A man with dark, wavy hair and a beard is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking out of a window with a grid pattern, with light coming from the left. The background is dark.

THE  
WOUNDED  
HEARTS  
SERIES

*DEVILISH*  
*PRINCE*

LYDIA HALL

DEVILISH PRINCE


---

**LYDIA HALL**

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# BLURB

**I was forced to save his life, but it was my decision to give the mafia prince my heart.**

Lorenzo fell in love with me after I was kidnapped to secretly operate on him.

It was terrifying, but the thought of death was even more unacceptable.

I had to stay alive for my sick brother.

But now, I have a real shot at saving him.

Lorenzo's father has proposed a fake relationship that seems crazy to me.

Publicly dating Lorenzo would benefit the crime family.

In return, I would succeed as a trauma surgeon and save the future of my hospital.

The plan was perfect on paper.

But Lorenzo was the opposite of that.

He was older, dangerous, and played tricks on my mind.

Yet, my heart longed for him like it never had for anyone else.

Lorenzo could have my love, but my trust was off-limits.

Especially after he broke every rule in the book, doing the unthinkable that we could *never* come back from...

---

## SOFIA

**L** aughing at a wisecrack made by a coworker and probably the best friend I've ever had, I shrug into my thick puffy coat and zip it up. Winter has a death grip on the city and despite the steam that rises from the sewer grates along the sidewalks, it's too frigid to walk anywhere. Even my below-zero-rated coat isn't warm enough, so I'll be a walking ice cube by the time I get to my car in the garage. Normally, I'd hail a cab or take the subway, but I chose to drive today. I just hope the old run-down Camry starts up the first time. The battery is weak.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow." I wave at the gang before dipping out of the breakroom. Jen snickers at her own joke and waves too. It's been a long day and all of us are exhausted. There was an eighty-car pile up on the George Washington Bridge and all of the victims were brought to Bellevue until we were so full we had to divert to other hospitals. As a trauma surgeon I've seen a lot of things, but I did more surgeries today than I have all week combined.

Nurses and orderlies nod at me with smiles as I pass by. Everyone knows my name, but I am shit at remembering other people's names, except my patients. I remember them all, every detail. It's what makes me the most prominent trauma surgeon in the country despite being only two years out of my residency. I took my studies seriously and I take my career seriously too.

The wind whips around me as I walk through the breezeway from the hospital ER to the parking garage. It's so cold the air



hurts my face, and if I'm not careful I'll get frostbite out here. I turn my collar up and jam my hands into my pockets. I forgot my hat in my locker, but at least my gloves are in the car still. They'll take a minute to warm up but the car has to run for a bit to circulate the oil anyway. I fumble in my pocket for my keys and wrap my thumb around the fob.

In New York people are always on their guard. Thugs and gang members like to do their dirty work after dark like this, and the hospital parking garage is no stranger to criminal incidents. So I keep my senses alert as I head down the stairwell to the second floor below ground. It's not windy but it's still cold. I'm shivering by the time I reach my old Toyota and my hand is so cold I almost drop the keys as I point the fob at the car and push the remote start button.

As expected, the car engine struggles to life, barely turning over with the weak battery in the cold. I need to get that looked at, but at least it's warming up as I approach it. I'll enjoy a hot bath and a mug of cocoa to relax after I get Calvin in bed for the night. He depends on me for everything since his crippling accident ten years ago, so even after a daunting day like today, my work isn't finished until he's cared for. I love my brother dearly though, so I care for him in the best way I can.

The light above where I parked seems to be out, maybe it burned out today sometime, but it makes me more cautious as I approach. I glance around the garage but there is no one here but me. So I hurry the last few steps and duck between the cars to open my car door when I hear a voice calling out.

“Hey... Lady.”

The deep baritone reverberates around the garage, echoing off the walls. I turn to see where the call came from but the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stands on end. My gut says “get in the car” but my feet stop, frozen to the cement beneath them as terror courses through every cell in my body.

My hand rests on the door handle and as I turn to climb in, something thick and scratchy drops over my head. I swat at it, pulling the material but there are strong arms around my

middle picking me up. I can't breathe, and my screams are muffled.

"Hey, stop! No!" I scream and punch and kick, but whoever has hold of me is stronger than I am.

"Get the van," a distinctly male voice barks and I hear tires squealing.

"Put me down! Help!" I scream as loud as I can and hear my own voice bouncing around in the cavernous space, but the squealing tires grow closer. "Help!"

"Shut up!" the man shouts and I tremble. He jerks me violently as I thrash about whimpering like an idiot. I drop my car keys and pummel his body as hard as I can, but there is no use fighting him. I'll damage my hands and then how will I perform surgeries.

"Now, get her in here before someone comes!" Another voice joins the fray after a van door is slid open. The metal upon metal is a very discernable sound, and once I'm tossed in, I hear it shut. The vehicle roars to life, tossing me against the wall as I try to sit up. I reach for the bag over my head but someone grabs my hands and pushes me back to the floor.

"Stay down," the first man says and I comply with him. I'm terrified, sniveling and whining as tears form and my body releases sob after convulsive sob. Just moments ago I was thinking of cocoa and a hot bath. Now I just want to survive.

"Where are you taking me?" I barely squeak the words out. If they wanted to assault me they'd have done it already and thrown me out of the van. This means I'm worth something, and the only thing I'm worth to anyone is for my skill as a surgeon. I have no money, no one to call in a ransom to. I'm broke and paying back student loans and my paralyzed adult brother depends on me in one of the most expensive cities on the planet.

"Shut up, bitch."

"Just hurry up, Norm, Renzo is dying...." The second man's voice sends shivers down my spine. I don't know who "Renzo" is or why he's dying, but I know why I'm here.

The van speeds through curves and turns too fast, tossing me around the back like a rag doll. I'm bruised and battered by the time it stops, and they yank the door open. I try to sit but my bones ache and I'm shivering again.

"Get up!"

"Take the bag off my head." I won't do anything for these animals unless I know what I'm getting into.

"Get the fuck up, or I'll shoot you." The man sounds serious but if his buddy is really dying, he needs me. I gamble my life on that fact.

"Shoot me and 'Renzo' dies. Now take the fucking bag off my head." I'm tempted to pull it off myself but the last time I tried the man next to me slammed my face into the floor of the vehicle.

"Just fucking take it off. He's going to crash." I can't tell who is who at this point, but one of them yanks the sack off my head, clearly made of burlap. It scrapes along my face and clings to my hair, and I blink my eyes a few times as they adjust. I have no clue where we are, parked inside a building that looks abandoned. I see plastic sheeting suspended from metal cables hung from the ceiling. Most of the place is dark, but beyond the sheeting is illuminated. I can see folks in scrubs moving about, hovering over a gurney in the center.

"What is this place?"

"Enough... now get in there and fix him." A man dressed in all black stands with a gun pointed at me. He gestures with the barrel toward the makeshift medical area and steps aside. Two more thugs stand near the van too, both with their own weapons. I slide out of the dirty van and shake my head. There is no place to scrub in, no sinks to wash my hands. No fucking heat to keep my fingers warm enough to operate.

"I can't do this. I need an operating room. I'm not a combat medic; I'm a trained surgeon." My protests anger them.

"Yeah, well if you don't go save his life, you're going to be a puddle of blood and guts on the floor."

I swallow hard and follow their nudges—or hard shoves—until I’m standing outside the plastic sheeting staring at a face I know to be one that strikes fear in the hearts of men of this city. Lorenzo Gatti, son of Antonio Gatti—Italian Don. His face is in the news constantly, and it’s just enough to make me want to piss myself.

“What? No....”

“Now, bitch.” The man behind me pushes me again and I have no choice. I take a deep breath and unzip my coat, shedding it. I can’t perform surgery in that thing. He holds the plastic back and I step into the makeshift room which is strangely warm.

“Uh... I can’t wash—”

“Welcome, Doctor. Hands up?” A woman, mid-thirties and scared-looking, offers me gloves. I haven’t even washed my hands. I glance around at the few medical personnel here and wonder if they’re all here under duress too. I don’t recognize any of them. “Just put your hands up or they’ll kill us all,” she whispers and my brain goes on autopilot. I raise my hands up and she shoves two gloves on each one, taping them off the way I would in surgery.

