was ours. One working theory was, he climbed into the back of the car and waited. The other theory, the plausible one, had the

killer waiting for me to return, since Hannah and I weren't home. When Hannah opened the door, he attacked, not realizing it wasn't me he killed, but my best friend.

Then he jacked up the place to cover his tracks, took the keys to Hannah's car and drove out to my mother's trailer. There were only a handful of people who would want to kill us, and I was sure the cartel had something to do with it. Jacolbi and Thomas believed it was deeper than that. Either way, two weeks into the whole investigation and we weren't any closer to an answer than we'd been the day Hannah's body had been found.

Which brought me back to Orosco. Detective Charlie Orosco. I couldn't remember how many times I talked to him over the last couple of weeks. More than I wanted to. That was for sure. More than Lewis, my new "on retainer" lawyer, wanted to entertain, as well. The detective was looking for a connection between my bestie and my mom and no matter how many times I told him there wasn't any, he didn't believe me.

"Everyone has a connection when it comes to these cases," Detective Orosco said. "You might not know it though."

Right. So, why was he asking me then?

"Well, if you're so certain," Lewis stated, "then why don't you tell us what you know, because quite frankly, these meetings are tedious and going nowhere. You're asking the same question six different ways and getting the same answer, Detective."

“The connection is obviously Erin,” he said. “My question is why?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing,” I mumbled. “The only answer I can give you is, whoever the killer is, he thought I was Hannah or Hannah was me.”

“Where does your mother fit into this?” Detective Orosco pressed.

“She was trying to sell me. She’s a mule for Centro Cartel. I mean, the list goes on and on. Maybe someone she pissed off wanted to send her a message and they got carried away?” I shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you. I ran and never looked back.”

Detective Orosco ran his fingers through his hair. The set of his jaw and the throb in the muscle there, showed his frustration. Lewis was right, we were going around in a circle without a real answer for any of their questions or mine.

“They match the others, don’t they?” The question slipped from me. “Hannah and my mother’s. They match the other victims.”

“I’m not a liberty to discuss that,” Detective Orosco muttered. “I can’t discuss any on-going investigations within the department.”

“Perhaps,” Lewis said, “you should comb through those files. I’m sure you’ll find something there.”

Detective Orosco blew out a breath then stood. “If you remember anything else, give me a call, Ms. Harper.”

When I walked out of the meeting with Orosco, Max and Jacolbi were waiting for me. They took the whole protect-me-

at-all-cost thing seriously. Both wore identical, intent expressions that didn't ease until I wrapped my arms around Max first then Jacolbi.

They shouldn't have forgiven me for lying to them. They should have been pissed I pretended to be someone else. Yet, neither of them, nor the others seemed to care I'd changed my name. Once Max let go of me, Jacolbi enveloped me into a hug, and I sighed. Or maybe it was the same reason I believed him too. He showed us his file after that night. Told us all about his asshole father. I realized I had more in common with Jacolbi than I expected.

"We can go now," I said, my voice muffled by Jacolbi's chest.

"About damn time," Max grumbled. "How many times do we have to indulge this?"

"I'm hopeful this was the last time," Lewis said with a frown. "Seems they've run into a dead end." He glanced at Jacolbi, suspicion in those heterochromia eyes of his. "But you have a lead, don't you?"

"Two birds, one stone," Jacolbi said. "Don't worry, the police will be looped in when we're ready."

Lewis grunted. "As long as you keep my clients out of your operations, I walk the case in with you."

"You have my word," Jacolbi said. "The only people going down are those responsible."

The rest of the day was a blur. With Jacolbi's help, I'd been able to box up what little I could from my apartment and

brought it to my new place at *Absolution*. I questioned more than once if Luca and Vicente knew something was going to happen and that's why they gave me a key, then I chided myself for being paranoid.

At seven, there was a knock at my door. The guys had things they were supposed to be doing, which left me alone in a new place, stuck in my circling thoughts. "Just a second." I didn't worry about some unknown coming to my door, since *Absolution* had some of the best security ever, thanks to Jacolbi and Luca's friends.

When I opened the door to see Vicente there, I was surprised. Yes, he was my immediate boss, but we usually talk while I was on the clock, not off hours. "I'm sorry for the intrusion." His words were clipped yet silky smooth, almost as if he'd practiced them before coming to see me. "Do you have a moment we can talk?"

"Sure," I replied. "No one is here." I stepped away from the door. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, mija," he said, closing the door behind him. "This won't take long."

"Okay." I returned to the living room a moment later to find him staring at photos of me and Hannah after I'd left home. Most of them were selfies inside *Trigger's* while others were inside our shitty apartment, we'd desperately wanted no part of. Seemed like a million years ago now. "So, what's up?" I motioned to the chair beside the couch.

"Thank you." The pensive look on his face as he reached into the inside jacket pocket had a bubble of anxiousness

welling inside of me. “I’ve carried this photo with me for many years. I thought, if I could fix my life, maybe I could give the woman I loved the will to do the same. This photo was taken seven months before both of our lives were upended.” He handed the picture to me, and my blood ran cold.

“That’s my mother,” I mumbled, shocked and a bit terrified. *I wish Indi would’ve stayed.* “How do you know my mother?”

“We worked for the same people, mija,” he murmured, trying to calm my jangled nerves. “I went to prison for our crimes, and I mistakenly believed your mother would take the chance to clean up her life. Do better.”

“My mother only cared about herself and how much money she could make,” I spat.

“I know,” he replied. “However, what I didn’t know when I went to prison was that she’d been pregnant.”

How could he not know? If he was with her, then there had to be signs, right? “Are you saying you’re my father?”

“There’s a chance,” he said. “Your mother never came to any of my trials. She never came to visit me, and when the opportunity presented itself for me to repent and earn my freedom back, I took it, which mean leaving my past behind. I thought, since she didn’t get clean or come see me, she fell back in with people I didn’t want to be associated with.”

“So, you didn’t know...” My mother truly was a piece of shit. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything, mija,” he replied. “I’m not telling you so I can invade your life and be your father. I thought, after everything you’ve been through, you could use one more person to lean on is all.”

“But you knew when you met me, or at least thought perhaps I could be, right?” I wasn’t sure why I pushed for answers. Wasn’t like my mother ever told me about my birth father.

“I thought perhaps, yes,” Vicente said. “But without DNA it was my word against your mothers. Something I wasn’t sure I wanted to press you for. You were hiding when you first walked through those doors. It makes sense, obviously.” He shifted in his seat, facing me. “Answer me this, what would you have done, had I told you the truth?”

Million-dollar question. I’d like to say I’d have been level-headed, but after everything my mother put me through, I would have thought Vicente was a plant. “Run away.” I didn’t hesitate with my answer. It was the truth. I would have gone as far as I could have, and knowing my luck, been caught by someone associated with my mother.

“Exactly,” he replied. “You were safer here, with us. I couldn’t harm you more than you already were. So, I kept it to myself and started planning for when the time was right. Obviously, the time isn’t right, now, either. But I couldn’t allow you to go through all this without knowing the truth.”

All these years I wondered about my father. Where he’d been. What he’d been doing. I asked my mother a few times, but she usually answered with I don’t know, or it didn’t matter.

Occasionally, if she was angry at me, she'd say something horrible like, *your father hated you. He never wanted you. You were as useless then as you are now.* Hearing his side, even if I took it with a grain of salt, made so much sense, because I knew my mother and all the disgusting things, she could do just to be mean.

“I could always use more friends,” I said. “But I only have one father.”

His amber eyes lit up with acceptance and pride. “We can take this as slow as you want. I need you to understand, had I known about you, I would have fought to protect you. I never would have left you with your mother. I can't make up for everything you've endured. Still, I hope I can be here for you now and help you through the loss of your best friend.”

I don't know why I did it. Why I climbed into Vicente's lap and cried. Maybe it was all the grief fighting to be let out. Or the release associated with my mother being dead, and I never had to worry about being found. Perhaps it was knowing my mother had been such a bitch, she kept me from my father on purpose to hurt both of us. But when I finally settled into his embrace and my sobs had turned to hiccupped jags, I didn't want to let him go.

Vicente wasn't just my boss.

He was my dad.

CHAPTER 17

Jacolbi

Time was something we had in abundance and waned all the same. For three weeks, Thomas and I went over the evidence and tracked the killer. We knew it was someone within the club or associated with the club. Who though, had been a question we couldn't answer. Which brought us to where we were in the investigation today.

Centro Cartel, more importantly, Phillip Guerrero had given a serial killer a place at a table, to which, didn't belong to him. The whys and how's were still unknown, and Luca's tight-lipped approach did us no favors in our search. We couldn't protect his club or Valentina if we didn't have the full truth. Hence why Thomas and I stood outside Luca's office.

I knocked and waited before opening the door. Vicente sat across from Luca, who had several files open on his desk. In front of him was a cup of coffee, fresh if the steam rising was any indication. He glanced up, and the shadows of his past reflected in his hazel eyes. Luca motioned to the chairs beside Vicente then went back to whatever he'd been reading.

"You know why we're here," Thomas said, diving right in. "I think it's time you told us everything."

Luca exhaled. "Past time, friend." He scrubbed his face before grabbing his coffee. For a second the quaffed, perfectionist façade slipped, showing the exhausted man who hadn't slept in days.

In truth, none of us had. Not since the murders. As much as I hoped Detective Orosco was more receptive to our willingness to help, about the only thing he'd told us, and we'd already figured out, was that Gianna and Valentina were the targets. Hannah had been a casualty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Everything else, no-go.

Had I not paid off one of the forensic pathologists we wouldn't have a copy of the killer's DNA. Unfortunately, a DNA profile still didn't tell us who the person was. Or where to start looking for him.

"Past time," Luca said. "Do you want to loop AJ into this call?"

Confused, I glanced at Thomas then Luca. "Why do we need the HBIC in on this?"

"Because she's known the truth from the beginning," Thomas said not taking his gaze off Luca. "Hasn't she?"

"She is perceptive," Luca replied, taking a sip of his coffee. "She was there that day."

Thomas grunted sitting back as the woosh of air left him. "The mission. This is all because of a mission?"

"I'm at a loss for what else it could be." Luca pushed away from his desk and began to pace before stopping in front of the window overlooking Absolution. "I unmasked him. Neutered his business. Destroyed his empire. Took his money and his women—what was left of them, anyway, after the fight."

Dumbfounded, I sat there, not sure what to say. Everyone in the room knew Luca worked with the CIA and had also

working in the shadows, always from other government entities. His palatial mansion sat in Mexico, where those who worked for him, believed Luca was some Cartel jefe. In reality, he was now the station boss for Mexico City. Or had the lines blurred even more since the last time I'd seen him?

Thomas pulled his phone from his pocket. "She deserves the truth." He scrolled through his contacts then hit send. When AJ answered, Thomas stared a hole through Luca's back. "You're going to want to hear this."

"Thomas? What's happened? Do you need Scotty and me?" The anxious quality in AJ's voice had Luca rolling his eyes.

"No," Thomas said. "I'm fine. Exhausted and ready to see you again, but this is all business."

"Hello, AJ," Luca said. "Miss me, too?"

"Nope," she replied, and I stifled a laugh.

"You still wound me. I hope after this conversation, we'll be able to become friends," Luca said. The genuineness in his voice tugged at me. In all the years I'd known AJ and Luca, they'd never been friends. AJ was cordial but distant. She shared intel with him when Luca needed it and accepted help when it was called for, but anything past that, AJ avoided him while also making her reasons clear.

"I highly doubt that." Her cool tone pulled a grimace from Thomas.

"Can we get all of the vitriol out of the way, please," Vicente snapped. "I understand there are resentments and

anger between the two of you, however a serial killer has targeted my daughter, and we are trying to protect her. So, squash your shit.”

“I apologize,” AJ said. “Please, Luca tell me what you need, and I will get started.”

“I don’t need anything,” Luca replied. “I thought I’d confess.”

My attention snapped back to Luca who placed his hands in the pockets of his trousers. Defeat etched across his face as if he allowed us to see the real him for the first time. The age and stress hadn’t been kind to him, nor the years. Whatever weight he carried, tugged him under more than he projected. Now, it seemed he barely tread water.

“Took fifteen years, didn’t it,” AJ said. “Well, go on. Tell me everything about that day.”

Thomas hissed a curse. “Amelia.” He never used her name unless he’d been pissed off. In all the years I’d known them, he’d only said it once.

“No,” Luca stated, holding up a hand. “She has every right to be angry. However, after I am done, I’d like an apology.”

“Not likely,” AJ exhaled.

“Right,” Luca said, sitting down. “The mission. We knew there were several tunnels being used to transport women, men, and children from the US to Mexico along with several South American cartels willing to transport those who’d been kidnapped back to Mexico to sell. We’d infiltrated the Los Zetas Cartel, knew the day of the drop and where the

kidnapped would be going. AJ's intelligence had been instrumental to getting us into the location. What I hadn't expected was him—Maxon Perez."

"He's dead, Luca. We've already been over this," AJ said. "He couldn't have been there."

"I thought the same until I saw him fire the first shot, beginning the chaos of that night and turning my life upside down." He handed me a file. The photo of the man on the cover wasn't the least bit helpful. I'd never seen him before. Maxon had dark hair slicked back and several small tattoos around his eyes and down his neck. He wore a tailored suit and a pair of Locs black sunglasses.

"What do you mean he fired the first shot? We found..." Her voice trailed off. "No. It can't be true, Luca. You're using the ghost of your friend to fuck with all of us."

"Continue your sentence, AJ," Luca said. "We both know it's true."

"Maxon Perez was KIA during an operation in Venezuela. You and I saw the mission readout," AJ snapped. "The rescue in Mexico went south because you lost your shit in the tunnel. I watched it happen."

"You saw what you wanted to see," Luca replied, keeping his tone even. "You couldn't see everything because it was dark, and we only had the small lights from our Go-Pro cameras. You didn't know who was down there, I do."

"Then why didn't you add him to your report?" she snapped. "If he's alive like you said he is, you should have run

it up the chain.”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“Because it wasn’t in the report,” she replied.

“And you were transferred out shortly afterward,” Luca stated. “I did write it in my report. His name, the location of the tunnels and who he worked for were redacted then removed from any documentation linked to the operation.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” AJ muttered. “Why would they want his name redacted?”

“Because he wasn’t who he said he was and the government didn’t want the blood on their hands,” Thomas answered. “As long as the government could say they didn’t know he was alive, they didn’t have to take responsibility for a mission gone wrong.”

“And why I’ve been relegated here in El Paso and Mexico,” Luca said. “I only have the pull I do, because of the information I’ve carried with me the last fifteen years. Maxon Perez is alive.”

I stared at Luca; unsure I was understanding where he was going with all this. “Are you saying, Maxon Perez is killing women, dumping them here all in an attempt to get you caught and settle some weird vendetta?”

“If only it was that simple,” he replied. “Maxon was left behind in a mission gone wrong. At the time Asher and his team were new. They had backing and clout but weren’t trained or tested. The CIA couldn’t call them in to do an

accurate report about the mission Maxon and I were on, so Maxon was ruled KIA.”

“I saw the final report from the mission,” AJ said. “He was killed in Caracas during a simple mission. On that should have seen your unit in and out before the Cartel de los Soles aka Nicolas Maduro’s forces knew you were there.”

“We had a rat,” Luca said with a lift of his shoulder. “Maxon and I both knew someone within our team was feeding information to Maduro’s people. Command thought if we could throw in false intel while we were on the mission, the information would make it back to the fighters and when they were captured, they’d tell.”

“Cocky,” Vincente muttered.

“Obviously. The plan didn’t work, and the day the Maxon was “killed,”” Luca made air quotes, “was because our rat told Maduro’s men where we’d be and when. We were ambushed.”

“So, the question is, how did Maxon get from Venezuela back to the states or even Mexico without anyone knowing any different?” Thomas mused.

“That I could never figure out—in the beginning.” Luca leaned back in his chair. “When I saw him in the tunnels, I hesitated and that caused us to lose five girls and two of my team members. Remember, AJ?”

“You were completely unhinged,” she said. “The cameras cut in and out. Tons of gunfire. Chaos doesn’t even begin to explain the shit-show.”

“I can admit, I went a little insane. My best friend was alive and now he stood on the wrong side of the law. I couldn’t begin to absorb, let alone digest, the rapid flow of information. The minute the women started dropping, I descended into a pit of darkness. A place I didn’t like. That’s when all this came about.” He motioned to the office, and I assumed the land *Absolution* sat on. “You had one screen shot from that day, that saved my ass, showing his face—changed, of course, from time and age. My bosses believed if I was here, eventually our paths would cross again.”

“A bar for criminal clientele. This whole place is one giant trap.” Thomas exhaled. “Fuck me.”

“Not on your best day,” Luca said. “Nor your worst.”

Thomas huffed a chuckle.

“So, what do you want to do now?” I asked, needing to understand how we were going to connect this Maxon guy with our killer.

“He didn’t mess up,” Luca said. “He’s toying with me. The DNA sample you were able to obtain, will prove Maxon is alive. However, given the circumstances, none of us in this office can operate on US soil. Maxon knows it. He’s teasing me. Tempting me to act out.”

Luca had a point. All we were ever going to be able to do was hand over the file to the police and let the DA run with the case. Not the fast and loose work we used to do. A knock came at the door before it opened, and Detective Orosco stepped into the space. He looked just as confused as I’d been seeing him there.

“I was told to be here for a meeting?” he said, glancing around the room. When his gaze landed on Thomas and me, he frowned. “Should have known you’d be in on this.”

“What can I say?” I grinned. “I’m in demand.”

Thomas snorted.

“You’re right on time,” Luca said, coming around his desk to shake Detective Orosco’s hand. “I called you here, Charlie.”

“Mr. Trapani,” Detective Orosco said. “You were the next person on my list of people to speak with.”

“Well, then this should be short and sweet. I have everything you need on the murders and the murderer. What I can’t give you one hundred percent is motive.” Luca gestured for him to follow. “This is everything I have on Maxon Perez along with Centro Cartel and Centro 5. I’m giving you the juiciest case of the year.”

“Pouring it on a little thick, aren’t you, Luca?” AJ muttered. “You don’t always have to be so magnanimous.”

“But it’s part of my charm, AJ,” he replied, grinning at Detective Orosco. “Two days ago, I was given information Centro 5 has been selling Fentanyl brought across the border through the tunnels just outside of El Paso at the Serenity Gardens which end at a little gas station off Malecón in Juarez, Mexico.”

“You’re fucking with me,” Detective Orosco said, flipping open the file. “How does this Maxon Perez fit in with Centro Cartel or even Centro 5?”

“I believe Maxon is an enforcer for Centro. I can’t tell you how long he’s been with Felipe. However, I have a feeling, if you cross reference the DNA sample from Gianna’s murder site and Hannah’s, along with the others, you’ll find they match Maxon. It was his calling card to me.”

“What makes you so special?” Detective Orosco asked, his gaze buried in file Luca compiled.

“We have history. If you ask for details, know I will have to kill you.” The way Luca said those words was almost as if he’d been joking, but he was anything but.

“You said the same thing,” Detective Orosco said, glancing in my direction.

“Because it’s true,” I replied. “We’re not who you think we are.”

“How do I trust this information if you won’t at least allow me to understand what is happening here?” Detective Orosco had a point. We were giving him a gold mine of intelligence, without him questioning us.

“Maxon Perez used to be an agent,” Luca said. “That’s as much as I am allowed to discuss with you, due to security issues. However, what you have there, including a photograph should be plenty for you to take him down along with the Cartel.”

The muscle in his jaw twitched. There was so much he wanted to know, I could see it in his eyes, yet, instead of voicing his thoughts, he nodded. “Fine. I’ll take the information under advisement. Thank you, Mr. Trapani.”

“You’re welcome,” Luca replied, pointing at the file.
“Don’t tell anyone I gave you that.”

“Why?”

“If you want to survive the cartel takedown, you’ll keep everything you learn under wraps until the mission is a go. There are rats everywhere, Charlie. Your police department is full of them. Nod if you understand what I’m telling you.”

Detective Orosco did as Luca asked. “Two birds one stone.”

“Precisely,” Vicente said.

* * *

Erin

Every day the grief of losing Hannah eased. When Max and Jacolbi told me they had a suspect, relief surged through me. At least no one else would have to die. Then there was Vicente, my father. I took an hour a day to spend with him, get to know him for who he really was, not all the bad things or ugly ways my mother talked about him, to hurt me and him.

Seeing him in a light different than my boss was, difficult to say the least. The stories he and Luca talked about while we ate lunch together, had me laughing and worried. My father wasn’t a good man before I was born. He did things that could make my blood run cold, yet he changed. He took responsibility for himself and his transgressions and became a better person for it.

I don’t think I’ll ever understand why my mother couldn’t be like him or why she chose the cartel over a better life with

her family and a man who seemed to love her very much. Guess she loved the lifestyle more than she even loved herself.

As I got ready to go out with Max, Jacolbi, Jorde, Indi, and Oz, I was also grateful for them. Had they not stepped into my life when they did, I'd probably be dead by now. That night, meeting Jacolbi was a coincidence. What transpired afterward was fate. I knew it deep down.

Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I smiled a little. Sadness tinged my eyes. I missed my best friend every day. Still, knowing her killer would face judgement, healed some of those wounds. I applied my lipstick then flicked off the light and exited the bathroom. The guys waited for me in the living room, each one yummiier than the last. Their styles were eclectic, which Indi being preppier than the others.

“Well, what do you think?” I crossed to them and did a slow spin.

When I was allowed back into my apartment, Jorde found a garment bag with my name on it in Hannah's handwriting. That was just like her. Creating even when we didn't have time to breathe let alone work on outside projects. When I opened the bag, I cried.

She'd taken a schoolgirl uniform and turned it into this sexy half skirt-shorts cutout frock with chains that looped from the front to the back at the opening. There was also a belt garter that wrapped around my thigh. The shirt she created out of a cropped tank top and mesh overlay hit my midriff showing off way more skin than I had inside *Absolution*.

“That’s it, we’re staying in,” Oz said, wrapping his arms around my middle. “No way in fuck I’ll survive if other guys look at her.” He kissed me then and groaned. “Strawberry lip gloss. Fuck, Bunny.”

I chuckled softly.

“Then we take the melon baller with us,” Jorde replied with a shrug. “An effective deterrent if we use it once.”

“There will be no eye gouging or fighting tonight,” Jacolbi came up behind me, pressing his chest to my back. “Tonight is about showing our girl off. If anyone touches her other than us, we’ll deal with it.”

“So, melon baller is a go.” Jorde cracked a half grin.

I snickered while the others covered their laughs with a cough. We were going to *The Ministry* tonight so we could be seen in public. All part of the plan to execute a search warrant, none of us were supposed to know Detective Orosco obtained. The only reason we did know was because of Jacolbi’s connections and even those we truly hadn’t comprehended fully.

He was letting us in slowly though. Telling us about his friends, which I knew he missed. Jacolbi told us about the places he’d been and the people he met. All of which was public knowledge, anything else, he’d skip over.

“All of you are going to be the death of me,” Jacolbi muttered. “Let’s get out of here, we have a schedule we need to keep.”

Like I said, we were going to burn off some steam and be seen. On the drive to *The Ministry* Jacolbi gave us another rundown of what was going to happen. We didn't have to stay long. A couple hours at most, just enough time for Detective Orosco's team to get into position and execute the warrants—Jacolbi's words not mine.

From there we could do whatever we wanted to. Freedom tasted pretty sweet, even if the night had just begun. We pulled up to the club twenty minutes later and were greeted by the valet. Jacolbi held out his hand to me, and I took it, sliding out of the Escalade.

The Ministry was busier than usual, but I guess it worked in our favor. Once we were inside, Max ordered a round of shots and our night was on. We danced and drank. Made out with each other. I let go of all the negative feelings suffocating me and had fun.

When Jorde pulled me into a darkened cove along with Indi, a thread of anticipation and arousal wriggled through me. However, when Jacolbi, Max, and Oz joined us, and we moved to somewhere a little more comfortable...

I was in heaven.

Whatever happened after tonight was for us to discover as slowly or as quickly as we wanted. I fell for five men, and they wanted me too. They weren't asking for forever, but what they wanted—me—I'd willingly give them. We were better together than apart, and they taught me a few valuable lessons along the way. One, I was stronger than I thought I was. Two,

leaning on those I cared about, didn't come with conditions, and three, love was unconditional.

Falling in love with them was easy for me.

Learning how to love myself after years of abuse, well, I still needed to work on that. Thankfully, I had my men to help me along the way.

EPILOGUE

Luca

The laptop sat open on my desk. The conversations and instructions being given were background noise while I sipped my drink. The burn of scotch rolling down my throat grounded me in the moment even as my mind transported me to a time when I was a grunt.

“You’re thinking too much,” Vicente said. “No one has said a word. There isn’t even any talk on the streets. We’ll catch him.”

I had my doubts.

“You don’t know Maxon like I do,” I said, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. “He’s smart. He’s the kind who will kill to get free and has.”

Vicente nodded. “He’s already began.”

I tipped my tumbler in Vicente’s direction. “Touché.”

“Would you call this mission successful even if Maxon wasn’t found?” Vicente tilted his head.

Good question. Taking Centro Cartel and Centro 5 off the board gave me breathing space. Still, we had Asesino men in our midst. I half wondered if Maxon had taken them over, considering how ruthless they’d become over the last few years. However, without asking them, I’d been left with conjecture.

“I suppose if we capture some tonight, we could ask them.” My gaze drifted back to the screen where the teams

were loading up. It'd been years since I'd last been in the field. I couldn't say I missed it.

AJ had been right about a few things. I had gone insane. I had lost my head in those tunnels, killing indiscriminately. Screaming my fool head off like some lunatic escapee. Maxon was more than just my friend and the lashing of betrayal I took the day he reentered my life, continued to affect me today.

"I've extended a membership to Charlie," I said, taking my mind off the action. "He'll fit in here."

Vicente smirked. "He's about to have his eyes opened, that's for sure."

I chuckled, staring down into my drink. "Yes, well, we all had to start somewhere. Right?"

The vehicles pulled up to the locations, four in total, and each team unloaded as one unit. Those with shields were in front, followed by the members carrying the battering rams and rifles. Their zip-tie cuffs bounced as they hustled to their designated spots.

Each team leader began the silent countdown and when they got to one, they each yelled, "El Paso Police Department search warrant."

Flash bangs and non-lethal were used to disorient and trap those who were being detained. Step by step they went through the buildings holding those within the sites at gunpoint while the remainder of the teams continued to search. The plan was executed with precision and a coolness he wished others had.

When each location was cleared, they stood the men up they'd taken into custody and walked them out of the buildings. The one person I'd hoped to see wasn't there and the muscle in my jaw twitched.

"Who do you think you are? Do you understand who you're talking to?" Felipe Guerrero barked, jerking, and twisting in the SWAT officer's grasp as they half walked/dragged him out of the building. "I'll have your job!"

No, he wouldn't. The evidence was overwhelming and an El Chapo he was not. I glanced at each of the other streams, hopeful, but it seemed even as quiet as we'd been Maxon got away.

"Damn it," I muttered, closing the laptop. "He's not there."

I flopped back against my chair, anger boiling in my gut. How? How had he found out? Orosco vetted everyone with Jacolbi's help to make sure no one would know what would happen tonight. It didn't make sense.

I finished my scotch and poured another before scrubbing my face. Exhaustion was a bitch. Knowing that mother fucker was out there somewhere, made it worse.

"We got the majority of them though," Vicente said. "Better than none."

