

a Dark Circle story



Dark
DAZE

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DARK DAZE

A DUSK BAY NOVELLA

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Gravel crunched under my tyres. Late dusk couldn't penetrate the trees, leaving the outside of the massive house bathed in darkness. Here and there, windows were framed in the yellow glow of the lights inside, but heavy curtains stole most of it.

“Is this the place, Mummy?” Nova asked from the back seat. The high pitched quiver in her voice matched the swirling thoughts in my mind.

“Yes, sweetie,” I said, lighter than I felt. Why the fuck was I bringing a five-year-old here? I wanted to turn the car around and get the hell out of here.

Should have.

“We won't be here long.” Was I trying to comfort her or me? “Just a couple of weeks, then we'll go home.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

I parked my car out the front and killed the engine. For a long moment, I sat with my hands on the steering wheel, staring into the deepening shadows. My heart raced, palms damp.

I needed to start the engine and head back down the arched driveway. I reached for the key in the ignition.

The front door to the house swung open and a warm glow rushed out like even the light wanted to escape this place.

I reluctantly let go of the steering wheel and opened the door.

“Daisy!” Bella shouted. “I thought you’d never get here.” Her presence was a shaft of sunlight in the middle of a storm.

I smiled back at her. *Pretend everything is okay and maybe this won't be a shitshow.*

“Hey, sorry, traffic was horrendous.” I slipped out of my seat and into her warm embrace. “You know I wouldn’t miss your wedding for anything.”

“You better not,” she growled. “My parents spared no expense, and I can’t get married without my maid of honour.” She leaned back and looked at me with mock scolding. Or real scolding. Whatever Bella wanted, Bella got. Including me, back here. The last place on fucking Earth I wanted to be.

“Of course you can’t.” I didn’t have to fake being happy to see her. She was the only reason I stepped foot back in Dusk Bay.

“Please tell me we’re not wearing bright pink dresses.” I might go back to Melbourne right now if we were. Fuck that.

She snorted. “Hell no. The theme is black and white. You girls will be wearing the cutest black dresses you ever saw.”

Should I be relieved or suppress a groan? I was in favour of black, but her idea of cute usually meant something I would never wear again. Not in public anyway.

“Sounds great, Bella,” I said. “I can’t wait to see it.” I stepped away from her. “I should help Nova out of the car.”

“I can get myself out of the car,” Nova protested. She undid her seatbelt and pushed the door open. She looked around before she slipped out, her small body tense, and moved to take my hand.

“Well, look at you,” Bella said to her. “You got so big.” She gave her a searching look.

She wouldn’t get an answer to her silent question. Nova was a mini version of me. A glance wouldn’t reveal who her father was.

“I’m nearly six,” Nova declared.

“So big,” I said softly. “Let’s get our cases.”

“Oh, help should be coming.” Bella looked over her shoulder.

“That’s not necessary—” I stopped as a couple of guys appeared in the doorway and headed towards us.

In the deepening shadows and with the light behind him, I didn’t notice him at first, and my eyes were on Vincenzo, Bella’s fiancé.

“So here’s the maid of honour,” he said in a slow drawl, before Vinny could speak.

Fuck, I recognised that voice before I swung my face towards him. What the hell was he doing here?

“Do you remember Ricardo DiMarco?” Bella asked.

“Ric,” he corrected, smoother than butter on the blade of a dagger.

“Right,” she said, undeterred. “He’s Vinny’s best man.”

Shit, really? I should have left while I could.

“It looks like we’ll be spending a lot of time together.” Ric offered his hand without missing a beat.

When I reluctantly held out mine, he shook it slowly, and for longer than necessary.

“What did you say your name was?” he asked, as if he didn’t know.

Fine, if he wanted to play stupid games, fucking let him.

“Daisy Lasalle,” I said. Even after so long, his voice and touch made my heart race, and my panties threaten to flood. I’d have to be careful around him.

So fucking careful.

“And who is your little friend?” Apparently he only now noticed the little girl who clung to my other hand. It was an act. He never missed anything.

“I’m big,” Nova declared. Apparently she’d recovered her usual childlike bravado. “My name is Nova Lasalle.”

“That’s a pretty name, big Nova Lasalle,” Ric said. “I bet you’d love a bowl of ice cream, wouldn’t you? Why don’t you come inside?”

He knew exactly what to say to get a girl on his side. To get them to do whatever he wanted.

So fucking careful.

“Yes please,” Nova said happily. She didn’t let go of my hand.

“Let’s get these cases first,” Vinny said. He slipped away from Bella’s side and walked to the back of the car to pull out mine and then Nova’s smaller case.

“Is that all you brought?” Bella asked. “I usually bring two or three times that when I go away.”

“We know,” Vinny said teasingly.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“If there’s anything Daisy needs, she can get it here.” Ric’s eyes raked over me as we stepped into the light of the doorway.

I didn’t miss his double meaning. Or his hungry eyes.

He was as devastatingly handsome as I remembered. Dark hair kept back neatly, but with a slight curl at the nape of his neck. Tanned skin. Brown eyes that looked straight into people’s souls. He still had an air about him that suggested he stole those souls and sold them to the highest bidder. The fierce loyalty until he slid a blade between your ribs. The sense of danger that made him compelling and sexy and terrifying at the same time.

“I always travel light,” I said. “It takes less time to pack and unpack.” And if I have to run, I leave less stuff behind.

“So practical,” Ric said. “Nova, there’s a bunch of other kids in the playroom. I bet you’d rather play with them than help mummy unpack?”

She looked up at me beseechingly. She didn’t want to leave my side but the sounds of shouting and playing filtered

down the corridor like a siren song.

“Go ahead,” I told her. “I won’t be long.”

She barely waited a breath longer before she trotted in the direction of the sound. For the first time in her life, she didn’t look back at me for assurance.

“Bella,” Ric drawled, “why don’t you go back to your guests? I’ll show Daisy to her room.”

Bella hesitated.

“It’s fine,” I said quickly. “The bride shouldn’t keep her guests waiting, right?”

Although, tonight was the first of many get-togethers between now and her wedding. She texted me a list a few days ago. I was tired just looking at it. Tired but determined not to ruin this for her. In our families, marriages only ended one way—when someone died. Often before their time.

This was important to her.

“Well, if you’re sure,” Bella said. Vinny grabbed her hand and tugged her away toward the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses.

Leaving me alone in the doorway with Ric and my cases.

He leaned past me to close the door. “I didn’t know you had a kid.” He picked up Nova’s case and handed it to me before picking up mine and carrying it towards the stairs.

I didn’t respond to his comment. Instead I asked, “How did you end up best man?”

“Because it’s accurate?” he said, only half joking. “After you left town, I started spending a lot of time with Vinny and Bella. Vinny and I work together now.”

“I see.” We reached the top of the stairs and crossed the dimly lit landing. He opened a door on the opposite side and gestured for me to walk through first.

I didn’t want to turn my back on him, but I didn’t want to make a big deal of it either.

After a moment, I ducked my head and stepped into the generously sized guest room. A double bed dominated the space. A single bed, made up for Nova, beside it. Through another door, I made out a bathroom.

I placed Nova's case beside her bed and started to turn.

Ric grabbed me so fast I didn't have time to fight or run. He pinned me face-first to the wall by my wrists and shoved his leg between my thighs.

A gasp slipped from between my lips.

"I was surprised when Bella told me you were coming for the wedding," he said in my ear. "After the way you left town, I figured you'd tell her to fuck off."

"You know why I went to Melbourne." I pushed back against him, but he didn't budge.

"You were pissed off at me," he said. "You wanted to punish me, so you left town."

"You lied to me," I snarled. "You told me you didn't want anything to do with your cousins and all the shit they do. But you were in it as deep as they were."

His grip tightened on my wrists. He pushed his leg in further, higher, brushing past my pussy.

I tried to ignore the jolt of heat that shot through me.

Fuck.

"Hypocrite," he hissed. "I know who you work for. Say it."

"It's not—"

"Say it," he insisted.

Reluctantly, I said, "I work for Caleb Brantley. But the legal side—"

Ric snorted. "There is no legal side where anyone with the name Brantley is concerned. No more than there is or ever will be with the DiMarcos. Or your family. Bella's or Vinny's either, for that matter. We're just one big happy, fucking mobster family. You claim you left Dusk Bay to get away from

them, but you never did. You never will. And then you came back. You know why?"

"Bella's wedding," I said, my voice tight. "That's the only reason."

"Bullshit." He pushed his leg up higher, rubbed his knee against me. "You came back because you know you belong here. You belong to me. You always fucking have and you always fucking will."

I started to deny it, but the words came out as a moan when his leg rubbed against my clit.

His grip loosened slightly. "You like that, huh? Of course you do." He slid his leg back and forth with purpose now. "Because you're mine. I'm going to make you come for me."

I tried to push back against him again, but all I did was rock myself against him, driving myself higher.

"That's my dirty girl," he said soothingly, his breath on my neck. "Show me you know you belong to me." He held both of my wrists in one hand and reached around to pinch my nipple. "You always liked it a little rough."

I started to tell him to fuck off, but only the first word came out.

He chuckled. "This is just the start of it, Daze. By the time the wedding comes around, you're going to beg me for my cock like you used to. Tell me you belong to me. Show me."

I didn't want to, but the pressure on my clit was too much. I rocked against his knee, riding him until I came, shattered into a million little pieces and cried out against the wall.

"See, that wasn't so hard was it?" He pinched my nipple harder. "You haven't forgotten. We're going to make up for every year we missed. Every year you made us miss."

He lowered his leg and stepped away from me. "Change your panties, we have a party to get to."

“There you are,” Bella said when I walked into the enormous dining room. Usually the place echoed, but tonight it was full. “I was going to send out a search party. Ric said you were getting changed but would be along shortly.” She gestured toward where he sat, looking smug.