“What are we dealing with?” My body kicks in now too, moving toward the patient. I have to think of him as a patient, not as the city’s most notorious criminal mastermind. I look down at his chest, already prepped and ready for surgery. There is an obvious bullet wound.

“Patient as suffered a gunshot wound to the chest. Traumatic pneumothorax presented; an intercostal drain in place. BP is seventy over forty, heart rate one-seventy-five and rising. Bullet fragments in the left lung and chest cavity. If we don’t open him up now, he’ll bleed out. We have two units of O-negative on standby, waiting on your orders.” The nurse takes her place next to the bed and I know based on those stats I’m cutting this guy open now, with dirty hands and all.

“Scalpel,” I say, holding my hand out and without thinking I slice into the man in what can only be described as field medicine. It takes two chest retractors and a nurse with constant suction of the cavity for me to find the bullet

fragments, but I sew up his lung and then his chest and save his life. My hands are trembling as the last stitch is put in place and a collective sigh escapes everyone in the room.

I make eye contact with the anesthesiologist who has tears streaming down her face. She's young, maybe in her early twenties, and probably sitting in wet pants from her expression. None of us want to be here today; I see it in their eyes. They were all taken just like me, and now that we are here, and we've seen faces we can't unsee, I don't know if we will live to make it home. I shudder to think what they will do with us, and I determine that I won't let these innocent men and women die.

"Alright, back out. Just the doctor stays," one of the men orders. I turn to him.

"What will you do with them?" I'm shaking, peeling my gloves off. I should have a mask and a hair net too, but this is so clandestine, they have no clue how to prepare a medical unit.

"Don't worry about it. You're sticking around to make sure he comes out of the anesthesia." The guy waves his gun at them and I feel my chest tighten. "And you'll stick around to make sure he recovers fully."

"My name is Doctor Sofia Carter. I work at Bellevue hospital. My coworkers will know I'm missing. If these people are harmed in any way—"

"You'll what?" His gun pushes the underside of my jaw upward.

"They'll report to me tomorrow, or I'll make sure this whole operation is exposed." I'm not afraid; I've seen jerks like this before.

"Oh yeah?"

"And I won't treat him at all. I'll let him die." I clench my jaw and he shakes his head then licks his lower lip and bites it.

"One word... they speak one fucking word to anyone and you all die. Got it?"

I stare at him with hatred in my gaze and he lets them all leave the area. I'm not sure if he will keep his word to not harm them, but they pile into the van and it drives off. I keep staring at him until his gun lowers and he tucks it into his pants. Then I turn back to the patient and stare at his bloody chest. He'll need antibiotics and lots of follow up care. This isn't over. He could take weeks to recover, and I don't have time like that.

"I need to get home to my brother..." Calvin needs me as much as this asshole.

"In time. Just make sure he lives..."

I hover by his bedside as the anesthesia wears off and he wakes. It's still hours later before they realize Lorenzo is heavily drugged and will have to sleep it off. I give him a shot of morphine for the pain and they make it clear to me that if I don't come back willingly tomorrow when they come for me, both I and Calvin will die.

I have to go along with them. What else can I do? I swore to care for my brother the rest of his life, and I'm not about to let these monsters end it prematurely.

---

## LORENZO

I'm talking in my sleep, in so much pain it feels like I'd rather be dead than dealing with this. The last thing I remember is the crushing pain I felt in my chest when that bullet hit me and a few foggy images of a beautiful woman as she administered some medications to my IV. Her voice, like an angel, still permeates the air, rousing me from my slumber. I blink my eyes open to the whir of machines, beeping and reminding me I'm still alive.

"He'll need to have this multiple times a day. I have a job. How am I supposed to do this? Do you have a nurse for him? If not, I have to teach you." Her voice—it's heavenly, but it's real, not a dream.

I turn and look at her face, screwed up into a scowl. Despite it being difficult to keep my eyes open I notice that she's dressed in scrubs, stethoscope around her neck. It confirms for me that it is definitely the doctor who was here last night as I came out of anesthesia, though my brain fog holds any other memories at bay. She's exquisite too—raven hair and green eyes. Eyes that captivate my attention as she looks down at me and her expression shifts from anger to a professional compassion.

"Mr. Gatti, how are you feeling?" Her fingers reach for the line connected to my IV, and she turns to the whirring machines.

I cough and clear my throat, trying to take a breath to speak. "I'm in a lot of pain, doc."



We have a doctor who works with our team most of the time, and I'm not sure why he is not the man standing over me right now, but I'm not disappointed by this pleasant surprise. It isn't every day a man gets shot in the chest and lives to tell about it. I trust my family to do what's right for me when I am unable to make those decisions.

"I can up the morphine for today, but we can't leave it at a high dose for long. You need to transition to oxy or Percocet and then wean off the opioids or you'll get addicted." She presses buttons on the machines and then reaches into her pocket and produces some sort of contraption which she presses on my forehead and swipes across it—a thermometer. She's probably checking for fever. Then she slides it into her pocket again and uses the stethoscope from around her neck to listen to my chest. I try sitting up but she lightly touches my shoulder and I relax.

My eyes flick to Norm in the corner of the room. He stands with his gun in hand and a menacing look on his face. It's normal for him. Though my other guys stand next to him chatting so he's probably irritated that they're not taking the job seriously. I notice the doctor's hands shaking lightly; she's terrified and for good reason. A man like me gets a lot of bad press but I'm not everything they say I am—frankly, I'm worse.

"You can leave..." I say the words loud enough for Norm and the others to hear. I hear a grunt of disapproval but they do as I say. The plastic hung around me shifts and they vanish. I wait until I hear their footsteps fading and then I look back up at the doctor. "I apologize that my men feel the need to intimidate you when you are clearly a professional and know what you're doing, Doctor...?" I leave the end hanging like a question. I need to put a name to this face.

"Sofia Carter, trauma surgeon at Bellevue."

I recognize that name. She's the fancy surgeon who has been making waves the past nine months at Bellevue. Graduated high school with her two-year degree. Finished med school in under four years. Went on to residency with outstanding marks and is now considered one of the leading surgeons in the

country all at the age of twenty-nine. And hot as hell I might add. I must have been in bad shape for the guys to swipe this poor lady off the street and operate on me instead of calling my normal man in. No doubt she was swiped; she's too scared to have come willingly.

I take her wrist in my hand and she jumps, but I don't squeeze it tightly. "Thank you for coming to care for me. I'm certain Norman and the others haven't made it easy for you."

She looks away and blinks rapidly. "True they didn't give me a choice, but for your sake I'm glad I was here. You would have died within minutes if I hadn't operated." The look on her face tells me she knows who I am. It's no secret. The whole city knows.

"They did well in selecting you to do the surgery. How bad was it." I wince and squirm. Just talking hurts right now but thanks to the beautiful Sofia Carter I will heal up and have a story to tell the next asshole who tries to gun me down. I'm invincible.

"You had bullet fragments in your lung and chest cavity." She pulls her hand away slowly and then checks the dressing on my wound. "Your vitals were tanking and I knew any second your heart would arrest. I did what I had to do as a medical professional."

The shaking in her hands has stopped and the fear in her eyes is now veiled through a haze of anger. I study her, because that's what I do—study people. I learn their strengths and weaknesses and how to exploit them. And by the looks of it, Sofia is frightened of me—her weakness—and very skilled as a doctor. Both things I can exploit.

"Thank you for saving my life, Ms. Carter."

"That's Doctor Carter to you, thank you. And there is literally no reason to thank me." She scowls. "Your people stole me out of my parking garage and shoved me in the back of a van with a bag on my head. You could have just asked. For that matter, the hospital has a trauma unit and with a case like this, I'd have been called in anyway."

Feisty... I like it. Sofia has an edge to her that normal women don't have. The bite in her tone, the darkness in her eye. She'll fit in around her nicely. I need people in my life who keep me sharp and on my toes, ones who aren't afraid to speak their mind and challenge me at times. It helps me stay objective and aware.