True. With Centro and Centro 5 off the streets and their empires crushed after tonight, an access point would be closed, but for how long? Someone would gladly step into opening and start a new syndicate or expand their already established crime network.

“I won’t stop until Maxon is killed,” I muttered, uncaring of how I sounded. “Until I see his lifeless body in front of me, there can be no celebration.”

“I’ll let everyone know.” As Vicente stood, my phone chimed with an incoming text. “Who is it?”

I slid my thumb across the screen and my blood ran cold.

Unknown: It’s been a long time, old friend. Too bad we couldn’t catch up while I was in town. Did you really think I’d fall for your trap so easily? Fortunately for you, I love a good game of cat and mouse. Catch me if you can, Luca.

* * *

I know, you weren’t ready for this story to come to an end. But don’t worry, while the Absolution Series will continue with other characters, there will be cameos by Jacolbi, Erin and the rest of the guys.

Find out more in Indulgence...

www.micheleryantreeve.com

* * *

Newsletter

<https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/x5h9k3>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TL Reeve, a bestselling, multi-published author, was born out of a love of family and a bond that became unbreakable. Living in Alabama, TL misses Los Angeles, and will one-day return to the beaches of Southern California to ride the waves at Huntington Beach. When not writing something hot and sexy, TL can be found curled up with a good book or spending quality time with her college-bound daughter.

Michele Ryan is a multi-published author. She embraced her creative passion and co-authored several books with fellow author TL Reeve. Michele has also published two solo novellas. Michele is a lifelong resident of the state of New Jersey, along with her husband and three children, whom she refers to as her hobbits. When Michele is not plotting or writing, she can be found either volunteering at her children's school or reading.

Read More from TL Reeve and Michele Ryan

www.micheleryantreeve.com

BETRAYED

Lost Souls MC the Beginning

**BROOKLYN CROSS AND T.L.
HODEL**

Betrayed @ 2023 Brooklyn Cross and T.L. Hodel

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BETRAYED

**You tried to destroy me, but instead you made me
unbreakable.**

The world seemed so simple at eighteen. I had everything figured out right down to who I was going to marry. Ian Mathers was the love of my life, the man of my dreams and the motorcycle riding, bad boy that every woman craved. Then one night the two most important men in my life betrayed me. I thought I could trust them, but instead they broke my heart, and I ended up married to a monster. One that seemed determined to crush my spirit as he broke my bones, but I would never give in and one day I vowed that I would be free.

Some souls are destined to be lost and I was one of them.

Welcome to the beginning of the Lost Souls MC.

Trigger Warning: This story contains material that may be sensitive to some. See website for more details.

Relationship pairing: M/F/F

CHAPTER 1

1981

Ian

“I’ll fucking kill her!”

I would rip those pretty mahogany curls out of her head and choke her to death with them. Maybe I should choke him...watch him struggle to breathe while the girl who was supposed to be my wife screamed at me to stop. She was fucking mine!

I could’ve fucked her over and been an asshole. Instead, I was fucking faithful. She was the only woman for me, and what did she do? She fucking married someone else.

“God damnit!” Heads ducked out of the way as a mug flew across the room.

“Jesus Christ, Grim.” My best friend Moose cautiously stepped closer with his hands raised. “Would you calm the fuck down already?”

I’d destroyed almost everything. The floor was littered with broken pieces of wood, glass, and other debris, and it still wasn’t enough. That was the thing about rage. It burned hot and fast in a chaotic storm of violence and wrath. Add betrayal into that, and everyone around me was pretty much fucked.

“Fuck you,” I snarled, kicking an eight ball on the floor at Moose.

It wasn’t his fault. I knew that. Hell, half of Moose’s time was spent breaking up club fights. He was the most logical

motherfucker I knew. Not that anyone would know that from looking at the size of him. The guy was gargantuan. He could get hit by a car and walk away. Hence, the road name Moose.

“Come on, Prez...”

My jaw ticked as I rolled my eyes toward the prospect tiptoeing across the rubble.

“What are you getting so worked up about?”

“Andy.” Moose shot the prospect a look. “Sit the fuck down.”

Yeah, Andy, sit the fuck down.

Smug bastard just smirked and stepped closer.

“Don’t worry, Moose,” Andy said. My fists balled as his boot crushed a piece of glass. “It’s okay.”

No, the fuck it wasn’t.

“The Prez and I are cool,” he said as his eyes swung my way. “Aren’t we Prez?”

Was this scrawny little prick trying to talk me down? He just joined last week. Who the fuck did he think he was?

“Andy,” Moose warned again.

But the prick kept on coming. Walking over here like I wouldn’t kill him the second he was within reach.

“You ever been fucked by a man, Andy?”

That made him falter, but just for half a second. Before I knew it, that stupid smirk was back on his face.

“You’re funny, Prez. See,” he said, looking over at Moose. “I told you he was fine. Why don’t you call some sweet butts in here?”

I wasn’t fucking joking.

“Why would we need any sweet butts?” I plucked the broken bottom of a mug off the table beside me, “When I’m looking at a bitch right now.”

Andy’s face paled as his foot froze mid-stride. All I could think as his throat bobbed with a gulp was, come on, prick, keep poking me.

Even Moose didn’t know what to say. He stood there darting his eyes between Andy and me, unsure if I would carry through with my threat. I wasn’t into guys. My dick just didn’t swing that way, but right now, I didn’t really care. As long as I could make someone suffer, then I was in. I preferred it was one person in particular, but you work with what you got. Besides, Andy had pretty blue eyes...just like her.

Andy’s foot dropped to the ground, and my brow arched, daring him to keep coming.

“Look, Prez...” The fucker didn’t look so confident now. “I don’t see what you’re so pissed about.”

Heat rushed through my veins, boiling my blood.

“April was a cool chick, sure...”

Oh, I was gonna kill him.

“But she was just a chick.”

I lunged, knocking Andy to the floor while slamming the broken beer mug into his face over and over again. Moose grumbled something and tried to pull me off, but I wasn't going anywhere.

April was not some fucking chick. She was my chick. The woman meant to have my kids. She was the only person who knew the real me. I told her I never wanted this life. I was born into it. I wanted to hand the reins over and take off like my older brother had, but I was loyal. I accepted my responsibilities and led because that was my duty. And that was okay because I had her. April was all the escape I needed.

Then she married someone else.

And this motherfucker had the same goddamn eyes as her.

Glass dug into my palm as I rained down my wrath.

Others joined Moose in trying to pull me off. I dropped them all. I took out one guy's knee, slammed my head back and broke someone's nose, and slashed another guy's face. Blood was everywhere. I could hear them yelling at me, but I couldn't stop. Not until the light sparkle in those eyes was gone.

Every strike I landed sent another image through my mind.

Slam...

That sweet smile turned into a frown.

Bash...

Tears streaked down her face.

Crack...

Pain and agony etched her forehead.

I was gone, lost in a fury of blood and bone, until a loud ‘Fuck sakes’ rang through my ears, and I was lifted off the ground.

“Fuck you,” I hissed, trying to get back to Andy and those fucking eyes.

Moose’s huge fist cracked off my jaw, snapping me out of it.

The ache crawling up the left side of my face doused the rage boiling through me to a dull burn. It wasn’t gone, but it was enough for me to take a breath and see the damage I’d done.

There was shit everywhere. Andy was a broken mass of groaning flesh. Two other guys lay on the floor beside him, one out cold, the other clutching his knee. And Moose had fat red drops sliding down his cheek, dripping on my arm. That one I felt bad about.

“You fucking good?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’m good.”

As good as I could be anyway.

Moose shot me a dirty look and set me back on my feet. I couldn’t take my eyes off the gash on his face. “You okay?”

“No motherfucker, I’m not okay.” He swept some blood off his cheek and yelled, “Someone wanna get a fucking cloth!”

I might've taken him to the hospital or offered him some payback if Andy hadn't opened his mouth.

“You're fucking crazy!”

My attention immediately snapped back to the broken face on the floor. “What was that?”

Andy gurgled and coughed out, “Fucking psycho.”

“I'm psycho, am I?” Alright.

I unzipped, pulled my dick out, and pissed all over him. Gotta say I liked the agonized grunts he choked out when he tried to turn his face away from my stream.

Moose dropped his head in his palm and muttered, “Jesus Christ.”

How's that for fucking psycho, you prick.

When I finished, I tucked my dick away and kicked Andy in the side. “Someone get this piece of shit out of my club.”

Thirty seconds later, he was dragged out.

That was when I noticed something on the other side of the room. A small blonde head ducked behind a chair. My first thought was that a piece of furniture survived. Then I saw her big doe eyes, and an idea curled the corner of my mouth.

“You.” I nodded at her. “What's your name?”

Frightened as she was, she still stood up and said, “Nadine.”

I gave her a quick once over. The girl wasn't bad. She had decent tits and a slight curve to her hips, but she looked young.

“How old are you?”

“Um...” Her eyes shifted to Moose, who nodded for her to answer. “Eighteen.”

That was young. What the fuck was she doing here in her designer jeans and clean pink t-shirt?

“She’s new,” Moose explained.

“Sweet Butt new or House Mouse new.”

“Foxy brought her in.”

That answered that question. Foxy only brought one kind of girl to the clubhouse. It also explained the outfit.

“You fucked anyone here yet?”

Nadine choked down an audible swallow and shook her head.

“Good.” I waved for her to follow and walked toward the door. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re gonna get married.”

If April could marry someone else, then so the fuck could I.

CHAPTER 2

1981 – Two Weeks Earlier

April

“Ah!” I screamed as my father’s hand connected with my face. Stumbling back, I gripped my stinging cheek and stared at him in horror. He’d never laid a hand on me in my entire eighteen years until this moment.

My eyes went to his finger as he pointed it at me.

“You’ll marry who I tell you to. I’ve let you get away with too much for too long.”

“Dad...I’ve always done what you asked, but I don’t even like Jackson. I love Ian.”

His heavy boots stomped toward me. I never thought I would be scared of my father, but I whimpered as he gripped the front of my leather jacket and yanked me up close to his nose.

“Are you refusing a direct order...again?”

Tears welled in my eyes as my lower lip trembled.

“You got to choose, Mom. You loved her. Why are you doing this?”

There was a flash of something in his hard silver eyes, guilt maybe, but it was gone so fast that I hardly had time to register it. I’d heard many tales about my father and how he could be a monster. It was hard to reconcile the gentle giant of a man I knew and the biker who had earned the road name Wrath for his volatile temper.

“The why is not your concern. You do what you’re told,” he growled, and I could make out the faint scent of whiskey mingling with cigarettes on his breath. “The wedding is set for next weekend. You’ll find a dress, smile, and do what every other woman has done to help this club by spreading your legs for Jackson and giving him a son. Do you hear me?”

“What? Please, Dad, don’t make me do this. You know I’m supposed to marry Grim. I love him, and you already agreed.” The tears spilled over, and I closed my eyes, turning my head away as he raised his hand to strike me again.

The blow didn’t happen. Instead, he pushed me away.

“I take back my consent, now get out of here,” he bellowed.

I wrapped my arms around myself and ran for the door. I didn’t slow down as I streaked through the clubhouse. The guys lounging around stared at me, but I didn’t glance at them on my way outside.

“Whoa, Pixie, what’s happening,” Mickey asked as I almost ran into him.

I avoided his outstretched hand and ran as hard as I could for my car. His yells got quieter behind me. No one in my father’s club would dare disagree with the prez, especially when it was club business. That was all I was, just another piece of business.

I knew I was seen as the lesser sex within the club hierarchy, but my father had never treated me that way. I was his princess, his whole world, and after Mom died, he made

sure I knew how loved I was. The man I saw tonight was not the father I knew. He was the man who everyone else saw. The one who fucked sweetbutts and shot anyone who crossed him.

Hands shaking, I managed to jerk open the door on my Firebird and collapsed into the seat. Mom would never have let him talk to me like that. Dad treated her like she walked on water. That was what I saw, and that was what I wanted for myself. I wanted to marry someone who loved me.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and grabbed a napkin to wipe away the black streaks of mascara running down my face. I wasn't going to do it. I wouldn't marry Jackson. He was a jerk when I met him before. Why would my father want me to marry down? It made no sense.

Ian was Prez of the Lost Souls, and my father had been all for us being together. Jackson was an enforcer for the Wild Dogs. And, from what I knew of the club and Jackson...I wanted nothing to do with either of them. The clubs were the same size, but going from Prez to Enforcer was wrong. Not only would this rip my heart out, but it was an insult.

"No, I'm not doing it," I said as my car roared to life with a turn of the key. I blinked away the rest of my tears as anger replaced the initial shock. If my father thought he could treat me like one of his fighting dogs, he could think again.

"Spread your legs and give Jackson a son," I grumbled. "Fuck that."

Pushing in the *Queen* cassette tape, *Another One Bites the Dust* blasted out of the speakers as I pulled away from the

curb. I stuck my arm out the window and gave the club my middle finger.

If I had to run off with Ian, I would do it. Once married, my father wouldn't dare touch me. We could hop on his bike, ride straight to Vegas, and be back before my father knew I was missing.

Grabbing my pack of smokes, I pushed in the car lighter and let the stick hang between my lips as my head bobbed to the music. There was always a twisting storm on the horizon when you were born into a motorcycle club, but I always thought it was glorious. I walked around school with my head held high despite coming from the wrong side of town. I didn't care what those sweater-wearing, big-haired, rich girls thought of me or my family. I wore the eagle on my back with pride, a badge of honor, and I would fight to the death if anyone said a negative word about the club, but now...I was questioning everything I thought I knew.

The night was cool, and I rolled down the window as I lit up the smoke and took my first drag, the little end glowing bright orange in the dark car. Ian's house was on a normally quiet street near the clubhouse, but there weren't any parking spots tonight as I turned onto his road. The driveway was crowded with bikes and pickup trucks.

"Shit," I mumbled as I pulled into a driveway further down. I was backing up to turn around when his front door opened, and Ian stepped outside. I smiled wide, but my heart stopped, and my stomach clenched tight as a girl stepped out with him and kissed him. I recognized her as one of the

sweetbutts from his club, and this wasn't a peck-on-the-cheek kind of kiss. It looked like she was trying to eat his face as she clung to his open shirt. His hands went to her hips, and I closed my eyes, not wanting to see anymore. I slammed my hands down on the steering wheel, and just like that, my heart shattered into a million jagged pieces of glass.

He lied to me. He said I was the only one he wanted. He told me his sappy story and said that I was the love of his life. Gripping the wheel, I dropped my forehead and opened my mouth in a silent scream as the betrayal and sadness coming from all sides tore at me.

They were gone when I lifted my head like it had never happened. All men were liars. I couldn't trust my father and now Ian, the two people I thought I could count on in this world.

Backing out of the driveway, I went home. What did it matter now who I married? At least Jackson was honest about being an asshole. I would never expect him to be kind or loyal.

I wouldn't expect anything from any man ever again.

* * *

10 Days Later

April

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Large curls were piled on my head with white flowers in my hair. The dress was nothing I would've picked out, but Jackson's mother insisted I wear her old wedding dress. The massive poofy arms felt like

kid's floaties and not a dress. Then again, maybe a life preserver was exactly what I needed to get through today.

"You look so beautiful," Jackson's mother cooed as she clutched her small purse and tissue to her chest.

A soft knock sounded at the door, but I didn't look away from my reflection. My eyes held the scars of what this was costing me. Ian had filled my heart, ripped it open, and thrown it away, leaving me numb.

"Hey, Pixie," Mickey said, stepping into view. He looked nice with his black jeans and suit jacket on.

"Hi, Mickey. Any last orders from my father?"

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked over his shoulder to the closed door.

"It's not too late, Pixie. If you want to get out of here, I'll drive the getaway car for you."

The corner of my mouth turned up, and even I wouldn't believe the half-hearted look on my face.

"Thanks Mickey, but where would I run?"

"Marry Ian," he whispered. "We all know how much he loves you."

I snorted and gripped the flowers in my hand tighter.

"That's a lie. I mean as much to him as to my father or Jackson. I was always just a woman to be sold off to the highest bidder...or for whatever reason, my father has. It just took me a long time to realize that my choices were never my own."

“Ian has come around like six times the past week. He’s worried. He started a fight with Sam, demanding to see you and make sure you were alive. Your father ordered him off the property, but I’ve seen the man Pixie, and I’m telling you, Ian loves you. Jackson will only hurt you.”

I slowly turned to stare at Mickey, who’d always been like an older brother to me.

“You mean like how Ian promised I was the only one for him, but then I found him with another girl the night I planned to run off with him?”

Mickey rubbed the back of his neck.

“Shit, Pixie, I don’t know what to say.”

“There is nothing to say. This was always going to be my life, and I was stupid to think my father was any different, that Ian was different.” I stared Mickey straight in the eyes. “You’re all the same.”

He stepped back like I slapped him.

“Dear, are you ready? They’re all waiting for you downstairs,” Jackson’s mother said through the door.

Mickey grabbed my arm as I walked past.

“I can’t speak for Ian and what you saw, but we’re not all like that.”

“Tell it to someone that gets to choose their future.”

Mickey let go, and I pulled open the door.

All I thought about was ending this life as fast as I could. I bought a gun but couldn’t pull the trigger. I sat with a razor

blade over my wrist, but ultimately, I couldn't slice my arm open. It was all I dreamed about—ending my life, erasing the numbness that made me feel hollow. It consumed my thoughts.

It was what I would fantasize about as I stood at the altar with Jackson by my side, and it would be what I thought about as he fucked me like his prized dog. I hated this world and everyone in it.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

CHAPTER 3

1983

Ian

“Shouldn’t you be with your wife?”

Was she fucking kidding me? She had her hand wrapped around my cock while my fingers were shoved up her cunt, and she was asking about my wife? If I wanted someone to kill the mood, I would call my mother.

“My wife is fine,” I purred, sliding my tongue up her neck.

This bitch tasted as sweet as she looked, and she looked pretty fucking sweet. All dolled up in her nurse scrubs with an innocent glint in her eyes. I knew I was gonna fuck her the second she walked into our room. Besides, Nadine didn’t need me. Women had been giving birth since the dawn of time without men holding their hands.

I would just get in the way. Now in here...

Her head fell back with a soft moan while I hooked my fingers inside her.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about what we should be doing.” I grazed my mouth across her cheek to suck her bottom lip between my teeth.

A few more pumps of my hand and her pussy tightened. I almost snorted when her hips pressed in. The only thing the little bitch was worried about now was her next orgasm, which worked for me. Busting my nut was all I gave a shit about. I

would walk out of here and go about my day the second I shot my load.

“This is wrong.” She gasped through a moan.

Not this shit again.

“We should stop.”

No the fuck we shouldn't.

“I have a husband.”

Who the fuck cared if she had a husband?

“I don't see him here,” I said while reaching into my back pocket for a rubber.

One could never be too safe these days. A guy had to protect his dick.

Guilt flashed across her face as her big eyes fluttered up at me.

“We've only been married for three months.”

“Uh-huh,” I grumbled, tearing open the foil with my teeth.

“Am I a horrible person?”

Jesus Christ, was she going to cry? I didn't have time for this shit. Pulling my hand from her cunt, I spun her around and pressed her face against the wall.

“I am, aren't I?” She whined into the drywall while I rolled the rubber down my shaft. “I'm a horrible person.”

Was she looking for confirmation? How the fuck should I know what kind of person she was? I didn't even know her

damn name. She might've tried to tell me, but I was too busy staring at her tits to pay attention.

“Craig is such a nice guy.”

I cocked a brow. “Who the fuck is Craig?”

“My husband,” she said in an annoyingly whiny tone.

Oh, right.

“Well,” I said as I kicked her legs apart, bent my knees, and lined myself up with her entrance. “That’s your problem.”

I slammed inside her so hard and fast that her entire body shook.

“Nice guys don’t want to hurt you.” I leaned in to growl in her ear, “I get off on it.”

I fucked her hard and rough, pressing her face harder into the wall with every thrust. That was mostly to shut her up. This bitch was fucking loud. The last thing I needed was to let the entire hospital know what we were doing. Moose would give me that look while Nadine bitched at me. No one needed that hassle.

I shoved my fingers in her mouth to get her to shut the fuck up. Her squeaky fucking moans almost ruined the mood. On the upside, the sound of her gagging helped me finally get the release I wanted.

Well, it was as much of a release as I could get. Nothing satisfied me anymore. Bitches, drugs, death, none of it curbed the craving that dug a hole inside me. It just kept getting

bigger and deeper with numbness. The only thing I did feel was the pain of others, and even that was mediocre at best.

I snapped the rubber off my dick and pulled my jeans up over my hips as a knock vibrated through the door.

“Grim, you better not be fucking in there.”

God damnit, the fucker found me.

The nurse’s eyes widened as she slapped her hands over her mouth as if the person on the other side would hear her shock.

“Oh, calm down.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s not your fucking husband.”

It was Moose—best friend and royal pain in my ass.

“I can hear you moving around in there,” Moose barked. “You better open this fucking door.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered while turning the knob.

Moose leaned over to look at the girl, quickly redressing herself, then turned his glare back on me.

“Really?”

Two years ago, the judgmental scowl on Moose’s face might’ve made me feel bad about my actions. Now, all it did was annoy me.

“What?” I shrugged and elbowed past him to walk down the hall.

He, of course, followed.

“Tell me you didn’t just fuck your wife’s maternity nurse.”

“Why not?” I paused to look back at him. “It’s not like I can fuck my wife.”

Not that I wanted to. I used the sweetbutts, the waitress at the burger joint down the street, a few drunk college girls, and anyone else I could. Monogamy was never part of our wedding vows.

“You’ve done some low shit, but this takes the cake.”

I just shook my head. This wasn’t a new argument, though I didn’t see the problem. Nadine was homeless and ready to sell herself to the entire club for food and safety. Now, she had a roof over her head and protection. She got what she wanted.

“Nadine is a good girl...”

I stopped and spun around.

“I never said she wasn’t.”

Nadine kept her head down and didn’t bother me much. She was still naggy and frustrating as fuck, but I didn’t get the third degree when I came home from a weeklong bender.

“I don’t get you.” Moose huffed out a sigh and crossed his arms. “Why do you insist on hurting her?”

I rolled my eyes and continued down the hall to the stairway door.

“She made her choice.”

The maternity ward was upstairs, yet I still heard a baby cry. Maybe it was coming from the waiting room or down the hall. Wherever the kid was, their cry smacked me in the face with reality. I was a father. For the first time in years,

excitement flowed through my veins. Warmth filled my chest as my hand wrapped around the doorknob, and for a brief second, the numbness was gone.

Then I heard Moose mutter, “Shit,” and looked down the hall.

That hole inside me spewed out all the wrath and hatred I’d bottled up.

Fucking April was standing down the hall with a big ass bruise on the right side of her face that anyone could see from a mile away. I looked at the door that led to my wife and then back toward April.

“Don’t fucking do it,” Moose growled. That was all the push I needed.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do.”

CHAPTER 4

April

I couldn't stop my hand from shaking. It looked like a two-year-old had written my name in the stupid little boxes. A woman sat across from me with her young son beside her, both staring at me like I was a monster. It wasn't far from the mark.

I didn't need a mirror to know I looked awful. I felt the swelling and couldn't see out of my right eye. The ice and anti-inflammatory I took hadn't done shit.

There were no tears...not anymore. I was upset the first dozen times Jackson came home drunk or pissed off, deciding to relieve his anger on me. I cried and blamed myself. Fuck I even tried to be different because I thought I was the problem. I wasn't the fucking problem, he was, but I had nowhere to run.

Jackson was the enforcer for the Wild Dogs MC, and my father sold me to him to pay off a debt, though I never got the whole story. No matter where I ran, he would find me and kill me. My choices were limited to staying alive, taking what Jackson dished out, hoping he got shot in the head or arrested, or...running and ending up dead within days, probably worse because he would torture me first.

"Mrs. McMillan?" The nurse at the counter called out, and I looked up from the clipboard. "Right this way."

Standing, I grabbed my purse and followed the nurse into the emergency area filled with people lying on beds with

curtains dividing them. She didn't guide me to one of those. Nope, I got special treatment with a room of my own.

I already knew what would happen inside these four walls. The nurse would try to talk me into leaving, offering help and pamphlets telling me to go to the police and press charges. Sure, if I wanted to end up on America's Missing Persons Database before the night was out. Any protection the club might offer me would be ripped away if I sold them out.

Most of the time, I knew when Jackson was coming home in one of his rages. Those were the nights I visited Prez's wife. We'd started a book club and even painted a little. She knew what he was like, just like they all knew, but she never said anything. I signed up for this when I said, 'I do.'

The door closed behind me, and I was surprised when it immediately opened again. I was usually sitting in here for a good twenty minutes.

Turning around, I didn't know what shocked me more, the fact that it wasn't the doctor or that my stomach flipped and my heart rate tripled just like no time had passed. Ian stood stock still inside the room. The door closed behind him as his large frame blocked all view of the hospital hallway. He looked the same, just a fuck load angrier, with a dark five o'clock shadow. His hair was a little longer, and for some reason, he seemed taller and a lot more muscular than I remembered.

My eyes ate him up like a once-in-a-lifetime meal. It had been so long since my heart beat like this that I forgot what it felt like or that it was even possible.

“Ian?” I whispered under my breath, even though he was right in front of me.

“What the fuck happened to your face?” He growled out, his hands balling into fists.

Nothing could’ve knocked me out of the dreamy fantasy faster, and I turned away from his dark stare.

“I fell down the stairs,” I said, giving my patented response.

“Bullshit,” he snarled. I gasped as his hand wrapped around my arm and yanked me into the corner of the room. My eyes flicked to the door a few feet away, but now it seemed like miles. “Tell me the truth, April. What the fuck happened?”

“What does it matter to you?” I shoved at his chest, but I would’ve had more luck moving a mountain. “Just go away. Don’t you have a kid being born soon or something?” I jerked my fingers back, way too tempted to get a better feel.

One of his brows arched up. “How do you know that?”

I couldn’t hold his stare and looked down at his chest, noticing the black t-shirt stretched wide over the hard muscle. I also couldn’t tell him I’d never stopped loving him or that as much as he hurt me, he was all I thought about. I kept in touch with one of the guys in his club, and he fed me information about Ian and his wife for a price. I’d become a stalker of sorts, obsessed with the past and what might have been.

The long-dead tears suddenly remembered how to fall and stung my face as they slid from my eyes. Great, now I was

fucking crying in front of him.

“I hear things,” I said. “The point is I’m right, aren’t I?” I knew from the lack of blood on his clothes. “That’s why you’re in the hospital. She’s probably delivering right now,” I said, unable to hold the snark out of my voice.

“She already gave birth.” A sharp pain lanced my heart, and I hated that after all this time, he could still hurt me. “I should be asking why the fuck you care when you’re the one that married someone else first.” His hand squeezed my arm harder. “You made a fucking ass of me. I was humiliated in front of my entire club.”

“Good, you fucking deserved it,” I growled back and was quickly shoved harder into the wall. “You gonna hit me? Kill me?”

His lip twisted in a snarl. “I fucking should. I would love to wrap my hands around your throat and kill you for what you did.”

“What I did?” A bitter laugh escaped my lips. “I guess you would see it that way.” I shrugged and met his glare, which was like staring down a bear. “Then do it. You’d be doing me a favor.”

Ian opened his mouth, but a hard knock sounded a second before the door opened, and Moose stuck his head inside. I couldn’t stop the smile that spread across my face at the sight of the man I thought of as a brother.

“Hey Pixie, long time no see,” Moose said, returning the smile.

“I haven’t heard that nickname in a long time.”