He raised his champagne glass to me and took a sip.

I wanted to take that glass, break it and hold a shard to his throat... While I fucked him.

The asshole knew it too. I thought I put him behind me when I left town six years ago, but I hadn't craved his touch more than I did right now. I'd need a shitload of willpower to stay away from him until the wedding was over.

“Sorry, I thought I'd grab a quick shower.” I peered through the doorway into the kids' play area. Nova was happily moving around the toy kitchen, apparently making dinner for the other kids. I smiled softly, but pushed it off my face when I turned back around.

“Well, you're here now,” Bella said. “You can sit anywhere.”

Thankfully, the seats to either side of Ric were taken, one by Vinny, and the other by Ric's scowling sister Hayley. She looked at me like she wished I would go back to Melbourne right now and never return to Dusk Bay.

If only because her expression pissed me off, I'd stick around.

I started toward an empty seat, but stopped to stare at the guy in the chair next to it.

He stared back.

We both frowned at each other until it clicked.

“Gunnar Cassani.” I couldn’t contain my surprise as I slipped in beside him.

His eyes were huge. He looked me up and down. “Daisy Lasalle. You grew up.” Apparently he liked what he saw.

So did I.

The last time I saw him, he was a gangly sixteen-year-old boy with wild hair, fresh out of braces. We hastily gave each other our virginity before his family moved away.

Now, he was around six foot four, his hair buzz cut, body clearly ripped under his T-shirt and jeans. If it wasn’t for his brilliant blue eyes and wide smile, I never would have recognised him.

“You got hot,” I said.

He chuckled. “I was going to say the same to you. It’s been what? Eight years?”

“About that,” I agreed. In the corner of my eye, I caught Ric watching us. Good, let him watch.

I smiled at Gunnar and put a hand on his rock hard bicep. “It’s so good to see you again. I had no idea you were coming.” The innuendo was intentional.

I glanced around at Bella, as though accusing her of holding out on me.

She shrugged unapologetically. “Gunnar’s whole family is friends with mine. It would have been weird not to invite him.”

“I’m glad you did,” I almost purred.

Ric put down his glass a little too forcefully, making it clear he was listening.

“What are you doing with yourself these days?” I asked.

Gunnar shrugged. “A little bit of bodyguarding, a little bit of debt collecting. I’ve been back in town a while, working for Ric and Vinny.”

My hand twitched. In other words, he was their hired muscle for doing dirty deeds. Exactly the kind of guy I should run the fuck away from.

I lowered my hand and accepted the glass of champagne one of the household staff handed to me. I was going to need several of these to get through the night.

“So, I hear you’re working for a Brantley?” he asked, clearly fishing for information but trying to look like he wasn’t.

I drank a gulp of champagne. “I might be.” Most of these guys, including Ric, would give their left ball for a chance to get close to anyone with the last name Brantley. With the exception of Zeke Brantley, who was some famous rock star or something. The rest were powerful men, especially Caleb, who headed the family business in Melbourne. Reuben, as the oldest brother, oversaw Sydney. He was the only one Caleb deferred to on anything. Ever.

Ric’s family and those affiliated with them had lost the favour of the Brantley family a decade or two ago. Instead of walking in the spotlight, they scrambled around in the shadows, picking up scraps and hoping to be noticed.

It occurred to me their interest in me might be because they presumed I was fucking Caleb. A connection to me might give them the in they were hoping for.

They’d be disappointed. I was valuable to Caleb as an assistant, and I knew in part he was using me to keep an eye on my family and Ric’s, but he wouldn’t go there any more than I would. Fucking with Ric was small-time compared to screwing with Caleb.

“I hear Caleb was invited,” Gunnar said. “Is he coming?”

“To the wedding, yes,” I said. “Not to the rest of it. He’s a busy man.”

I tried to stay out of the parts of his business that kept him the busiest but I was fully aware of what they involved. Smuggling diamonds, running guns, drugs, prostitution. If it was illegal, he had his finger in it.

“Of course,” Gunnar said quickly. “I’m sorry, I’m sure you don’t want to talk about work tonight.”

“Yes,” Bella said from her seat. “No more talking about work. We’re here to have fun. Right, Vinny?”

“Right,” Vinny agreed. As if he and Ric and fuck knows who else wouldn’t be talking about it later. There was always a deal to be done, or a problem or person to deal with.

“I’ll drink to having fun.” Gunnar raised his beer glass while slipping his other hand onto my thigh.

“Me too.” I raised my champagne glass and clinked it against Gunnar’s. I sipped and tried not to let it show on my face when he slipped a hand up my skirt.

He left it there until one of the staff announced the buffet was ready.

“Ladies first.” Vinny stood and pulled out Bella’s chair as she rose. She really must be in love. She’d usually punch any guy who tried to treat her like she was fragile. Instead, she stopped to give him a kiss.

“Get a room,” someone shouted.

I glanced over to see one of Gunnar’s brothers, Mannix, jeering at the pair. He’d also grown up. And, like his brother, had grown out. He looked big enough to pick up a truck and throw it.

Gunnar stiffened.

I swung my gaze over to look at him. “Is everything okay?”

His lips twitched as though he wasn’t sure he should answer that. “Him and a couple of his friends have been getting into trouble recently. Over their heads kinda shit.”

“Don’t tell me they’re doing legal stuff,” I said dryly.

He looked surprised, then chuckled. “No, legitimately bad shit.”

It must be bad if someone like him was worried about it.

“Nothing you can’t manage, I’m sure,” I said.

“Yeah. Let’s get something to eat.”

We both stood and I realised how big he was. I wasn’t tiny, but beside him I felt like it. He could have put his arms around me and cracked me like a nut. I already knew his cock was in proportion to the rest of him.

“See something you like?” he asked teasingly.

“Huh?” I realised I was looking right at his groin and jerked my eyes back up to his. My face heated like crazy. “Maybe I do.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Ric demanded.

I was tempted to ignore him, but Gunnar didn’t, or at least *couldn’t*.

“Hey, boss. Just talking to an old friend,” he said easily.

I turned to see Ric’s face looking like a thunderhead. It was satisfying as fuck.

I started to say something like piss off, but a shout from Nova interrupted me.

“Mummy, can I have a hot dog?” Her voice was loud and piercing as only a five-year-old’s can be.

“Excuse me.” I worked myself out from between the two guys and over to the buffet.

Three tables were piled high with about a million different kinds of food. One whole section was covered in hot dogs, chicken nuggets and all sorts of shit kids prefer to eat.

“But that salad looks so good.” I pointed and smiled teasingly.

She placed her hands on her hips and pouted at me. “But Mummy!”

I mirrored her stance and grinned. “Of course you can have a hot dog, sweetie.” I lowered my hands.

She happily grabbed her hotdog and took it back over to sit with her friends.

“Your kid?” Gunnar asked. He stood a couple of metres away, one eye on Ric while he grabbed a plate. “She looks like you.”

“She’s cuter than me but just as big a brat,” I said.

Ric picked up two plates and shoved one at me. “We’ll talk later.”

“Is this where you tell me what to eat?” I asked with venomous sweetness.

He stepped over closer to me and spoke in my ear. “I fucking should, and you’ll do it.”

“Don’t make me break this plate over your head,” I said, not bothering to keep my voice down.

“Do it,” he said. “That will give me an excuse to put you over my knee and spank you until your ass is bruised and you can’t walk, then fuck you until you scream.”

I snorted. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.” I turned away from him and resisted the urge to pile desert on my plate. I suspected that would piss him off, which was exactly the point. But if I did that, I’d miss the delicious roast beef and salad and what looked like bread straight out of the oven.

Ric leaned over my shoulder and said, “If there weren’t kids here, I’d bend you over the table in front of everyone.”

I looked sideways at his cheek. “Having kids around wouldn’t stop you from doing that. Your sister, on the other hand, hasn’t stopped giving me the evil eye since I walked in. Does she still have you on a short leash?”

“I’m on no one’s leash, Daze,” he growled. “People are on mine. You’ve been away for a while so I’ll forgive you for not knowing how things are now. You’ll learn soon enough.”

“I can’t wait,” I said sarcastically.

“I know you can’t,” he said. “Because, in case you’ve forgotten, I know your weakness. The reason you left town. Because you love this lifestyle and the power it brings. And what you love most of all, is men with that power. That’s why you work for Caleb. You can’t get away from it because you don’t want to. You’re mine because you want that too. Because you want to be fucked by a powerful man. You get off on it. You sense it on me, how much I have now. That’s why you didn’t push me away, why you were so eager to fuck my leg like a bitch in heat.”

“You were holding me down,” I hissed.

He chuckled softly. “The door was open. If you needed help, all you needed to do was shout for it. You didn’t even try to tell me no.”

Fucker, he was right. About all of it. I *did* like powerful men, I always had. That was exactly why I ran. I was drawn to it like a moth to flame. Not just that, but violence and death.

I saw my father kill a man with his bare hands. Watching the light fade from his eyes was the hottest thing I ever saw.

That was the night Nova was conceived. The night I knew I would be completely fucked up if I didn’t leave. I would be as bad as the rest of them.

I left, but the cravings never left me.

My head pounded from the night before, and a glass or four too many.

I managed to avoid Gunnar and Ric after dinner. Or they avoided me.

Most of the women had gathered in one room and the men in another. Thank fuck Ric's sister Hayley made herself scarce after glaring at me all through dinner. I ignored her apart from giving her an occasional death stare. What the fuck was her problem anyway?

The guests who stayed over at Bella's house had barely begun to stir, except the kids. They gathered in the playroom and were now discussing the rules of whatever game they were about to play.

I watched them for a while, then went to grab coffee and toast from the buffet table. Everything was fresh like it was just brought in from the kitchen. It probably was. The staff would likely spend half the day replacing cold food and refilling the coffee pot.