Sofia walks to the table set up at the foot of my bed where various medical supplies scavenged from local pharmacies have been organized. There are bandages and gauze, some bottles of pills and even a myriad of liquid medications, syringes and gloves. They guys got whatever they could find. None of them are medically trained, so they just took everything.

"Where did you get this stuff?" Sofia holds up a clear bottle with liquid in it and shakes her head. "This is a controlled substance." Her tone thickens with frustration and she glares at me.

"I think you know as well as I do that I've been a bit out of commission. You'll have to ask Norm where they got that stuff."

"Is this why I saw all the cops outside the pharmacy?" Sofia sets the bottle down and rolls her head around on her neck before pressing her eyes shut. She's trying to remain calm, likely only because she expects me to stay calm. Probably something to do with my blood pressure or stress level and how it would affect my healing. She doesn't know me. I don't need my surroundings to be calm in order to stay in control of my emotions and bodily reactions. I've looked down the barrel of a gun many times.

"Ms. Carter—" I take a breath and correct myself. "I apologize, Dr. Carter. My men did only what they needed to do to keep me alive."

I cough and a jolt of pain shoots into my chest and gut. It's bad. I'm weak. If one of my enemies came in here I'd have zero chance of defending myself. I don't even know how long it will be until I can sit up on my own. My guess is that if I were in the hospital, I'd be there under the watchful eye of

nurses and doctors round the clock for a week or more. Except, if I went to a hospital the only way I would leave would be in the back of a police cruiser. They've been trying to get their hands on me for years; they just can't make anything stick.

"Mr. Gatti—"

"Please, call me Lorenzo." I wheeze the words out, my voice low and gravelly. I don't want to trigger another coughing fit.

"Lorenzo, you need medical care that I cannot provide here. You are at high risk of infection or blood clots. You need a team dedicated to watching you round the clock. You're in critical condition and—"

"I have you. That's enough."

She stops talking and stares at me in shock. Someone within the warehouse opens or shuts a door somewhere, causing the air pressure to shift and the plastic sheeting surrounding us to shake. She glances around at it and then looks back at me.

"What do you mean, you have me?" Her arms fold over her chest and she shifts from foot to foot.

"I mean, you are my medical care. And I will pay you a nice sum to come check on me. You can show my men what must be done or checked when you're not around. Say you come three times a day and—"

"No." Her interruption is blunt and comes with a firm head shake. "I am not your personal physician." Sofia walks over the machines I'm hooked to and presses buttons, moving the tubes running from them to my arms and chest. "And I can't be a part of anything illegal. You've ripped off a pharmacy for thousands of dollars of unneeded medications."

I try to chuckle but it causes a coughing fit. My body heaves and I roll to my side as I cough up blood. Sofia rushes to me with a white towel and holds it under my face, her forehead furrowed. With one hand she cradles my head, with the other she puts on her stethoscope and listens to my chest through my back. The coughing is excruciating; I feel like I'm drowning. But nothing is as bad as the searing pain at the gunshot site.

“Try a deep breath,” she coaches, leaving the towel by my dripping mouth and straightening. “In slow through your nose... Now out slow through your mouth... Good, again...”

Sofia continues her gentle coaxing until the fit passes and I lie here weak and drained. It hurts to breathe again, something I feel I might suffer for days to come, but again I remind myself I am alive, and that is what matters.

“You have to stay calm.” Her tone is soft again, caring almost. She’s more than a skilled and talented surgeon. She is a healer, a woman whose mere presence exudes compassion and empathy. “If you get worked up you can bust the stitches loose and cause internal bleeding.”

“Can you stop the coughing?” I ask, fighting the urge to have another fit.

“Not with these medications.”

“Can you get them?” My life is on the line still; that much is clear.

Sofia backs up a step and hangs her stethoscope around her neck again. Her pursed lips and drawn eyes reveal a distaste for the position I’ve put her in but I play to her sympathies. I can force her to stay and do whatever job I please. I know that. I’ve done it for many of my subordinates in the past. But I want her to come willingly; no one wants to force people to care for them. Besides, I know that look in her eyes. She wants to see this through, and that works in my favor. I want to see her again, when I’m feeling well enough to engage with her.

“I can provide protection...”

My comment jostles her and she scowls. “I don’t need your help or your protection, Mr. Gatti. The last thing I want is people thinking I work for you.”

“The city is dangerous.” My own voice sounds foreign to me, likely from irritation in my throat after so much coughing. But it sounds ominous, as if I’m prophesying her dark future into existence, because whether she knows it or not, she needs my protection now.

“I’m well aware of the dangers of the city. Thank you.” She rubs the back of her neck. “I can’t work this way. You need to be somewhere clean. You need a round-the-clock nurse. You need to purchase your supplies and medications which I prescribe to you and you cannot and will not perform any illegal actions while under my care. Is that clear?”

I’ve got her right where I want her. She’s hooked. She can’t walk away so long as I need her. She’s one of those fixer-types. The ones who see someone broken and have a compulsion to heal or fix them somehow and she can’t turn her back until I’m whole. Only, she will do it her way only. For now, I can live with that.

“Got it, Doc.” I wink at her and smile and her shoulders relax.

“Good, then I will come twice a day. You will hire a nurse the right way. No kidnapping, no throwing someone in a van and forcing them. Got it?” She’s testing me, trying my patience and it’s not something I allow. But for now, she can have the lead. In due time she will learn who I am.

“I give you my word, I will not coerce anyone or steal anything. My actions and those of my men will remain above the table and legal.” I try to raise my hand but my shoulder protests and I feel a tickle in my chest. So I only blink and nod once.

“I’ll leave my orders with your men as they bring me to the hospital. They are to be obeyed strictly.”

I wonder if she’s getting off on this? Bossing a man like me around... Is it a power trip? “Of course, Dr. Carter. Anything you say...” I’m learning now, everything I need to know. How to think about her, communicate with her, and even how to get her to do whatever I want, and fuck do I want her to do things. I may be critically injured but my cock doesn’t think so. And the instant I feel well enough, she’ll know it. “Anything else?”

Her eyebrows rise. She’s surprised by my consent and acquiescence. “I think that’s all.”

“And you’ll still refuse my protection?” Willingly walking into my fold is what’s best for her, but she doesn’t know that

yet. I'm waiting, knowing that if she refuses it means a little more work on my end—well, my guys' end anyway.

“Thank you, Lorenzo, but no. I can protect myself. I'll come back later today.” She moves toward the corner of the makeshift room and squeezes through the plastic sheets and I hear her footsteps as she walks away.

I guess I have to make her understand exactly how much she really does need my protection.



---

## SOFIA

I'm exhausted. I've been pulling double shifts at work all week on top of three visits a day to Lorenzo's ostentatious house. The man doesn't know the meaning of the word modest and it shows. I sit on the subway, too cold to even get my car started, and listen to the chatter of busybodies gossiping about a mutual acquaintance they know. I could care less. My feet hurt; my lower back feels like I've carried a million pounds, and I still have to care for Calvin this evening.

When Lorenzo paid me—in cash, no surprise there—I was shocked. I feel a bit unnerved with five thousand dollars in small bills nestled in a nondescript envelope in my purse. I make a very decent salary, but my tuition repayment and the cost of living here in the city makes me feel like I'm impoverished. This money will go a long way toward helping me. Calvin needs more than I can give him and there is an experimental procedure trial this summer I want to get him into.

Still, no amount of hopefulness for the future erases the fear that someone will learn what is in my bag and swipe it from me, along with my banking information, ID, and other personal effects. I'm not sure what I expected from him. A wire transfer would only lead authorities directly to my doorstep if Lorenzo goes down for something.

I'm relieved when the train stops at my station and I slip out, clutching my purse to my side. I weave through the busy masses and climb the stairs, watching over my shoulder the whole five block walk to my apartment. It's in a high-rise west

of Macy's, and I could probably just walk to work, but somehow the subway feels safer. There are more witnesses on a train than on a side street, and with the sun still setting by five-thirty p.m. most days, I don't take many risks.

By the time I get to my apartment I'm shivering so badly I can't feel my fingers. The building manager hasn't fixed the heat in the lobby either, so I get no relief until I'm safely inside my apartment where Tina, the in-home nurse, is ready to leave. She stands as I shut the door behind me and smiles softly.