“You sure are just as cute as one,” Moose said. “Fuck girl, you may even be prettier than the last time I saw you.”

It was so wrong, but the growl coming from Ian made me want to tear off my clothes and jump on him. In just a blink, he wasn’t married with a baby, and I wasn’t married and fearing for my life. For that one breath, nothing had changed. For a few beats of my heart, I felt alive inside, but reality is a bitch, and just like that, it all disappeared.

“The doctor is headed this way. You need to go,” Moose said to Ian. He smiled at me again. “It was good seeing you, Pixie. I miss your face around the clubhouse. You always could light up a room.” Then Moose was gone, leaving the door open.

Blinking, I turned back to Ian, who looked as torn as I felt about him leaving. Although, I was sure his reasons were not the same as mine.

“This isn’t over. You will tell me.” Ian let go of my arm, and I didn’t say anything as he backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

My lower lip trembled as all the old emotions and pain rushed to the surface, swallowing me whole. Sliding down the wall, I sat in the corner and let it all out. Once I left this room, I had to return to my life, and I couldn’t take any of this with me. I needed to shut down and didn’t know if I was strong enough for a second time.

It was sad and maybe pathetic, but I would rather Jackson took my life with his next blows than suffer through Ian, pummeling my heart into dust all over again.

CHAPTER 5

Ian

Determination and fury balled my fists as I stormed past Moose down the hall.

He stepped up behind me. “Where are you going?”

“Where the fuck do you think I’m going.”

The answer to that was pretty fucking obvious. I was going to kill Jackson McMillan. I was going to rip his fucking heart out and shove it up his ass, and that was after I cut his balls off and stuffed them down his throat.

Motherfucker had put his hands on April. I still fucking hated her, but that didn’t mean someone else could hurt her. Jackson stole her from me, and I would be damned if he took her pain and tears too. That shit was mine.

Why the fuck was she protecting him? Most clubs had rules about this shit. Old ladies were not punching bags. Nadine wasn’t my first choice. She frustrated the shit out of me, but I would never lay a hand on her. The Wild Dogs were just that—fucking dogs.

Moose’s large paw grabbed my shoulder and pulled me to a stop. “Do you want to start a war?”

I looked him dead in the eyes.

“Maybe.”

The Wild Dogs had it coming. I didn’t give a shit about their prez’s apologies and negotiations. The fact that he allowed April’s marriage to happen showed exactly how much

respect they had for us. Why the fuck should we give them any?

Moose shook his head. "It's not worth it, Grim."

"I disagree."

"How many people did we lose in the last one?"

The Bratva were some hardass sons of bitches, but...

"We still won."

Technically, it was more of a truce. Territory lines were drawn, and we stayed out of each other's business. We'd even done a couple of jobs together since then, not that I was particularly fond of working with any mob, let alone the sneaky fucking Russians. There was always a catch.

"Yeah, we won," Moose grumbled. "But at what cost?"

That statement made my gut churn. My sister's dull, lifeless eyes still haunted me. My brother Maverick left the country shortly after that.

Blowing out a breath, I scrubbed a hand down my face.

"I can't let this go."

"Yes, you can," Moose said. "She's not yours to protect."

"The fuck she..." I choked on my words the second my eyes landed on the door where April was.

He was right. April wasn't mine. Not anymore. Maybe she never was. Why else would she protect a piece of shit like Jackson if she didn't love him?

Numbness crept back up my spine. Why the fuck did I care what happened to her? April chose someone else. Jackson could be her knight in shining armor. Except he wasn't a knight, he was the goddamn villain, a mangy dog that needed to be put down.

Fuck it.

“Yeah. I’m still gonna kill him.”

The only thing that stopped me from marching out of the hospital and shooting Jackson in the head was the voice I heard behind us.

“You’re going to kill who?”

My face dropped in my palm as I groaned, “Who the fuck invited you?”

I could feel my mother cocking her hip behind me. “You didn’t think I would miss seeing my grandchild, did you?”

Kind of. At least, I hoped she would. We didn’t have the best relationship. Other mothers were kind and loving. Mine was a hardass bitch, which according to her, was only to make sure her boys were strong. I think she just enjoyed being a pain in the ass.

“Now,” my mother said, walking up beside me. “Who are you killing?”

“Jackson McMillan,” Moose answered for me, and I shot him a dirty look.

It was none of my mother’s business.

“Jackson McMillan?” My mother cocked a brow. “Why would...”

Her unfinished question was answered when a doctor entered the room at the end of the hall. April’s eyes met mine for a fraction of a second, and it all came rushing back: the hurt, the pain of losing her, and the desire to kill her and her husband.

“Oh, I see.” My mother grumbled as the door once again closed.

I felt the sting of her slap before I heard it, and all I could think as my head twisted to the side was, I should’ve seen that one coming.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing? That girl is none of your business.”

My head whipped back around as I met my mother’s snarl with one of my own. “The fuck she isn’t!”

“That girl not only left you, she downgraded.” My mother’s words caused my jaw to tick. “She could’ve had a prez and married an enforcer instead. That’s how little she thinks of you.”

God damnit, she really knew how to dig that nail in.

“Jackson fucking hit her!” Why I told my mother that, I had no idea. It just came out.

“So what? Who cares. April made her bed. Let her lay in it.”

I kept looking down the hall, hoping to catch another glimpse of her pretty face. Something that Ma noticed because the next time my eyes rolled that way, she cupped my face and turned my stare back to her.

“Let her go, Ian. She isn’t worth a second of your time.”

I wanted to, I really fucking did, but April was right there. She was always right there.

“I could kill her.” I could kill them all.

My mother pulled my forehead down to hers and sighed, “What have I always told you?”

“Play smart, not hard.”

“That’s right. You’re on the path to being king of this world.” Her dark eyes snapped up to mine. “Don’t fuck it up over some chick.”

A part of me wanted to slap the living shit out of her—April wasn’t some chick—but my mother was right. She might be a bitch I couldn’t stand, but she was smart.

“Now, how about you take me to meet my grandson.”

Fuck, that was right. I had a kid now—a kid I had yet to see. Guess I wasn’t winning any Father of the Year awards.

My mother’s hands dropped away from my face as I let out a long breath. “Alright, let’s go see my kid.”

“About fucking time,” Moose muttered.

I turned to head to Nadine’s room and instantly froze. Standing a few feet away with a smug smirk on his face was fucking Jackson McMillan.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your touching moment.”

Motherfucker!

The only thing that kept me from tearing his eyes out was the look my mother shot me.

Moose was about as impressed as I was to see the asshole, but he still tipped his head down the hall. “Your wife is down there.”

“Thanks,” he sang while practically skipping past me.

I couldn’t stop myself from grumbling, “I hope she fucking kills you one day.”

He stopped and arched a brow. “What was that?”

Don’t do it, Ian. Just keep walking and ignore the prick.

One step was all I got before spinning around. “You fucking heard me.”

“Careful, Grim,” Jackson tsked. “You’re overstepping your bounds.”

Overstepping my bounds?

“Fuck you, you piece of shit.”

Moose swore under his breath as I stormed forward and jabbed my finger in Jackson’s chest.

“April is my bounds.”

Moose and my mother were both on edge, but I didn’t care. They could both fuck right off.

“Is that so?” Jackson said, then leaned in and softly added, “Who’s cock will she be bouncing off of tonight?”

My fist flew before Moose could stop me.

CHAPTER 6

April

The doctor began the conversation with the typical pep talk about leaving and my options.

“Look, I know you’re just doing your job, but can you please just tell me if anything is broken and—” I stopped as screaming started in the hall.

The doctor whipped open the door. I moved to follow him but jumped out of the way as a chair flew by and crashed into the wall. What the hell was going on?

Nurses were running in my direction, and that was when I heard Jackson’s voice and Ian yelling, “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Fear snaked down my spine as a cold dread settled in my stomach.

“Knock it off, you fucking idiots,” Ma yelled.

Ian and his mother didn’t have a good relationship. He wasn’t lying about his child being born if she was here.

“For fuck’s sake,” Moose growled, his voice strained.

I ran toward the small waiting area where I’d been sitting not long ago. It looked like a bomb had exploded. Chairs were lying on their sides as people cowered from the large men rolling around on the floor.

Blood dripped from Ian’s nose, and a bruise was forming on his face. Jackson didn’t look much better. Moose was trying to pull Ian off of him, and for a brief second, I

wondered if I should just let Ian kill Jackson. I dreamed of his death, but Ian in prison when he now had a kid to look after was not the way I wanted that to happen. No matter what, Ian's child was innocent and deserved a father.

They were fighting because of me. Ian was the dick that broke my heart, but the Lost Souls had a strict code about hurting your old lady. Something the Wild Dogs should have learned.

Pushing off the wall, I ran toward them, and as they rolled, Jackson ended up on top. Without thinking, I barreled into his side. The force of the hit made me cry out as my swollen cheek collided with his shoulder, and we tumbled off Ian. The pain was instant and hurt worse than the initial punches. My stomach rolled, and I felt like I was going to pass out.

I pushed myself onto my knees and spotted the glint of Jackson's switchblade. No matter what punishment came later, it was worth saving Ian's life. Jackson was good with a knife. So good that you would bleed out with one strike, even in the middle of a hospital.

"What the fuck are you doing bitch," Jackson growled under his breath as I panted to catch my own.

Our eyes locked, and I knew he was going to hurt me again.

"Saving your ass from going to jail," I said as security and police officers rounded the corner.

His eyes narrowed, and I knew he didn't believe me, but I didn't care what he did anymore. You could only take so much

punishment before you stopped caring about anything.

“Both of you get up,” the policeman said, and I turned my head to look at Ian as he slowly stood.

He didn’t look at Jackson as he put his hands behind his back. No, he stared at me, eyes cold and full of hate. The rage that burned there was as palpable as if his hand was around my throat.

“Let’s go,” the officer who cuffed Ian said, but still, he didn’t take his eyes off mine.

“Call Mange. He’ll bail me out,” Jackson said as the other officer pulled him away.

“You okay, Pixie,” Moose asked as he walked away from Ma, whose glare was eerily similar to her son’s.

“I will be,” I said and let Moose help me to my feet. “I think.”

The room spun, and I gripped Moose’s arm to avoid falling over.

“This is all your fault, girl. You didn’t deserve my son then, and your sorry ass certainly doesn’t deserve his loyalty now.” Ma sneered and stomped away. She hadn’t changed, and her feelings for me certainly hadn’t improved.

“Don’t mind her,” Moose said, wrapping an arm around my waist to help me to a chair. “I better head to the station and make sure they don’t put those two in the same cell.”

Moose smirked, and I would’ve too, if it didn’t hurt so much.

“Moose...” I held his arm a little tighter, never wanting to let go. “I wanted to say thank you. I never got to say that before, but I always appreciated your friendship.”

I let go of his arm, and Moose stared down at me, his eyes soft and kind, which seemed to contradict the hulking size of the man.

“You ever going to tell us why you didn’t marry Grim? It’s as plain as day that you still love him, and he loves you.” He shrugged. “I don’t get it.”

I laid my head back on the cinderblock wall, watching the nurses and orderlies clean up blood and set the chairs in their rightful place.

“It doesn’t matter now. What’s done is done, and you all have a new baby to celebrate. All hail the new king.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and looked away from Moose’s concerned face. It hurt too much to think that he could’ve been my family. I’d been so close to something different. I hated that I never confronted Ian about what I saw. Maybe we could’ve fixed shit then, but we couldn’t go back in time now.

Moose stepped away but stopped before looking back.

“For what it’s worth, you’re still my family. If you want out, come find me, and I’ll get you to Canada.”

Moose stomped away, and I almost jumped up and chased after him. I would’ve if I weren’t positive the recourse would be my father hung by his neck with a bullet between his eyes.

Then I would be hunted down, and my throat slit after getting passed around like a sex doll.

I was born into an MC. I knew exactly what would happen.

“Mrs. McMillan?” I looked up at the doctor who had been with me before all hell broke loose. “We better finish that exam.”

Nodding, he helped me to my feet. I shuffled beside him down the hall like seeing the love of my life defending my honor hadn't just happened.

* * *

1984

April

“You're fucking coming, April,” Jackson growled.

Going to a huge MC gathering was not what I wanted to do. I hated going anywhere with Jackson. Riding with him, and staying on the road for days while he partied and fucked other women, all in the name of honoring someone I'd never met, was not my idea of a good time. I would rather poke pins in my eyes.

“Why the fuck do you want me there? All you're going to do is run off, drink with the guys, and fuck some other girls while I'm left alone,” I yelled.

I was pushing my luck, and maybe I wanted to. Jackson stomped toward me, and I didn't flinch as he raised his hand.

“What? Are you planning on breaking the other one?” I held up my casted arm. “Go ahead. I'm sure the doctor would

love to see me back this soon.”

Jackson’s fist curled into the front of my t-shirt before he pushed me up against the wall.

“You’re pretty fucking mouthy for someone that isn’t even woman enough to give me a son.”

The blow was below the belt, hitting the way it was meant to. Not that I really wanted to have a child with Jackson, but the fact that I couldn’t get pregnant when all the other old ladies had kids made me feel inadequate as a woman. I’d stupidly thought telling Jackson how I felt would make him more understanding. Instead, it only gave him more ammunition.

My lip curled up as I snarled back at him. “You heard what the doctor said. It may not be my fault.”

I laughed as he slammed me against the wall.

His finger was suddenly in my face.

“I wonder how much you’ll laugh when I slit your father’s throat for giving me his defective daughter. Maybe I should demand a refund or a swap for your younger sister.”

My lips pressed together so I didn’t say something else to antagonize him. My sister, Lizzy, wasn’t really my sister by blood, but that didn’t matter. She was a house mouse that a few families, including mine, had allowed to stay in their homes. We were super close before I married Jackson, but as soon as I realized what kind of life I set myself up for, I cut off everyone and everything...well, almost everyone.

“Nothing to say to that?”

“When do we leave,” I asked, knowing that was what he wanted to hear.

A cruel smile spread across his face.

“That’s better.” He pushed away and marched across the room. “We ride out in an hour. Be ready.”

I glanced down at my broken arm. The doctor said it would be six weeks before the cast could come off, but some things never mended.

CHAPTER 7

Ian

There was something about the roar from a trail of bikes that was oddly calming. Almost as if the engines revving were a lullaby. As a kid, I would sit back and close my eyes while the vibrations coursed through me. Other kids had fairy tales and music to put them to sleep. I had the hum of Harleys and the soft glow of headlights.

That was probably why I enjoyed gatherings like this. It didn't matter why we were called. The crowd of leather, along with the smell of whiskey and gas, was my home. If South Dakota weren't so far away, I would go to the rally in Sturgis every year. Before I was Prez, I went all the time, but now I had shit to do and responsibilities.

"Hey, man." A member of the Devil's Debt walked up and clapped his hand in mine. "Been a long time."

Yeah," I said. "It's been a while."

I had no idea who he was, but he seemed to know me. Not surprising. Every Prez here was well known.

"I heard you had a kid."

I nodded. "I have a son."

Cory sure was a cute little shit. I couldn't get enough of his laugh and chubby little cheeks. I spent every second I could with him when I wasn't handling club business or following a certain someone around.

Speaking of a certain someone...

My eyes drifted around the various clubs. Each had a chair dubbed the throne for their leader, but I was only interested in one particular throne. Mongrel was the Wild Dog's prez, and let's just say the name fit his face. He'd gotten older since the last time I saw him. Gray was creeping into his beard, and I could see the wrinkles under his eyes from here, but he wasn't who I was looking for.

My gaze was drawn to a familiar face in the crowd like a moth to a flame. Poor little April didn't look too happy. The scowl on her face rivaled the angriest motherfucker I knew. She crossed her arms and huffed. Her marriage hadn't improved this last year. I knew it hadn't because I'd followed her.

Every Wednesday morning, she went to the café down the street for coffee and waffles. On Thursdays, she did chores and ran errands. Fridays, she tried to avoid her husband until he went out and started his weekend of drinking and fucking.

But it was her Sunday afternoon activity that I found ironic. At noon every week, she drove down to a little church on the south side of Miami to counsel battered women. I would call her a hypocrite if it weren't the pot calling the kettle black.

We married other people, and I had a kid, but there was no way in hell I was going to sit back and watch April's belly grow with another man's seed. Interesting fact: Prednisone reduces sperm count, and Jackson drank a lot. Thanks to Moose and his incessant questions about my frequent trips to the vet, there was now a cat wandering around the clubhouse.

I leaned forward, resting my forearms on my knees as Jackson strutted through the crowd toward his wife. He didn't look happy. Something had pissed him off, and if I were a betting man, I would say it was the low cut of April's black t-shirt. I wasn't the only one staring at her tits.

One good thing about a gathering like this...Jackson wouldn't lay a finger on her. Not in front of all of us.

“So what do you say?”

I tipped my gaze back to the Devil's Debt member. “About what?”

Why the fuck was he still here?

“Tonight?” His brows knitted as if he was surprised I hadn't heard him.

Not sure why. It wasn't exactly quiet. People were yelling, music was blaring, and bikes were revving. It was easier to hear during the peak hour at a nightclub.

When I said nothing and stared at him, he explained, “The mud wrestling? You said we could use a few of your sweetbutts?”

“Oh yeah, Roxy has a few girls, I think.”

I waved my hand, dismissing him, and turned my attention back to April.

She looked really good in those tight fucking jeans. If I tilted my head the right way, I could almost see her ass. Too bad Jackson stepped in, obstructing my view. Judging by how he waved his hand over her chest, my assumption about the

shirt was correct. April wasn't putting up with it, though. She returned his snarling scowl with one of her own.

That's my girl. Or at least that was my girl.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I let out a sigh.

What the fuck was I doing? Wasting my time following her around, and for what? Revenge? Satisfaction? Hope? April made her choice. She even defended the prick. Whatever we were was dead the second April said I do. She killed us.

Sometimes I think she killed me. Forgiveness wasn't an option, even if she did come crawling back...though I wouldn't mind seeing her crawl.

My brow arched. That wasn't a bad idea. I liked the thought of humiliating and degrading her. Watching as she got down on her hands and knees while I jerked off. If she was good, I might let her lick my boot.

Her argument with Jackson halted when her eyes rolled to the left and met mine. The corner of my mouth lifted. One look was all it took to trap her. April stood there with her lips parted, staring back at me. Could she sense what I wanted to do to her? Did she see the images running through my mind?

You want to play with me, Kitty Cat?

I couldn't stop myself from mouthing, "Tulip."

April shivered and tore her eyes away.

I hadn't called her that in a long time, yet it felt completely natural. Like, I never stopped saying it.

She was trying hard not to look at me and failed miserably. Those bright blue orbs kept darting my way. I, on the other hand, didn't give a shit. I sat here and openly ogled her, and there wasn't a goddamn thing anybody could do about it. I knew this shit was a powder keg waiting to blow. All it needed was a match.

The next time April's eyes rolled my way, she wasn't the only one to notice me sitting here. Jackson did, too. Deep lines etched his forehead as utter hatred took over his face. I damn near laughed when he puffed his chest out. Prick wanted to hit me. I could see the desire tightening his fists.

Challenge tugged at my brow as I gave him a small nod.

Come on fucker. I dare you.

For a second, I thought he would take the bait, but then he looked around and clenched his jaw.

That's right, you little pissant. Stay down there with the other minions while I sit up here on my fucking throne.

There were rules at a gathering like this, a hierarchy that had to be respected. That didn't mean I wouldn't egg the prick on. I sat back, turned my eyes to April, and grabbed my junk.

That did the trick. Jackson stormed forward as I rolled my shoulders back, preparing for a fight.

Then April had to go and get in the way. She rushed forward to cut her husband off and pulled him in for a kiss. The final thread of control I was hanging on snapped as his lips touched hers.

April just sealed her fate. I was done playing games. Fuck this stalker and prey bullshit. It was time to hunt and feed. The powder keg just blew.

And she was the fucking match.

CHAPTER 8

April

“Why aren’t you with Jackson,” my father asked as I approached his tent. I rolled my eyes.

“Nice to see you too, Wrath,” I said, purposely using his road name.

He hated it when I did that, but I couldn’t think of him as my father anymore, not after he sold me off to pay debts. Who the fuck did that to their only daughter? Now if I could find a way to stop being loyal to his fucking ass, I would be golden.

“To answer your question, the piece of shit is around here somewhere,” I said, watching his face flame red.

Was I trying to give him a heart attack every time I saw him now? Maybe. It brought me way too much fucking joy to see how pissed I could make him. How times had changed? At one point, I was his little angel, sitting by his side, his pride and joy. Now I was the bitch that couldn’t get pregnant and had a mouth worse than a trucker fucking a sailor. I put up with very little—besides what Jackson dished out—and even those episodes weren’t as frequent.

When he broke my arm, I grabbed a knife and held it to his throat, hand still and stare level. I saw a waver of uncertainty in his eyes. He knew he could push, but he’d backed this bitch into the corner with a stick too many times, and I bit back.

“Still no respect for your man, I see,” my father said.

“Respect is earned, and he hasn’t earned shit from me. The only reason I stay with the waste of space is to keep your wrinkly old ass alive.” Mickey laughed, then covered his mouth and coughed as my father glared at him. “Good to see you, Mickey.”

“Good to see you too, Pixie,” Mickey said, smiling.

We had coffee once a month, and he kept me up on what my father didn’t want me to know. Shit like, how he was still coughing up blood and refused to take his medication regularly or quit smoking. Fucking, stupid, stubborn men.

Even though anger burned through my veins regarding my father, I stepped up to him and gave him a hug. He was skinnier than the last time I saw him, his bones more prominent on his face.

He gripped my arm before I could pull away.

“One day, I’ll be gone, and when I am, I don’t care what you do.” His voice was barely a whisper.

Shocked, I stepped back. My father’s silver eyes didn’t give anything away to those standing around, but I’d heard him loud and clear. He wasn’t forgiven, but that was the only push I needed to remove Jackson from my life for good.

“I’ll swing by later.”

I didn’t wait to be excused and stepped out from under the shade of my father’s tent into the bright sun. My stupid broken arm was sweating inside the cast, and I hadn’t realized how much I loved rulers until now.

“Hey Pixie, you’re smoking today,” Digger said as I walked by his tent. Giving him a wink, he bit his fist, making me laugh.

“Thanks, you still look as fuckable as ever.” Teasing him, I made sure my ass swayed a little more and smirked when he swore.

I’d never been unfaithful to Jackson, although he’d given me more than enough reasons to be or leave him. Hell, even kill him, but I hadn’t done any of that. No, I played the part of the dutiful wife. But it made me feel good being noticed, and that was all that mattered. The good Lord knew that Jackson hadn’t made me feel that way since the day we got married.

As I neared the Wild Dogs’ tent, I saw Jackson flirting with some girl from another club. He didn’t bother to try and hide it anymore. In fact, I think he enjoyed rubbing it in my face. He stared down at the girl’s boobs, his hand touching her hip, and I knew what they would be doing later.

“Fuck me, Pixie, you are still the finest piece of ass in this place,” Grizzly said as he walked by. “I would give those tits of yours a pearl necklace right now if I could.”

I smiled wide at Grizzly, the prez of the Brumbies. He’d been trying to get into my pants since I turned sixteen. Jackson must have heard the comment and stomped over, glaring at Grizzly.

“What the fuck are you doing with your tits hanging out?”

I lifted an eyebrow at him. “You’ve seen this top a hundred times.”

“Bullshit, I would remember a top like that.”

“You would have to be sober, and with your dick not in another chick long enough to notice,” I growled and stood up straight as he took a threatening step in my direction. “Do it, fucking hit me in front of all these clubs, then let’s see how quickly your throat is slashed.”

It wasn’t a false boast or anything to do with me specifically. Most of the guys here hated abuse. Rough sex... sure, but beating your old lady was a no-go. Jackson wouldn’t survive five minutes.

He got right up in my face but pointed at my boobs.

“Cover these fucking things up.”

“Fuck you.”

I could feel someone staring at us and figured they were enjoying the show. That was fine, but when I glanced to the right, all I saw through the sea of bodies was Ian’s intense stare. It felt like he was trying to bore holes into the side of my skull. Even with the murderous glare, my heart jumped. I was starting to wonder if I would ever be free of the confines of my love for him. He was like vines growing over my heart, covering it completely, and no matter how much I cut off, they choked out everything other than him.

I quickly looked back at Jackson, trying to take in what he was saying but not really hearing him or caring. I could still feel Ian’s glare as if it were his hands.

“I told you to behave, or you’d be sorry.”

“I can’t be any more sorry than I already am.”

Unable to stop myself, I looked toward Ian again, and he hadn't moved. It was as if he were a predator staring down prey. I just wasn't sure if it was Jackson or me he wanted to kill...or kill first.

“Why the hell are you looking over there?”

“I'm bored and looking for someone other than you to talk to.”

He growled and stepped right up to me as if getting me to back down would show how manly he was. Hell would freeze over before I bowed at his feet again.

Ian was like a fucking magnet, and my head turned for a third time. This time, Jackson stopped mid-rant to see what had my attention.

As soon as he saw Ian, I knew there would be bloodshed. Even though it was clear Jackson didn't want me, he sure as hell didn't want anyone else to have me.

“Is that who you're fucking staring at?”

“Who?”

“Don't fucking lie to me. I know you were looking at Grim,” Jackson growled, his voice threatening as he held his arm out in Ian's direction.

I looked over again and swallowed, my brain racing to find a good excuse.

“I didn't see him until you pointed him out. I was busy looking at a fight about to break out.”

Jackson looked back, and Ian chose that moment to grab his crotch as he smirked.

“I’m going to fucking kill that prick,” Jackson said. He turned and stomped in Ian’s direction.

“No, Jackson.”

“I should’ve done this after he attacked me at the hospital. He’s a dead man.” He reached for the gun in his waistband, and all I could see was Ian with two shots through his chest or one between the eyes.

I reacted. Grabbing Jackson’s face with my good arm, I slammed my lips to his, shoving my tongue into his mouth the way he liked. My fingers snaked into his hair, gripping it hard so he couldn’t yank away.

“I know what you’re doing,” Jackson said when I released his mouth to come up for air.

“Is it working?”

He looked over to where Ian was sitting and smiled. My heart sank at the sight of the empty seat. I needed to stop torturing myself like this. There was no more me and Ian, not in anything. And there would never be again. I needed to find a way to get over him.

Jackson smiled wide. “Yeah, I would say it did.”

CHAPTER 9

April

Coming here with Jackson was a mistake. If there'd been a way to get out of it, I would've taken it. Jackson was the worst piece of shit. There wasn't a bigger dick around, and I wasn't talking about what he was packing in his pants cause that was lacking. I finally gave up and left the main arena rented out for the occasion. Shit was going sideways quick with this crowd. Talking and drinking all day in the sun created a perfect storm. Fights had already started, and the next stage was couples fucking up against walls.

Even with all of that, Jackson still didn't pay attention to me. Nope, he snuck off with a sweetbutt who apparently had a great ass in her jeans. I stomped harder along the darkened rows of tents, bikes, and small temporary buildings. My hand went to my ass to confirm it was just as round and amazing as I remembered. I had a great ass. I had a better ass now than when I was eighteen, for fuck's sake. Staying fit and doing a workout I found called yoga kept me looking great, not that I was old, but I knew I had a smoking bod.

I wasn't all that upset. It was the principle of the matter. Maybe that was what pissed me off. Jackson wasn't sneaking off to be with the next Claudia Schiffer. No, he snuck off with a girl barely able to drink. It actually made sense when I thought about it. She wouldn't know he was pathetic in bed, which fed his ego. He couldn't stir an orgasm in me if he paid me.