Rich people problems—they hated cold toast.

I poured myself a cup and tried to decide what to put on my toast when heavy footsteps approached slowly.

Mindful it might be Ric, I scooped up a butter knife and set two pieces of toast on a plate. I reached for the butter as they stopped behind me.

I whirled around, knife in hand and jabbed it toward the guy's throat.

He stood perfectly still. He didn't even flinch.

I couldn't say the same about myself. My eyes widened and my hand dropped.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I thought you were..."

Hilton Blake looked down his hawk-like nose at me. "Someone else?"

"Yeah, I'm, a little twitchy I guess." I turned around and placed the knife on the side of my plate. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Obviously." He moved around me to pour himself a cup of coffee.

"I'm sorry I should have—"

"Should have what? We're not at work. You're not my assistant here. Are you?" He spooned two sugars into his coffee before putting the jar aside.

"No, si— Um." My face heated. Trust me to look like a fucking idiot.

"Hilton is fine, Daisy," he said. "I'm not your boss here. I'm only another guest come for the festivities and the wedding. Caleb thought it best to send someone."

"To make sure people don't plot behind his back," I said without thinking. Hilton was the man for it. The only person he answered to was Caleb. And I answered to Hilton.

A decade older than me, he always listened attentively when I spoke. Like I was the only person in the room. It was impossible not to be drawn into the moment. I had to be careful not to bear my soul, just so he'd look at me for a few minutes longer.

Okay, I had a little crush.

I'd also heard him order someone be killed, without blinking an eye. It was easy to underestimate a man like him. That made him more dangerous than someone like Ric.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “Where better than a gathering like this? All those heads together, alcohol pouring. People get bored, or they get bold.” His eyes lingered on me like I might be one or the other of those.

“Do you expect them to be plotting anything?” I decided on honey and started to coat my toast in it.

“I hope not,” he said. “If they do, I’ll deal with it. And if they don’t, I get a two-week paid vacation.” He winked.

My heart fluttered.

Down girl, I told myself. He’s your boss. You’re acting like a bitch in heat, like Ric said.

The rest of his accusation whispered through my mind too. Hilton was, undeniably, a powerful man. His skin was a few shades darker than Ric’s, his eyes a richer brown. His long chin was covered by a short beard with only one or two grey hairs. He usually wore an expensive, tailored suit, but today he wore casual pants and a dark button down shirt. He looked like a model from a magazine.

I cut my toast into two slices and frowned at him. “Did you get here late last night, or early this morning?” I didn’t know if he was a morning person or a night person, because he was in the office when I got there and was still there when I left. For all I knew, he slept there.

“Yesterday afternoon,” he said. “I wasn’t around because I had a matter to take care of.”

I tried not to look too interested, but I knew a look of curiosity crossed my features.

He sighed. “I’m sure you listen to office gossip.”

“I try not to,” I protested. Certain things were difficult to avoid overhearing.

“Enough to know I recently ended the relationship I was in,” he said.

“I might have heard that,” I admitted.

“She’s not happy about it. We had a fight yesterday afternoon when I got here and I thought it best to stay away for a while, to let her get over it.” He heavily shrugged one shoulder and sipped his coffee.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“That’s the third time you said that since I got here,” he pointed out.

“I meant it each time,” I said. “One of the wedding guests?”

“Hayley DiMarco,” he said regretfully. “Caleb said...” He shook his head.

That she’s a bitch? I suggested silently. “I can imagine what he said.” I nibbled on my slice of toast.

“Right. I’m sure you can. The DiMarcos are nothing if not predictable. Ric, in particular, is one to keep an eye on. And his cousin Dane. They’re both ambitious men. Not as powerful as Caleb and the rest of his family, but certainly working on it.”

“You think they’re going to make a move against Caleb?” I asked.

“Not unless they have a death wish. If that’s the case, then that’s what they’ll get.” He could have been talking about the weather.

I hated the way my pulse raced. Threats and casual mentions of murder shouldn’t be sexy, but they fucking were.

I tried to keep my voice even. “I think they’d prefer to align with Caleb, not replace him. Or at least, work with him or for him. They’ve always been interested in self-preservation.”

Hilton chuckled. “That’s accurate.”

What the hell did a man like him see in Hayley anyway? A willing pussy? A nice, wet mouth? She was smart, but she was more sour than a freshly picked lemon. She also craved power the way I did.

“If they say anything that suggests they’re working against Caleb, I’ll bring it to you,” I promised. “But they’re unlikely to say it to me. They know I work for him.”

“Good girl,” he said approvingly. “Keep your ears open. You never know when they might let something slip, especially after a few drinks. Or after a fuck.”

He gave me a long look over his coffee cup and I knew he was picturing me naked, fucking, or both. Fucking who though? Him or someone else?

My tongue darted over my lips.

He watched that too.

“People do open up after they’re intimate,” I agreed.

“Caleb will be grateful for any information,” he said. “Especially if we can deal with problems before they arise.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was suggesting I sleep with anyone I suspected of working against Caleb to get information from them.

Oh, wait, that was exactly the kind of thing people like Hilton suggested people like me do for them. There’s nothing they wouldn’t do to get, or hang on to power. Including using anyone and everyone.

“I’ll keep my ears open.” That was all I could promise.

“I have to admit, I’m looking forward to getting to know you outside the office,” he said. “You’re a beautiful woman, smart, and you know how to use a butter knife to kill a man.”

My face heated and I shrugged. “My father taught me how to take care of myself.” If Hilton was a threat, there were several places I could jam that knife that would have killed him. I wouldn’t have hesitated.

Bella would be slightly annoyed if I disrupted the festivities but she’d get over it.

He leaned in as though he wanted to tell me a secret. “There’s nothing sexier than a woman who knows how to take care of herself.” His breath brushed over my ear like a feather

and sent a quiver of desire through my belly and down between my legs.

My attempt to be so fucking careful wasn't working very well right now.

“Even if it's only with a butter knife?” I asked softly.

“Especially if it's with a butter knife.” His laugh tickled my neck. “It shows how flexible you are.”

Oh, fuck. He was definitely *not* talking about me having versatile thinking. His proximity and his words were making me wetter than Dusk Bay itself.

He's your boss, I reminded myself. Not to mention how complicated things already were with Ric and my brief flirtation with Gunnar. Then there was Nova, whose life I did *not* want to fuck up. I stayed away from this life as best as I could for her sake. Away from family, but away from the craziness too.

Didn't she deserve that and more? Spoiler alert, yes she did.

“Right,” I said awkwardly. “I—”

“I don't want to rush you,” he said. “Like I said, I'm looking forward to getting to know you better. I'm not the kind of man to play games. I go after what I want. And what I want is you.”

He leaned back and sipped his coffee. His eyes were dark and intense, his gaze all about me, like no one and nothing else in the world existed. “For the record, I always get what I want. Always.”

I knew that about him. I'd never seen anyone question him when he asked them to do anything. They never thought twice, including me. Hell, if he told me to bend over the table right now, I'd probably do it.

He knew it too, I saw it on his face. That should have irritated me, that anyone could be so cocky, but I liked being wanted.

Aside from Ric yesterday evening, I hadn't had much to do with men since Nova was born. I was busy with her and most men ran away when they knew I had a kid. Honestly, if that was their reaction, I didn't want them anyway. Me and my kid—we're a package deal. I wouldn't compromise.

"Is this where you expect me to drop to my knees when you say so?" I said lightly.

He smiled. "No. Believe it or not, that's not what I want. Although, I know you would if I asked you to. Like I said, I don't play games, but I don't want to rush. I want you on your knees because that's where you want to be. I want you spread out in front of me, because you're ready to beg for me to lick you until you scream. When I fuck you, and I will, it will be because you can't wait any more."

I licked my lips and swallowed hard. "All right then. I guess I'll let you know."

He laughed softly. "I know you will. Aside from her ambition, I ended my relationship with Hayley because I wanted someone else instead of her. You."

"Did you tell her that?" I grimaced.

"I did," he said.

Well fuck, that wasn't going to make the next couple of weeks as awkward as hell, was it?

“This is like the old days,” Bella commented. “Me and Vinny, you and Gunnar.” She smiled slyly past me to where Gunnar sat on another sun lounge.

“Kids playing in the pool in front of us,” I said dryly.

“That was part of the vision,” she said. “Little kids running around us. Vinny and I want at least four. Right, Vinny?”

He made a face. “Sure, babe.” He pressed his sunglasses up his nose with his knuckle. “Whatever you say.”

Bella was unfazed. “Four is a perfect number, don’t you think Gunnar?”

Gunnar, who was staring at the side of my face, made an unintelligible sound. “Sure, four is good. Or six.”

I turned to look at him like he’d grown a second head. “Six?”

He shrugged. “I always wanted a big family. We have six in mine and it works. More or less.”

Considering what he told me about his brother, Mannix, it seemed like less was more accurate, but from what I remember of his family, they were close.

“You want to give Nova a little brother or sister, don’t you?” Bella asked. “She seems to be enjoying spending time with her cousins.”

“Yeah.” In two days she’d gone from being the kid who was stuck to my side, to one who was always in the presence

of at least several cousins. She seemed happier and more confident than I ever saw her. The idea of taking her away from this after the wedding hurt my heart. Honestly, the thought of leaving wasn't as appealing as I thought it would be. This was home more than Melbourne had ever been. Fucked up though that was.

"I'm sure Gunnar would be more than happy to help you make one," Bella said.

"She's subtle, isn't she?" I said to him.

"No, but she's not wrong," he admitted, his eyes intense and hungry. "I always thought the four of us would end up like this. I was pissed when my parents moved us away. It was bullshit."