"He's ready for his bath." Her typical non-greeting is okay. We're not friends, just customer and service provider, and that's okay. I need the help and the insurance company sends me whoever is on their payroll to help. Tina has been around for a few weeks though, and Calvin seems to like her.

"How is he emotionally today?" I hang my purse on the coat rack and start peeling off my layers. My brother has been in a slump lately, feeling like he's a burden. He can speak and hear just fine, but the accident left him paralyzed from the neck down. I can see how he'd feel like a burden, and very lonely too. Quadriplegics often have no friends, and I'm his only family in the city.

"He's up and down, apologizes a lot. You sure you can't call in a cousin or aunt to help? I think he would see that people care and want to be around him, that he's not a burden." She picks up her sweater and puts it on, then walks toward me, reaching for her coat.

I shake my head and step out of her way as she dresses. "No. I really can't afford to put anyone up and this city is too expensive to ask them to come and not provide for them while they're here. But thanks for the offer." My heart drops. I know Calvin has been feeling this way for a while and all I want to do is help him feel better. I know the trial will get his spirits up but until I am guaranteed a spot for him, I can't even tell him about it. Can't get his hopes up only to let him down.

"It's just a suggestion." Tina puts her coat on and buttons up. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I hang my coat and gloves as she lets herself out; then I lock up. I'm in for a challenging night if he's still feeling down, but I have to be strong for him. I'm all he has and the more I show how emotional I get in caring for him the more he blames himself. It isn't fair to him that I am sad or stressed by other things and let it show. I'm certain he would love to be stressed out by work or strange mafia men demanding he work for them. Calvin can't even use the toilet without help. Feeling sorry for myself only shows him that I am struggling and he blames himself for that struggle.

So I smack a smile onto my face and kick my shoes off by the door before I shuffle into his room and say hello. He's watching an old rerun of some seventies sitcom and he looks up at me when I walk in. I fall into my typical doctor routine, forcing my emotions away to take care of a patient, though my heart is still heavy.

"Hey... how was your day?" I walk to his bed side and straighten his blanket. Tina has him in bed already but I was supposed to help him bathe tonight.

"Hmm..." he grunts, and turns back to his show. "Just another day."

The TV tray across his lap is cleared. Sometimes his dinner plate is there when I come in but such long shifts lately means he is finished hours before I'm off work. I'm hoping I don't have to visit Lorenzo for much longer. It's lengthened my day substantially.

"Tina said you were down again. Anything I can do to help?" I pick up his tray and set it aside, then perch on the side of the mattress and he grimaces.

"I don't need help. Just let me sleep." Calvin was always my protector, despite being older than him by two years. In high school he knew which boys were trouble and chased them off before they could ask me out. He often followed me on dates secretly, ensuring the guys I dated kept their hands to themselves and showed up every time I needed him. Watching him receive the diagnosis of being paralyzed was devastating for me, but I never got to mourn that. Since the day of his

accident I've cared for him. And we both mourned the loss of our parents together.

"Alright," I say reluctantly, standing. "Want a bath?"

"No..." He's curt and cold. I'm certain he's doing that thing where he thinks I'm upset with him, so I give him space. There's no sense in coddling him or attempting to talk him out of his mindset. I just have to give him time and keep applying love and compassion and he will see I won't give up. His counselor will be around in the next day or so anyway, so maybe that will help.

I head back out to the living room where I fish my phone out of my purse and pour a glass of chardonnay before sinking onto the couch. I'll wait a while before having a hot bath to make sure Calvin doesn't call for me. Once he's sleeping I'm off the clock officially and I can rest a bit. Until then I scroll my social media and read a few news articles. But my mind wanders to Lorenzo.

On one hand it's flattering to be the one he selected to care for him. He's a very powerful and wealthy man, and there aren't many people in this city who don't know his name. He had his pick of hundreds of very capable surgeons, yet his men—probably well informed—chose me. I feel a bit chuffed about that.

On the other hand, I'm ready to be done. I watch too many TV crime dramas to remain calm about the situation. I don't work well under pressure and the idea of being roped into some organized crime family and forced to do their bidding scares me. It might be just fiction, but those shows paint a very bleak future for anyone who is so lucky to be noticed by the don or his men. And the son of the don is the exact man I need to avoid, at least based on television.

I'm busy flicking through post after post on Facebook when I hear something at the door. For a moment I think it's the neighbor coming home, but then I hear talking and a bang at my door knob. My heart leaps into my throat, and I dart off the couch with my phone in hand, dashing down the hallway to

Calvin's room where he is dozing. I fumble with my phone as I call 9-1-1.

The banging at the door grows louder, as do the murmurs, quickly becoming shouts. My hand shakes as I hold the phone to my ear and wait for the dispatcher to pick up.

"Nine-one-one what is your emergency?" It's a man's voice on the other end of the line and I feel slightly less terrified now that someone else knows there is an emergency, even if only because the call connected.

"Uh... This is Dr. Sofia Carter, five-sixteen West Thirty-Sixth Street, unit three-twenty-one. Someone is trying to break into my apartment." There is a loud crash and I jump and scurry to the door and shut it, locking Calvin's bedroom door. He remains sleeping through it all, television creating just enough noise to mask the ruckus. "Please hurry," I whimper and the man on the other end says a few things to someone else.

"Ma'am, where are you located within the residence? Is someone with you?"

"I'm in a locked bedroom. My brother is with me but he is paralyzed. I can't leave him." This can't be happening. The Hudson 36 building is supposed to have excellent security and I pay extra to ensure we are safe here. New York is a violent city; I've always known that. My aunt lectures me every time we talk that I should get a job outside the city and take Calvin closer to my family, but this is my home and Bellevue is my job. I can't commute in; the expense and time wouldn't be worth it.

"Ma'am, we're sending a squad car now. Do you know any of your neighbors? We can call them for you."

"Neighbors? Uh... no." I don't have time for relationships or the ridiculous small talk that comes with knowing neighbors. We pass by each other like ghosts in the night and nothing more. There is an elderly woman on my floor—she'd never help. And I've seen a man, probably a plumber based on his work uniforms. But he's three floors up I think. No one here can help me. Not even my brother.

“Sit tight. We have units dispatched and one of them is only a few blocks away.” Just as the man says that, I hear the sirens in the distance. I also hear footsteps inside my apartment moving toward the bedroom.

“Oh god, they’re in the house.”

“Stay where you are, Ma’am. Help is coming.”

The door knob jingles and the sirens glow louder. I walk around behind Calvin’s bed and crouch on the floor, whimpering like a fucking baby, and trembling. Then the footsteps retreat up the hall with hastily shouted warnings about cops. I breathe a sigh of relief as the apartment grows silent for a full minute or more before I hear police announce themselves.

“They’re here,” I mumble into the phone.

“Go let them in. I’m going to hang up now, Ma’am. Have a safe evening.”

Still shaking, I rise and end the call and clutching my phone tightly, I let myself out of Calvin’s bedroom to see a police officer with his gun raised pointed right at me, coming down the hallway.

“NYPD, Ma’am, we got a report about a break in.” He says the words but doesn’t even stop to acknowledge any response on my part, which is fine. I don’t respond anyway. I press myself against the wall, nearly knocking off a framed photo of my parents, and let him pass. Another man with a gun in hand stands at the entrance to the living room with shoulders squared as the first walks into Calvin’s room.

“I think they left.” I hug my arms over my chest and hear a bit of racket in Calvin’s room then the man emerges and heads into my bedroom, followed by the bathroom. The second cop reaches his hand toward me, gesturing for me to join him in the living room. I see the door standing open, the knob busted and lying on the ground. Those guys did a number on the frame and the door itself. The super will have to fix it, maybe even before I sleep tonight.

“Clear,” I hear from the hallway as I step into the living room.

I'm shaken. Nothing like this has ever happened here. It's the second thing in less than ten days that has hit me like this and I'm starting to fear for my safety. I hover in the center of the living room between the TV mounted on the wall and the coffee table where my glass of wine still sits.

"Uh... God, I feel like a fool." I rub my forehead and almost break down crying.