A belch made me look back, but it was just someone with their woman heading toward the never-ending party. I turned back just in time to see a hand streak out of the dark between two large tents. There was no time to scream as the hand wrapped around my arm and fingers dug into my skin. With a hard jerk, I was yanked off my feet and pulled into the darkness like a sea creature had me in its grasp.

The momentum caused me to whip around, and I smacked up against one of the small buildings. The moment I stopped moving, my mouth was assaulted by lips I would know anywhere. The memory of them was branded on my brain. As Ian Mathers bit my lower lip hard, all the reasons not to kiss him vanished. I cried out enough that he invaded my mouth with force. The kiss felt more like an attack, but it didn't matter. The reaction in my body was the same.

The spark that had never died roared to life, and I moaned into his mouth, letting him possess me. Wrapping my arm around his neck, I pulled him harder into me, demanding more. I was angry with him for still capturing me like this after all this time, but I was furious with myself for wanting it.

Ian's fist gripped my hair hard as he yanked my head away and held it, forcing me to stare into his hazel eyes. Heart pounding, I tried to catch my breath and my sanity.

“Fuck, you still taste like sin on my tongue, Tulip.”

The nickname—that only he called me—made my stomach clench along with my pussy which was suddenly wide awake and ready for whatever.

“Get off of me, Ian,” I said softly.

“I’m not on you yet, but don’t worry. I will be very soon.” I saw him smirk in the moonlight that penetrated the narrow space between the buildings. This was insanity, and I needed to get away from him. He was addictive, and my body begged me for the hit it craved.

“You know what I mean,” I said, pushing against his chest. Just like at the hospital, he didn’t budge. “I mean it, Ian. Get the hell away from me before you get us both killed.”

“Ha, I’m not scared of that piece of shit you married. He can try and come at me.”

I opened my mouth, and Ian shut me up by kissing me again. I could feel my lips swelling and bruising with the abuse, and I fucking loved it.

“See that Tulip, you don’t really want me to leave,” he said, the arrogant mask firmly in place as he lifted his head.

I would’ve argued, but he attacked my neck, right over my jumping pulse, and I moaned, rubbing my body against his before I could stop myself.

“I’m going to fuck this sweet cunt.”

“No,” I said, pushing on his chest again, wishing I had both hands.

His eyes hardened into a glare that set my blood on fire. That condescending stare was like ambrosia. If he kept looking at me like that, I would do any depraved thing he wanted.

His eyes flicked down, staring at my chest.

“Fuck this top. No wonder Jackson didn’t want you walking around like this. It makes me want to eat the fuck out of them.”

I sucked in a deep breath. Why was he doing this to me? He made his choice, and I made mine.

“I said no.” I seethed as some of the old anger mingled with the carnal craving coursing through my body, making a toxic combination.

“And I fucking said yes.” He yanked my hair harder, and tears of pleasure and pain sprang to my eyes. “In fact, you’re going to get on your knees and suck my cock just like old times.” I tried to shake my head no but shivered at the sound of his belt buckle coming undone.

“Fuck off, Ian, I owe you nothing. We’re so over that the bones have turned to dust.”

“You think so? And, whose fault is that?” He growled, getting right up in my face.

My pulse spiked higher than it had in a very long time. His chest was pressing into mine, and I remembered all too well how his body felt under my hand, but I couldn’t go there again.

“Yours,” I said, my voice dripping with venom.

I wasn’t sure what came over me then, but I freed my hand from where it was trapped between our bodies and swung at his face. The blow wasn’t hard, but his head moved slightly from the impact. When he turned his eyes back to mine, my heart stopped beating.

A man should not be able to make the sound that came from Ian. He stepped back and spun me around so fast that I screamed and whimpered as my face slammed into the wall with Ian's muscled chest pressed against my back.

"Is that the lie you like telling yourself? I remember history a little differently, Tulip," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"You would," I managed to say before my cheek was pressed harder into the wall, his hand and body easily keeping me in position as his other hand worked at the front of my jeans to get the belt undone.

"Is this what you prefer, Tulip? A man that beats you, breaks your bones, sends you to the hospital, and doesn't give a shit about fucking you? Is that what you wanted?"

Pain exploded in my chest. It was one thing to know what I lived with. It was another for Ian to say it out loud. He didn't get that right. I would've given up everything to be with him, and he fucked me over first. He lied to me. He left us first—I wasn't to blame for what happened to us. Emotion clogged my mind enough that all I could think of was wanting him to go fuck himself. I hated him for what happened and how much I still loved him. Even with everything festering between us, my heart was forever entwined with his.

"Have you missed this?"

I opened my mouth to tell him to leave me alone, but his hand slid into my underwear, and I shuddered instead as his finger slipped right into my pussy. Nothing would've stopped

the physical reaction. A moan slipped from my lips, and my knees went weak.

“Look at this sweet cunt all wet for me. You want my cock ramming this hot pussy, don’t you?” A tear trickled free from my eyes even as I moaned in response to his thrusting finger. “You want a man who wants you, a man who would fuck you in front of all these bikers and let them know you’re mine. Don’t you?”

It was posed as a question but felt like a demand, and my lower lip trembled as the orgasm I’d dreamed of for so long began to rise.

“Say it, Tulip, tell me the truth. There is no one here to listen to you and hold the words against your upstanding loyalty to a man who will never love you.”

His finger was relentless, and my panting got heavy as he rolled my clit between his fingers. I ground my teeth together as my body and mind came undone. Threads of the past had always been there, and as if he’d always controlled the other end, he played with them now.

My ass pressed back into his body, and I could feel his cock, long and thick, behind his jeans. Whimpering as my body shook uncontrollably in his grip, the words I knew I shouldn’t say tumbled from my mouth.

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes, what?”

“Oh fuck, I’m gonna come.” I bucked, trying to get his finger in deeper.

“Oh, not yet, Tulip.” Withdrawing his finger, he slapped my pussy, and I jumped but had nowhere to go other than into his body. “You need to say exactly what you want.”

“Yes, I want everything you said, and I fucking hate that you made me say it out loud.”

I could almost feel the smirk on his lips. He ran his tongue up the side of my neck, his teeth finding my earlobe and biting down hard enough that I knew he would leave indents. I didn’t fucking care if Jackson found them.

“I love this cunt of yours, so mother fucking tight.”

He slid his finger back into me, and I cried out. My body went weak with the need coursing through me as the pain ripped at my heart and the guilt tore at my mind.

Whatever inhibitions were left disappeared with the next thrust of his finger, and my body won out. My hips thrust back and forth hard, fucking his finger, and with a strangled gasp, I came. I lost the last bit of strength I had left, and only Ian’s arm held me up as the waves of pleasure flooded my body.

“Yeah, that’s it, Tulip, keep coming. Let Jackson wonder when he’s between your legs if you already came for me.”

“I hate you so much,” I choked out as Ian pulled his hand out of my jeans and stepped away. I slowly turned around and stumbled back against the wall. As I stared up at him, the world felt like it was right once again and blowing up at the same time.

“Mmm,” he growled, putting the finger he had inside of me into his mouth and sucking it clean. He held it out for me

to see in the moonlight. “You see that Tulip? You knew what you were giving up. That’s what you did, not me.”

Ian glared at me. The silence built around us, along with the anger and hate that was bitter on my tongue.

“So long, Tulip. I hope it was worth it.”

He turned and marched away, and the anger I’d been carrying in my chest ripped from where it was packed down.

“Fuck you, Ian. I saw you!” His footfalls slowed and then stopped as he looked over his shoulder. “Did you never wonder why? Why I suddenly changed my mind?” His eyes narrowed, but I didn’t give him the chance to respond. “My father ordered me to marry Jackson, which I later learned was to pay off a debt. I told him no and ran off to tell you that we needed to elope. I went to your house and got there just in time to see one of the sweetbutts coming out and you shirtless with your fucking jeans undone.”

I pointed my finger at him, my hand shaking uncontrollably in the moonlight. Pain had a funny way of twisting into something so much more potent with time.

I shook my head at him.

“You left me first. I bought a gun to keep from marrying him. I got as far as putting it in my mouth but couldn’t pull the trigger.” I stepped forward. “But I wish every fucking day that I’d been strong enough to end it all. If it kept the memory of you from haunting me every night, I would’ve done anything. So fuck you, Ian, fuck you and your righteous bullshit. You did this.”

Spinning around, I marched away from him. My heart was ripped from my chest all over again, but his time, I said what I wanted to say three years ago and held my fucking head high.

CHAPTER 10

Ian

If guilt could weigh a person down, I would be buried neck-deep in the ground. And not because of what I did but because of why I did it.

The tears glimmering in April's eyes caused the voice in my head to tell me to walk away. I should've walked away. Things would be easier if she hated me. But like a moth to a flame, I couldn't stop myself from storming after her.

Grabbing her arm, I whipped her around. A small breath huffed through her lips as I shoved her back against the wall.

"You think you have everything figured out, don't you?"

"It didn't take a genius to figure out what you were doing."

Fuck I loved it when she was pissed off. The little snarl in the corner of her mouth made me want to bite her lip again.

"Is that so?" I leaned in to enjoy the sweet scent of her shampoo while I hissed in her ear, "How fucking sure are you?"

Her breath hitched as she shook her head. I could see that spark toying in the back of her mind the second her eyes met mine. Uncertainty was a bitch. Especially when you started to question everything you thought you knew. Was her assumption wrong? No. I fucked that girl. But she had no idea why.

"I know what I saw, Ian. It's burned into my memory forever. You should've stabbed me in the chest with your knife

rather than let me see that. You ripped my heart out.”

Was it wrong that I was enjoying the quiver of uncertainty in her tone? Or how she still looked at me with as much passion as the day we first met.

“It’s ironic.” I snorted while pressing in on April. “I never thought the thing that brought us together would be what ripped us apart.”

April’s brows knit as her palms flattened against my chest.

“Fuck off, Ian. You can’t charm your way out of this one.”

She tried to shove me away, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I stayed right where I was and ran my hand up her side to grab her neck.

“Do you remember the last night we spent together?”

One look was all it took to transport me back in time. I could feel the warmth of her body and how her eyelashes tickled my chest when she blinked. No one felt as good as she did in my arms. She was meant to be there, curled up against me. Sometimes, I tried to find that feeling with someone else, but no one felt like April. No one could fill that hole like she did. But out of everything I experienced with her, the sweet sound of her laugh was what I missed the most...

“Ian, stop.”

“Never.” I couldn’t help but giggle with her as I buried my nose in April’s neck. She was so sensitive that a simple kiss in the right spot would cause her to laugh.

She slapped my back in a meager attempt to push me away. "I thought bikers were supposed to be badasses."

"I am a badass," I said while tickling my fingers along her side.

She squirmed and giggled. "Badasses don't tickle."

"Says who?" As far as I could tell, I had the woman of my dreams completely at my mercy. It didn't get much more badass than that.

"Keep this up, and I swear to God I won't marry you." She threatened while clawing at my back.

"You think you can get away from me, Tulip?"

"I can run pretty fast."

"I would be up for a little game of hunter and prey." I teased while propping myself up on my forearm.

Despite the way her eyes rolled, her smile was bright and happy. I wanted to spend the rest of my days making sure that smile never left. Even if it meant I had to hurt her first.

"I love you, Tulip." I ran my finger over the curve of her face and sighed. "I want you to remember that, okay?"

I hated how her happy expression morphed into one of concern. "What's wrong?"

How did I answer that? How could I possibly explain the inner workings of my conniving, manipulative mother's mind? She thought April was a weakness that I shouldn't have. We'd been arguing about it ever since I proposed. It wasn't necessarily anything new. My mother and I were never on

good terms. It wasn't a big deal. So what if my mother didn't like my wife? The bitch didn't like anyone.

At least, that was what I thought until I found out my mother had taken it upon herself to remove the weakness. I had no idea how many people she'd contacted. So, my only option was to convince my mother that I didn't care about April. I needed her to think I was marrying April to have a child, her grandchild, the next Prez, and that was it.

"Ian?" Guilt burned through my chest when April's hand cupped my cheek. "Tell me what's wrong. I can help."

No, she couldn't.

"It's nothing." I gave her a small smile. "I just wish we could stay like this forever."

That sweet girl was gone now. The men in her life destroyed her. Now, all that was left of my Tulip were wilted and scarred petals, a scowl, and the ghosts that haunted her eyes.

"How could I forget?" There was no denying the venom dripping off her words. "So much for staying like that forever."

"You're the one that married someone else!"

"And you fucked someone else." She shot back. "At least I know what I'm getting with Jackson. You made me believe in real love, and the whole time you didn't give a shit about me. You hurt me worse than any blow from Jackson's fist."

She would never understand how hard those words stabbed me in the heart.

“Yeah, and you’ll end up in an early grave.”

It gutted me how she stuck up for that piece of shit. He smacked her around and openly fucked other women, yet she stayed true to him. He was going to kill her one day. I could see it happening. I knew guys like him. I killed guys like him, and I wanted to rip his fucking throat out of his still-breathing body.

“So what?” April shrugged. “I’m already dead. You killed me that night. Nothing else has mattered since.”

“Wrong again, Tulip.” I leaned in and growled, “I saved you that night.”

Unable to take the look on her face anymore, I pushed off the wall and stormed away.

CHAPTER 11

April

What the hell did he mean by he saved me? I had no idea how long I stood in that spot, not moving or thinking. I couldn't stand it any longer and pushed away from the wall, trying to control my runaway heart, but it did no good.

I needed answers. I was sick of all the lies. It felt like too many things in my life had been a lie. Maybe the truth would hurt me more, but that was my decision, not his. Not anymore.

The Lost Souls set up their tents and trailers on the football and soccer fields on the far side of the encampment. I'd spotted Ian's trailer the moment it pulled in. My heart had stupidly fluttered in my chest at the thought of him.

Weaving through the shadows, I spied the trailer with the Lost Souls symbol painted on the side and stomped toward the door. Moose stood near the fire talking to a member I didn't recognize, but I didn't care if anyone saw me.

He looked over and smiled, but his smile fell when he saw the scowl on my face. I knew what I looked like pissed off. Moose quickly cut me off before I could reach the trailer door.

"Pixie, what are you doing," he asked, his voice low like he didn't want Ian anyone to hear me. Well too bad.

"I'm here to see Ian," I said, and tried to step around him, but he blocked my path.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

“I think it’s a fucking great idea.” I tried again to push past him, but it was no use. My hands curled into fists. “Get out of my way, Moose, right now.”

“Pixie...please.”

Moose didn’t get any further when the trailer door banged open, and Ian glared at us from the doorway.

“What the fuck, April?” Ian growled. “I said all I’m going to say.”

“Fuck you, Ian. We aren’t done with this conversation,” I yelled, drawing more attention from the other Lost Souls members. Ian looked around at his club, and they quickly looked away.

“Let her in, Moose. She’s making a fucking racket.”

“Shit,” Moose mumbled under his breath but stepped aside.

Stepping up into the trailer, some of my fearlessness faded in the tight space. There was a large bed, a small kitchen, and what I guessed was a bathroom. I had nowhere to go, and as Ian closed the door behind us, the walls caved in on me. His movements were casual as he lit a smoke and sat at the small table, already sporting a bottle of whiskey.

“You’re here. Are you going to speak or stare all night?”

“I came here to get answers. What did you mean?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I stepped closer, my anger burning. “Don’t do that. Don’t act like what you said about saving me didn’t just happen. I

want the truth.”

“I have nothing to say,” Ian growled.

“Fuck you, Ian.” I shook my head, pointing my finger at him. “I’m not leaving until you tell me.”

He got to his feet, and all the air left the trailer.

“Go home, April. Go home to your husband and forget we had this conversation.”

The trailer door whipped open, and I jumped before I realized it was Moose and not Jackson in the doorway.

“That’s it, I’ve had it with both of you,” Moose said. “Sit down right now.” Ian didn’t move. Moose glared and stepped closer as he pointed to the table. “Don’t make me force you,” he snarled at Ian, who swore under his breath and sat.

Moose’s eyes darted to mine. “You too, Pixie. Sit down.”

I sat at the table, and our knees touched, sending a jolt through my body.

Moose leaned against the wall like the most intimidating counselor on the planet. If they ever wanted to scare kids straight, hire Moose as the school counselor. You would never have a kid out of line again.

“April, you first. Tell Ian what happened. All of it.”

Ian looked over his shoulder at Moose. “You know?”

He shrugged. “I know enough. I have ears, listen, and can add two plus two. I tried to talk to you multiple times, but you kept saying you didn’t want to hear about the lying, cheating cunt that married that piece of shit McMillan.”

“Cunt, huh?” I crossed my arms and glared at Ian.

“I was pissed.”

“Pissed is a slight understatement,” Moose said.

“You can shut up now,” Ian growled.

“No. I’m so sick of this. You two have loved one another since the moment you met. Here we are years later, and you still do, even if you’re too fucking stubborn to admit it. Now clear the fucking air. This lack of communication shit is irritating the fuck out of me. I swear you give me ulcers.”

I giggled at Moose. He could always make me laugh.
“Fine, I’ll go first.”

I took a moment to collect myself as Ian turned his intimidating stare on me.

“We were so close to the wedding, then out of nowhere, my father called me to his office. I didn’t think anything of it. We talked in his office all the time, but this was different. Right away, he said he arranged for me to marry Jackson instead. I was shocked, then angry. I found out after it was because he owed a debt that Jackson paid off. I was Jackson’s payment.”

“Son of a bitch,” Ian snarled. “He should’ve come to me.” He crushed the cigarette in the ashtray and drank some whiskey. I waited until he settled again before I continued.

“I wasn’t having any of it. I left, as I said, to find you. I thought we could go to Vegas and get married. Then it would be done. I was yours at that point. I didn’t care if we had a big wedding, just that we were together. But when I arrived at the

house and..." I looked away from Ian. "After I saw that...I realized I couldn't trust you either and went home. My father made the arrangements, and the rest is history."

"Good, now you, Ian, I mean it. You fucking tell her the truth."

"Remind me to demote your annoying ass from vice prez when we get back."

"I wish you'd fucking do it," Moose grumbled. "I'm going to leave the two of you alone." The door slammed shut, and the whole trailer shook. The sudden silence was deafening, and I fidgeted in my seat as Ian stared at me.

"Fuck you're still so beautiful," he said. I looked away from him, unable to stare into his eyes and not feel like crying.

"How did we get here, Ian? Tell me what you meant. I deserve to know why you betrayed me after everything we shared. After what you said..." The emotions clogged my throat as I fought not to have a complete breakdown in front of him.

"Fuck. Tulip... you know you were my whole world. Hell, you still are."

As my eyes found his, the softness that rarely filled them was there, and it felt like a slap in the face.

"Do I? I thought I did. I thought we had something. It was us against the world."

"It was." Ian ran his hands through his hair and finished the whiskey. "My mother saw you as my greatest weakness. She thought you would lead me around by my cock, and that I

wouldn't be a good leader. She also thought other MCs would use you against me. Maybe she was right. I would've done anything for you. Fuck, I still would. You want me to kill Jackson? I'll do it. War with the Wild Dogs, I don't fucking care. I'll burn this entire place down if you ask me to," he said, his hands balling into fists.

My mouth fell open. I believed every word Ian said. The conviction in his eyes told me what he was saying was the truth.

"What did your mother do," I asked, not answering his question. It was way too tempting to tell him yes. Kill them all and save me from my life, but I married Jackson when I could've run. I chose to obey my father when I couldn't pull the trigger.

"She put a hit out on you. I had to prove you didn't matter as much to me as she thought. She was over that night along with the guys and...I made my point in front of them all." He reached out to grab my hands on the table, but I pulled them back and put them in my lap.

"She wanted me dead?" I wiped away the tears that had started to flow. There would be no stopping them now. The dam had broken.

"Yes."

"So you fucked a sweetbutt to prove you could love me but that I didn't mean as much as she thought?"

"Fuck...yes and no, it was to prove that I wouldn't let what you want interfere with club decisions."

“I see. What I wanted.” I didn’t think anything could hurt me more than seeing him that night, but this was worse, and I wished I’d never demanded to know the truth. Some things really should be left alone. Nodding, I slid out of the seat and pushed myself up. I felt dead inside.

“Such hardships you’ve had to endure. Must have been terrible fucking a slew of women all this time to prove how little I meant. My heart breaks for you,” I said, my voice void of all emotion. “Goodbye, Ian.”

“Where are you going?” I didn’t answer as I walked past him. Ian had hammered the final nail in the coffin of my soul. Everything I didn’t realize I was holding in hit me then, and I didn’t know where to go. “April, where are you going?”

Ian was out of the seat and had me by the shoulders before I could reach the door. I didn’t fight him as he forced me to turn around.

“Don’t do this, Tulip, please. Don’t you get it? She was going to kill you. Ma hired people to ensure it happened, and I couldn’t allow that. I couldn’t let her hurt you. I did what I thought would appease her, and it did.”

My eyes flicked up to his. “You’re one of the smartest men I know, Ian, and the best you could come up with was to fuck a sweetbutt? That was the only way to prove you would still be a great leader? Do you even know how stupid that sounds? Or were you so enamored with getting your dick wet for the rest of your life with whoever you wanted that you didn’t care.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Really? See, all I hear is that you solved two problems that night. Yes, you finally found a way to get your mother off your back and, I guess, save me if you want to act the hero, but let’s face it, Ian, you always had reservations about a monogamous relationship. So there you were, faced with the ultimate noble reason to cheat, to save my life.” I lifted my brow, and he had the decency to look away.

“You weren’t supposed to find out. It was a one-time thing, and then we could get married and not have her gun held to our heads.”

I burst out laughing, unable to keep it in. “Wow...you are more delusional than I thought.”

“What the fuck, April? I thought you would understand I did this because I love you.”

I shoved his chest, forcing him to step back and let go of my arms.

“Understand what? Pull your head out of your ass. First, I was always going to find out. People talk, and if not the guys, your mother would’ve happily rubbed that in my face. Hell, even the sweetbutts talk.”

I pointed my finger at him, my hand shaking. “Second, it was never going to be one and done, not for her, and now I think not for you either. Be honest with yourself. We were young. Did you really see yourself settling down? Never being with anyone else again?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I know better now. It never would’ve happened. It was a fantasy I had built up in my head, but the reality was that we would always end up here. Bitter, emotionally destroyed, and broken.

I just couldn't see it. My love for you blinded me. If fucking the sweetbutt that night or any night after was really the best you could come up with, then...it kind of says it all, doesn't it?"

He didn't say anything, and I turned for the door, only to be grabbed and slammed against the wall, his body pressed into mine as he glared down at me. My heart didn't react. The usual butterflies and clenching in my stomach didn't happen, and I knew I was numb. I'd finally hit my breaking point, and I felt nothing at all.

"I can't change the past or how smart or stupid my decisions were. I did what I thought was right at the time. But as for wanting other women. No, Tulip, that's where you're wrong. I've never wanted anyone else the way I crave you." I opened my mouth to tell him I didn't believe him, but he put a finger on my lips, cutting off my objection.

"I know what you're going to say, and it's not true. It doesn't matter how many girls I've fucked. All I ever thought about was you and being with you again. I thought about our talks and you lying your head on my chest. Your smile lit up my worst day. When I dreamed, it was the smell of your skin and the softness of your hair running through my fingers. I longed for just one more ride and day at the beach." His eyes were panicked, and I hated that I believed him. The flicker of hope that came with it was agonizing.

"I've felt guilt with every girl since you. When you married Jackson and refused to talk to me, I knew you knew. Deep down, I've always known that you knew, and I fucking

hated you for making me feel guilty. For making me feel so much. The anger consumed me in a rage that could've swallowed the world." He cupped my face, his eyes full of longing. Desire swirled in my gut, but I tried to keep a stranglehold on it.

"You still make me feel the same way. Not a single minute has passed that I haven't wanted the same thing I did then. I want you. I want to marry you, have children with you, have you by my side where you were always supposed to be."

"Why are you doing this to me, Ian? You're already married, with a child."

"I love Nadine as a friend and the mother of my child, but we have an understanding. We don't love each other like a couple. She knows I love you. She will love you."

Very little surprised me anymore, but Ian managed to shock me multiple times tonight, and I stared at him in disbelief.

"It's true. Besides Moose, she is the only one who knows how much I still love you, Tulip. I still want us. Nadine encouraged me to reach out, but I just couldn't. After everything, I thought it was best to leave you alone, but you're in my blood. You occupy my mind and my heart. I meant what I said. I will rip Jackson's beating heart from his chest. Say the word, and he's a dead man."

Like a slow-motion movie, he lowered his lips to mine, stopping just before kissing me.

“You’re my heart, Tulip, my tattered soul that never healed and is still bleeding. Say it, say you still love me.”

My heart hammered like a drum, pounding loudly while my mind went blank. Did I hear him right? Was this real, or was it another dream? It felt real. I wanted it to be real, but how could I trust him?

“Say it, Tulip, and we’ll find a way to make it work.”

There were moments in time that were true crossroads, and this was one of them. I’d taken my share of wrong turns, and there was a good chance this was another, but nothing could’ve stopped the words buried deep inside me since I married Jackson from spilling out.

“Don’t be a dummy. Of course, I love you. I’ve always loved you. I never stopped. Nothing could ever erase you.”

CHAPTER 12

Ian

The match had officially met the powder keg. Nothing was stopping me now. A decent man would step back, giving her time to absorb all the information while she made her own decisions. But decency was never my strong suit. Any willpower I had vanished when her delicate fingers tangled in my hair.

The quiet moan that escaped her mouth danced along my tongue like fireworks. I slammed April back and greedily swallowed every gasp. She breathed life back into me. The numbness was gone, and I felt everything. Her body pressed against me, how her breath warmed my lips and the little quakes that wobbled her knees. All of it crashed through me like a wave. It was too much and nowhere near enough.

I needed more. I needed her.

With a growl, I grabbed April's ass and lifted her up to wrap her legs around my waist. My fingers dug into her firm globes. After three years of watching her prance around in tight jeans, I finally had my hands on the prize.

April squealed and pulled her lips away. "What are you doing?"

"What the fuck do you think I'm doing?"

One turn and three steps later, I dropped her on the bed. April propped herself up before I finished pulling my shirt over my head.

Her small hand raised, palm out. “Ian, listen...”

That was as far as she got. I dropped my shirt on the floor and smirked while her eyes remained locked on my abs. I was fit when we were together, but now...anger was a great motivator.

The need to strip the rest of my clothes off and take what I wanted was strong, but the look on her face was too cute to pass up. “I’m waiting, Tulip.”

“For what?” Her head tilted as her tongue darted out to moisten her bottom lip.

“You told me to listen.” I bent over, bracing my hands on either side of her hips. “What am I listening for?”

“Ian,” she whispered. “We can’t do this.”

“Yes, we can.” Nothing was stopping this. Jackson could walk in with a gun right now, and I wouldn’t flinch.

“You have a wife and a kid.”

Nadine was a good woman. She’d never done me wrong, and Lord knows there were plenty of times when I deserved it. But I felt no guilt. The only thing rolling through me was pure, unadulterated lust.

“Nadine isn’t my wife,” I growled while standing back up. “You are.” April always was. I didn’t need some words in a church to know that.

April rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You haven’t changed.”

Oh, she wanted to play that game.

“Tell me you don’t want it,” I said while unbuckling my belt and letting my jeans fall to the floor. My hand moved along my shaft as I continued, “Look me in the eyes and tell me you haven’t dreamed of my cock spreading you wide every night. Tell me you haven’t wanted to find a way to put us back together and rekindle what we lost.”