"Yeah, it was." Then I moved on with Ric for a while. I didn't forget Gunnar. Hell, we'd known each other since preschool. On the day we met, he pulled my ponytail and I punched him in the face. When the teachers told my father, he gave me a high five and took me on an outing to the shooting range for fun and practice.

Gunnar's parents hadn't minded his black eye either. From what I gather, his mother yelled at him for touching me in the first place. There was none of that, 'he's only doing it because he likes you,' bullshit. And no one suggested I punched him because I liked him. Although I did, because he didn't cry.

"And here we are—" he started to say.

He was interrupted by Ric, who hurried out the back door dressed in a dark suit. He looked wired and hot as fuck. Hot enough to melt my panties clear off.

Drooling *wasn't* being fucking careful, I told myself.

"There you are," he said to Gunnar. "We have work to do. Let's go."

"Right, boss." Gunnar placed his hands on the armrests and pushed himself to his feet.

Ric's gaze settled on me. "You wanna come? Should be fun. Just like old times."

I glanced over to where Nova swam, flotation devices on her arms, a grin on her face.

“Go on,” Bella said. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

I shouldn’t want to, given whatever the fuck they were up to probably involved a lot of blood and maybe a little death. But I *did* want to.

Playing it as cool as I could, I shrugged. “I guess so. It’ll be nice to get out and see how Dusk Bay has changed.”

If they were up to some shit, they might let it drop when we were alone. Would I tell Hilton if they did? That was a tougher question, and I wasn’t sure of the answer. Hilton was my boss and in spite of him telling me he wanted me, these two guys were a big part of home. The most fucked up parts, maybe, but still...

“We’ll be happy to give you the personalised tour, right Gunnar?” Ric said. He looked at Gunnar like he had anger simmering under the surface. He didn’t give voice to it until we stepped away from the pool and out to Ric’s car.

“You two are getting cosy,” he said. He looked directly at me. “I’ve heard you and Hilton Blake were having a quiet chat the other morning too.”

“He’s my boss,” I said coolly. “I’m sure you know that.”

He opened the door to the back of the car and gestured for me to get inside. “Are you fucking him?”

I looked him in the eyes, unflinchingly.

“No.” Not yet. I slid into the seat, and half expected him to follow me in and pin me down.

He gave me a long look that suggested that was exactly what was on his mind, but he closed the door and got into the driver’s seat.

Gunnar got in beside him. “Where are we going?”

“Shore Road. Frankie O’Malley is getting too big for his boots. It’s past time we reminded him who’s in charge around here.”

I leaned forward and rested my forearms and the side of Ric's chair. "And who is that?"

I expected him to say he was, but instead he said, "Caleb, but we're keeping the peace and looking after our own interests. Nothing that would be considered overstepping. Don't worry, you're gonna enjoy this. Frankie, not so much."

I sat back and watched the sights of Dusk Bay slide past. The place changed a lot since I lived here. The buildings were taller and closer together. It was quickly becoming a city, not the town it used to be. Good, I preferred cities anyway. There was always something going on.

Ric pulled up by the side of the road in a grittier part of town. This had certainly changed. It used to be a hipster waterfront, full of restaurants and cafés. Now, everything was rundown. Paint peeled off the sides of buildings. Every second window was boarded up.

"You bring a girl to all the best places," I said sarcastically.

Ric turned and flashed me a smile. "Fuck yeah, I do. Don't pretend you don't love it. You're as at home here as I am. You belong here." He didn't add that I belonged to him, but the words hung in the air like smoke. He clearly knew there was something between Gunnar and I that hadn't died, even though he tried his best to kill it all those years ago.

"Frankie owns the pub on the corner," Gunnar said. He eyed me like he wasn't sure if I should be here.

I was sure he hadn't forgotten I could take care of myself.

"We'll go in around the back," Ric said. He brushed a hand over my cheek and added, "Just how I like it."

My stupid heart fluttered. He was a possessive asshole, but he got me better than most people.

I rolled my eyes at him. "How are you single?"

He stepped away from me, then said over his shoulder, "Who says I'm single?"

I didn't expect the burst of rage that flared up like pouring oil on a bonfire. One minute I was calmly standing beside the

car. The next I was ready to slam a hammer into someone's ankles.

That someone wasn't Ric.

Sounding much calmer than I actually felt, I said, "Who is she?"

It wasn't until he turned around that I realised he'd been watching my reflection in the side mirror. I was ready to use a hammer on the triumphant expression on his face.

"There's no one else." Without another word, he turned and headed around the side of the building to the back.

Gunnar gestured for me to walk in front of him. The look in his eyes was more guarded, more controlled, but I could tell he saw as well.

Fuck, this just got more complicated.

The door to the loading dock was open and a couple of people were moving kegs from the truck into the pub.

They spied Ric and Gunnar and went from slowly industrious to anxious as hell in the blink of an eye. They walked a little faster into what I assumed was the cool room.

"Remember the time my father got your father to lock a guy in his own cool room?" Ric asked cheerfully.

"Yeah," I said. "That was one of the easier cleanups." We went back a week later and the guy was frozen stiff. Carrying him out of the truck was like carrying a side of beef.

"Good times," Ric said.

Yeah, Ric had fucked me up against the side of the truck while the guy warmed up. By the time he was dropped off to be dispensed with, he started to smell.

"Frankie," Ric greeted an older man with a smile.

Frankie, who was emptying a glass washing machine, jumped and turned around, a glass in each hand.

The moment he saw Ric and Gunnar, he knew he was fucked. What he didn't know was how fucked. So, rather than

panic and run, he put the glasses down and clasped his hands together.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I’m not open yet, but I can make an exception for you two.”

His eyes widened slightly when he saw me. “Three. Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” Now he had, he didn’t seem able to look away. Especially from my breasts.

“We don’t want anything to drink,” Ric said smoothly.

“I do.” I rested my elbows on the bar and scanned the bottles that lined a shelf on the back wall. “Bourbon and cola. Please.” I smiled sweetly, but with an air of menace.

I’d been on plenty of visits like this before, and it was all coming back to me. Like riding a bike or whatever.

“Of course,” Frankie spoke with a faint Irish lilt, and moved quickly to get my drink.

“Well, if Daze is going to have one, I’ll have a beer,” Ric said.

“Me too.” Gunnar stepped up beside me and placed his hand on the back of my neck.

Frankie hurried to get those as well. “I presume this isn’t a social call.” He looked ready to pee his pants.

“Nope.” Ric sipped his beer like he was in no hurry. “I heard a rumour you might have received some money from a certain party. One who wanted you to launder it for them. But you wouldn’t do that, would you? Because you only do that for me.”

Frankie swallowed audibly. “I... It was just one time. He was desperate and he helped me out with some things.”

“I heard it was more than once.” Ric raised his eyebrows at the quivering man.

“Maybe twice,” Frankie admitted.

“Ah, twice.” Ric nodded. “In that case, Gunnar here gets to break two of your fingers. Unless Daisy would prefer to do the honours.” He nodded towards me.

Frankie backed up a couple of steps. “Please—”

“I’m happy to let Gunnar do it,” I said easily. This life was trying its best to suck me back in, but I wasn’t ready to go that far. Yet. As it was, I was about ready to ruin my panties.

Ric nodded to Gunnar. “I’ll let you choose which fingers to break.”

Frankie looked like he was going to cry.

I should have had sympathy for him, I really should, but he would have gone to Ric for help in the first place. That was how it worked. Ric never went to anyone. He’d help, but he made the rules and they accepted them. Frankie knew the consequence if he tried to screw him over.

The crack of his breaking bones made me shiver, but not with disgust.

It made me burn like a volcano ready to erupt.

“Fuck, that was awesome.” Bella leaned against the wall, swept a bunch of her heavy skirt aside and tugged off her heels.

“A bachelorette party with ball gowns was pretty fucking cool idea.” I went for simple elegance. Ankle length, tight fitting, black, with a plunging neckline.

Bella was dressed like Cinderella. If Cinderella wore a black dress and a headband with condoms taped to it.

“Of course it was.” She giggled and almost fell over as she straightened up. “I might have had a drink or two too many.”

“You’re right at the bottom of the bottle of vodka,” I told her.

She pointed at me. “Shit, you’re right.” And giggled again. “Come over here and sit with me. You look like you’re going to fall down.”

“You’re leaning over sideways.” I grabbed her hand and led her over to the couch.

“No, you.” She flopped down heavily. Her skirt rose and fell around her. In that dress, she took up three quarters of the couch.

I slipped into the last quarter. “If you fall asleep, you’re going to wake up in that dress.”

She made a gesture that she didn’t give a shit right now.

I decided not to press the matter. We would deal with her regrets in the morning.

“You should get married, Daisy,” she said. “Then we can have another party like this.”

“There will never be another party like this,” I said. Not to mention the last week was complicated enough without throwing the idea of marriage into the mix.

Every time I turned around, one of those three guys was watching or waiting to help me with something, or coming up to talk to me, or asking me to go somewhere with them. That was all, none of them tried to do anything to me, or with me but flirt.

Hilton didn't even do that much. He talked about the weather and the other guests.

Every time we spoke, Hayley seemed to appear out of nowhere just so she could glare at me. I stared back at her until she looked away, but she was starting to give me the shits.

Whatever he felt for me had nothing to do with her. I didn't ask him to end their relationship. That was her fucking problem.

“You should get married anyway,” Bella said. “And have lots and lots of babies.” She squinted at me. “Hey, you never told me who Nova's father is.”

“Didn't I?” As if I didn't know that already. I hadn't told anyone, including him.

Especially him.

She grabbed my hand a little too tight and squeezed. “Come on, if you can't tell your best friend, who can you tell? I won't tell anyone.”

That was accurate; she was unlikely to remember this conversation in the morning.

I glanced around the room. Most of the guests had left and the staff who hurried around cleaning up weren't paying us any attention.