"You did the right thing by calling, Ma'am." Cop one, tall guy with a thin beard, smiles at me strangely and then walks to the door and stands just outside my apartment. I hear his radio click and he says something but I can't hear what it is.

"Thank you for coming." I don't know what else to say, or what I'm supposed to do. I've never had to call 9-1-1 before, and I don't care for the cop standing in my home at all, though I'd rather it be him than the guys who broke in my door.

"Did you see the people who gained entry?" He reaches into his breast pocket of his coat and pulls out a notepad and pen, then holds it ready to scribble down anything I say.

"No... but I heard at least one male voice speaking. There was more than one." I feel cold and vulnerable, like my entire world is no longer safe. The cop grills me for twenty minutes until the super arrives and installs some makeshift locks for the night with a promise to return in the morning and fix the door. I'm so shocked I can't even sleep when I lie down.

I just lie there staring at the ceiling with a butcher knife on my pillow, listening to the sounds in the building and thinking about Lorenzo Gatti. He said he could protect me, but somehow even that doesn't feel safe. I still think I'll take my chances with the street thugs, even after the cops warned me there were several break-ins this week.



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## LORENZO

I pour myself a glass of Brandy, compliments of my father. He's become a near-constant presence in my home since I was shot. His daily visits are usually a surprise. I never know when he's going to walk in but he's welcome. I have nothing to hide from him, not even the luscious Dr. Carter who'll be here any moment. She's been here thrice daily for the past two weeks, diligently refusing to allow me to protect her.

"I don't get it, boss." Norm stands with his hands clasped in front of his waist in his normal posture, watching me move about my study. I owe him my life now, and he is humble enough to tell me it was all in a day's work, but without his quick thinking, I'd be dead. "We broke down her front door. We've been following her around for two weeks. She still won't break?"

"She'll break..." My calculated plans will not fail; they never do. Sofia Carter is as good as mine. Until now I've kept my men on the fringe, watching and hovering. It would be too obvious to her if she encountered devastating circumstances too often immediately following my offer of protection. These events have to look random and unrelated. It is the only way she will truly fear for her life and that of her brother and turn to me. "Believe me, Norm. She'll break."

The doorbell rings and I raise my eyebrows at him. She is here to administer her medications for me and listen to my heart. One last check of the wound on my chest and I know she will attempt to rid herself of my association, but she doesn't know

the lengths to which I will go to keep her in my good graces. In fact, until now I've not been well enough to show her myself fully. If she will allow me, today I will do just that.

Norm leaves my side momentarily to attend to the door and I place the glass cork back in the bottle and set it on the shelf. I've offered Sofia a drink more times than I can count but she refuses each time with the excuse of work or a long commute home. Today I won't waste my time. I have other things in mind for our time together.

I hear heels clicking on the marble floor down the hall and a soft soprano voice chattering in indistinguishable words. It sounds like Norm has already irritated the good doctor, which surprises me because up until now she's been mostly pleasant, and he's been on his best behavior, but perhaps it is because I'm dressed and on my feet today in my study, rather than reclining on my bed or sofa as usual. I sip the Brandy and await her appearance in the doorway with a placid expression.

Norm appears first, nodding at me, and then Sofia, stethoscope around her neck, coat unbuttoned in front. Her cheeks are rosy from the cold, thick woolen headband clinging to her head. Her normal scrubs and lab coat are absent, replaced with a pant suit and long trench coat. She looks elegant and I flick my hand at Norm to dismiss him.

"Doctor, it's so good to see you." I raise my glass at her and she scowls before yanking the headband off her head. Her hair is a bit mussed, but she smooths it as she slides out of her coat and pockets the headband. She drapes them over one of the cream, leather armchairs near the door and moves deeper into the room, closer to me.

"You're up and about. That's good," she says, nodding. "This will likely be my last visit then."

I'm positive she is misguided but she won't learn that for a while, so I humor her. "Then it's a miracle and I'm healed. You have saved me." I spread my arms wide, smiling at her. My right arm is still weak, pain in that side of my chest from the way my pectoral muscles were sliced open to fish out the

slug. But I'm already regaining strength, pushups and weight lifting.

"Let's just have a look at the stitches now. I could probably cut them out today rather than waiting for them to dissolve." Sofia talks with her hands as she comes to stand in front of me. "It's probably best if they just work their way out though. You'll have less of a scar."

I chuckle as I remove my tie and begin to unbutton my shirt. I wait for it—the look on her face as my body is revealed to her. It's the same every time, which is why I know she belongs with me. Her eyes always search my body, not like a doctor who needs to check on a patient, but as a woman whose own body feels the chemotic interchange between us.

She licks her lip and waits and I move slowly, button by button. When I undo the final one and pull it out of the waistband of my slacks, she takes a shallow breath and moves closer. Her eyes take me in, but she doesn't touch. Not this time. She wears no gloves, hasn't washed or sterilized her hands, and after previous assertions that she has no need of such trivial matters when tending to me, she still insists it is protocol.

"What do you think?" I ask, squaring my shoulders. I've no shame that for the past two weeks my physique has changed because my body is a temple. I've been fit my whole life. It'll only take me a few weeks to be back to peak shape, but even now my body looks better than the average forty-year-old.

"Uh..." She squints, as if having to force herself not to react, and leans closer to the wound. "There is a bit of redness that I don't like. You need to keep taking your antibiotics. I may prescribe you more." Her hand reaches out as if she wants to touch me but she pauses and grimaces. So I grab her wrist and bring her hand to my chest.

"What are you doing?"

"I've told you, there is no need to shy away. I have no open wound anymore. Feel free to examine me, Doc." Her palm is sweaty and her eyes jerk up to meet my gaze. She's every bit as frightened of me as she is aroused. Her cheeks are light

pink, but her lips warm to a deep ruby, blood rushing in to match her arousal. I'm sure her pussy drips for me, those lips as dark as the ones on her face.

"Mr. Gatti—"

"Lorenzo, please..." I step closer to her, letting her palm splay against my chest. The thudding of my chest against her touch is electric. "You've been waiting for this moment for weeks, haven't you?" I step closer still and she stiffens.

"I'm not sure what you mean, I—"

"I mean, you like looking at me. Don't you, Dr. Carter? You like fantasizing about me? You've probably never seen a man with a body like mine up close and personal."

Sofia's lips stammer out a few unintelligible sounds and she takes a step backward but I pursue her. "I hear you've had a few mishaps..."

"What?" she gulps, shaking her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"I have a friend who is a policeman. He told me someone broke into your home, that you reported another man for following you in the parking garage... Are you in need of my protection yet?"

"Wait... How could you?"

"I have eyes and ears all over this city. So let me ask again... Do you need me yet?" My question, a double entendre, brings more guttural protests even as I back Sofia against the edge of the sofa. She's pinned there between my body and the unmoving heap of leather and wood over which I may just fuck her. "Hm?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking." She licks her lips again and I press my hips into her. My cock is swelling, not quite hard but firm enough to send the message I want her to receive.

"Do you need me?"

Using the tip of my pinky I draw a line across her forehead, pushing her bangs to the side. Her dark hair threatens to hide the beauty of those emerald eyes and I can't have that. I need

her to see every expression on my face, because things are about to get interesting.

“Mr. Gatti, I...”

“Lorenzo...” I correct her and lean closer. “Judging by the way your breathing is rapid and shallow, the dark ruby tint of your lips, and the way you seem flustered by my closeness, I’d say you do need me.”

“Can you please back up?” she asks, but her other hand flutters to my chest, protesting her own words.

“I’m going to give you what you’re asking for, and you’re going to enjoy it, and then you’re going to accept my protection, because an angel like you needs a man with the devil for a soul... Else, how will you remain pure?” I loose her wrist and she sucks in a breath as my hands rest on her hips momentarily before I back away just far enough to undo her pants.

“What are you doing?” she asks again, but she doesn’t lash out. There is no shouting, no pushing me away. Her breathing is erratic, hands trembling.

“I’m doing what your body is asking me to do...” The moment her pants are open, I slide my fingers into her panties to find her silken folds dripping with moisture. “See...?” I smear my fingers through her juices then pull my hand free, bringing my fingers to my lips. One by one I suck them clean and smirk at her.