The way her lips parted was all the answer I needed.

“Take your clothes off, Tulip. I want to watch you play with your pussy.”

“Ian.” A flush tinted her neck as she said my name.

“April.” I gripped my cock hard and grunted.

My little Tulip could object all she liked. It wasn’t going to stop me. She wanted it just as badly as I did. The second her eyes fluttered up to me, and I saw a spark of lust behind that glimmer of guilt, April’s fate was sealed.

Fuck watching her, I wanted to feel her.

I grabbed her jeans, ripping them open and pulling them off her hips before anything could leave those pretty lips.

My eyes immediately locked onto the delicate pink flesh between her legs. Her pussy was begging for me, all glistening and wet. April fell back with a moan as I speared my fingers inside her tight walls.

“Ian,” she panted, “your wife...”

My sweet little Tulip was always so concerned with hurting other people.

God himself couldn't stop me from crawling over her. Hellfire could erupt around us, and I would let the world burn while I enjoyed every ounce of her pleasure. I leaned down, inhaled her sweet scent, then dragged my tongue up the side of her neck.

“Nadine would rather fuck you than me.”

April's wide eyes snapped over to mine. It was cute how those surprised lines crinkled her nose, but not as cute as how her face flushed when she was about to come.

I slid my fingers through her folds, flicking her clit as April gasped. “Don't lie to me.”

“Who says I'm lying?”

Damn her stubbornness, but fuck, it was hot. She wasn't the type to roll over and take it no matter how much she wanted to give in. I forgot how much that fire in her got me hard, but not everything I did or said led to some hidden agenda. My agenda was clear and purely selfish. What could I say? I liked how her body twitched when she tried to hold back like it was now.

“Fuck off, Ian.” Anger and lust flickered in her glare. “You don't really expect me to believe that?”

“Believe what you want, but I'm not the only one in my marriage enjoying the sweetbutts.” Her eyes flashed with jealousy, and my heart pounded harder. There was my Tulip. The woman who would rip a bitch apart for glancing my way. I rolled her clit between my thumb and finger and held back a snicker as she bit into her bottom lip.

“God, I hate you,” she growled in the sexiest tone I’d ever heard.

“Yeah,” I breathed, “but you love what I’m doing.”

The tension tightening her muscles proved that.

“You’ll never change,” April snarled while trying to hold back her orgasm and push my hand away.

It was a feeble attempt at best with one good arm. Thanks to her asshole husband, April only had one arm to use. I would pay him back for that later.

“Once a cheating bastard, always a cheating bastard.”

I deserved that one, but it still hurt. Grabbing her uncasted wrist, I slammed her arm down on the bed. “I explained that.”

“Fine, but I still call bullshit. There’s no way you’d stay married to someone who didn’t want your dick. You were all I wanted, and it wasn’t enough.”

The pain in her stare tugged at the ache in my heart. She still thought I wanted those other women. Yes, I could’ve found another way, but it was what I thought would work best, with no time to come up with a better plan.

The irony was that April was the only one who knew the real me. The only one that ever would, even if she didn’t want to believe it. She was the only woman I ever truly wanted.

“Ask yourself this, Tulip.” I leaned in and whispered, “Why would I stay married to someone that didn’t want my dick? It’s not that difficult to piece together.”

Her mouth opened to argue just as realization washed over her face. “You’re protecting her.”

I didn’t need to say anything. April knew the answer. Same-sex couples were not well accepted. That was how Nadine found herself homeless and in my clubhouse. Her parents kicked her out. Yes, I fucked her until she got pregnant, and yes, she was my wife, but I hadn’t touched her since we found out she was pregnant with Cory. She gave me what I needed, and I gave her a safe life, free from judgment.

“Ian...”

I pressed my finger to April’s lips and shook my head. “I’m done talking about Nadine, it’s time to fuck my real wife.”

Kneeling, I pulled April’s legs apart and positioned myself between her thighs.

“Hang on, Tulip.” Three years of frustration throbbed through my cock as I lined up with her entrance. “I’m about to ride you hard.”

I pushed into her tight, wet pussy and groaned as pure and utter euphoria washed over me. April’s walls clenched around my shaft, trying to push me out while her heat sent a spark shooting down my spine. Nothing in the world felt better than this. Not getting my dick wet with a random, riding my hog, or even a fucking high from a drug could top her. For the first time in years, I didn’t need to bury myself in meaningless sex and hide behind substances. I was finally home.

And I was going to kill the motherfucker who tried to make me leave.

* * *

April

“Hang on, Tulip,” Ian said, his cock pushing into me.

My back arched off the bed as my nails dug into his shoulders. The pounding of my racing heart made it hard to hear the words of love Ian murmured. It was stupid to believe him, but I did.

He was my everything, always was, and I felt alive for the first time in three years. My beaten soul and battered body had stood up to Jackson and tolerated the abuse to stay alive, but I was dead. I just hadn't recognized it.

I expected Ian to slam into me, but he surprised me, slowly spreading me wide. He pressed and held like he was trying to shove his entire body into my pussy, and it felt like heaven. I'd missed him but didn't realize how much I also missed our physical connection until this moment. He was my other half. His muscles strained, and his shoulders flexed under my touch.

Ian was always sexy, but time had turned him from beer into a top-shelf scotch. He filled me up like we were made for one another, and I guess we were. I'd thought we were soulmates until that one fateful night, but the way my soul lit on fire with him proved that I'd been right. I wanted him, but the voice in the back of my head screamed it would be worse when I was forced to leave all over again.

Yet, I couldn't stop myself. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he sank deeper with a groan.

"Holy fuck," he said, his voice strained. "I can't hold back and be nice," Ian said. "I've waited too fucking long to feel you again."

Wrapping my arm around his neck, I hung on. "Make me scream," I whispered in his ear, and he shuddered.

He growled like a dog, the sound equally terrifying and sexy as he slid out and thrust home. "Ah fuck, I'm going to come too fast, shit."

I loved making him lose control like this. It was hard to do, but I always got a rush from knowing how much I affected him. It was a drug to my system. And, just like nothing had ever changed, his words had the same effect on me.

The orgasm he'd been coaxing from me with his fingers rushed to the surface as he thrust into me so fast he took my breath away. I felt full and wanted more of him at the same time. I let go of his neck as he pushed himself up. He grabbed my hips, lifting me to fuck me even harder.

I screamed his name, no longer caring who heard or why this shouldn't happen. My skin sang with pleasure as I watched him disappear into my body. Ian's head was back, his mouth hanging open as his hips worked at a blinding pace. My orgasm didn't build and push over. No, it slammed into my body, and I screamed again as the waves washed over me.

"Oh fuck me!" Ian bellowed, his pace erratic, and I knew he was close to coming. Panic filled me at the thought of him

pulling out. I wanted him to come in me. I wanted him to claim me as his again, and even though filling me didn't make it so, I still needed it.

"Come in me, please. Please, Ian, don't pull out," I whimpered.

"I'm never pulling out of you, not ever again," he said through clenched teeth, yelling as he slammed into me hard.

I felt him coming inside me and prayed I got pregnant. Even if everything else failed, I wanted our child, the child I was always supposed to have with him. I wanted a piece of him with me forever. Did that make me a horrible person?

He pumped three more times until he collapsed on top of me. We held each other, limbs locked as we panted. I couldn't say how long we stayed like that before Ian rolled over onto his side and pulled me into his body.

I couldn't stop touching him. This didn't feel real, and I never wanted it to end. But reality was a bitch who liked to kick you in the fucking teeth, and Nadine's pretty smile flashed through my mind.

"I can't be the other woman. I just can't." I covered my mouth as the tears fell in a steady stream.

"You never were, Tulip," Ian said, pulling me tighter to his chest and holding me like I might disappear. "It's always been you."

I clung to him, never wanting to let go of this small slice of happiness, this moment of reprieve from what awaited me

when I left this trailer. I didn't know if I could even go back. It would kill me, and yet, what choice did I have?

“I want you to come back to Florida with us. You're mine, Tulip.”

“I can't.”

“Are you really going to protect that abusive piece of shit?” Ian growled.

Wiping my tears, I looked up into his whiskey eyes that were burning with anger. “Is that really what you think I did?”

“Sure seemed like it. At the hospital, you stopped me from putting him in one of the beds, and then earlier, you kissed him when I instigated a fight that would've solved all of this shit. If he'd come at me, I could've won you in the fight, but no, you had to go and kiss him.”

I shook my head slowly. “Ian, I was protecting you. Jackson had a knife hidden in his hand at the hospital. You would've bled out in seconds. Never mind that you were minutes away from the cops deciding that you were the one to arrest. Earlier, he had his hand on his gun when you decided to grab your junk. You may not care if you die, but I do.”

The hard stare softened, and he cupped my cheek. “Don't do it again. I'm supposed to protect you, and when I think of what he's done to you, how he hurt you...” Ian growled. “I will rip his spine from his still-breathing body, and before you object, I don't care if the Lost Souls and the Wild Dogs fight forever. It's time I take back what's rightfully mine.”

Grabbing his face, I slammed my lips against his and kissed him hard. Our tongues lashed, and I felt his cock thickening between our bodies.

“How do you see it working? Jackson is dangerous, and I just...”

“Stop objecting Tulip. Nadine will love you, and you are my heart. I don’t give a fuck if people talk. You’re mine. Do you understand that?” He rolled us over and settled between my legs again, his cock nudging my pussy.

I felt torn in two and didn’t know what to say or do. “Jackson scares me, Ian. I couldn’t live with myself if he hurt you because of me.”

“What did I just say?”

“To let you handle it.”

“And?”

“It’s hard to do when I’ve stared the demon in the eyes so many times. He’s dirty. He will use whatever he can or whoever he can to get at you.” I shook my head. “I love you so much.”

“Then we will figure it out. It’s not like I’m some fucking choir boy. The Lost Souls has doubled in size since we were together.” He kissed my lips softly. “Trust me.”

“Fine, I’ll leave Jackson, but I need to go home first. I have things to tie up before I can take off, and I want my fucking car. He’s already taken everything else from me, he’s not taking my fucking car too.”

Ian laughed, his voice deep and rich. The sound rolled over me, making me shiver. “I will make arrangements and talk to Nadine, but you only have one week from when we leave here to set your shit straight, or I’m kicking down the door and taking you with me.”

I smiled. “Shut up, and make love to me.”

“Fuck I love you.”

CHAPTER 13

Ian

Twenty-one hours, sixteen minutes, and fifty-one seconds. That was how long I'd gone without feeling April's touch. Not long, considering the years we spent apart, yet it felt like an eternity. Every second I had to see her stand by Jackson's side ticked by like an hour.

I'd killed the fucker countless times in my head and went for my pistol more than once. Not a good idea in a camp full of bikers. I didn't give a shit if I was taken down in the process, as long as Jackson was dead and April was free. That was what I told myself every time my finger itched to pull the trigger. Then April would look at me as if she could sense what I was thinking, and I stopped.

I couldn't break her heart twice, even if it meant that prick got to live...for now. I highly doubted he would let her go without a fight, and when that time came, I would be ready.

"What are you doing?"

I didn't need to look up to feel the judgment in Moose's eyes.

"Nothing." That was a lie, he knew, and I knew it. But I had my reasons for keeping quiet.

"Really?" Moose rolled his bike up next to mine and cocked a brow. "Because it looks to me like you're taking a headcount."

The man knew me. I'd give him that much. Most of the clubs were already gone, except for three. Ours, the Skeevers—the stupidest fucking name ever, it was so dumb that I would kiss the ass of the man that came up with a worse name—and the Wild Dogs. And it wasn't the Skeevers I watched.

“Ian,” Moose warned.

“Moose,” I sang back while skipping my eyes over Wild Dogs members, adding to my tally.

Most weren't a problem, but they weren't the ones I was counting. The enforcers, VP, and a couple of others were who I had my eye on. Jackson McMillan was at the top of that list. That sneaky fucker fought dirty. I believed April had been trying to help me, even if I didn't consider it then.

Moose leaned back on his hog and sighed. “How long?”

“What,” I asked while still counting. There were fifteen so far that would have to be taken out in one way or another.

“How long did you give her?”

No one said he was stupid. Sometimes I thought the fucker was too smart. “One week.”

She agreed to leave Jackson. If I had it my way, I'd have shot the fucker in the head the other night. But she wanted the time to go back and clean some shit up. That shit, I was assuming, had to do with her piece of shit father or the group she attended. I didn't buy her ‘I want my car back’ excuse. So, I gave her what she wanted. I owed her that much.

“We can't go to war over some chick, Ian, no matter how much I love her as sister and think you two should be

together.”

The fuck we couldn't. “April isn't just some chick. She is my wife in every way that counts.”

“I know, but...” Moose let out a breath and scrubbed his hand down his face. “Is she worth dying for?”

I looked him dead in the eyes.

“Is Andrea?”

Moose was a puppy when it came to his old lady. He'd never touched a sweetbutt or looked sideways at one since he landed her.

He growled at me. “It's not the same. Marrying Andrea didn't start a war. Is she worth the lives that we will lose?”

“Yes.” I would sacrifice every single person on the planet for her. Besides... “You're forgetting something.”

“What,” Moose asked.

“April's a Lost Soul.” She always was. “And we protect our own. Her piece of shit father sold her to Jackson to pay off a debt. He knew we were engaged, he could've come to me, but instead he made a deal with that fucker right under my nose.” I rolled out my shoulders. “She never wanted to leave me. That means she never left us.”

That was something he couldn't argue with. He wanted to. His mouth opened just as April rode past on the back of Jackson's ride. One look at her casted arm caused Moose to clamp his lips shut. I wasn't the only one who wanted to kill

the fucker. Murder was written all over Moose's face. That didn't stop him from trying to reason with me.

"She's not yours anymore. You need to consider Nadine."

Bullshit. "She was always mine."

"But she did marry him."

I never wanted to punch him more than I did at that moment. Instead, I tightened my grip on my handlebars and said, "She was stolen. There's a difference."

There was only one way to deal with a thief. Break his fucking legs. And I had a plan to do just that. Jackson was one man. If I took down key club members, he wouldn't have a leg to stand on. That was why Ravage wasn't here. I sent him back a day early. The Wild Dogs' vice prez had a bit of a gambling problem, and I wanted to make sure the fight he had money on didn't go his way.

Never place a wager with the Bratva. Uri Ivanov didn't fuck around. The deeper in debt I could get their VP, the more he'd owe me when I bailed him out. It was all about leverage.

"Look, Ian. I get that you love her..."

"I don't just love her Moose. April is my reason for living. She is my heart, do you get that?"

She was the first breath I took in the morning and the last thing I saw before I went to sleep. Every step I took and every move I made, she was right there with me. People called me a heartless bastard, and they were right because she was my heart. And until I had her back, safe in my arms, nothing would be right.

“I get that, Ian, I really do. But just be sure you’re ready for whatever the consequences are. In war, no one is safe.”

CHAPTER 14

April

It took me the whole week to slowly fill my car. I stuffed bags in the truck and behind the seats before pulling the cover back on, hiding everything in plain sight.

I said my goodbyes to the women at the meetings I attended for abused spouses. Ian thought I was teaching it. I laughed. I was way too broken to teach anyone shit, especially when it came to a relationship. But those women were one of the reasons I forced myself to wake up and keep going in the mornings. They had given me hope for a better tomorrow on my worst days.

“Hey, Useless Cunt, get your ass in here,” Jackson bellowed from the living room.

Such class. I almost panicked when he walked in the door, convinced he knew I was up to something. Turned out Prez canceled church, so he came home instead of fucking a sweetbutt. Some wonders would never cease.

Wandering into the living room, I crossed my arms. “What?”

His eyes rolled up to mine, and he glared, but he didn’t have the I’m going to put you in the hospital look.

He held up his empty glass. “Get me a drink, and make it a double.”

I was going to say something sarcastic, but this worked out better than I could’ve planned. He would be suspicious if I

was nice and offered to get him a refill. Walking over to the glass and picking it up, I wasn't surprised when Jackson smacked my ass.

"I like it when you behave. Why can't you be like this all the time?"

"Cause I'm a woman," I drawled.

He laughed. "Ain't that the fucking truth."

I rolled my eyes as I walked away. There was one final 'Fuck you' I had for Jackson. Smirking as I pulled the freshly made ice cubes out of the freezer, I held them up and stared at them. Before I left Ian, I sucked him off twice. Both times, I spit the contents into a small jar I found.

At the time, I had no fucking clue what to do with it and planned on throwing it out when I got home. It was pretty fucking weird to be wandering around with cum in a jar, but then the idea hit.

Popping my little creations out of the ice cube tray, I held back the laughter as I put the slightly foggy cubes into a tall glass. Knowing that with every sip Jackson was sucking on Ian's sperm filled me with great joy. Whiskey bottle in hand, I poured three fingers and reached into the back of the cupboard for my prescription.

Insomnia was a side effect of having an abusive prick for a husband. Especially one who pulled you from bed in the middle of the night by your hair to beat the shit out of you for whatever perceived slight. Luckily, this new sleeping med was

a liquid. I put triple the prescribed dose into his drink and stirred it around.

There wasn't much left. "Fuck it," I mumbled and, for good measure, dumped the rest in. If Jackson died of an overdose, you wouldn't see me crying.

Rolling out my shoulders, I slipped back into the living room and set his glass down while he yelled at the television. I never understood this ritual of yelling at the players on the screen. It wasn't like they could hear.

"Hey." Jackson grabbed my arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

I stared at him, unsure what he wanted me to say and terrified he knew about my plan and had been playing me all night.

"Suck my cock." He grabbed at his jeans, and the meal I'd just eaten rolled in my stomach.

"The game is still on, and I refilled your drink." I smiled playfully, hoping he would let it go. "I'll clean up the kitchen and slip into something sexier for you."

"I don't care what you're wearing. I want your mouth, not your pussy."

"We just had garlic pasta. Do you really want a garlic dick?"

He let go of my arm, and I bit back a sigh of relief. "Whatever, I should've just stayed at the clubhouse. That's why we fuck the sweetbutts, you know, they don't pull this bullshit." He wagged his finger up and down at me.

Comments like that used to hurt, but now I saw them for the manipulation they were.

I didn't argue, nodding as he shoed me away and picked up his drink. Just because it was too good to pass up, I waited by the door and watched as he sipped his drink and crunched on an ice cube.

Making sure I was loud in the kitchen, I washed dishes slowly, wiped down all the counters, and even grabbed the mop and bucket to scrub the floor. I could still hear Jackson grunting and yelling at the television, but his speech was less clear.

Once I was sure there was nothing he could bitch about in the kitchen, I went to the bedroom and hopped in the shower. Resentment filled me as I covered my cast with a plastic bag to keep it dry. Finally being free felt like a dream I hardly dared to focus on too closely, or it might slip away.

Stepping out of the shower, I grabbed a towel to wrap around my waist when the bathroom door slammed open with a bang. I screamed and jumped back as Jackson loomed in the doorway, his eyes trained on me.

"I ffffuckin told youuu that I..." He grabbed me by the bicep, his eyes narrowing. "Whaaa did youuu dooo slut?" Jackson growled. Even drugged, he was still strong.

"Nothing, get off of me."

I jerked on my arm, managing to get it free, but his fingers dug in so hard that his nails left scrapes. He lunged at me, and I screamed, jumping away faster than he moved with the

sleeping drug in his system. Jackson stumbled and tripped over his feet, his head grazing the edge of the bathtub as he landed.

Head wounds bled a lot, and red smears coated the clean white tile.

“Biiiiitch,” he slurred.

Not wasting a second, I jumped over his legs and out the bathroom door. My clothes were on the bed, and I ripped the plastic bag off my arm in a mad panic.

“Get baaack heeere biiiiitch,” Jackson growled, and I heard him struggling to get up. My heart hammered inside my chest, my whole body shook, and I decided to say *fuck it* to the bra. It would take too long to put on with the cast. Grabbing my tank top, I pulled it over my head and sat down to put on underwear, socks, and jeans.

“Cleeean up thhhiiis messss,” he yelled, and more things crashed in the bathroom.

Fear gripped my throat, and panic laced my mind as his shadow flooded the bedroom a second before he stepped into the doorway. He looked like a bear ready to attack. “Now!”

“Stay away, Jackson, you’re acting crazy,” I said. He wobbled on his feet as he walked toward me. Now, I was blocked in. I should’ve grabbed my clothes and changed downstairs.

“Tlllll...mee...” His mouth worked as he took a few more steps, but no sound came out. He suspected me of doing something to him. If he didn’t pass the fuck out, then I wasn’t

getting out of here without a fight. I really wished I had both my hands.

He swayed and stumbled closer, and I waited until he passed the end of the bed before leaping on top and trying to run. I didn't get very far as he wildly jumped and grabbed my leg. With a scream and a crash, I fell off the bed and slammed into the wall. Dazed, I rolled over, expecting Jackson to crawl off the bed like some horror movie monster to finish the job. I could picture him wrapping his hands around my throat.

When he didn't, I quickly assessed if anything else was broken and slowly sat up, peering at the bed. He was passed out face down.

"I hope you fucking suffocate to death," I growled and, with stiff movements, got myself up on my feet. His fingers twitched and I stumbled back. The bruises were already forming. I'd hit my shoulder hard into the wall and my hip and knee on the floor.

Grabbing my plain black leather jacket, I stuffed my arms inside the sleeves. I was never wearing a Wild Dogs jacket again, even if Jackson somehow lived, found me, and dragged me back.

"I fucking hate you Jackson, you never deserved me. You tried to break me but made me unbreakable instead."

Grabbing my backpack from the closet, I swung it and my purse over my shoulder before slipping out the bedroom door and quietly closing it behind me.

As I slid into the driver's seat, I felt more empowered and in control of my life than ever. Who the fuck knew what would happen with Ian and Nadine. Just thinking about it hurt my head, but it was my fucking choice. I was in control of my life from now on.

Revvng the car, I looked in the rearview mirror at the cut above my eyebrow and the black eye forming. Jackson would never put another mark on my body. I pulled out of the garage, and much like I had three years ago, I raced down the street toward my future and the man I loved.

CHAPTER 15

Ian

“That’s it,” I snatched the phone off the wall and pressed it to my ear. “I’m calling Moose.”

Nadine grabbed my wrist before I could dial the first number. “You need to calm down, Ian.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down.” Why was she always telling me to calm down? I had an excellent reason to be on edge. “She should’ve been here by now.”

“And she will be here.” Nadine grabbed the receiver from my hand and hung it back up.

“You don’t know that.” Jackson could’ve fucked April up again or found out what she was planning. Maybe he killed her this time.

My gut wrenched at that thought. What if April was lying somewhere, hurt and alone? What if I couldn’t find her in time? If Jackson laid a finger on her, I swear to god, I would burn that whole club down to the ground.

“She’s fine.” Nadine reached up and cupped my cheek. “You’d know if she wasn’t. Crossfire owes you, remember.”

My plan for the Wild Dog’s vice prez worked. It took two fixed games to put that fucker in a hole with the Bratva. I pulled him out of that hole, and now he owed me. He couldn’t go to his prez. There were strict rules about dealing with any mafia. At least in my club. If someone wanted to fuck around with Uri Ivanov, that was on them. They wouldn’t pull down

everyone else with them. Hell, I might shoot them myself just for putting everyone at risk. And as far as I knew, most MC presidents felt the same way.

“She’ll be here, Ian. Have some patience.”

“Fuck off, Nadine,” I slapped her hand away, “I’m tired of your rainbows and sunshine bullshit. You need a reality check.”

Her parents had kicked her out. But why would that dampen her outlook on life? It wasn’t like the two people who were supposed to love her no matter what turned their back on her. Oh wait, they did. Then she sold herself like a common whore so she could eat.

“Why the fuck are you so positive all the time?”

“People are generally good.”

I snorted. “No, they aren’t.”

That right there was a perfect example of the fantasy world she lived in.

“Yes, they are.” Nadine insisted while returning to the pile of Cory’s clothes she was folding.

“Really?” I couldn’t take this shit anymore. “Was I a good person on our wedding night?”

Even though her back stiffened, her voice remained calm. “That’s what husbands are supposed to do.”

That was what husbands are supposed to do? Really? That was her fucking explanation. She cried for most of the night,

and I didn't stop. I didn't give a shit about her tears or pleas. I fucked her in every way that came to my mind.

"It's called rape, Nadine." And it wasn't the only time I took her against her will. "You should've had me fucking arrested." I rubbed my face. I was a piece of shit and angry with the world. She just happened to be in the line of fire.

Fuck, I did a lot of shitty things in my life. I had killed people, stolen, and cheated, but those first four months of our marriage were what condemned my soul. I regretted every single fucking thing I did to her. She didn't deserve it.

"Fuck."

"You're different now," Nadine whispered. "You care about Cory and I."

"Don't kid yourself, Nadine. I'm not different." I sighed and shook my head. "I just got bored."

That was a lie. I wasn't secretly a good man. There didn't seem to be anything redeemable inside me. I still did terrible shit. I proved that last month when I passed Nadine's so-called girlfriend around my men, making Nadine watch. To be fair, the bitch threatened to expose her lesbian tendencies with Nadine unless I paid her off. Cunt didn't care about the money now. I wasn't entirely sure she was out of the hospital yet and she was never stepping inside this clubhouse again.

I may not love my wife as I should, but I sure as fuck wouldn't let some piece of shit college bitch use her. What did Nadine say afterward? Maybe she was in trouble and desperate. Like that justified the bitch's betrayal. Her naivety

was so fucking annoying that I wanted to slap her sometimes. But I wasn't Jackson. I didn't hit women.

Where the fuck was April? That was it.

I grabbed my holster off the table and slung it over my shoulders.

"Ian," Nadine warned as I started loading bullets into the barrel of my revolver.

"Shut up and keep folding those fucking clothes."

She huffed and shook her head. "Impatience will get you nowhere."

I flicked my wrist, snapping the barrel shut, and rolled my eyes her way. "It got me a son."

Okay, that was a low blow, but I was already going to hell. Might as well rub salt in the wound.

"I wonder what April would say about your attitude."

She did not just go there.

"Careful, Nadine," I growled. "I don't care about you that much."

Would I sacrifice her for April? Yes, in a heartbeat. I would slit her throat myself.

The door flew open as I grabbed my cut off the back of the chair. The look on Moose's face told me I wouldn't like what he had to say.

"April's here."

Or maybe I would.

Relief washed over me as I made my way to the door.
“About fucking time.”

She made it out okay. That was all that mattered.

“Wait....” Moose pressed his hand against my chest, stopping me. “Before you see her....”

My eyes narrowed. “What?”

“She’s um...”

“She’s what!”

“Ian,” a female voice called from behind Moose, and a second later, April rushed over and threw her arms around me.

She was shaking and out of breath, and the fresh bruises on the side of her face and a cut on her forehead made me grit my teeth. I had a good fucking idea who’d done this to her. Jackson was a dead man.

My eyes shot to Moose. Killing Jackson was all I could think about. It burned in my gut.

Moose tipped his head, giving me a warning look, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. Too late, the war started the day Jackson took her from me.

As if April could sense my thoughts, she tucked her face into my chest and whispered, “Please don’t leave me.”

My heart sank at the sound of her plea. I wanted to kill that motherfucker. Every muscle in my body twitched. But I wanted to be with her more. I needed to be with her. I needed to be the man who kissed her wounds and made her feel safe. The one who saw her smile and held her hand when she was

scared. I needed to be the man she deserved instead of the boy she ran away from three years ago. I broke her heart that night, I couldn't break it again now.