I sighed and hesitated for a few moments longer before I said, "It's Ric."

Her mouth formed an O. "Ric as in... Vinny's best man Ric?"

"As in my ex-boyfriend Ric, yes," I said.

She blinked at me a couple of times. "Does he know? He doesn't, does he?"

"Nope," I agreed. "And I'd like it to stay that way."

Honestly, I had no idea how he'd react if he found out. He was volatile at the best of times. And the worst.

"Right," Bella said slowly. "My lips are sealed."

"Promise?" I looked at her firmly.

"I promise never to tell anyone Ric is Nova's father," she said.

I exhaled softly. "Thank you. I don't know what he would do if..." I shook my head. I was lost in my thoughts for a moment until I realised Bella was snoring.

Fuck.

"Need some help?" a smooth voice asked.

I whirled around.

Hilton stood a few metres away, Gunnar behind him.

Fuck. How much had they heard? Their expressions gave away nothing. Maybe there was nothing to give away. Chances were they just stepped into the room.

"Yeah, I could use a little." I rose quickly. "I didn't know you two knew each other."

"I used to work for Caleb," Gunnar said. His gaze went to Hilton.

"We were discussing the possibility of Ric also working with us," Hilton said.

"I see," I said. "I'm sure he'd like that."

“He would,” Gunnar agreed. He stepped over and scooped up Bella like she weighed nothing. “Probably a good idea if you don’t mention it to him until Hilton is ready.”

“Of course,” I said. “My lips are sealed.” Funny I was saying that only a couple of minutes after Bella had.

“And we won’t say anything to Ric about him being the father of your child,” Hilton said.

My heart stopped.

Fucking hell.

My mouth went dry and I swallowed. “You heard?”

“Heard, but guessed before that,” Hilton said. “It’s obvious to anyone with two eyes that he wants you as much as we do.”

Gunnar looked at him sharply but didn’t say anything.

Hilton continued. “And you two have a past. I know you well enough to know you don’t go around fucking anything with a cock. I also know you tried to put this life behind you, and he wouldn’t have let you do that if he’d known.”

“Exactly,” I said. “He *can’t* know. At least, not yet. Maybe someday.”

“Let’s get her to bed,” Hilton said to Gunnar. I wasn’t sure if he was talking about Bella or me.

Gunnar nodded and started towards the stairs.

It might have been the alcohol and it might have been their presence and the growing tension between me and all three guys, but I didn’t want to spend the rest of the night alone.

Nova was with her cousins, well away from the bachelorette party. I was a grown woman and they both wanted me. There was no reason why I couldn’t fuck one or both of them.

I walked beside Hilton as we made our way up the stairs.

Vinny met us at the top. “Hey, I was just going to go looking for her.” He smiled at her sleeping face. “It’s going to suck to be her in the morning.”

“Technically, it’s already morning,” Gunnar pointed out. “But yeah, she’s going to have a bitch of a hangover.” He grinned.

“You’re only smiling because it’s not you,” I said. “Wait until after tomorrow night’s bachelor party. I bet you’re going to get shitfaced.”

“Fuck yeah I am,” Gunnar said. “Free alcohol for the win.”

I snorted a laugh and smiled at him. “You two go and put that poor woman in bed.” I waved at Gunnar and Vinny.

“Yes, ma’am.” Vinny gave me a sarcastic salute. He gestured down the corridor and the pair disappeared that way.

I turned to Hilton and licked my lips. “Could you help me out of my dress? I can’t reach the top of the zip.” Yeah, I could, if I tried hard enough, but you know, seduction and all that. I wasn’t very good at it, but it was a start.

“I’d be happy to.” His brown eyes saw straight through my bullshit and right into my horny little soul. He followed me into my room and closed the door behind us.

Then locked it.

I swept my hair over my shoulder and out of the way, and dipped my head.

His warm hands brushed over my back before he gripped the zip and drew it down with agonising slowness.

He brushed the pads of his thumbs over my lower back, then slid his hands up my bare skin. He paused for a moment at my left shoulder blade before he hooked his fingers into the straps of my dress and pushed them off my shoulders.

They slid down my arms until the dress pooled at my feet.

I stepped out of it and turned around slowly. I was naked except for a tiny, black G string.

I looked up at him. “Is this where I have to ask you to do things to me?” Because I fucking would if I had to.

He looked me over like a lion admiring a gazelle. Hungry and ready to pounce.

“Just tell me you want me to fuck you,” he said simply.

I stepped up to him and slid my arms around his neck. A little voice in the back of my mind reminded me he was my boss, but all that did was get me going even more.

“I want you to fuck me,” I said. More than anything. I wanted to feel his hands all over me. I wanted him to fill me to the brim.

He slanted his mouth over mine and started to devour me with his lips and tongue. He slid his hands down my back and cupped my ass, then lifted me up until my legs were wound around his waist. He carried me over to the bed and lay me down before he lay over me, his legs on either side of mine.

Between kisses, he said, “I’m going to fuck you until you forget your name. I’m going to claim every centimetre of your gorgeous body. I’m going to make you scream out my name until your voice is hoarse. And when my cock slides inside you, you’ll know you’re mine.”

All I could do was say, “Yes... Please.” I wanted all of that and more. “Give me everything. Don’t hold back.”

He nibbled my earlobe and chuckled. “I won’t.”

I believed him.

I helped him out of his clothes, threw them aside to form a pile on the floor.

Many times, I imagined what he looked like naked. Now I saw him, he was better than I imagined. He wasn’t as ripped as Gunnar, but his body was all firm, slender muscle like a runner. And his cock was huge, erect and ready.

He grabbed the front of my G string and ripped it, leaving it as nothing more than a shred of fabric. He grinned, then dropped it on the floor.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, giving my whole body a long sweeping look. “Now I’m going to find out how you taste.”

Yes please.

He kissed his way down my body and stopped between my thighs. He parted them firmly with his hands, then slid his arms under my thighs to open me out to him.

“Just beautiful,” he said, half to himself. “I’ve been waiting so long to see you.” He tickled me lightly with the tip of his tongue.

I shivered even though the touch was barely more than that of a feather.

“More?” he asked.

“Much more,” I agreed. “Please.”

“Good girl,” he said approvingly. “I like it when you ask nicely.”

Suddenly shy, I managed to say, “I like it when you call me good girl.”

He smiled up at me. “Keep being a good girl and I’ll keep saying it. In return, I want you to call me boss.”

I gulped.

“Okay,” I squeaked. “I mean, yes boss.”

“Good girl.” He lowered his face and started to lap at my pussy.

Not surprising, he knew exactly what to do with his tongue. He didn’t go straight at me though. He took his time, teasing and flicking until I was ready to scream at him to touch me more.

He took me right to the edge of bliss, then let me back down until my vision cleared and blood slowed. Somehow, he knew exactly where the line was and how to keep me from crossing it.

Ironic since we were crossing so many other lines right now. What would Caleb think? No way Hilton would touch me if he knew his boss would skin him for it.

No, this was the touch of a man who knew he could do it without repercussions. When Hayley found out, and she

would, that was another fucking problem I'd deal with when it came.

Right now, I was more concerned with me coming.

I grabbed fistfuls of bed covers in each hand and arched my back, grinding my pussy into his face, silently begging after all, but only for him to let me get some relief from the pressure that thundered through me.

He picked up his shining mouth and smiled. "Your body is so obedient."

"Please..." I said breathlessly. With no touch at all on my clit, my body was aching, demanding. "I need..."

"I know what you need," he said. "I know very well." He lowered his mouth and gave it to me, stroking his tongue over my clit and sliding the tip inside me.

I rocked against him once, twice and then came, gently at first, but then with growing intensity until my whole body throbbed and sang.

I groaned. "Fuck, yes." I drew out the second word, then tipped my head back against the mattress and cried out his name.

I came down as he took his mouth from me and crawled slowly up my body, his eyes on mine.

"Good girl, but louder next time."

I panted a laugh. "Yes, boss. I'll try."

"Don't try. Do. Roll over."

I did as he asked, rolling onto my stomach and looking at him over my shoulder.

He lay over me, straddling my thighs. His erection poked into my ass cheek before he opened my legs and positioned his cock outside the entrance to my pussy.

I groaned for the second time in a few minutes as he pressed himself inside me.

He grunted. “Fuck, you feel incredible. I knew you would. I’m going to fill you.” He slid in further until he was fully seated inside me, his stomach pressed hard against my ass.

“That feels so good, boss,” I murmured. It fucking did. He was so long and thick I had to stretch to take him, but it felt amazing.

He leaned to whisper in my ear. “I’m going to fuck you slowly. I want to enjoy every minute and every centimetre of your luscious body. You were made for this. Made for me to fuck.”

I couldn’t disagree with that right now. I could barely think. All I knew was his weight on me, his erection deep inside.

“Tell me,” he urged as he started to move. “Tell me what you’re made for.”

“For you,” I said breathlessly. “For you to fuck me.”

“Good girl,” he purred. “That’s right.”

“For you to come inside me,” I added.

“Hell yes, you were.” He thrust slightly faster. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do. And you’re going to take every drop into your body.”

“Mmmm, yes, please, boss,” I said into the mattress.

With every stroke, he hit me inside at the perfect angle, driving my back to that perfect brink.

I bucked against him, trying to encourage him to move faster. He didn’t. I was forced to slow to match the pace he stubbornly kept to.

“Boss, I’m going to—” I started.

“Not yet,” he said immediately. “Wait until I say.”

I groaned in frustration, but did as he asked. I clenched my teeth and balanced right on the threshold.

“You’re doing beautifully,” he soothed. “So beautifully.”

I puffed out my nose and concentrated.

“Okay, I want you to come now,” he said.

I did just that, the second he finished speaking. I came so hard and fast I couldn't help from throwing my head back and screaming out his name.