“Lorenzo, this is—”

“What you want... say it...” My hands reach for her hips again, this time gently nudging her slacks southward, over her hips, along with her panties.

“I...” She gasps again as my fingers find her mound, thumb pushing against her clit. “Stop,” she whispers but what she means is “fuck me.”

“As you wish...” I pull my hand away but only so I can drop to my knees and devour her.

“What are you doing?” Sofia asks again, but there is no force behind her words. Her voice is weak, eyes wide as my head lowers. I drag my tongue through her folds, tasting her sweet, pungent nectar. Her knees nearly buckle. I tease, pulling her clit between my lips and sucking hard. She gasps and throws her head back.

“Oh, fuck...” she moans.

“Good...” I say before I bury my tongue deep inside her, two fingers sliding into her drenched pussy to fuck her. She cries out and molds herself to my face, riding my tongue and fingers with abandon. But this isn’t how I’m going to claim her. No, I want to watch her eyes as my dick pulses inside of her, filling her with my seed. So I let her ride it out a moment, panting and leaning on me while I undo my pants with my free hand.

She whimpers as I pull away, hand fisted in my hair. I slowly stand and lick my lips, staring her in the eye. “Do you need me?” I ask again, angling my cock to push between her thighs into her soaked valley.

Sofia whimpers again, palms pressing against my chest as I enter her. “Tell me you need me,” I demand, voice low. The head of my cock slides in slowly and I withhold, waiting. “Say it.... Say you fucking need me.”

“I...” she whimpers, but she holds back too. It’s a game of cat and mouse. I have her on the edge, ready to experience something only I can do for her, and she is holding back.

“Say it!” I shout, bringing my hand down hard against her thigh and the side of her ass. The loud crack of skin against skin startles her and she jerks, fingers clawing against my chest. “Say you fucking need me.”

“I...” she hisses, and I spank her again. “I need you,” she moans.

As she lets the words roll off her tongue, I thrust upward and into her. Sofia cries out, nails digging into my chest as she slams her hips against mine to take all of my length inside of her.

“Is this what you wanted?” I grunt, sliding a hand up her thigh to fondle her clit. “To be fucked senseless?”

“Ohhh,” she moans, hips thrusting against mine.

Her tone is still so hesitant, so unsure. I bring my head down to her neck and suck hard, wanting to leave a mark. She throws her head back and tilts it to the side, exposing her throat, and I take it. I mark her as mine. To anyone who sees it, it would be clear what she is to me. The pleasure is building deep in her core, and I can feel her walls clenching down on my cock. I can feel the tension building in her body, and it makes me want to push her even further.

“Play with your tits,” I command. I thrust up into her again and again, hard and fast. My fingers dig into her hips and it’s all I can do to keep her steady as I fuck her senseless. Her fingers come up to her breasts, and she massages them, pinching her nipples through her blouse. Her moans are louder now too, higher pitched. She’s close.

“Do you want to cum?” I grunt.

“Yes,” she hisses. “Please, yes.”

“Come on my cock, Sofia,” I say in her ear. “Cum for me.”

She cries out as her orgasm claims her. Her walls squeeze down on my cock as she cums, and the pleasure is too much, even for me. I slam into her one last time as I come hard inside of her, emptying myself deep into her core.

I pull out of her as soon as I’m done, and she collapses backward against the sofa. I can’t resist the urge to drop a hand to her breast, tweaking her nipple. It makes her breath catch. “You’re mine,” I growl at her. She looks down and away from me as if she’s ashamed of the animalistic urge I’ve just satisfied. “Now, do you want my protection or not?”

I turn and tuck my dick back into my pants, zipping them up, but leaving the belt hanging loosely. She bends and slides her foot back into her slacks and panties and pulls them up, fastening them in silence. I watch her fumbling fingers knowing she will have weak knees as she walks away.

“Thank you, but no. I’ll see myself out.” She takes the first few steps toward her coat and I watch her legs shake. Her ankles wobble in the heels and then she nearly drops her coat as she tries to put it on.

“I’ll be in touch, Sofia,” I call after her and she doesn’t even so much as glance at me as she leaves.

Yes, I have her right where I want her.



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## SOFIA

**W**inter still has its damn death grip over New York, but today has been a bit warmer, only in the thirties instead of below freezing. I drove today, so as I exit the hospital and make my way through the parking garage, I whisper a prayer that my old Camry will start up. I'm off early today thanks to a scheduling mishap. I've had so many hours over the past few months when my supervisor said we were double scheduled, I volunteered to go home and give the other surgeon the shift. I'm on call, but the hospital is never busy enough to need two trauma surgeons.

I shiver, my heels clicking on the cement as I approach my car. It's been two weeks since I left the nonsense with Lorenzo Gatti behind me, and all of the medical staff involved have checked in more than once to thank me for putting my life and career on the line for them. I'm just glad it's over, though I've had a few dreams of that sex with him, and I don't mind those one bit. The man has the body of a Greek God and isn't afraid to use it. I had to go home and shower after that experience and found myself late to work.

The thought of him brings a smile to my lips at first, but it soon sours as I push my key fob to remote start my car. The car clicks like a playing card in a bicycle spoke and I know it's dead again. I grit my teeth and scowl. Even on my day off I can't catch a break. It's as if the universe has conspired against me for months to make sure I don't rise to new heights or something. I kick the tire and growl beneath my breath, releasing a puff of crystalized breath into the air.

At this rate I'll be waiting until someone comes along who has a set of jumper cables or a tow truck can get to me. I should have backed into the space to make it easier in the event this happened, but I wasn't thinking this morning when I got here. Calvin's depression is lifting now that he knows he's been accepted into the trial this summer and he was talkative. I didn't want to leave him so I was running late, and now this.

"Goddammit..." I pull my phone out and swipe to unlock. I have to call roadside assistance, but if a kind stranger comes along before then I can always cancel it.

My insurance company has a handy app for these matters so I open it and put in my current location then type in my need—a jump start—and submit the request. The app tells me it will be more than an hour before someone can get to me, and I think about going back inside the hospital, but no one will no I need a jump if I'm waiting in there. So I stash my messenger bag and purse in the front seat of the car and lean on the trunk to wait. My feet are freezing; these sensible shoes weren't meant for being outdoors in winter for any length of time, but then I didn't expect this to happen today.

Several cars whip past without noticing me wave my hand at them. One man is nice enough to stop and put his window down, but he doesn't have a set of cables and neither do I. When another car approaches twenty minutes into my waiting, I am shivering so hard I look like a seizure patient. They slow and the window comes down, and the man inside leans closer to the passenger window. He's wearing a sock hat pulled low over his forehead and thick glasses with black plastic rims. I immediately feel uneasy, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Hey, need some help?" he asks in a gravelly voice. I feel my body tense and the hairs on my arms stand up.

"Uh... dead battery," I tell him, gesturing over my shoulder with my gloved thumb. I'm thankful I'm wearing scrubs and not a skirt today, but nothing could prepare me for the chill of anxiety as he nods and throws his car into park.

"Sure thing. I got a set of cables in the back..." The man leaves his car running and hops out, rounding to the back of

his car. It's a station wagon, old school kind with wood panels on the sides and windows all around. I straighten and watch him, hugging my arms over my stomach. The garage is quiet now, no other sounds. Only a few cars have been past here, and being the faculty garage, there isn't exactly a steady stream of patients in and out for moral support.

The man comes around the back end carrying some jumper cables after he shuts his hatch and nods at my car. "This it?" he asks, and I step back. I know how to do this. I've seen it done a dozen times, but now I'm feeling uncertain about it.

"Yes..." Reaching into my pocket, I press the unlock button, thankful there is still enough charge to trigger the power locks. The man wiggles between my car and the one parked next to it with his cables in hand and opens my driver's side door. I glance nervously around the garage, still hearing no other sounds, and I linger near the running engine.

Then I feel awful for making such base assumptions about a kind man who has stopped to help me. He didn't have to, and he could have just driven past like those first few people. He reaches into the car and pops the hood, then goes around front and opens it. I can't see what he's doing, so I shimmy between the parked cars and round the hood, only to see him with a pipe wrench in hand, cables draped across the cold engine.