“Come on.” I kissed the top of her head and scooped her up. “Let's get you in the bath.” I fucking loved how she wrapped her arms around my neck and cuddled into me like no time had passed.

I carried April toward the bathroom and looked over my shoulder at Moose. “Call the doctor. She needs a new cast.”

There was some blood on the plaster, and I didn't know if it was hers or Jackson's, but either way, I wanted every last speck of that motherfucker off her. I would take a tally of every mark on her body, and that prick would pay for each of them.

CHAPTER 16

April

I didn't care if I looked weak. For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt safe. My body was still shaking at the thought of Jackson waking up and realizing I was gone. It made me want to find a hole and hide. I hated that. I hated that he'd reduced me to that. As much as I stood up to him, inside...I was a terrified fucking mess.

Ian picked me up, and my tears soaked the side of his neck. I knew I shouldn't cry. It only gave him more reasons to storm out of the house and hunt Jackson down, but I couldn't stop them.

"Shh, I've got you, Tulip. He's never touching you again," Ian said, his arms holding me tight.

"I'm sorry, I can't stop them," I said, the words slipping from my mouth like a bad habit.

Ian sat me down on the bathroom counter, and I didn't want to let go of him but let my arms slide from around his neck. He lifted my chin, my bottom lip trembling as I met his whiskey eyes.

"Don't say sorry to me for crying."

Looking into his eyes brought back all the old memories, mistakes we made, and dreams of the life we should've had. We were both too young and stupid to recognize a once-in-a-lifetime love and should've fought it out. My tears fell faster. How many nights had I forced myself not to feel, show emotion, or care about what happened to me? How long had it

been since my heart knew how to pound without fear, anger, or self-loathing? The dam had burst, and everything was hitting at once.

“I hate crying. I hate it so fucking much,” I mumbled through the tears running over my lips, the saltiness on my tongue. Ian smiled at me.

“There’s the sass I missed so much.”

“I should’ve killed him. Before I left, he was passed out. I could’ve shot him, but I didn’t, and...fuck, that’s gonna haunt me. I had the opportunity to take my life back for good, and I didn’t pull the trigger.”

“No, you did what we talked about. I will take care of Jackson,” Ian growled, but my gut told me I should’ve taken my chances with the wrath of the Wild Dogs.

“He’s probably still out. I can go back and...” I tried to hop off the counter, but Ian caged me in with his arms.

“No, you will never go back there again.”

“But, this is my opportunity. I was freaked out when I left. Getting away from him was all I could think about, but Ian, I could be free from him forever. There wouldn’t have to be a war.”

Ian smirked and chuckled. “Just take a moment and think. If you kill their enforcer, the Wild Dogs will be gunning for you. There wouldn’t be a safe place to go without heavy protection.”

“Won’t that happen anyway? I left.” He lifted his large shoulders and let them drop.

“Not the same way. An old lady choosing to leave versus the murder of a member holds a different level of payback. That’s saying the club gets involved at all. I didn’t steal you. You walked away.”

This was the same argument we had in the trailer before I left, and I still didn’t agree with him. I should’ve added poison to Jackson’s whiskey instead of the sleeping drug.

“Trust me, Tulip, this way is better.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am.”

“Hi,” a woman’s soft voice said from the doorway, and my back stiffened.

How could I have forgotten all about Ian’s wife? My eyes raked over her pretty face, surrounded by blonde hair. Her dark brown eyes had hints of amber, which was unusual. Even though she’d given birth a year ago, she looked like she could go out and model. She was that beautiful.

She stepped into the bathroom and held out large fluffy towels. “I’m really happy you made it safely.” She smiled. That was strange.

I wouldn’t be smiling at the woman who had just intruded on my marriage. As much as I hated Jackson, I still glared at the women he openly fucked. When I kept staring without saying anything, she cleared her throat, her cheeks pinking with a blush.

“I’m sorry, where are my manners? I’m Nadine.” She didn’t hold her hand out for me to shake but stepped in close.

Ian moved out of the way so she could hug me.

My brain stopped working. It was one thing to know he was married and for Ian to say his wife was fine with me being here, but seeing the woman in the flesh was something else. She held me tight, and it took a few seconds for my mind to catch up and reciprocate the hug.

“I’m April,” I said, unsure what else to say.

Pulling back, Nadine smiled. “Oh, I know. Ian has always talked about you. We’ve had long conversations about how you were the one that got away and how he would give up everything to get you back.”

Ian cleared his throat. “Okay, I think that’s enough. I want to get her wounds clean.”

“Yes, of course, we can talk after. I’ll go put on the kettle for some tea.” Nadine’s hand slid down my arm and gripped mine. “I’m so happy you’re here.” She left the towels on the counter, turned, and walked out, closing the door behind her.

What the hell just happened? I looked up at Ian, who was smirking at me.

“I told you she’d be happy you’re here.”

“I know you said it, but....” My eyes glanced at the closed door. “I just don’t get it. I never would’ve shared you. We’re where we are because I saw you with someone else. I was so close to driving my car through your living room window. The only thing that stopped me was not knowing who was on the other side of the glass. If I’d killed Moose or someone else with my rage, I never would’ve forgiven myself.”

“I’ve never shared my heart with anyone else. Nadine and I are friends with benefits out of mutual convenience, but I’ve never loved her. She knows it and never expected anything else. You’re mine, Tulip, you always have been. If I could turn back time and have a do-over, I would do things differently.”

“So much lost time and so many regrets,” I said, staring at my shaking hands. I slowly gripped them into fists.

Ian spoke as if seeing into my soul, “You’ve always been the strong one. I was weak. I will never admit that outside these doors with anyone else, but I was weak, not you, and I intend to make up for all the lost time.”

My eyes locked with his, and their warmth was like a shot of whiskey to my system. He made me lightheaded, always had. It wasn’t fair that time made him more rugged and handsome. Reaching up, I touched his cheek and let my fingertips trace the rough five o’clock shadow.

“How does this work, Ian? I can’t picture what a day in this situation looks like. I can’t imagine what the sleeping arrangements are.”

“Breathe, Tulip. We will figure it out.” I conceded that everything wasn’t going to get figured out overnight. “Come on, let’s get you out of these clothes.”

He turned around and twisted the taps. Within seconds, the tub was filling. Slipping from the counter, I shrugged off my leather jacket, wincing when I rolled out my shoulder. I’d hit it harder than I realized when I crashed to the floor. My adrenaline was so high that I barely noticed hitting things, but

my knee was throbbing, and so was the elbow of my un-casted arm.

Ian was putting bubbles in the bath, and if any of the guys at the club saw this, he would never live it down. It made me love him even more. Was it possible to love someone more than with your whole heart?

I peeled my tank off and quickly slipped out of my boots and jeans before daring to look in the mirror. I avoided most of them, not liking the person I saw staring back, but I forced myself to look today. I looked like shit.

The circles around my eyes were so dark I could've passed for a raccoon. Bruises lined almost every inch of my body, all at different stages of healing, giving my skin a rainbow effect. The cut over my eye probably needed stitches. I hadn't noticed the blood from the wound, leaving a dried streak down the side of my face. I'd been in survival mode for the last three years. It was a constant boxing match, just without the robes or a ref to call time when things went too far.

Ian stepped into the reflection behind me, his face a mask of dark anger and desire. It was a sexy and dangerous expression that made me hot all over. When his hands touched my hips, I startled, and his face darkened into a glare as his lip pulled up like he was growling. His eyes traced my body in the mirror, and I knew he'd memorized each mark.

"I'm going to kill him. I will rip his fucking balls off, shove them down his throat, and then gut him with a butterknife so I can rip them out again."

Stepping back into his body, I stared into the reflection of his eyes.

“I believe you.”

As worried as I was about him trying to take on Jackson, I would have more luck talking to a wall right now. It was like trying to stop a charging bull when Ian decided something.

His hands slid up the front of my body and cupped my breasts, making me sigh and lean back into him. Reaching behind me, my hand gripped the hard length of his cock through his jeans. He growled out my name as I ran my fingers over the denim.

“I want to wash you clean and tend to your wounds before I make love to you.”

“Make love?” I gave him a small smile as butterflies took flight in my stomach.

Ian dropped his head to my ear, his voice rough and gravelly, “Yes, make love to you. You’re the only one I’ve ever loved.”

“I love you too, Ian.”

CHAPTER 17

April

I couldn't think of a word to describe the level of awkwardness I felt. Now that the adrenaline of my harrowing escape and the thrill of seeing Ian had passed, I felt like an intruder.

Ian refused to leave my side and sat me on his lap in the kitchen, not caring who was around. The doctor was friendly and said he would leave my cast off until he could take an X-ray since it had been five weeks. Moose was supportive, but I could see the worry in his eyes. Nadine...I didn't know what to make of her. She brought me hot tea and chatted like we were old friends.

All of that was odd, like walking into a circus with a bunch of exhibits of strange and unusual things. It felt wrong to stare, but you couldn't stop. That was how it felt sitting in that kitchen, except I was the one on display.

I ran my hand over the white dresser—there was no way Ian chose this—and lifted the lid of the jewelry box, unsurprised to see a dancing ballerina. The little chime played as the dancer spun in circles on her toes. I watched until she stopped moving and slowly lowered the lid.

“What am I doing here?”

My eyes drifted to the bed with soft purple and gray sheets. I couldn't stay here. It was time to do what I should've done in the first place...head for the Canadian border. I had

my passport and enough money in my bag to make it in a day if I didn't stop and two if I stayed overnight someplace.

I could get a job as a waitress or bartender and rebuild my life. Ian made my head soft. How did he talk me into leaving Jackson to come live with him and his wife...his fucking wife? I shook my head.

Grabbing my jacket, I pulled it on and swung my backpack over my shoulder. The door opened, and Ian's imposing frame filled the space. He looked at the bag on my shoulder, then narrowed his eyes at the leather jacket.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm leaving. I'm going to Canada."

"The fuck you are."

"Yes, I am. Move Ian. I never should've come here."

He growled at me, and all the air left the room. I swallowed hard but lifted my chin. Ian stepped inside, forcing me to step back as he slammed the door shut.

"Was everything you said to me bullshit?"

"What?"

"You heard me, Tulip, do you not love me? Was this all payback? Are you still so scared you'd run back to the man with your tail between your bitch legs?"

The sound of the slap was loud as my hand cracked across his cheek. "Don't you ever call me that again."

Ian held the side of his face, but his eyes were less angry and filled with a heat that made me wiggle.

“I’m not going back to Jackson, don’t be an asshole,” I growled. “But, I can’t stay here with you. Now get out of my way.” I stepped to the side, but Ian followed me. Glaring up at him, I wanted to punch him in the face next. He pointed to his other cheek, his eyes mocking me.

“What the fuck Ian?”

“Answer my question. Do you not love me? Was it all talk?”

“Are you fucking crazy? You know that’s not the case, but it doesn’t mean anything.” I stomped away from him, pointing at the dresser, jewelry box, and bed. His eyes followed me. “This is your marital bedroom with your wife, who is currently in the spare room.”

I shook my head at him. “I don’t know why I expected this to feel normal. Yes, she’s very nice, like *Brady Bunch* nice, but it doesn’t make this right and....” I leaned back against the dresser and crossed my arms. “I can’t get all the thoughts of all the other shit between us out of my head. Your mother will come for me again, my father and the Screaming Eagles will come for you alongside the Wild Dogs, and for what? For me to stay hidden in this house with your wife forever?”

Ian stepped closer, and instantly, the large room felt small.

“And what’s going to happen to the already screwed up dynamic when you get bored of me and start fucking all the sweetbutts again? I swear to you I’ve lost way too many fucking marbles in my head because I will shoot every last one before I blow your cock off your body.”

I was shaking as Ian chuckled. It was tempting to shoot him now because he made me that insane.

“Fuck, Tulip. I love it when you’re jealous.”

“I’m happy you find the situation amusing. I never should’ve come here. I’m such an idiot.” Pushing away from the dresser, I marched for the door and was shocked when Ian didn’t jump in my way like a human barrier.

“I only ever thought of you,” he said as my hand touched the handle. “Anger coursed through my blood, Tulip, and I hated you with everything in me. You were the one person I trusted with my heart, and you stomped on it and walked away. Every person I’ve fucked since was a lifeless action to scratch an itch. But, in the quiet, late at night, you filled my thoughts. Your smile, laugh, the way your hair fanned out on my chest. The annoyed look that made me want to fuck you senseless like I do right now. I’ve only ever wanted you.”

I turned to face him, but he still had his back to me. “I won’t force you to stay if you want to leave. I’m not Jackson, but...” He slowly turned around, and my racing heart seized with the look in his eyes. “I promise I’ll never touch another woman with you in my life. I will hand you the gun myself if I do. You might as well shoot me because to lose you all over again will kill me.”

There were so many emotions pulling me apart that I rubbed my chest. I wanted Ian. I loved him and never stopped even when I should’ve, but to stay seemed like a prison of a different kind.

“Are you that unsure about us,” he asked, and I realized I was staring at my feet.

“No, but I’m so screwed up. The baggage is clinging to me and choking me out like a noose tight around my neck.”

“Just answer the question, Tulip. Do you love me?”

Our eyes locked when I lifted my eyes to his, and I knew before I spoke again that my fate was sealed.

“My love has never been in question. I love you with every fiber of my being. I’d do anything for you, kill anyone, take a bullet for you...fuck, Ian. Of course, I love you, but that doesn’t make any of this easier.”

Ian walked across the room, the energy charging and stealing my breath away with each heavy footfall. He braced his hands on the door beside my head, and my body shook with a potent combination of love, need, and fear.

“Then stay. Take your place by my side where you always should’ve been. You’ve always been my queen,” he whispered against my ear, and all I could picture was tearing his clothes off. “It will take time to get sorted, but we have weathered a hurricane already, we can do this.”

“I can’t think with you so close. You turn my brain to mush.”

He chuckled, and the sound rippled across my skin. My resolve slipped and hit the floor along with the backpack. I gripped his hair as he nipped the soft skin over my erratic pulse.

“Fuck, you taste sweeter than sin.” He smirked. “So tell me, what happens when I’m buried deep inside you?”

I licked my dry lips. “I can’t think at all,” I admitted and jumped when Ian’s hands gripped my hips.

“Then that’s where I’ll stay until you realize here with me is where you belong,” he said. Ian’s voice was as rough as his five o’clock shadow rubbing against my cheek. I shivered as the sensation shot right between my legs.

He pushed my jacket off my shoulders, and it landed on the backpack. It felt as final as if Ian slid a lock across the door. I was trapped. My heart was imprisoned behind bars years ago, and I would never be free. I could’ve picked the lock, walked out right now, and never looked back, but I didn’t want to be free of him.

“You’re not going to run away again, Tulip. This is your home now,” he said, peeling my top over my head. “Geezus fuck, I love that you don’t wear a bra, and look at these tits. They’re still so fucking perfect.”

I was going to make a smartass remark, but his tongue flicked over my nipple as his fingers rolled the other, scattering all my thoughts. Grasping at them now was like trying to catch confetti in a windstorm.

“Yes, oh god, that feels so good,” I moaned as he switched nipples and sucked on the little peak until it was as hard as the other.

“I should make a no-clothes rule in the house ‘cause I’m going to have you out of your clothes more than you’ll get to

wear them.”

“Is that so?” I gasped, taking a sharp breath as he almost ripped my jeans in two when he tore open the zipper.

“Yes.” Who knew that one word could hold such finality? And I would be a liar if I tried to say I minded. “Fuck I need to taste you.”

Gripping my ass, he lifted me like I weighed no more than a feather and laid me on the bed. My heart fluttered when he growled like a wild animal as he yanked off my boots and tight jeans. Laughing, I gripped the comforter, trying not to slide off the bed. The last to go was my thong. He stared at me so long that I thought something was wrong.

“I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight,” he moaned and grabbed his cock through his jeans. “What the fuck do you do to me woman?” He knelt between my legs, pushing my knees out until they touched the bed. “Keep your legs spread wide.” I nodded, not trusting my voice. His hands slid under me and, with a hard tug, pulled me closer, lifting my ass so my pussy was pointed directly at his mouth.

His eyes found mine, never wavering, as he lowered his head and drew his tongue along the folds of my pussy like he was licking his favorite dessert.

“Three years. Three long, fucking years since I got to taste this sweet pussy. You’re going to fucking scream for me, Tulip.” Like a man starved, he dropped his mouth, and his tongue swirled around, making me moan. “Grab your tits, pinch those nipples for me.”

I did as he asked and whimpered as he sucked on my clit and groaned, sending a thrill through my body that I'd forgotten could exist. I raked my fingers through his hair and pulled him into me, wanting him closer.

“Oh, Ian, I'm gonna come,” I whimpered, my back arching off the bed as I ground my pussy into him harder. “Fuck yes.” I bucked my hips up and down, the climax so close that the moment he slid a finger inside me, it pushed me over the edge, and I screamed his name.

I'd only ever been with two men, but only one made me feel like I was a woman and desirable. Only Ian made me feel anything. My chest filled with warmth and a pulsing need to take more despite my fear of this being ripped away and crashing to the ground around me. I would take all I could get.

Panting hard, I slumped back into the bed as euphoria washed over me.

“Geezus fuck, Tulip, I could eat you all day,” he said, taking long, slow licks.

“Please do,” I mumbled, loving that he chuckled.

“If I weren't so fucking hard and dying to be inside of you, I would.” He put my ass down, and despite my disappointment, I couldn't deny that the show he gave me as he got undressed was worth it. His shoulders flexed, and when he turned around, I admired the muscles along his back right down to his equally hard ass.

“I feel your eyes on me,” Ian said as he looked over his shoulder with an arrogant glint in his eye.

“Oh yeah? And what does it feel like?”

“Sin.” He turned around, and I got an eyeful of his hard cock.

His cock felt like steel wrapped in satin when I crawled the short distance to the edge of the bed and wrapped my hand around him. Ian groaned at my touch and shivered as I drew my tongue along his tight balls right to the tip of his cock. Swirling my tongue around the head, I smirked as he swore.

He grabbed my long hair, wrapping it around his hand to pull my head back, forcing me to look up at him.

“You still like that, don’t you? You like it when I pull your hair.” I licked my lips as my answer. “Do you still like to be ordered around?”

“Only by you.”

His eyes flared with a dark passion that I knew well. “Fuck I missed you, now put my cock in your mouth. I’m going to fuck your mouth hard. This is your only warning.”

It had taken practice to take him down my throat in the beginning, and I was out of practice. But I opened my mouth and teased the head of his cock, making him growl. That sound alone made me wet, and I wiggled my ass.

“You want to come again already,” Ian asked, and I rolled my eyes up to his as I lowered my mouth around the thick girth of his cock.

“Mmhmm.” That was all I managed, with him filling my mouth.

Ian smiled. “Don’t worry, I have something special planned for you.”

I took a deep breath as he pressed my face further down his length. I gagged, but when he groaned, my body responded and relaxed.

“Come on, Tulip, be a good fucking girl and take all my cock. I know you can do it. No one else has ever been able to.”

Just the thought of anyone else’s lips anywhere near his cock sent a wave of rage through my body, and an annoyed, strangled sound escaped my lips. He was mine, and I would cut anyone who came near him from now on.

“You don’t like that, do you, Tulip? Don’t like other women touching me?” My nails dug into his legs, and he sucked in a deep breath. “Fuck, I love that. I love your jealousy. It’s all mine. Every fucking ounce of it is mine.” With a swallow, I shoved him the rest of the way down my throat and only stopped when my nose hit his stomach. “Oh fuck,” he yelled.

Pride filled me as his body shook and his hand tightened in my hair. “You’re the only one, Tulip. You’re the only one that has ever made me feel like this. Holy fuck, let the Lord strike me dead right now, and I’ll die the happiest man in the world.”

He let me pull back enough to take another breath before pushing my head back down. He was relentless with each thrust and I knew my throat would be raw before he finished, but I didn’t care. Tears welled in my eyes, but I loved every second of it and wanted him to come in my mouth.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Ian said and pulled out as he yanked my hair back. I stared up at him and licked my swollen lips. “You’ve gotten better. Did you do this to Jackson?” He snarled, and the corner of my mouth turned up.

“You mean how you’ve perfected your skills on all the sweetbutts and your wife?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I wouldn’t play that game when I’ve only been with two men, and you’re one of them.”

“It should’ve only ever been me. I should’ve been your first and your fucking last,” Ian said.

Grabbing his sack I gave it a squeeze as I wrapped my fingers around the base of his shaft. I applied enough pressure that it should’ve caused pain, but Ian’s knees began to shake as he groaned in pleasure. I knew what he liked, what he craved.

“I forgot what a fucking bad girl you can be.” His cock waved in front of my face, the head an angry shade of red.

“Do you still have a ring,” I asked, and Ian released my hair.

“You gonna put it on me?”

“Of course.”

I couldn’t help taking in his ass and long legs as he walked to the closet and reached for a box on the top shelf.

“Don’t bring anything over here that you used on someone else,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’ll fucking beat your ass with it.”

Ian chuckled and turned around to face me. “Oh, I’ll be beating your ass, not the other way around.” He opened the lid and pulled out the replica cock he had made. “Remember the first time I used this on you?”

“How could I forget? I think everyone in the movie theater will remember that forever.” I felt my cheeks going red. My heart was pounding harder with each step closer.

“Did he—”

I cut Ian off. “He barely touched me, let alone fucked my ass or used a toy on me, so before you ask, the answer is no.”

“Good, and no, I haven’t used anything in this box on anyone else. Not even once.” He dropped the box onto the bed, and I looked at our small assortment of toys. “I’m going to fuck all of your holes tonight.”

Reaching into the box, he grabbed the lube and smeared a large amount on the fake cock.

“You’re serious?”

“I fucking am. Grab all the pillows and put them so you don’t have to lean on your arm.”

I hopped off the bed, grabbing all the pillows, and layering them before reaching into the box for his favorite ring. I slid it over his cock and stretched it wide to fit around his balls. He groaned as I eased my fingers out. He looked sexy as hell, standing like that, all his muscles flexed and on display, with his cock hard and standing in the air. The ring added to his dangerous vibe that loved some pain while we fucked.

Laying down with my ass in the air, I couldn't help wondering if I was really up for this? I guess I was about to find out.

“Are you going to fuck my ass?”

Ian scoffed like I was being ridiculous. “Not until you're pregnant, and even then, I'll keep filling you until you can't take it anymore. Then and only then will I move to your ass.” I licked my lips.

“You want to have a baby with me?”

Ian grabbed my hair, and I cried out when he jerked me upright on my knees and whispered in my ear.

“All I've ever wanted is to have a baby with you. I'm fucking you every second of every day until you're pregnant with my child. If we have a girl first, we will have another and another until our son, the rightful heir to the Lost Souls, is born. Understood?”

“Yes,” I said as he nibbled at my neck and sucked on my earlobe.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good girl, now lay down, ass up.” I slumped forward onto the pillows, my ass in the air, and cried out as the tip of the fake cock rubbed against my hole. “Fuck you're tight,” Ian said as he slowly started to work it in.

“Ah, it's too much.”

“You're going to take it all.”

I buried my head in the pillow and bit down on the fabric, trying to relax.

“There it’s in, just breathe.”

I shuddered and took deep breaths. It felt like the first time all over again. Ian soothed me as he rubbed his cock on my clit, slipping it inside just enough to get himself wet before rubbing it on my clit again. I had no idea how much time had passed when he slowly thrust all the way into me. I felt his abs pressing on my ass as his fingers dug into my hips.

“So fucking tight,” he said. I didn’t have to look to know he was clenching his teeth just like me. “Holy shit.”

“Touch yourself, Tulip, you will come with me. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled into the pillow and slid my hand between my legs. My clit was already sensitive, and I shivered as I rubbed.

I screamed his name seconds later as Ian pulled out and slammed into me. He didn’t hesitate as he picked up the pace, and every time he rammed forward, the fake cock got pushed further into my ass.

Ian’s deep groans, my screams, and the slapping of our skin filled the room. A meteor could crash through the roof, and I wouldn’t have noticed it as he pushed my body to the brink of pleasure and pain.

“I’m going to fucking come. Come now, Tulip.”

I rubbed faster, but I wasn’t fast enough, and his hand slapped down on my ass. I cried out with the sting.

“I said come.”

My fingers worked feverishly, but I didn't avoid another hard smack.

“Now, Tulip. Fuck, right now.”

He thrust into me, and my body toppled over the steep edge. I screamed loud enough that I was sure the entire neighborhood heard me as I came in waves of unimaginable pleasure.

“Fuck!” Ian yelled, and I could feel him coming inside of me. He pumped into me until he had nothing left, and we collapsed into a panting mess of sweaty limbs and heavy breathing.

He slowly pulled out, and I felt empty despite the intrusion still in my ass.

“Roll over and slide up the bed,” Ian said, and even though every part of my body ached, I did as told me. I couldn't believe he was still hard as he settled between my legs.

“I don't know if I can do another round just yet,” I said, my body limp and sore.

“I'll need at least thirty to be able to come again,” he said, and I whimpered as he removed the toy from my ass. He pulled the cock ring off, and a moment later, I heard the water running in the bathroom.

I was half asleep when he crawled back into bed behind me and pulled my leg over his so he could slide back into my pussy. I sucked in a ragged breath.

“I’m staying in you all night.”

Ian dropped his lips to the side of my neck. I looked over my shoulder as he pulled me closer and touched his lips to mine. It was the sweetest and most tender kiss we’d ever shared. Everything we’d lost and been through and all the love that had only grown between us was in the kiss.

“I love you, Ian.” I held onto his arm like a lifeline to my sanity.

“I love you, Tulip. Now rest up. I don’t plan on leaving this room for a while.”

CHAPTER 18

Ian

Watching Nadine and April interact was strangely fascinating. They'd grown closer over the past two weeks, but sometimes April got this look in her eye and pulled back. Not that I minded. It gave me a reason to throw her over the counter or drag her to the bedroom—which she preferred.

I think she felt guilty around Nadine. She shouldn't. Nadine and I hadn't touched since we found out about Cory, but I really preferred to fuck April in the open, where Nadine could see. What April didn't seem to understand in that scenario was that Nadine wasn't watching me, she was watching her, and I knew she would be hot to lick that pussy. The fucked up thing was that I got off on April's jealousy, so I hadn't reassured her that Nadine's longing stares were not for me.

I understood it. If some motherfucker eyed her up, I would rip his eyes out, but oddly when Nadine did it, it didn't bother me.

My head tipped as I rolled my eyes over April's ass as she swayed back and forth and sang while doing the dishes. She had a great voice, her talents should've been on a stage under bright lights.

"We should help her," Nadine whispered in my ear.

"I am helping her." I was planning what I was going to do to her tonight.

Nadine shook her head, dropped Cory in my lap, and joined April at the sink, grabbing a tea towel.

“You don’t have to help,” April said when Nadine started drying a cup.

Nadine smiled, giving her a small hip bump. “It always goes faster with two.”

Not always. I was tempted to sit her on the counter and eat her out like my fucking dessert.

“Well, someone could’ve gotten off his ass,” April drawled, looking over her shoulder. “Instead of staring at mine.”

“Why would I do some dumb shit like that.” I had the perfect view.

“Watch your language around the baby!”

I snorted at April’s snarl. “But ass is fine?”

Fuck, I loved it when she got all lippy and bossy.

She gave me the cutest defiant chin lift. “An ass is a part of the body.”

“Technically, so is shit.”

Nadine and April shot me dirty looks, and the baby they were so worried about was laughing and giggling on my lap like this was the best episode of Sesame Street.