He came a moment later, thrusting fast, but deliberate and firm. This was no wild abandon. Even when coming, he was in control.

He sagged against my back, only breathing slightly heavier than usual.

“You're everything I imagined,” he said softly. “And more.”

Some time, I might ask him how often he thought about me. For now, I squirmed around under him and rolled over onto my back.

He smiled and kissed me, still tasting of me. I wasn't done yet; the flavour turned me on like hell. I put all of that into my kiss.

He murmured against my lips. “Good to see you're not done, because I've just begun. Two is a good start, but my lucky number is seven.”

I melted against the mattress and let him explore every centimetre of me, like he promised he would.

“No, that doesn’t go there,” Nova said. She picked up the block I’d just put down and moved it.

“Silly me,” I said with a laugh. “What was I thinking?”

She gave me a look like she didn’t know either and went on building while I watched.

“So you like it here?” I asked.

She nodded. “Uh-ha. Alyssa said you should have brought me back sooner. She said her dad said people weren’t happy that you weren’t here.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

She nodded. “Because you’re family and family should stay here.”

“What do you think?” I asked. “Do you think we should stay here?”

Her nod was more vigorous this time. “I don’t want to go home.”

In the corner of my eye, I saw someone approach and looked up to see Ric. His face was red, eyes flashing with anger.

In a barely controlled voice, he said, “Hey, Nova. The other kids are getting ready to go in the pool. Why don’t you join them?”

She glanced at me.

“Go ahead.” I was enjoying a bit of quiet time with her, but I had a feeling whatever he had to say wasn’t going to be very fucking quiet.

She slipped out of her chair, gave me a quick hug and ran out of the room.

Ric watched her leave, his face turned towards her until she was out of sight.

He whipped around towards me so fast I almost flinched.

“What the fuck didn’t you tell me she was mine?” he snarled.

My heart stopped. What the hell?

“What are you—”

He cut me off. “Don’t bullshit, Daze. I know she’s my kid. Did you forget to mention that fact? Did it slip your motherfucking mind?” He pointed at his head. “Is this where you tell me you sent a text and maybe I didn’t get it?”

“No, I didn’t send a text.” I got up from my chair and took a few steps away from him. Angry Ric was unpredictable and dangerous.

“No shit,” he said with a grunt. “No text, no call. No nothing. Why?” He glared at me like he wanted to rip my soul apart. And then the rest of me.

“You know why,” I said. “I was trying to put this life behind me. I wanted to give my daughter a better life.”

“So you decided that a better life was away from me? Away from Dusk Bay? Away from your family, her family? And I got no say in any of that?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“After we had that fight, I figured—” I started.

“Figured what?” he demanded. “Figured I wouldn’t give a shit? Figured I didn’t deserve to know? What did you figure, Daze?” His breath was ragged with fury.

“I figured we would never talk to each other again,” I said. “You said you didn’t care if I left town. What reason would I have for thinking you’d want to know about a kid? We were

twenty, for fuck's sake. You were determined to take back what your family lost. What did you care if you knocked me up?" I crossed my arms and lifted my chin. "The only thing you cared about was power."

"That's not true," he said. "I cared about you."

"You cared about getting laid," I snapped.

I thought he might get mad at that but he laughed. "Just like you. Don't think I don't know you fucked Hilton. The whole place heard you."

I shrugged. "So what? Are you going to run off and tell Caleb?" Hilton probably had already and we both knew it.

Ric took a couple of steps towards me.

"I had a right to know I have a kid." His anger had cooled, but it was still very much there on his face. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, Ric. I might have. I thought about it plenty of times."

"But you never acted on it," he said. "You took that from me. And from her. What about her right to know who her father is? Did it ever cross your mind you were stealing that from her?"

"No," I said firmly. "Because I gave her everything she needed." At least, I tried to. Seeing her in this place made me realise she missed out on some things. Considering I was little more than a kid when she was born, I don't think I did too badly.

"What if she needed her father? Did she ask about me?" He leaned over to scoop up a block from the table and toyed with it between his fingers.

"Sometimes," I said. "When kids from school talk about their fathers, she wondered about hers."

"What did you tell her?" he demanded.

"I told her the truth. I told her things didn't work out between us, but that I was always there for her because she

and I are a team.” She always seemed more or less content with that. Or maybe she understood that was all she was going to get from me in the subject.

“Not for much longer,” he growled. “She’s my fucking kid and I deserve to be in her life.”

“Ric—” I put a hand out to him.

He jerked away from me. “No, Daisy. You’ve said enough. You’ve *done* enough. You kept her from me and you know I don’t like being kept from what’s mine.”

“Didn’t you say the other day that was me?” I lowered my hand and tried not to panic.

This was exactly what I was afraid of. He could tear my life to shreds if he wanted to. Killing me would be less painful.

“You still belong to me, but that doesn’t mean I won’t destroy you for taking my daughter away.” His face was a mask of stone cold ruthlessness. I’d seen him give other people that look countless times, but he never looked at me that way.

“And you wonder why I didn’t tell you,” I said, as cold as him. “If you knew, you would have taken her away from me when she was born.”

He was very still for a few moments. “I lied when I said I didn’t care if you left town. I was pissed off. You walked away from us, and I let you. If I knew you were pregnant, I wouldn’t have let you leave. We would have gotten married and raised her together.”

“Would we?” I asked. “Would I have gotten a say in that?”

He stepped closer and reached up to tangle his fingers in my hair. He clenched his teeth and pulled me towards him. “That’s how it would have gone. I know it. You know it. Why do you always have to fight me on everything?”

I looked him right in the eyes. “Because you like the challenge.”

He laughed softly and tangled his fingers tighter. “That right there is why we belong together. Plenty of other women

are happy to open their legs for me, but you always kept things interesting. Trying to run away from this life was like trying to run away from yourself. Your heart is darker than you think. It might even be darker than mine. The sooner you admit to yourself..." He shrugged one shoulder.

"You know what, I don't give a shit. You made your bed and I'm going to make you regret it. By the time I'm done, Nova won't even remember you."

He shoved me back away from him and stalked out of the room.

I staggered a few steps until my back touched the wall. I leaned back against it and stayed like that for a while.

I lowered my head until my face was surrounded by a protective wall of hair. I trembled all over, but I didn't cry. Fuck that.

I was a badass. I got off on pain and death. My heart was as dark as he said it was. He was right about that, and running away never put any of it behind me. Not really.

He was also right that we would have gotten married if he knew I was pregnant. We would have made each other as miserable as shit. I was as determined to get away from Dusk Bay as he was to stay. Even if this was still home, I had to have the time away. I couldn't, wouldn't regret a moment of it, even if Nova missed out on a few things.

I focused on my breathing until my heart stopped racing so hard. I couldn't let him take her away from me, no matter what I had to do to prevent that. Even if I had to kill him.

I pushed myself off the wall and headed out the door. I barely got more than a couple of handfuls of steps before I saw the two people I wanted to see the least. Both of them looked like they did nothing wrong in their lives.

Assholes.

"Daisy?" Hilton in particular looked at me like a cat that got the cream. Seven times like he promised.

Seven times too fucking many.

“Are you okay?” Gunnar asked.

I pushed past them both. “Piss off.”

Gunnar made a grab for my arm, but I jerked it away before he could touch me.

“Leave me alone,” I hissed. “You’ve done enough damage.” Leaving them both gaping, I stalked away without looking back.

“What’s wrong with you?” Bella asked sharply. She grabbed the bag my bridesmaids dress was in and yanked at the zip. “You haven’t even seen the dress yet.”

“What?” I tore my eyes away from the view of the garden and looked over at her. “Nothing. Sorry, my brain was a million miles away.”

“Yeah, no shit,” she said. “Did you and Ric have a fight? He’s been stalking around for the last couple of days like a wounded bear. It was kinda funny at first, but now it’s getting annoying.”

I shrugged. “No idea,” I lied. Her wedding was in two days. I didn’t want to dump my shit on her. She was stressed out enough making last-minute plans and hoping the flowers turned up, and none of the guests died between now and then.

The flowers probably would turn up. The rest, I couldn’t guarantee. If the flowers weren’t delivered on time, I could guarantee someone *would* die. No one in Dusk Bay would mess with Bella’s wedding.

She looked at me like she didn’t believe a word.

“Maybe you should ask him,” I suggested. “Or have Vinny talk to him if they’re such good friends.” Ric would have told Vinny about Nova by now, wouldn’t he? If Vinny said anything to Bella, she would have mentioned it the moment she saw me this morning.

That was between the two of them. I’d stay the fuck out of it.

“Right.” She tugged the sides of the bag away from the dress and held it out to me. “See, isn’t it cute?”

“It’s fine,” I said. I took it from her and lay it over the back of a chair while I stripped off my shorts, T-shirt and black, lacy bra.

“Fine?” she echoed. “Has anyone ever told you you’re hard to please?” A sly smile crept onto her face. “Did Hilton tell you that?”

I made a disgusted face and stepped into the dress. I turned so she could do it up at the back, then looked at my reflection in the mirror.

Cute was not the right word. It was so low in the front, it barely covered my nipples. The skirt fell to just above my knees.

She stood behind me and said, “You look smoking hot.” Her brow creased. “I don’t think I can let you wear it. You’ll look hotter than I will.”

I looked fucking hot, but I snorted anyway. “No one will even notice me. Their eyes will be on you the whole time.” That was stretching it, and we both knew it, but she seemed to like my answer. Truthfully, at least half the men at the wedding would want to get me *out* of this dress. At least half of the women too.

Good. Ric, Gunnar and Hilton could all drool over what they’d thrown away. Assholes.

“You look like you’re about to stab someone in the eyeball,” Bella said.