He looks up at me, his face obscured by the darkness of the garage. "Where's your purse?" he asks suddenly, and I feel my heart jump into my throat. I take a step back and stare at him, unable to form words.

My mind races with possibilities, fear coursing through my veins. I never should have been so trusting; I should have known better than to stay in this empty garage and let a stranger help me. He takes a step toward me, and I freeze, unable to move. He reaches out his hand but I flinch away. My heart pounds in my chest.

"Please, I just need a jump..." I back into the side of the car parked next to mine and he walks toward me, then swings the wrench and smashes my driver's window. It makes me yelp and jump in fear. I scream out for help, my voice echoing off

the walls of the garage. I'm horrified and terrified, my heart racing as he grabs a hold of me and starts to drag me away. He's strong and I struggle against him, but it's no use.

He shoves me onto the ground and returns to the broken window and leans in. I wince and hold my arm. Pain shoots through my body from hitting the cement so hard. Then I think of my phone. I pull it out and dial 9-1-1 before he returns and kicks it right out of my hands. The phone skitters across the cement beneath a few cars and I whimper and cover my head.

"Bitch!" he shouts before smashing the back window of my car too. Glass shards rain down on me and I curl up into a ball, my heart pounding in my chest. He jumps back into his car and burns rubber as he drives away. I lie there on the ground, shaking and broken, wondering what just happened.

I'm so scared that I can't move right away. I can hear the sound of sirens in the distance, and it's then that I realize how close I was to being taken from this place forever. Tears stream down my face as I lay there, sobbing silently in fear and shock. My body trembles as the sirens get closer and closer until they finally stop near me. I push myself up, sobbing uncontrollably.

One single police cruiser is here, two cops. Both of them exit their vehicle and move toward me. "Ma'am, are you alright?" one asks, kneeling next to me. "We got a report of a 9-1-1 call from this location."

"Dispatch, this is unit two-seventeen; we have a possible 10-21." The other man whose voice sounds familiar stands over me too, hand on his radio. I recognize him. He is one of the cops who came to my place when those thugs tried to break in. Confused, I sit straighter and take the first officer's hand to stand up.

"I had a dead battery and I called roadside assistance, but this guy came up and offered to help. He smashed my windows and took my purse." I stammer out the story of what happened, but I can't take my eyes off the taller of the two men. How is it possible that he was at my house and now here too? With the

number of police officers in New York City, this is a very strange coincidence.

The men walk me through giving an oral statement, which they record, and then they wait with me until the tow truck is here. It hauls my car off to a body shop and when it's gone, I head back into the hospital, nearly frozen to the bone with frostbite, and with a stern warning from the police that there have been many reported muggings in this area over the past few weeks. It's ironic to me that the man's warning was the same three weeks ago when my home was invaded.

Shaking, I stand near the ER entrance nurses' desk and wait for my Uber to arrive. Jen's shift is over now, and as she passes through the ER on her way out the door, she glances at me and I grimace.

"I thought you left over an hour ago?" Moving my way, she folds her gloves in her hand and cocks her head.

"Long story..." I sigh and look over her shoulder out the door, hoping my ride is here. It's not, and now I have to endure a lecture. Jen—very close friend and colleague—knows nothing of the Lorenzo Gatti incident and I'd like to keep it that way for now.

"I have time." She plants an elbow on the nurses' station counter and narrows her eyes at me, raising one eyebrow.

I huff and sigh louder, but she doesn't get the point. It's like she thinks she's my mother. "I was mugged, okay? The car wouldn't start. I called roadside, but they were an hour out. I waved down a car and he got out with cables to jump me and then smashed the hell out of my car and took my purse."

In order to avoid her stern gaze I step toward the door so I can see more clearly the instant my Uber is here and I am saved from this pressure. I'm a grown woman and I don't need her doting on me like I need a parent.

"Sofi, you're literally terrifying me. From now on I walk you to your car. Got it?" She pursues me like a yapping puppy.

"Yes, Mom." A car pulls up and my phone chimes. "That's my ride."

“I’m not kidding, Sof. You have to be safe.” Jen follows me out to the Uber and watches me climb in.

“I understand. I just need to go home and rest now. Okay? I have a lot of calls to make to cancel credit cards and stuff.” I shut the door, knowing I’m being rude, but emotionally I can’t take it right now.

Jen stands there watching as the Uber pulls out and all I can think is, “Should I have taken Lorenzo up on his offer of protection?”

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## LORENZO

**M**y tactics are working. Sofia called me yesterday, ready to make a deal. I stand in my living room next to the large picture window watching over the sprawling front lawn waiting for her to pull up. I arranged for her to come to my home and remove my stitches, now more than one month after my shooting. Most of them have dissolved, but that isn't the reason for her to come and she knows it.

On the call she indicated she was checking on me, but when I pressed her about her reasons, she admitted that she might need my help in the protection department. I knew she'd come around, mostly because she's running scared. Violence seems to surround her, even when it's not focused on her. Take for instance the bank robbery that happened only seconds after she deposited her cash payment from me. Norm told me that rattled her to her core and she went home and locked herself inside for two days.

When a small red sedan pulls up, I know it's her. No one comes to my home unannounced except my father, and he has drivers to chauffeur him wherever he wants to go. None of them drives a red car. This must be a rideshare service. I know Sofia's car is in the shop waiting on a windshield replacement and as I suspect, the back door opens and she climbs out, looking nervous.

Her long, cream trench coat hugs her frame, cinched tightly at the waist, but revealing her bare calves and black heels. She's come from someplace important, not a normal workday. I expected blue scrubs and a lab coat. This is a pleasant surprise.

“Norm!” I shout, and he’s here instantly, in the door and ready to do as I ask. “See to Ms. Carter and make sure she’s comfortable the instant she walks in.” I watch her mount the stairs as Norm scurries off to answer the door. When she disappears out of view from the window, I turn to the liquor cabinet and find my finest bottle of Scotch, pouring two glasses just as I hear the click of her heels on the floor outside the door.

“Sir, it’s Dr. Sofia Carter to see you.” Norm’s announcement is for her benefit only, to make it appear like I’m more civil than I am. I turn with two glasses in hand ready to welcome my frightened guest.

“Welcome, Sofia, have a seat.” I nod at the pair of burgundy leather sofas facing each other. Their Victorian charm is separated by a claw-foot coffee table, perched over an expensive rug I picked up in the Middle East after a business deal. She’s not been in this room, because I limit who I invite here. Her eyes dart around, taking everything in. It’s lavish, but that’s how a prince lives, is it not?

“Uh...” She takes a few steps in, clutching her purse to her chest. Norm has taken her coat, hung in the coat closet near the door I assume. She wears a light green blouse and dark navy skirt. Sheer panty hose make her legs glisten as she moves farther into the room. “This is...” Her eyes draw upward to look at the chandelier, spared no expense from Tiffany’s.

“Yes, it is, now have a seat,” I say again, this time setting her glass of Scotch on the table as I lower myself onto the sofa facing the window. Sunlight pours into the room casting its glow over everything. Every inch of this room costs more that she makes in a year, from the custom wallpaper to the tchotchkes she ogles as she shuffles over and sits in the gilt chair with its matching burgundy leather seat.

Sofia blinks hard a few times and focuses her eyes on me. Not every room in my house is decorated with such detail or expense. This room is where I bring those whom I would like to impress, to open their minds to the ways of my world and invite them to dabble a little. Business ventures, politicians, even a lady now and then.



“Your stitches...” she mumbles but her hand reaches for the whiskey. She picks it up and gulps it, then screws her face up and shakes her head as the burn sinks through her. I could have warned her, but it’s enjoyable watching her squirm.

“If you’d really like to see them, I will show you.” I lift my glass to my lips and sip carefully, enjoying the musky undertones of the liquor. “But I believe you came here to discuss a different matter.”

Sofia gasps and breathes deeply a few times before slapping the glass onto the table and putting a finger in her collar to loosen it. Her face flushes red and she fluffs her dark hair. She’s on edge, like a beast in the woods who knows his days are numbered. She smells the scent of the lion approaching, ready to devour her.