“Don’t worry about Cory. He needs to learn how to handle stubborn women.” I looked down at my son as he clasped his tiny hand around my finger. “Don’t you, buddy.”

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you turn that innocent child into an asshole,” April said with a hip cock.

“Hey,” I barked in a teasing tone. “Watch your language around the baby.”

Her jaw tightened, and I smirked. She wanted to hit me. I could see it all over her face. The only thing holding her back was the baby on my lap. Even though April still had bouts of feeling strange, she loved Cory. And I loved watching her with him. It made me dream of the day her belly was swollen with our own baby. I couldn’t wait to see her all fat and barefoot. Sure, she would complain just like Nadine did about how she couldn’t get comfortable and was always hungry, but I wanted all of it with her. The wild tears and panic attacks, even the strange nesting thing women did.

When I cared for Nadine during those last months of pregnancy, she became a friend, not an annoyance. Neither one of us wanted to share that situation with the other, but we made it work.

With April, it would be different. I wouldn’t disappear for the first trimester and only show up when she called. Guilt kept me from being there for Nadine, and I can’t say it would be any different now. It was hard to watch another woman carry my child. With April, I needed to go to doctor’s appointments and hold her hand while she gave birth. I would be there for everything.

Don’t get me wrong, I loved Cory. I would die for him. He just had the wrong mother.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” April’s eyes narrowed. “You better not be thinking about round three.”

Technically, it was round four. I fucked April twice before we got out of bed and once more while she was cooking breakfast.

“I’m sure Nadine wouldn’t mind another show.”

April’s cheek flushed a bright pink that made my dick jump. But the shy side glance she gave Nadine had me tempted to bend her over the sink.

Nadine rolled her eyes and returned to drying dishes. “Just ignore him.”

“That’s a good idea,” April agreed and spun around to pick up a plate.

Wasn’t that cute? They were trying to gang up on me.

“Is this how things are going to go?”

Neither one said a thing in response.

“You know I can see you, right?”

Just the sound of water sloshing and silverware clinking.

“That’s okay.” I tipped my head and again rolled my eyes down April’s body. “I’ll just sit back and enjoy the view.”

That one got an annoyed snort from one of them. I couldn’t tell which one because I was too busy watching the greatest ass ever made sway back and forth.

“This is what we call the silent treatment, Cory.” I bent down to kiss the top of my son’s head. “Women think it pisses

us off, but it doesn't..." He giggled and reached up to paw at my cheek. "We get all the perks without the hassle."

April spun around and threw the wet cloth at my head.

I chuckled and ducked out of the way. "Aren't you supposed to be ignoring me?"

"That's it..." She stopped when her eyes landed on Cory, then crossed her arms and huffed. "Eat a dick."

I let out an exaggerated gasp and covered Cory's ears. "There's a baby in the room."

"You know what, Ian?"

"What?" I challenged back.

She stood there for a minute, eyeing me, before charging forward and snatching Cory off my lap.

"Give me that baby." She propped Cory on her hip and shot me a dirty look. "You don't deserve him."

She got that right. I wasn't the father Cory deserved and probably never would be. But April did. She lit right up every time my son yanked on her hair. She was born to be a mother. I was the guy lucky enough to be along for the ride.

I couldn't stop myself from standing up and cupping her cheeks.

"I don't deserve you," I whispered, giving her a soft kiss.

"You two are so sweet," Nadine sang.

"I could be sweeter if you took the baby." I could be sweet all damn day.

Unfortunately, a deep voice interrupted us. “No, you can’t.”

Fucking Moose.

When I shot him a look, the big fucker folded his arms over his chest. “We have church.”

Damnit. Fucking club responsibilities were always getting in the way of my dick. Who woulda thought that the club would be a cockblock.

If it were any other day, I would tell Moose to handle it and have some fun with my woman. But this was one meeting I couldn’t blow off. War was coming, and I was going to fire the first shot. Right into Jackson McMillian’s head.

CHAPTER 19

Ian

Church was exhausting. Whenever I came up with a solid plan of attack, Moose or one of the other guys would talk me out of it. I got it. No one wanted a war, but one way or another, it was coming. The Wild Dogs Prez had already called me, meaning Jackson went to him when he couldn't find April, and the club agreed to help find her.

I told him it wasn't my fault if Jackson couldn't keep track of his wife and hung up. After which, I gargled half a bottle of mouthwash. Just calling April that asshole's wife made me feel dirty, and I usually liked dirty. I didn't tell April about the call. There was no need to worry her. I didn't want to give her another reason to run. Besides, I would keep her safe.

That was why we needed to hit first. If we took out Jackson, the hunt for her would end. Why bother looking for an old lady when no one was around to claim her? I, on the other hand, would definitely have a target on my back. No one agreed with that scenario. They didn't want me to put myself in the crosshairs. That was club loyalty. But I was okay with it, so long as April was free.

And just when I was making some headway, Ma showed up. She burst through the doors demanding to know where 'the little bitch' was. I slapped her across the face and kicked her out. I probably shouldn't have done that. Now she would be poking around looking for info. Just fucking great.

Grumbling under my breath, I scrubbed a hand down my face and swung the door open.

Ma was like a dog searching for a bone. She wouldn't give up until she found something. I hoped April waited up for me. That smile of hers always gave me comfort. But it appeared as if she'd already gone to bed.

Sighing, I turned on a lamp and shrugged off my cut to hang on the back of a chair before tip-toeing to the bedroom. At least I could still crawl into bed and wrap my arms around my woman.

Besides, I didn't have to worry about Ma this second. She would start with the sweetbutts—who were all scared of her—and none of them had seen April, so there was nothing for them to tell. Moose sure as hell wasn't talking. He knew what she was like. Eventually, I'd have to give up the ruse. April was right. I couldn't hold her prisoner forever. No matter how much I wanted to keep her to myself.

A seed of guilt dropped into my stomach when I opened the door and saw April sitting on the bed with her nose buried in a book. She was so beautiful, with the lamp light cascading around her, that I forgot how to breathe. Then she looked up at me, and that seed grew into a swirling pit.

How could I keep her trapped? Was I any better than Jackson if I did?

“How...” Her brows furrowed. “What's wrong?”

April was the only person I couldn't hide from. She could always read my emotions.

Walking across the room, I cupped her cheeks, kissed her lips, and whispered, “Nothing you need to worry about.”

Her eyes burned with questions. She didn’t like being kept in the dark but dropped it...for now. That was something to worry about later. Right now, I just wanted to feel her softness pressed against me.

I pulled my shirt off, let my jeans fall to the floor, and crawled under the covers with her. She happily accepted my embrace and tucked into my arms, like she knew I needed to feel her safe and sound.

One sniff of April’s sweet scent had me running my tongue up the side of her neck.

“Stop it.” She giggled, giving my forearm a playful swat.

I lifted my lips to her ear and growled, “Never.”

“Ugh, you’re insatiable.”

“Only when it comes to you, Tulip.” I slid my hand over her hip and under her panties.

That was when I noticed how her body tensed. It was a brief reaction that lasted a fraction of a second, but I still felt it.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” I could read her just as well as she could read me.

“It’s fine, Ian. Don’t worry about it.”

No, it wasn't fine.

Propping myself up on my elbow, I looked down at the spark of sadness in her eyes.

“Talk to me, baby.”

I wanted her to be happy. I would kill someone to see her smile if that was what it took. Jackson was on the top of that list.

But that wasn't what was on her mind.

“This is...it's...It's still weird Ian. It may even be weirder. You're married, but your wife is sleeping in the next room. She watches us have sex, I mean...I don't know. All I can come up with is that it's weird. There is simply no other word.”

Ugh, not this again. “We've been through this—”

“I know,” she cut me off. “But it still doesn't feel right. Your wife should be sleeping in the same room as you. If it were me, I wouldn't be in another room. Then again, there wouldn't have been another woman, or I would've killed her, but that's beside the point.”

Was April getting attached to Nadine?

“So what do you want? Do you want me to make her move out?”

Her mouth dropped open as she gasped. “No, I didn't mean that.” Her eyes flicked away from mine. “I feel bad. I shouldn't, but I do. Nadine's been so great with me and...I'm confused about right and wrong and how I feel fits into that.”

I'd seen the shy glances and flush tint her cheeks when Nadine was around—it was obvious that April was curious—but I didn't want to push the subject. Despite how often it happened, threesomes weren't openly talked about. Nadine was the only person I wouldn't mind sharing April with if that was what she wanted.

Maybe she needed me to push the subject? There was only one way to find out.

“So, invite her in.”

A bright pink hue flowed down her cheeks. “I can't do that.”

“You just said she should be sleeping in here.”

Her entire demeanor instantly changed. Her face hardened, and she looked up at me, spitting mad. “If you think I'm going to watch you fuck another woman....”

Fuck, I loved how jealous she got.

“I swear to God, Ian, I will rip your—”

My mouth crashed down on hers long enough to swallow her words.

“I have no interest in fucking Nadine.” That ship was a means to an end and sailed the day I knocked her up. I cocked a brow and asked, “Do you?”

“What!” She snorted. “Of course not.”

Liar. “Then why don't you invite her in? Are you scared to touch her by accident? Are you afraid you'll like her eyes on

you?” April’s cheeks flamed a vibrant red while her eyes narrowed into a glare.

I knew many things about my little Tulip. How she smelled first thing in the morning, what kind of tea she liked, how much she hated having her feet tickled, and that she never backed down from a challenge. That might make her appear weak, and April was not a timid little kitten.

“Fine.” She shot me a scowl and got out of bed. “I’ll go and get her then.”

“You do that.” I snickered as she walked out the door. This was going to be interesting.

* * *

April

Son of a bitch. I should’ve seen this coming. I should’ve known that Ian would find a way to turn this back on me, and of course, I accepted the challenge. Something about him made me want to prove that I was as tough as any of the guys in the club. It might be his mother never thinking I was good enough and some wallflower, but I couldn’t back out now.

He casually smirked at me as I slipped from the bed, and I wanted to smack that fucking look right off his face. I might have stuck my tongue out at him, which made him laugh. It was rare to feel young again, like nothing had changed. Like my time with Jackson was nothing but a bad dream.

Rolling out my shoulders, I marched down the hallway and stood outside Nadine’s closed door. I stared at the plain brown

wood and rubbed my eyes as I thought about what the hell it was I was considering.

Nadine was a lesbian, which meant she wanted to be with me or might want to be if she was attracted to me. I guess? I didn't know how to navigate this. I was so far out of my depth. I should have just turned around and admitted defeat, but Nadine chose that moment to open the door.

“Hi,” she said.

No one could deny that Nadine was stunning. What would it be like to kiss those lips that were so full and perfect? A shiver ran down my back as I pictured her dark eyes staring into mine as she swirled her tongue around my nipple.

“Is something wrong?” She poked her head out into the hall. “Did something happen to Ian, or did Jackson find you?” She looked genuinely worried.

“Do you think I'm pretty?” I blurted out and couldn't believe I asked that question.

Nadine's cheeks turned a bright red. “Of course I do. You're so beautiful. It's no wonder Ian has been obsessed with you for years. I would be, too,” she said, looking down.

There was something about her actions that hurt my heart. I was hiding from a man, but she was hiding who she was from the world.

Nadine's eyes went wide with shock when I grabbed her face, but she couldn't be any more shocked than I was when I touched my lips to hers.

CHAPTER 20

Ian

I could count on one hand the number of times I'd been shocked to the point that it stole my breath: the first time I felt pain, watching my father's murder, hearing that my brother was abandoning the club and me, seeing my son for the first time, and I couldn't forget the gathering where April bumped into me and turned my world upside down. But none of those struck me as hard as when April walked back into the room holding Nadine's hand.

It wasn't the way she held Nadine's hand that trapped me. It was the look on her face. Uncertainty and nervousness twinkled in her eyes while she trembled. I saw every movement and heard the questions in her head as she and Nadine got on the bed together.

April glanced at Nadine, and it was clear what she was asking. When did this happen? Was it wrong? Did she want it, or should she be running away? And was this really happening?

The anxiety that April was showing now reminded me of our first time together. The way she blushed and nibbled on her bottom lip. I loved her sass but this shy moment made my heart clench tight in my chest. How many more firsts would we have had if things had been different? How many could we create now? I wanted them all with her.

April sat and wrung her hands. "I don't..."

“Shhh.” I pulled her back into me and brushed her hair behind her ear. “I’ve got you, Tulip.”

Nothing would happen that she didn’t want, but I couldn’t tell her that. This was like coaxing a virgin into giving in to her secret desires. Her fear could drive her away. She needed to enjoy it and give in, even if that enjoyment was a bit forced.

I smoothed my hand up her arm and over her shoulder. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

“She’s more than sexy.” Nadine lifted her hand and grazed her fingers down April’s cheek. “She’s captivating.”

April let out a shuttered breath while Nadine scooted closer and tipped her head. She wasn’t new to this game. Most girls needed a bit of a push toward their same-sex desires. And as much as I hated to admit it, she was fucking good at it. I’d seen more than one sweetbutt—who swore they were straight—cave to the carnal need to know what it was like.

I could sense an argument coming on when April parted her lips. So, I grabbed her head, twisted her neck, and slammed my mouth down on hers. Every fiber of my being wanted to rip her clothes off the instant her tongue touched mine. But I settled for the trembles and gasp I got in return.

I had to maintain control. That way, if April woke up in the morning wanting to hate someone for what happened, she could hate me. Tonight, she could just let go and enjoy.

Tearing my lips off hers, I growled, “Don’t think, don’t worry, just kiss her.”

Nadine knew what I was doing. When surprise filled April's eyes, Nadine cupped her face and whispered, "I won't hurt you, and I won't do anything you don't like. Do you trust me to do that?"

One nod was all Nadine needed to kiss April gently. That small tender moment morphed into something deeper and sensual. I watched their mouths move, and tongues dart out while slipping my hand between April's thighs to press down on her clit through her panties.

April groaned, Nadine moaned, and I growled as desire that only April stirred roared through my body. So much for taking it slow. I tore the soft material of her shirt in half. It wasn't the other woman that made me hard. It was the pleasure my woman got from it. And I needed more. I needed to see her come entirely apart.

Shoving my hand down her panties, I finger fucked her hard. April threw her head back, panting as Nadine's mouth moved to her nipples. She writhed against me, but I speared my fingers in her hair and yanked her head back.

"Come on, Tulip," I purred in her ear. "Show Nadine how beautiful you look when you come all over my hand."

Her body responded to my order as her pussy clamped down around my fingers, and she let out the sexiest moan I'd ever heard. Two seconds later, my clothes were gone, and Nadine's head was between April's thighs. How April lost her panties, I couldn't remember. Everything was lost in a lust-fueled haze.

I stroked my cock while Nadine pleased April with her mouth. Holy fuck, I was going to bust a nut watching this. April gripped her tits as her legs fell further apart for Nadine.

“You taste so sweet,” Nadine whispered, and I shivered, knowing exactly what she meant.

Nadine’s fingers slipped into April as she licked her like a goddamn cat with cream, and I couldn’t take anymore.

“Out of the way,” I growled at Nadine. She didn’t hesitate to let me have my woman. I grabbed April’s ankles, flipped her onto her hands and knees, and shoved my cock deep inside her. “Fuck, you drive me crazy woman.”

It was the truth. April had magic in her pussy, and only she could quench my need. Nothing compared to the feel of her, and I fucked her hard and without mercy until she was clawing at the bed. And still, it wasn’t enough. I understood that deep down, it would never be enough. She was the forever I’d lost, the unstable now that I wanted despite threats from every direction. She was my future, yet fear that she could be ripped away from me at any second nagged at my mind. All of that and more made me feral. Feral to claim her to make her mine over and over until it was truth. Marriage papers didn’t mean shit to me, but they did to others, and I needed to figure out how to marry her and make her my wife for real.

Reaching back behind me, I picked up the dildo I’d grabbed while April went to get Nadine and dug my fingers into her hip.

“You feel so fucking good,” I said through clenched teeth while thrusting in as deep as possible. Her moan shot straight

to my cock. April wiggled her ass around as I pummeled her harder, and I fought to keep my load from filling her too soon.

“Now...” I held her ass back against me and dropped the toy on the bed in front of her. “Fuck Nadine while I fuck you.”

I damn near blew my load when she shot me that uncertain look. Then again, when I barked out, “Now,” and her tiny hand wrapped around the toy’s girth.

“Do it, please,” Nadine begged as she slipped before April and spread her legs. “I need to come so bad, please,” she said, her eyes hooded with lust as she stared at April.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Nadine rubbed her clit inches from April’s face. “Oh yes, please. Shove it in.”

Nothing was hotter than watching my woman shove that fake cock in Nadine’s cunt. She was tentative at first, but as Nadine moaned and writhed around on the bed, April’s rhythm and force matched mine. The more they moaned, the harder I got until a shiver shot up my spine and stole my vision.

I roared and drove into April, pushing my seed deep inside her while she and Nadine screamed their release. At that moment, I felt something I hadn’t felt in years—tranquility and peace.

April was mine, and I needed everything to stay exactly like this. She was finally where she belonged, and the woman I married in a fit of rage was no longer a mistake. Nadine was my gift to the woman who owned my soul. The tenderness and soft moments that I couldn’t give April, Nadine could. April

made me want to be a better man, while Nadine believed I was. I hadn't been, but now there was hope I could be. Rage had consumed too much of my mind and my decisions.

I didn't deserve either of them. I'd fucked them both over and hurt them in ways I could never make up for. But in a strange, fucked up turn of events, Nadine and I made up the person April deserved. She was better than either of us.

CHAPTER 21

April

“Get the fuck off my property now before I shoot you in the head!”

I woke up with a start, sitting up straight just as Nadine did.

The last month was wonderful and felt like a fairytale. I never thought I could love two people at the same time, and I never imagined a woman involved. Nadine was the female best friend I’d been missing my whole life. I was never close with the sweetbutts or girls at school. My friends were always the guys at the club, and then Ian.

I loved Ian with all my heart, but there were just some conversations you couldn’t have with a man. More than that, she helped me learn things about myself, my body, and my beliefs that I never thought possible. She was like a soft feather brushing against my skin, making me shiver, while Ian was the whole fucking eagle. Together, they were two halves of my soul.

“No, I know she’s here.”

“Shit, that’s my father,” I said, jumping from the bed and racing around to put clothes on.

“April, don’t go out there. Let Ian handle it,” Nadine said, her eyes filled with worry.

“I’m not going to run out there and announce I’m here, but I’m also not the type to hide in a room while a man protects

me.” Nadine jerked like I’d hit her, and I realized how that sounded. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just...” I sighed. “Sometimes I think I should’ve been born a man, that’s all.”

Before I could put my foot in it anymore, I slipped out the bedroom door and down the hall until I could see out the screen door to the driveway. Ian blocked the view of my father, his hands on his hips. He made one fucking sexy wall of muscle.

“She’s a married woman and needs to learn her place. She must go back to Jackson. That’s where she belongs.”

Ian growled, and it sounded like a bear. “Jackson is an abusive piece of shit, and if you were man enough to act like her father instead of looking out for yourself, you would’ve shot him in the head the first time he laid a hand on her.”

“She’s his wife to do with as he pleases. You have no right to come between them,” my father said, and I knew he was playing with fire.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing I haven’t, and if she has taken off, then good for her. It’s about fucking time. Jackson never deserved April, and if it weren’t for you, I’d be married to her right now. So get off my property, old man, before I throw you off.”

“I’ve checked everywhere. She has to be here,” my father said, and I shook my head. I couldn’t believe that after all of this, after all the broken bones, bruised faces, and hospital visits, my father wanted me to go back to Jackson. I shouldn’t

have been surprised, but that tiny bit of hope that we could be father and daughter again died.

“I said get the fuck off my property now.” Ian pulled the gun out from his waistband. I was ready to rush out there and stop him before he shot my dad in broad daylight in front of an entire neighborhood.

Nadine grabbed my arm. “I’ve got this.”

She swayed past me and opened the door. “Ian honey, what’s all the yelling about? The baby is trying to sleep,” Nadine said, her voice sweet despite the angry men.

Ian turned and looked back, and I could just see my father. He’d aged a lot since the last time I saw him, but what struck me was that I didn’t care if I ever saw him again. I didn’t even think I would cry if Ian pulled the trigger right now, except for what it would do to him.

“Sorry, Pumpkin, this asshole thinks my ex is here,” Ian smoothly lied.

I didn’t like him calling anyone else a nickname, no matter the reason.

“Your ex? You mean that girl who married another man and left you a week before your wedding,” Nadine asked. “What’s her name?”

“April.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Nadine could act. “Why would she be here?”

“Because this old piece of shit thinks I stole her from her husband.” Ian wheeled on my father. “And I’m telling you for the last fucking time that April is not here, but wherever she is, I hope she keeps on running from the likes of you and that asshole you forced her to marry.”

“If I find out she’s here...”

Ian took a step in my father’s direction. “You’ll what? The Lost Souls would crush you, and you know it. Don’t threaten me, old man, or you’ll live to regret it.”

My father turned around and stomped away. A moment later, I heard a motorcycle rev. Shit, this wasn’t good, it wasn’t good at all.

Nadine walked back into the house, followed by a fuming Ian. He looked like a raging bull with a head full of steam.

“Son of a bitch comes to my home and demands to search my house. He’s gotten too bold, and I think he and my mother have spoken. He rambled off some of the same lines she did when she stormed into the clubhouse.” Ian stomped past me, then turned so fast I flinched and closed my eyes purely out of habit. “Jesus, April,” Ian said, his voice much softer.

He cupped my cheeks, and I realized I was shaking as he kissed my lips. “I’m sorry, I know you won’t hurt me, it’s just....”

I stared into his eyes as his forehead touched mine. “Don’t apologize. God, I want to rip him into shreds. Fuck, I hate myself for not taking you away sooner. I should’ve just done it, but I was angry and hurt.”

“Let’s not rehash that again. We can’t change anything. Look, I should leave....”

“Fuck no.” Ian barked out. “No one is scaring me away from you, never again, and you’re not leaving.” He sighed. “I mean...you can leave the house. I just mean...fuck.”

“I’m not leaving the two of you. I meant to stay somewhere else, like a safe house. Someplace no one knows about. At least for a while. They’ll stop looking for me with you eventually.”

Ian braced his hands on the wall on either side of my head. “This feels like giving in to fear. I don’t like it.”

The tension left his tight muscles when I linked my fingers behind his neck.

“It can be someplace close by. Maybe a cabin out in the swap, or there are farms around here. There is even that big farm beside the amusement park for sale.”

He lifted a brow. “How would you know that?”

I lifted my shoulder in a shrug. “The newspaper. I’m just saying for a few weeks. You can come every night as soon as you know no one is following.”

“I hate sneaking around. If Jackson weren’t underground hiding like the fucking yellow-bellied piece of garbage he is, I would’ve crushed him by now.”

Fear rippled down my spine. “If he’s hiding, he could be watching already.”

“I do like the idea of getting out of here. I go to the grocery store, so at least I get some sun, but April is trapped inside. If we were on a farm with trees blocking the view, we could play with Cory outside and go for walks,” Nadine said.

Ian looked between me and Nadine, who kept her distance and gave us this moment. She was good about knowing what we needed. It seemed unfair that I didn't know her as well.

“Fine, but just until we get rid of Jackson.”

I nodded and smiled as I hugged him tight. “Thank you, Ian.”

“Shit, Tulip, you know I can't say no to you.” He groaned as I pressed up against him. “And if you keep doing that, then I'm not going to find us a place to stay, and it will be all your fault.” He growled against the side of my neck.

“But you left the bed before a proper wakeup,” I said, cupping his thickening cock.

“Woman, you are playing with fire.”

“Who said anything about playing?” I ducked under his arm, running for the living room and squealing as he gave chase.

“Don't you know you shouldn't run from a predator,” Ian asked his voice husky with lust.

Rounding through the kitchen, I grabbed Nadine's hand, screaming and laughing as Ian chased us down the hall to the bedroom.

“The two of you are in a world of trouble,” he said, undoing his belt.

“Why? Have we been naughty?”

“You already know that answer. Now both of you take your damn clothes off before I rip them off.”

I really loved this new life, which terrified me. Before, I didn't have anything to live or hope for, and now I did. Having hope for a future was scary, yet I wouldn't give this up without a fight. I had an idea, but one I would keep to myself for now. Jackson would never break me again. I would make sure of it.

CHAPTER 22

1 Month Later

April

Stepping outside the farmhouse, I closed my eyes, letting the sun bathe my face. I loved it here. There was an amusement park next door, and at night, we sat outside watching the flashing lights and listening to people laughing. There was a healing power in laughter that I had felt since we moved here.

“Mama,” Cory squealed. I opened my eyes, expecting to see him and Nadine setting up the kiddie pool, but he ran toward me with his arms open.

Shock pierced my heart. I looked up at Nadine, worried about what she would think, but she smiled wide, her eyes as bright and caring as ever. Bending down, I let the little boy I loved as my own run into my arms. I picked him up and bopped him on the nose as he giggled.

“Poo, poo, poo,” he chanted, pointing at the small blue pool.

“We’re having a party. Your birthday is tomorrow,” I said, unsure how much Cory caught, but he smiled and played with my long hair.

“Parry,” Cory said, and my heart swelled with happiness. He kissed me on the cheek, then squealed and pointed at Ian as the motorcycle roared, pulling into the driveway.

As soon as he was parked, I let Cory down, and I couldn't stop smiling as he waddled on his chubby legs with his arms out, yelling, "Dada!"

"You going to tell him now," Nadine asked as she stepped up on the deck beside me. She nudged my shoulder as I blushed.

I linked my fingers with hers. What had seemed so taboo when I first arrived now felt like home. I loved Ian fiercely, but Nadine had claimed a piece of my heart, and sleeping between them was so normal now that I couldn't picture it any other way.

"I think this is something we should tell him together," I said.

She cupped my cheek and laid a chaste kiss on my lips. Nadine tasted like sweet strawberries. She was soft and never demanding, yet I felt her strength through her selfless heart.

"No, I had my moment. This is yours," Nadine said softly and smiled wide as Ian stomped up the stairs, making monster noises as Cory laughed. "Come here, you little monster," Nadine said, taking Cory from Ian. "I'll give you some time alone. I need to run his bath."

"Poo, poo," Cory yelled.

"That's for tomorrow," Nadine said, tickling his tummy, but I knew there would be tears before the night was over that he didn't get to play in the pretty blue pool.

Everything else was set up, including the tiny bouncy castle that only held two children. It was perfect since we

couldn't let anyone other than Moose and Andrea come over with Archie. They were the only ones who knew I was here or where any of us were, for that matter.

“Hey there, my sexy wife,” Ian growled, and I would never get tired of hearing those words. He kissed me like he always did, leaving me breathless and pressed up against the wooden pillar of the porch. “You wanna go for a ride? I’ve been dying to get you on the back of my hog again.”

I looked at the bike and frowned. “But what if someone sees us?”

“Ah, I picked up a full-face helmet. I know it’s not sexy, but it will hide who you are, and you can tuck your hair up.” He ran his fingers through my dark hair. “We really should dye this blonde.”

I didn't want to dye my hair, but he had a point. “Anywhere special you want to go?”

“I have a spot in mind,” he said, smiling. That glint in his eye and the curl to his lip promised I'd be screaming his name and sweaty before he was through.

“Alright, let's go.”

Ian opened the farmhouse door. “Nadine, I'm taking April for a ride. We'll be back in a few hours.”

“Okay, sounds good. Have fun,” she said over the sound of Cory crying and saying ‘poo’ over and over.