I grimaced at my reflection. Yeah, I *did* look angry. I *was* angry, but I reminded myself this was her time to shine. I needed to dial my shit back for a while.

“You can take the girl out of Dusk Bay but you can’t take Dusk Bay out of the girl,” I said. “Don’t we all look like we’re about to stab someone in the eyeball?”

“I’d prefer to stab them in the balls,” she said. “Get them where it really hurts.”

“I don’t know, but I suspect being stabbed in the eyeball would hurt,” I said.

“Not for long though,” she pointed out. “Watching them writhe around in pain is much more satisfying than a quick death.”

“Sadistic, but true.” I could think of three guys who I would happily stab in the balls right now. Okay, two. I wouldn’t live very long if I killed or maimed Caleb’s pet.

“Okay, tell me what’s wrong,” she insisted. “I know you’re not moody because you need to get laid. Are you cranky because you’ll have to go back to Melbourne in a few days?”

She popped out a hip and locked a firm, expectant gaze onto me. “You’re only going back long enough to pack and come back here, right?”

“I don’t know.” I started to get out of the dress. “I haven’t thought about it.” That was a flat out lie. I hadn’t thought about anything else.

I grabbed the dress before it could fall to the floor and handed it to Bella to put back on the hanger. I reached for my bra as a knock sounded on the door. A second later it was pushed open and Gunnar stepped inside.

His eyes immediately went to me, standing in only my panties.

I met his gaze, unflinching, my chin raised. When my nipples pebbled, it wasn’t just because of the cool air in the room. I still wanted to stab him, let’s get that clear, but he was too hot for anyone’s own good.

“Daisy, they said you’d be in here. Sorry to interrupt but we need to talk.” He didn’t look very sorry. The way he was eying my breasts, he was anything but.

“I have nothing to say to you,” I said coldly.

“That’s bullshit,” Bella said. “Whatever is going on, clear the fucking air. Screw each other. Whatever you need to do to get it out of your system. I’m not having you be miserable at

my wedding. Sort it out.” She hung the dress back up and stomped out of the room.

The door banged shut behind her.

I crossed my arms under my breasts, pushing them up slightly. I had nothing to be ashamed of. If he had a problem with me being half naked, he could turn away.

“So talk,” I said coolly. “Do it quickly, I have better things to do.”

He stepped over closer to me, reminding me how much fucking bigger he was than me. Just standing here with him made me wet. But I wanted to kill him as much as I wanted to fuck him. More.

“Let’s start with whatever you think I did wrong,” he said slowly.

“Really?” I cocked my head. “You’re going to play dumb? You know what you fucking did.”

He shook his head. “If I did, I wouldn’t be here asking what I did. If you want me to grovel on my knees, I can do that, but you need to tell me what I did first.”

Grovelling sounded appealing, yes.

I lowered my arms. “Ric confronted me. He knows he’s Nova’s father. I didn’t tell him and I know Bella wouldn’t. That leaves two people. You and Hilton.”

He frowned. “Shit.”

“Yeah, *shit*,” I said. “Now Ric is determined to take my daughter away from me.” I stepped back when he moved towards me.

“It must have been Hilton, because I didn’t tell him anything.” A frown creased his brow. “Then again, Hilton? Doesn’t make any sense. He’s head over tit for you. So am I. Ric is like a brother to me, but—” Gunnar shook his head. “This wasn’t my secret to tell. He deserved to know, but it didn’t come from me. I’ll swear on whatever you want me to swear on.”

He seemed sincere. The Gunnar I knew was a shitty liar, so he must be telling the truth.

“I believe you,” I said reluctantly. I hadn’t wanted to think he would do something so crappy, but some asshole told Ric. If it wasn’t Hilton or Gunnar, then who the fuck was it?

“That’s good, because the sight of you standing there almost naked is killing the hell out of my balls.” He gave me a lopsided smile.

“Awww, poor thing,” I said without any sympathy. I raised one eyebrow. “What are you going to do about it?” I had the strongest urge to feel his cock deep inside me.

He closed the distance between us, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of my panties and yanked them down to my knees. He pulled his hands away and let them drop to the floor.

“I thought you were overdressed.” He grinned.

I looked him up and down. “What does that make you then?”

“Very overdressed,” he said. “What are you going to do about it?”

Trust him to throw my words back at me. Asshole.

“You mentioned grovelling on your knees,” I said slowly. “I’ll settle for a striptease.”

“I think I can arrange that,” he said. He stepped back away from me and grabbed the hem of his shirt with one hand. He tugged it up and off over his head.

Holy shit, he was all tattoos and grooves of chiselled muscle. Just the sight of him made my whole, hungry pussy throb.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his track pants, gave me a smile that would have melted my panties if I was wearing any and pushed them down his hips. He also wasn’t wearing any underwear.

If I’d thought Hilton’s cock was big, it wasn’t compared to Gunnar’s. Shit, had he been that big back when we were

sixteen? Whatever, he was that big now. And hard. Erect, his cock was slightly curved to the left.

“Can you see how blue my balls are?” he asked.

I tilted my head and had a good look. “Yes. If you don’t come in the next hour or two, they’re going to explode or fall off, or some shit.”

“Wouldn’t want that, would we?” he asked. He stepped closer to me and slanted his mouth across mine. He kissed me hard and deep, a clash of lips and tongue and teeth.

I murmured something against his mouth, but I couldn’t even tell what it was I said. Coherent thought eluded me, or I let it go. Whatever, either way it was gone and I didn’t give a shit.

I turned us and walked him back a few steps until his back was against the wall. I pressed myself full length against him, my arms around his neck.

He broke off from my mouth and kissed his way down my cheek to my neck.

“I’ve been thinking about this for eight years.” He grazed his tongue over my throat. “I’ve been in love with you since the first moment I saw you, up to your elbows in red finger paint.”

I laughed softly. “That was always my favourite colour.”

“I like it too, but I’ve always had a preference for pink.” He ran the tip of one finger around my nipple.

“Really?” His touch burned like fire through my blood. “I’ve always liked reddish purple too.” I curled my fingers around his cock.

He grunted eloquently and thrust a couple of times into my hand. “I don’t want to come like this.”

“Where do you want to come?” I swiped the pad of my thumb over the tip of his cock. It was already slick with pre-cum.

“I’m not currently able to make an important decision like that,” he said. “I’ll come wherever you want me to come. Whenever you want me to come.”

A guy who wanted me to take charge, that was a refreshing change. I liked being submissive, but I could switch.

I glanced around the room before settling on what I needed. I took his hand and pulled him over to a chair in the corner. I shoved him down onto it, then grabbed the cord out of a dressing gown hanging beside my bridesmaid dress. I yanked it free of its loops and tugged it experimentally. It would do.

He looked at me with curiosity, his eyebrows high when I grabbed his wrists and placed them on the arms of the chairs.

I tied one of his wrists to the chair with the cord, then wound it around the back of the chair and tied his other wrist.

“This wasn’t how I thought this afternoon would go, but I like it.” He grinned.

“Good,” I said. “If you didn’t, I’d have to find something to gag you with.”

He chuckled, but it turned into a groan when I knelt in front of him, placed my palms on his thighs and took his cock into my mouth.

He was a big mouthful, but tasty.

I pried his thighs further apart, and caressed his balls with my fingertips.

“Holy fuck, woman,” he ground out. “Your mouth is—” He bucked his hips up to meet me, driving his cock deeper into my mouth. His eyes half closed and his mouth turned up in a blissed out smile.

Right before he came, I slipped my mouth off him.

“Tease,” he groaned.

“Don’t let me reconsider that gag,” I warned.

He smiled, his lips pressed tightly together.

I got to my feet and straddled his lap, my knees to either side of him. My eyes locked firmly on his, I lowered myself slowly, impaling my hungry pussy on his cock.

“Mmmm.” His eyes were fully shut now, his lips slightly apart.

I angled myself so my clit rubbed against him each time I rose and fell, sliding up and down his length.

“You feel so good inside me,” I said, breathless from exertion and pleasure. Being in control didn’t hurt either. A big boy like him could stop me anytime he wanted to, but he relinquished control and I liked it. It was addicting.

“Mmmhmm,” he said in agreement. He drew his lower lip in between his teeth and bit down, his hips moving faster.

“Not yet,” I ordered. If a guy could make me wait, then I could do the same to them. Right?

He made a sound of protest, but slowed slightly, his arms straining against the cord.

“Good boy,” I told him.

His eyebrows twitched and he smiled. Evidently that worked both ways too.

I rubbed myself against him harder, faster, letting his cock work my G spot at the same time. My breath came in ragged pants out my nose.

“I’m going to—” I moaned. “Come with me.”

He nodded and bucked harder, driving us both closer and closer until we tumbled over the edge of slick, sweat coated blissful oblivion. I left my body for several minutes, my whole world shattering into shards of light and fireworks, nerve endings singing as they pushed from pressure to release.

I came down with a rush of air, trying to catch my breath from the high.

“Holy fuck, Daze,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I agreed. That was very different from the last time we were together, as clueless sixteen-year-olds. So much

fucking better.

“You can tie me up any time,” he said. After a moment he added, “I love you, Daze.”

“I love you too,” I said softly. Right now, I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or if I should still run like hell.

“I have something to say and you’re going to listen to me.” I jerked my head towards the sitting rooms.

“You’re sounding more and more Dusk Bay by the day,” Ric said. He narrowed his eyes at me and for a moment I thought he’d tell me to piss off.

Finally, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind us.

I only walked a few steps when he lashed out. He grabbed me by the throat, shoved me against the wall and brought his face right up close to mine.

“You think you can tell me what to do?” he growled. “Have you fucking forgotten who’s in charge here?”

As calmly as I could with a racing heart, I said, “Caleb. And in his absence, Hilton.”

I refused to panic, even when I saw it in his eyes he was tempted to keep on squeezing.