Ian wrapped his arm around my waist as we walked to the bike and pulled the plastic bag off his handles. Opening the

box, he held out a black helmet with a skull on the side, and I smiled.

“I had them add the Lost Souls name to the back.”

A tear pricked the corner of my eye as I ran my fingers over the gold lettering. I quickly wiped it away, but Ian caught the movement.

“What’s wrong? Do you not like it?”

“No, I love it. That’s the problem.” I looked up at the farmhouse and then into his whiskey eyes, wishing I could drown in them and never deal with reality again. Jackson was the boogeyman hunting me, and we were all on pins and needles until he was found and eliminated.

“You need to stop worrying so much.” Ian pulled me into a hug, and I let him hold me.

“I’m trying. We better go before I turn into a sobbing mess,” I said, pulling back. I quickly did my hair up into an elastic that would hold it under the helmet and out of sight.

Nothing was better than climbing on the back of Ian’s bike and wrapping my arms around him. As the motorcycle roared to life, I shivered and locked my hands together. I could’ve sat back and relaxed. I’d never been scared to ride on the back like some other girls, but I wanted to be as close to Ian as possible. The hours we weren’t together while he handled club business were agonizing. Every hour felt like a day.

We cruised along the freeway, and I soaked in the moment. This was life. We had been riding for a good hour when Ian pulled off on an exit that was new to me. The houses were

further apart, and there was little to no traffic. Ten minutes later, we pulled into a small parking lot with a fast-food truck.

“Stay here.”

As Ian wandered over to get what I presumed was our dinner, I looked around and spotted a sign that made me smile. I did know this spot, but we’d only been here once before... the night he proposed to me. My pulse quickened at the thought of getting a do-over. Could this be happening?

Ian put the food into the saddle bag and gave me the drinks. I smirked when I saw the chocolate milkshake. I drank one that night, too. Butterflies soared around my tummy as he fired up the bike, and we were off again.

Sure enough, we pulled into the parking lot of the same quiet, out-of-the-way beach we’d been to years before. A lifetime had passed, yet it seemed like yesterday. There wasn’t a single car in the lot, but he parked as far away from the entrance as he could.

Ian killed the engine and swung his leg over the bike. I pulled the helmet off, and we sat there enjoying the view of the waves rolling into shore.

“Do you remember this spot?” Ian looked at me.

“How could I not?” Reaching out, I ran my thumb over the five o’clock shadow on his cheek. I like that he didn’t grow a full beard. Beards reminded me of my father, and he was the last thing I wanted in my head when I was with Ian.

“This is where I thought my forever was starting,” I said.

Wrapping his hand around my neck, Ian pulled me closer until our foreheads touched.

“I’m so fucking sorry. I should’ve killed her. Instead, I killed us. I’ll never forgive myself for that and for what you suffered because of me.”

“It wasn’t all you. My father sold me first.”

“That doesn’t matter. You would’ve found out, and I was an idiot to think I could’ve hidden it from you. I would’ve destroyed us no matter what.”

I searched his face and could see the pain in his eyes.

“Why do you keep beating yourself up? We need to move on.”

“Because it keeps me awake at night. I lay in bed and watch you sleeping but hear your screams in my head. I see your bruised face and broken bones, and it tears my heart out that I let that happen. I claimed to be your protector but crushed us at the first sign of trouble. I should have killed my mother, and if I had it to do all over again, I would put the gun in her mouth and smile as I pulled the trigger.”

His hands shook on my face, and his eyes were lethal.

I licked my lips. “Would this be a good time to tell you I’m pregnant?”

Ian sat back like I’d slapped him, his eyes wide. “Are you serious right now, or are you playing with me?”

Sitting the drinks aside, I got off the bike. I pushed Ian’s leg so he was straddling it backward, and I straddled him.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I licked at his bottom lip.

“Do you really think I’d joke about something I’ve wanted from day one? I’m pregnant. I took the test three times.”

“Oh fuck, I love you so fucking much!” I expected the ferocious kiss. I didn’t expect him to grab my ass and leap off the bike like a madman. “Fucking yeah! You hear me, world, I fucking love you,” he yelled, making me laugh. Ian’s eyes were filled with tears as they met mine. “I love you, April, my spring Tulip. I love you so much my heart aches just thinking about you, in all the best ways.” He dug around in the pocket of his cut and held up a little black box. “Would you marry me even though my ass doesn’t deserve you? Please, once and for all, be my wife?”

“The answer was always yes,” I said, kissing him like it was the last time.

CHAPTER 23

Ian

This was the day I never thought would come. I had my Tulip in my arms, wearing my ring, with my baby in her belly. It was different than when Nadine told me. I loved my boy. Cory was strong and rambunctious, everything a man could want in his son. But the child April carried was the one I'd dreamed about for years. A part of me hoped that it would be a girl. Not only because she would most definitely be like her mother, but then I wouldn't have to worry about accidentally playing favorites.

What if I loved him more than Cory? I had made many mistakes in my life, and I didn't want to fuck up my sons too.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I smiled at April, sitting on the back of my bike, and hung the gas nozzle back on the pump.

"You are not fine, Ian." April sighed and reached out to cup my cheek. "Now tell me what's wrong."

I both loved and hated how well she knew me.

"If I told you to drop it, would you?"

The cocked brow she gave me in response was all the answer I needed. It made me chuckle. Not many women in my world had balls big enough to tell a Prez off, let alone stick a knife in their sack to get them to talk, which is exactly what April would do.

“You’re stubborn as hell, woman.” I grabbed her wrist and kissed her palm. “But I love you.”

“Don’t try and sweet talk your way out of this.”

“I’m fine, really,” I said. “Just promise that you won’t let me play favorites.”

April reared back and knitted her brows. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

Many things weighed on my mind. Finding that prick Jackson, making sure my mother didn’t find out about April, and paying her father back for every bruise April endured because of him. And even with all that, not playing favorites with my kids was still at the top of the list.

“Ian.” April sighed as a frown tugged at the corner of her mouth. “You’re nothing like her.”

“You sure about that?”

There was no hesitation in her answer. “Yes.”

“You do remember my brother, right? Did he seem happy to you?”

Our mother drove Maverick away. He had his escape planned before he could walk. I was jealous of him up in Canada, free from her vile grip. Sometimes, I thought about joining him, but I couldn’t abandon the club. My boys needed me.

“Maverick left her, Ian. Not you.”

That was the point. “I know that, but what if I do the same thing to Cory?”

“Your mother is incapable of love,” she said.

“Some would say the same about me,” I argued.

“The fact that you worry about hurting your son says otherwise.”

That was a hard point to argue. I couldn't say that my mother ever worried about hurting any of her kids. She didn't even show up at my sister's funeral. ‘Why would she be broken up about a girl with nothing to offer?’ she had said.

“The only good thing that woman ever did...” April wrapped her arm around my waist and pulled me into her. “Was give birth to you.”

“You just like me for my dick.”

She rolled her eyes. “It's not always about the dick.”

I nuzzled in and dragged my tongue up the side of her neck to whisper in her ear, “You sure about that?”

“Ian, we can't,” she argued despite the shiver wracking her body. “We're at a gas station.”

“So?” I looked back at the only attendant staring at a TV behind the counter. “I don't think he'll mind.”

He hadn't looked up once from whatever show he was watching. And there was no one else coming down the road. The only light for miles around was from inside the station. Plus, I'd dreamed about fucking April on my bike for far too long.

“It's not happening,” April insisted.

I loved the adorable way she lifted her chin in defiance. Too bad for her, that shit turned me on. Before she could stop me, I had her off the bike with her feet on the ground.

“Tan...”

“Shh,” I purred in her ear while unbuttoning her jeans. “He’s going to hear you.”

She looked over her shoulder, glaring at me with big, bright eyes. “We can’t do this here.”

That stern look on her face softened as I pushed my hand between her thighs and fingered her clit. Her head was shaking no, but her pussy was wet and ready for me. One yank and her jeans slid over her hips. Two seconds later, I buried my cock deep inside her.

I groaned while she moaned and braced her palms on the seat. Her nails dug into the leather. My sweet little Tulip was holding back her pleasure because she didn’t want to be caught. A better man would cover her mouth to muffle her sounds. But I wasn’t a better man. I was a cold son of a bitch who enjoyed claiming my woman in front of anyone and everyone. That shit made me come so fucking hard my knees buckled.

I wanted that pipsqueak attendant to see. And low and behold, when I looked back, I got my wish. The scrawny little shit was leaning over the counter, eyes wide.

Grabbing April’s hips, I slammed into her hard, again and again and again. Every thrust held a silent message for the man watching.

Thrust.

Listen to her.

Thrust.

She's mine.

Thrust.

Touch her, and I'll slit your fucking throat.

My sweet little Tulip wasn't arguing anymore. She moaned and clawed at the seat while arching her hips for more, and I gave it to her. I fucked her hard in every way I could. On my bike, bent over my bike, behind my bike. At one point, I had her ride me while I revved the engine. I watched her bounce on my cock while that scrawny little shit probably jerked off behind the counter. Either that or he was scared. I was too busy swirling my tongue around the greatest pair of nipples God created to care.

That is until April slowed down and whispered, "He's looking."

"Good," I growled, grabbing her ass to slide her along my length. "Now, show him how hard you come on this cock."

When she hesitated, I lifted her and slammed her back down, pulling what she'd been holding back. April's orgasm ripped through her, arching her back as her walls clamped around me. I damn near went blind from the sensation. I dug my fingers in her ass and held her down, shooting my load as deep as I could.

We sat there while April laid her head on my shoulder and caught her breath. The serene moment didn't last long. April lifted her head and glared at me right before she slapped me.

I couldn't help but chuckle at how her face reddened with embarrassment. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were mad at me."

"You think," April huffed and crossed her arms. "I'm telling Nadine."

I shrugged. "If you want to disappoint Nadine and let her know she missed the show, that's on you."

The dirty look I got in response was almost as cute as the snort that followed.

"Can we go home now?"

She moved to get off me, but I grabbed her thigh to stop her. "Where are you going?"

She looked at me, confused. "To get behind you?"

"Oh no." I shook my head and passed her the helmet. "My dick is not coming out of you all night."

I would stay right where I was, warm and hard inside those tight walls.

When concern arched her brow, I knew what she was thinking. 'This wasn't safe, and what about the baby?' But I would never let anything happen to them. She was precious cargo, and I'd been riding since I could walk.

I leaned forward, grazing my lips against hers. "Do you trust me?"

April took a second to eye me before begrudgingly pulling the helmet over her head. “If you kill me, I will come back and shove my foot so far up your ass.”

“Deal,” I snickered and revved the engine.

CHAPTER 24

April

We'd just finished singing *Happy Birthday* when the sound of a motorcycle slowing down had Ian pointing to the house. I sprinted as fast as I could, but I knew that whoever it was would see me running.

I had dyed my hair blonde—I wasn't fond of it—but with Nadine outside, my heart sank. They found us and my beautiful little fantasy world was ending. My body shook all over, the trembling starting at my fingertips as cold dread pressed down on me.

It felt like I needed to run and never stop, and I hated it. Being away from Jackson for so long had made me realize how dead I was inside. That wasn't living, and I never wanted to see his face again. Jogging up the stairs, I ran for the spare room at the front of the house. Tears trickled down my cheeks at the sight of Ian's mother, Marge.

Leaning against the wall, I covered my mouth. I needed to get my shit together. I couldn't let Marge get to me. Living in fear would only make her happy. Running my hand along the blade at my hip, I closed my eyes and let the weapon calm me. How something so simple as a sharp blade helped, I couldn't say, but it did.

The voices outside got louder. I bent down and slowly cranked open the brand-new windows Ian had installed, just far enough to hear better.

“Don’t you lie to me, boy. I know you’re harboring that slut here, and I won’t stand for it,” Marge yelled, and Cory started to cry.

“I’m not a boy, and I don’t take orders from you. Not anymore. Go ahead and threaten me again and see how fast I put a bullet between your eyes, old woman,” Ian growled, and I shivered at the lethal tone in his voice.

“You’re going to regret this son.”

“What I regret is letting you run Maverick from the country. I regret allowing you to talk me into proving I didn’t love April,” he said. “But what I regret most is not killing you years ago. You’re a snake, and your venom is toxic to my entire club. You’re no longer allowed on Lost Souls property anywhere.”

“You can’t do that,” Marge yelled. “I’m your mother, and I was married to the Prez....”

“Yeah, and he’s dead! From this moment on, you are to me as well.” I dared to lift my head and peeked out the window. Ian was right up in his mother’s face as he yelled at her.

“Moose, call the guys and tell them to spread the word. My mother is shot on site if she steps one foot on any Lost Souls property.”

She raised her hand to smack Ian. He grabbed her wrist and flipped her on her ass in the blink of an eye. Gun out and pointed at her. I covered my mouth in shock.

Please don’t shoot her in front of Cory.

“Get off my property, and if you come back, you will leave in a body bag. I’m done with your fucking manipulative ass. This is your only warning.”

Marge glared up at him.

“You have until three,” he said. “One.” He pulled the hammer back, and her eyes went wide. “Two.” She scrambled onto her knees and got up, jogging for her motorcycle.

“You’ll regret this,” Marge yelled as she straddled her bike.

“Three,” Ian yelled, firing his gun into the sky. Marge ducked, her face paling as he lowered the gun and pointed it at her.

She was quick to get the bike turned and sped down the driveway. I slumped against the wall and giggled.

“April?” Ian called up the stairs, and I could hardly stop the fits of laughter long enough to yell where I was before I was consumed with laughter again. “You okay?”

The look of concern on Ian’s face only made me laugh harder. “The look...the look....” I burst out laughing, and Ian began to laugh along with me. “The look on her face when you pointed the gun at her.” I held my now aching stomach. “I will never forget that look,” I said, wiping away the tears from laughing so hard.

Ian sat beside me, grabbing my hand as he laid his other one on my stomach. I stared into his whiskey eyes and drank them in as we sobered.

“I promised to protect you and our unborn child, and I meant it.”

I cupped his face and kissed him. “I knew you would. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

* * *

Man, these cravings were real. I never thought they would be this bad, but here I was for the third night in a row, getting up to scrounge through the fridge like an oversized mouse. At this rate, I would be the size of a blimp before the baby was born. I kissed Ian’s forehead when he suddenly grabbed my hand.

“I’m just getting a snack. I’ll be back.”

“Want me to come?”

“No, I’m fine.” Ian nodded as Nadine rolled over in her sleep. “Go back to sleep.”

It took a little tugging, but I pulled my hand from Ian’s grip and smirked as he scowled in his half-awake state. Padding quietly out into the hall, I yawned as I passed the last bedroom—we were turning it into a nursery—when someone slapped a hand over my mouth and dragged me back into the darkened space.

Fear ripped through my body as my groggy brain caught up to what was happening. I jabbed my elbow back and screamed as loud as I could with my mouth covered. There was a distinct grunt as my elbow connected.

“Shut up, you little bitch,” Marge said. I wasn’t sure if I was more shocked that it was her or that it wasn’t Jackson.

Something sharp poked into my neck, and I froze. My heart pounded hard, the thumping loud in my ears.

“I knew you were here. You’re the only cunt who could ever make my son turn his back on me. You were trouble the first day he laid eyes on you,” she snarled.

“It’s called love, something you wouldn’t know anything about,” I said.

“Love is for the weak.”

“Only someone who has never been loved would say that.” The blade pushed deeper into the soft underside of my neck.

“My son loves me. His dick wants you, and it’s deluded his mind. He will forget all about you when you are gone for good. Just like he forgot about you last time.”

“You’re the deluded one if you truly think that. Ian will hate you more than he already does,” I said. My eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and the full-length mirror across the way showed the glint of the knife to my neck as Marge held me from behind. I knew she would kill me no matter what I said. Marge’s ambition and thinking had poisoned her. She was so desperate to hang onto the power she had before that it warped her already twisted mind.

“My son doesn’t hate me,” she snarled.

“Really? Do you think he doesn’t suspect you of killing your husband? You think he doesn’t blame you for chasing Maverick out of town?”

“My son abandoned the family. That’s not my fault.”

“He left because of you. Spin it however you want, but if you want to know why you’re on the outside, look in the mirror.” Her hand shook. “I never hated you, Marge. I always hoped we could be friends, and one day I could call you mom. My mother died years ago, and you were the only mother figure in my life. Instead, you chose not to see the opportunity to gain an ally and tried to have me killed.”

“Is that all you think I did?” The low chuckle raised the hair on the back of my neck. “See, this is why you never would’ve made a good Prez’s wife. You don’t bother to ask questions.”

“You mean like Nadine?” Sarcasm dripped off my every word. Nadine never got involved with club business. Most old ladies didn’t, so why did she expect me to swim against the stream?

“That’s different, she was always a useless tit and would at least do whatever I wanted.”

I rolled my eyes. Marge didn’t know Nadine. Nadine was as sweet as they came, but she was no pushover.

“But with you...I needed a backup plan on top of a backup plan. Your father didn’t suddenly end up in debt for no reason. He also didn’t choose your husband. I did,” she said, and I could hear the evil in her voice.

Ian had always believed his mother was a monster, and it was coming through now. My stomach churned as my brain

processed what she'd just said. Marge was behind my marriage to Jackson this entire time.

Tears pricked and burned the back of my eyes. My hands balled into fists as rage brewed in my stomach.

“You hated me that much?”

“I was hoping he'd kill you, to be honest. He's killed more than one sweetbutt and hooker. He tends to get off on that shit.”

I knew what she meant. The evil that I heard in her voice, I saw in Jackson's eyes when he attacked me. So many times, I wondered if I was staring at the devil. I prayed to God for him to kill me quickly if that was what he planned.

“And what dirt did you have on Jackson to get him to agree to your plan? He never struck me as the marrying type.”

She was quiet for so long that I wondered if she'd stroked out behind me. I was sadly disappointed when she finally spoke. “I guess there is no harm in telling you now. I plan on killing you anyway.”

“There is one person Jackson loves, and he gets his dick wet often inside her cunt.” I stayed silent, not wanting to deter her from the topic. “Let's just say he likes a little incest.”

Shock rendered me speechless as I tried to figure out who she could be talking about.

“You're lying,” I finally blurted out.

“Am I?”

This was too much. I didn't want to listen to any more of this. "Whatever you say isn't going to bother me now. Jackson wasn't my one true love. I had already found that with Ian. We have it again now, but if you plan on killing me, let's get it over with."

She made a disgusted sound. "In such a hurry to die?"

"The less time I spend pressed up against your body and listening to you babble on, the better."

"You always were an ignorant cunt, too bad Ian couldn't see that."

She moved the blade further across my neck, and I knew she would slit my throat.

"Would you really kill your unborn grandson," I said, pleading with the small part of humanity I hoped she still had inside of her cold soul.

Her arm faltered. "You're lying."

"I'm not, and I'm carrying a boy." That was a lie. I didn't know the sex, but Marge valued men over women, which was stupid since she was a woman.

"Anything born to you would be nothing more than a bastard child anyway. I should start by cutting it out of you."

I didn't wait for her to finish whatever she was going to say next. Pushing her arm away, I twisted her wrist and leaned forward like I'd learned in my battered women's class. They had a self-defense teacher come in twice a week to work with us, and I'd never been so happy for it.

Marge's body slammed onto the floor hard enough to shake the house. She was on her back and groaning. My only concern was my unborn child, so I turned and ran for the door, screaming. Marge was faster than she looked and slammed into me as my socked feet skidded on the hardwood floor.

I screamed again, louder this time, as I collided with the banister and almost flipped over the top. It bowed out with the sudden abuse of weight, but I managed to duck and move away, crying out as her blade caught my arm.

“Get back here,” Marge growled.

Holding my injured arm, I rammed her hard in the gut like I was playing football. The railing cracked this time, and I screamed like a banshee as we started to go over the side. Strong hands gripped my shoulders, but Marge hung onto my wrist. The banister groaned and snapped completely, sending Marge swinging, using me as her rope. I cried out as I landed on my stomach, my shoulder wrenching and my face slamming into the floor. More hands grabbed my feet, and I knew it was Nadine.

“Let go of April,” Ian yelled.

“Never she needs to die. You'll thank me for it,” Marge said, her eyes wild.

“Now, Mom,” Ian growled.

Instead, Marge lifted the knife to slice my wrist. Fear for my unborn child lanced my heart.

Bang.

The gunshot made my heart jump. My ears rang, but it was the sightless eyes and blood dripping down my face that calmed me. Marge was dead.

The close-range bullet had blown part of her head right off, and I looked away as the gore made my stomach flip. Marge's hand slipped from my arm, and landed near the bottom of the stairs before tumbling the rest of the way to the floor. She lay sprawled on the floor like a morbid cartoon character, but I couldn't look away from the gore.

Ian pulled me up and turned me around to look me over.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" I looked down at my shaking hands, covered in blood. "April, answer me."

His hands tightened on my arms. "No, no, I don't think so. Just my arm."

"Here," Nadine said, holding out a towel to Ian.

He tied it tight on my arm and ordered Nadine and me back into the bedroom to stay there. I didn't want to and grabbed his arm as my fear took over.

"Is she really dead? She was going to kill our baby," I said, my voice breaking.

"She's dead, but you don't need to see this." He kissed my forehead. "I'm going to get Doc to come and look at your arm. Just stay in the room until I say it's clear to come out."

Nadine wrapped her arm around my shoulders, and as soon as we walked into the bedroom and the door closed, I broke down. Gripping Nadine, I cried as she cooed and soothed me. Ian's mother was behind it all. She hated me so much that she

wanted to see me suffer or die at Jackson's hand. I couldn't believe that she'd almost taken everything from me again.

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up," Nadine whispered as my tears finally slowed.

Walking into the bathroom, I stared at the blood smeared down my face and took a moment to appreciate that Marge was dead. I never realized how much her darkness hung over me, a looming figure as real as Jackson.

* * *

I woke up hours later to Ian crawling into bed and pulling me into his arms. I clung to him like he was going to disappear.

"How's your arm," Ian asked, his thumb running over the bandage.

"I'll live. Doc did a great job stitching it up."

"Fuck. I was so scared when I heard you scream. I thought my heart stopped in my chest." Sitting up, I kissed his cheek and noticed tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to kill your mother," I said.

Lifting my chin, he forced me to look at him. "Don't you ever apologize for that, not ever. I'd kill her again if I could. Anyone who would storm my house and try to kill the woman I love and my unborn child doesn't deserve to breathe another day."

My lower lip trembled, and Ian leaned in and kissed my lips so softly.

“If you had gone over that banister...” He shook his head. “If anything happened to you or the baby. I would’ve died on the spot.”

“What scares me is that it’s not over. Your mom told me she arranged for my dad to be in debt and had dirt on Jackson to make sure he chose me as his payment. She was evil, Ian, but whatever she put into motion is still in play. We will never be safe until my father and Jackson are stopped.”

“Or maybe we will be safer. Could be that whatever she had as leverage is lost.”

I nodded. He could be right. It made sense, but in my gut, I knew that at some point, another shoe would fall. For now, I was going to hold Ian tight, praying that he was right and I was wrong.

CHAPTER 25

Seven Months Later

April

“Ahhh!” I looked up at Ian as the pain ripped through my body again and decided that if I lived through this birth, I would kill him for knocking me up.

No amount of books or warnings could prepare you for this experience or level of pain. My body was being ripped apart from the inside. Another scream echoed inside the room as the doctor told me to push.

I gripped Ian’s hand so hard I was surprised the bones didn’t snap.

“You’ve got this, Tulip. Breathe through it,” he said, kissing the top of my head as the contraction eased.

“Tell me to breathe through it one more time, and I’m going to castrate you,” I said, and his eyes went wide as he swallowed.

My back arched off the bed as the next contraction hit.

“You’re almost there, just one more good push,” the doctor said.

I no longer cared that sweat dripped from places I’d never sweat before. Or that some strange man was staring at my vagina while it was as wide as a football. All I cared about was summoning enough energy to push this baby out.

“I don’t know if I can,” I said, my head rocking back and forth. We’d been in here for hours, and I was so tired that I

didn't even know if it was the same day.

Ian lifted my chin. "Yes, you can. You're the toughest woman I know. You've got this. One more push." He nodded, and I took a deep breath as I felt the contraction start.

"Push now," the doctor said, and I screamed as I gave it all I had.

I collapsed back on the bed as relief washed over me. A moment later, a loud cry filled the room, and my heart soared. There was no telling where the strength came from, but I pushed myself up straight as the doctor handed over my wrapped bundle. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life.

"Congratulations, it's a boy." The doctor smiled at us. "I'll give you a few minutes, then we will come back to take the baby to get cleaned up."

"Thank you," Ian and I said together.

"Oh my god, we have a boy," I said, looking up at Ian. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and his eyes filled with love. I would never forget this moment as long as I lived. I wanted to cherish it forever.

Linking my fingers with his, I tugged his hand as he wiped away the tears. "Fuck, I...I want another one with you already."

"Um...how about we take this one step at a time because I'm not sure if I'm letting you near me with that dick again."

Ian laughed and kissed the top of my head. "What do you want to name him?"

He was all red and chubby and so cute. Staring into the quiet little face, I said the first name that came to mind.

“I want to call him Chase.”

Ian smirked. “Chase Mathers. I love that. Welcome to the world, son.”

EPILOGUE

Two Years Later

Ian

There was a knock at my office door.

“Come in,” I barked out.

Moose opened the door, and I knew the news wasn't good by the look on his face. “The fucker is back, he's come out from underground and has some new friends.”

“How many new friends are we talking about,” I asked, standing from my desk.

“Too many,” Moose answered, and my hand clenched into a fist.

“If Jackson McMillan and Wrath want a fucking war, I'll give them a war. No one threatens my family. No one.”

Moose nodded and closed the door as I picked up the phone. I had my own friends to call. They weren't the only ones building alliances over the last few years, and it was time to call in those favors. McMillan wasn't stealing my happiness, not ever again.

* * *

I hope you enjoyed reading about the Lost Souls. More are coming your way soon.

Check Out www.brooklyncrossbooks.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've been crafting stories for as long as I can remember, but in 2016 I decided to take the plunge and dedicate myself fulltime to the writing profession. Since then, I've been very fortunate to have had my work featured in a variety of publications. I look at the world through a writer's lens. I see stories in everyday life just waiting to be told and do my best to be the medium through which they reach the page. To find out more about my work, browse my newly updated Author Portfolio and get in touch if you have any questions or would like to discuss working together.

If you like your books dark and edgy with a dash of humor and lots of spice then look no further. I have always had a deep passion for writing that stemmed from a wild imagination. When I'm not busy typing away about the next character you will fall in love with, you can find me walking with my dogs on the farm. You will also never see me without a hot cup of coffee in hand.

From the age of six I trained and was highly competitive in my equestrian sport of dressage with aspirations of an Olympic dream. After twenty-five years of competition I hung up my competition hat to start coaching and training riding enthusiasts. But, I have always found myself drawn to writing and knew that I wanted to find a way to write full-time.

I want my work to be authentic and to tell a story that others can immerse themselves in and relate to. If I can make you smile, laugh, cry, hide under the blankets or have your heart pound out of your chest, then I have done my job.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.L Hodel is a Canadian author, poet and artist. Though coming from a difficult childhood she excelled at writing, having her first poetry published in junior high school. When she's not writing she occupies her self with numerous crafts, hobbies and is an avid gamer. She lives in Calgary with her kids and cat, and may have a slight weakness for horror movies. (Okay, that's a lie, she's probably seen them all)

Read More from T.L. Hodel

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AFTERWORD

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