His grip tightened slightly. “And then me. Not you. What the fuck is this about?”

Still unflinching, I said, “I want to know who told you about Nova. Who was it?”

He shook his head. “Not you. What does it matter who did?”

“It matters,” I insisted. “Tell me who. The. Fuck. It. Was.”

He growled, but then said, “My sister, Hayley. I didn’t believe her at first but she convinced me. And then you confirmed it.” He pressed his erection into my hip. Of course this would get him hot.

His hand around my throat was doing the same to me. I was turned on so hard it hurt.

“How did she know?” I asked. I made no attempt to move away.

He shrugged his shoulder. “I dunno. Who the fuck cares? She overheard someone talking about it or something. Seems everyone knew but me.”

He squeezed a little tighter. “You know, if I kill you now it’ll make the whole custody shit a lot easier.”

“Why don’t you then?” I asked.

“Maybe I will.”

I slipped a hand into my pocket, pulled out a folding knife and flicked it open. I had it pressed to his ribs before he knew I had it.

“And maybe you won’t,” I said. Did he really think I would walk around here and confront him without being armed? He should know me better than that.

He looked down. All I had to do was push, and the blade would slide straight between his ribs. It wouldn’t kill him, not quickly anyway, but it would make him let me go.

I thought he’d get angry, but instead he chuckled.

“That’s my girl.” Risking impaling himself on the knife, he leaned in to kiss me roughly.

I didn’t move the knife away, but I did kiss him back until he broke it off.

“You’re moving back to Dusk Bay,” he stated. “I won’t sue for custody if you do. One on condition—she knows who her father is. It’s way past fucking time for us to be together. You and me and her. And Gunnar and Hilton too if that’s what you want. I don’t fucking care. You belong to me and you belong

with me. The rest, we'll sort out later. For now, put that fucking knife away. The only one around here doing any stabbing is me, into your pussy with my cock." He loosened his grip on my throat and tangled a hand in the front of my shirt.

I drew the knife back, but didn't put it away, not yet. I kept my eyes on him, because he made it all sound simple, and I knew he was still angry with me.

"You won't sue for custody?" I asked. "Why? The other day you were adamant."

"The other day I was pissed off," he said. "How would you feel if you learnt you had a kid you never knew about? That the woman you've loved since you were seventeen kept something important from you? You'd be angry too."

"I guess so," I admitted.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "You would have used the knife on me if I kept something like that from you." He tightened his grip on the front of my shirt.

"Is that what you want to do?" I glanced down at the blade.

"No," he said. "I want you with me, not dead." He kept me pressed against the wall and said, "Never lie to me again. I'll never lie to you either. I fucking love you." He kissed me roughly again.

"I shouldn't, but I fucking love you too," I said when we came up for air.

I could have put the knife away, but instead I put a hand on his chest and shoved him back toward a chaise which sat against the wall.

"Now here's the Daze I know and love." He grinned.

"Shut up, Ric," I growled. "For once in your fucking life, shut up."

I pushed him back onto the chaise, straddled him and lightly pressed the blade to his throat.

“Some people would think I should cut your throat while I’m here,” I said.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I looked at him thoughtfully. “I think you should stay very still while I fuck you.” I started to undo the front of his shorts.

“And if I don’t?” He looked at me sideways.

I pressed the knife against his skin until the tip drew a drop of blood. “That’s what will happen.”

The blood trickled down his neck.

He smiled. “How did you ever think you could get away from Dusk Bay? You’re one of us, right down to your bones.”

“It took the time away for me to see that,” I said. “I’m not gonna say sorry for leaving. I’m back now.” I shoved his shorts down and freed his erection.

“You never were good at saying sorry,” he lifted his hips to help me push his pants down further.

“Neither were you,” I told him.

“It’s one of the things you love about me,” he said.

“Maybe.” I shrugged and pulled my skirt and panties aside so I could impale myself on his cock. I was so wet, I slid down all the way until he was balls deep inside me.

“I told you you would beg for my cock.” He looked smug.

“I don’t hear any begging.” I sat on him firmly, unmoving.

“You have a knife to my throat,” he pointed out. “You’re not so much begging as you are insisting. Same thing as far as I’m concerned.”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?” I asked.

“You know better than to think I would listen. Now fuck me, woman. Fuck me hard.”

I shook my head at him, but I rode him mercilessly. So hard that every so often I nicked his neck with the blade. By the time we both came, gasping and crying out, sticky with

both our cum, blood slid down both sides of his neck and pooled on the dark fabric beside his head.

“Now everyone will know who you belong to,” I told him, admiring my work with a tilt of my head this way and that.

“They already know.” When I finally folded the knife and put it away in my skirt pocket, he sat up and pulled up the hem of his shirt. He turned so I could see his left shoulder blade. The words, ‘property of Daze,’ were tattooed on his skin.

I reached out to trace my finger around the ink. “When did you get that done?”

“The week after you left town.” He twisted around to look at me. “I knew you’d come back some day. I figured I’d get one to match yours. Do you still have it?”

I slipped off him and turned to pull up the back of my singlet. In red ink, the words, ‘property of Ric,’ were tattooed. I forgot it was there until now. That must have been why Hilton wanted to fuck me from behind. So he could get off on screwing someone who might belong to someone else.

“How would you feel if I added to that?” I asked.

“Property of Ric, Gunnar and Hilton?” He put his arms around me and drew me back to his chest. “I’d rather share you than not have you at all.” He hesitated for a moment. “There’s the small matter of allegiances.”

“I’m not supposed to tell you, but Hilton is going to ask you to work with Caleb,” I said.

He stiffened. “Really? It’s about fucking time. That would certainly make things easier.”

“Then there’s a small matter of your sister hating me because Hilton wanted me instead of her.” I grimaced.

“Would you like me to have her killed?” Ric offered. He wasn’t joking.

I thought about that for a moment. “No. We can deal with her if she becomes a problem.”

“Okay.” He nestled his face into my hair. “I know you’ll let me know if that changes. In the meantime, we have a rehearsal dinner to get to. People will notice if the best man and maid of honour are missing.”

“Right, and we have two other guys and a little girl to talk to.” What was Nova going to think of all of this?

I had no idea.

Nova squinted at me. “Three boyfriends?” She looked from Ric to Gunnar to Hilton.

Only Gunnar looked nervous at all. He couldn’t sit still in his seat for longer than a second or two.

Ric was as smug as ever, a small smile on his lips. At least he’d taken a few moments to wipe the blood off his neck. He looked a bit less like someone tried to kill him now.

Hilton was cool and tightly controlled. He exuded quiet confidence. Like he said, he always got what he wanted.

I wasn’t sure if he was expecting it to end quite this way, but if he had a problem with it he’d say so. Or he’d have the other two killed after the wedding. I guess we’d find out which one it was later. Hopefully he was okay with sharing, because I was getting used to having the other two around.

“How do you feel about that?” I asked. “And moving back here?”

She kicked her legs under the small chair she sat on. “Can we live here, with Bella? And my cousins?”

“Your cousins have to go home after the wedding,” I said.

“And so will we,” Ric said. “I have a nice big house in town we can all live in. Most of your cousins live closer to my place than Bella’s.”

“Is there a pool?” Nova asked. She looked at him like that was a deal breaker.

Ric snorted. “Of course there’s a fu— pool. I wouldn’t be very cool if I didn’t have a pool, would I?”

Nova giggled. “That rhymed.”

Since she handled that information pretty well, I thought I might as well jump in with both feet.

“There’s something else I’d like to tell you, sweetie,” I said gently.

“He’s my daddy?” Nova pointed at Ric.

I did a double take. “Who told you that?” I could fucking guess.

“Aunt Hayley,” Nova said cheerfully. “She said I shouldn’t tell anyone who told her. Did I do wrong?” Her small brow creased with worry.

“Not at all,” I said quickly. “You did great.” Hayley on the other hand...

I looked up at Ric. He predictably looked furious. He might have her killed after all, just for doing that. Personally, I was going to stay well clear of her and any trouble between them.

“Can I go and play now?” Nova asked.

I sat back. “Sure. Don’t get messy, the wedding is in a few hours.”

“Okay, Mummy.” She hopped up and headed towards the door. She stopped when she got there and turned around to look at Ric. “Do I call you Daddy?” She frowned.

“Only if you want to and when you’re ready,” he said lightly.

I could tell from the look on his face that he wanted her to, but that was something they’d have to work up to.

Nova nodded and skipped out of the room.

“Daze can call me daddy any time.” Ric grinned.

I rose and socked him on the chest with the back of my hand. “Don’t let me cut your throat for real.”

“Can you believe this woman belongs to us?” Ric asked the other two guys.

“You three belong to me,” I said firmly. “Now, I believe we have some business to discuss before the wedding?”

“Yes we do,” Hilton agreed. “Business which will mean I spend more time in Dusk Bay than Melbourne.” He snaked an arm around me. “With the woman I love. Whom I have loved since the day we met, but always felt was out of reach.”

I looked at him in surprise. “Me? Out of reach?” He was the one with all the wealth and power. I was just an assistant.

“Caleb expects big things from you. So do I. You have an iron will, and you’re as bad as and ruthless as the rest of us. Maybe more so. You were always destined to return home. And now you have, you’re going to turn Dusk Bay on its head. I, for one, am very glad you’re on our side. You’re going to be a woman to be fucked, but not fucked with.”

“And we’re all here for it,” Gunnar said.

“Every fucking day,” Ric agreed. “Our Daze is going to set the motherfucking world on fire.”

Fuck yeah, I was.

After the wedding.

THANK YOU FOR READING! If you want to read more about Gunnar’s brother, Mannix, and his friends, check out [Bait](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Alabaster writes reverse harem and, paranormal, sci-fi and fantasy romance.

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