“Uh... yes, well.” She blinks rapidly again and glances around. Norm stands in the doorway waiting for my instruction as always, and I eye him. He takes my expression as an order and makes himself scarce.

“You were saying?” I sip the whiskey again and wait. Forcing her to say it is much more fun than supplying the words for her. She’s been too resistant. It’s time to make her beg.

“I, uh... I think it’s time for you to maybe... I was thinking that I may need...” She clams up, pinching her lips together in a firm line. “I need your protection.”

Smiling, I set my glass down and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and tenting my fingers in front of myself. I watch her throat constrict as she swallows. Then she squirms again, readjusting her position in the chair, showing signs of great discomfort. She’s uncomfortable asking for my help because she knows what sort of help that is, but that’s okay. Anyone who rushes into this family is a fool. She’s wise to be cautious.

“I’d be happy to offer you a proposition...” Narrowing my eyes at her, I set my jaw and wait. She glances around nervously again and then clears her throat.

“Proposition?”

“Yes... a proposition. A business exchange if you will. You provide something for me, and I provide something for you.” I lean my head to the side and she sinks farther into the chair.

“Uh, you offered to protect me...” Her eyebrows twitch as they grow closer together.

“Ah, yes, but that was before you walked away. You took your money and that was payment for my treatment.”

“But—”

“Would you like to hear my proposition?” I lean back now confident I have her firmly in my grasp. Draping my arms along the back of the couch, I cross one leg over the other in an intimidating posture and stare at her sternly.

“I don’t understand. I thought...” She swallows again and rubs the back of her neck. Her knee bounces furiously, her shoulders curled around her purse still clutched to her stomach. She licks her lips and continues. “Yes, please tell me your proposition.”

She’s so young, so naïve. She really thought she was going to waltz right into this house and get something for nothing—after fucking me and leaving without a goodbye. Silly girl...

“I will provide my best men to protect you. They’ll follow you around so stealthily you won’t even know they’re there. You will fear for nothing, day and night. You will make a peep and they will storm the gates and you will be saved.” I feel smugness creeping into my expression and I let it blossom into a full devilish smirk.

“In exchange for?” she stammers, knee still bouncing.

“You will date me, openly and very publicly.” Relaxing my posture, I reach for my Scotch and sip it, watching her over the rim as she scowls and her nostrils flare.

“Absolutely not. There is no way. I have a reputation and—”

“Why did you call me, Sofia?” I finish the drink and set it down on the table hard. She jumps, startled by the sound and my glare. “Because I seem to remember you approaching me about this?”

She blinks rapidly and looks at her knees. Her feet are turned inward, toes pointing together. She breathes hastily, shaking her head, but says, "Someone broke into my house; then someone else smashed my car up and stole my purse. I've been terrified. I saw a man following me and then right after I was at the bank someone robbed it. I've never felt so unsafe." Her words come out rushed, breathy. She really is terrified, and it's obvious she hasn't realized that I'm behind it all.

"Hmm... Well it does seem you could benefit from my proposition. You just have to agree to the terms." I stand and fold my fingers together, letting my arms hang. She takes it as a cue to stand too, but I merely want to disarm her. "If you agree, your fears are vanquished. No need to look over your shoulder in a dark alley anymore."

Sofia huffs out a sigh and rolls her eyes, narrowing them and turning away as she says, "Fine."

I can't stop the smile from creeping across my face. She's feisty. I like it. "Good, then consider it done." I wave my arm in a sweeping gesture and move toward her.

"What are you doing?" she asks, dropping her purse.

"Well, you can make your first payment to the cause..." I reach for her, snatching her wrist and pulling her against my body. She turns her hands to fists and pushes against my chest.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you fuck me like you did last time you were here and that is how we set our deal in motion." Sofia's eyes widen in shock and disbelief. She tries to pull away from me, but I hold her tight.

"Are you out of your mind? I'm not going to sleep with you again!" she yells, struggling against my grip.

"Oh, but you will," I say, my voice low and menacing. "You don't have a choice in the matter. You see, I know everything about you, Sofia. And I know that you want what I'm offering."

"What-what do you know about me?" she asks, her voice shaking.

“Oh, just that you’re a very naughty girl.” I bend my head, forcing her to look at me.

“I-I-I don’t know what you mean,” she stammers, her eyes wide. I slip my hand to the back of her neck, gripping her tighter as I move closer to her. I can smell her sweet floral perfume and see her chest rise and fall from her shallow breaths.

“I know you liked what I did to you, and you want more of it.”

“No,” she whispers under her breath, shaking her head. Her eyes are begging me not to do this. I ignore the plea and move closer to her.

“You’re a bad girl, Sofia. I can tell by the way you dress and the way you walk.” I squeeze her neck tighter, watching as fear flashes in her eyes. My dick is already hard for her and I’m having what I want. “I’m going to be so fucking hard for you when you finally give it to me, Sofia. So hard, I’ll rip those tight, sexy little clothes off you and fuck you so good you’ll forget your name.”

Sofia blanches at my words and I know she’s scared. She should be. I want to break her. I want to fuck her so hard she’ll never forget me. Fuck her so good that she’ll be begging for more.

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## SOFIA

He's doing it again, ruining me with the way he speaks to me. He has moisture puddling in my panties and my body rebelling against my sense of propriety. I can't sleep with this man in exchange for his protection. No doubt he will protect me as he promises, but that would make me a whore, and I'm not a whore, no matter what he thinks.

But having sex with him for the sheer pleasure of it, for the goddamn way he gets my blood pumping—that I can do. This is Lorenzo Fucking Gatti. He's a billionaire more powerful than the mayor of New York City, and he has turned his eyes on me as the object of his obsession. What woman in this city wouldn't be marginally tempted to jump into the deep end and swim with the fishes?

"I..." I start to protest but something inside of me stops me from continuing. The last time this happened, it felt incredible. He made my body feel things I never knew I could feel.

"Say it." The way he demands things from me sends shivers down my spine.

"I..." I whisper, my voice barely above a breath. It's wrong. I shouldn't want him. I should be running from a man like him and straight to the nearest police precinct, but my body has a mind of its own and hijacks my mouth to whisper... "I want you."

He smirks, "Good girl."

He pulls me closer to him, his lips crashing into mine. Our mouths battle for dominance as his hands roam my body,

pulling at my clothes. I moan into the kiss as he breaks away to trail his lips down my neck.

Before I know it, I'm naked and he's tying my wrists together with my own pantyhose.

"What are you doing?" I ask, but the look on his face tells me, I'm not going anywhere until he's done with me. He opens his fly and pulls his dick out. He's hard and beading with pre-cum already. I whimper at the thought of what that tool can do to me—what it can make me feel.

He pushes me forward and I drop to my knees. I bite my lip as he pushes my head down towards his crotch. I feel his thick length press against my lips and I open my mouth to accept him. I can taste the salty pre-cum already seeping out of the tip of his cock. I can't help but moan as he pushes himself deep into my throat. He's thick, and my gag reflex kicks in. I push against his thighs but he thrusts relentlessly as his hands lace through my raven waves.

"Fuck, you are taking this so well, Sofia. It might become a new favorite of mine..." He looks down at me struggling to breathe, gagging on his cock as he thrusts, and holds my hair back so he can watch every detail. My knees ache, I feel light headed, and finally he pulls out.

"Shit," I hiss, sucking in a breath. With my wrists tied together, there isn't much I can do but obey him. My pussy aches for release now, but I get the feeling I'm his fuck toy and maybe he won't even pleasure me.

"Get up," he orders and I stumble to my feet, a bit ashamed that I'm naked. I take a few unbalanced steps and he guides me toward the window. It's bright, the view of the street quite clear from where the house overlooks the neighborhood.

"What are you doing?" I ask, but my question is returned with a hard smack to my ass. I hiss in pain and shudder, knowing full well what he is capable of.

"I want the entire neighborhood to know you're mine, and I want you to remember I'm not a man to be trifled with." Lorenzo takes my bound wrists and reaches them upward

toward the curtain rod bracket. I whimper as he lifts so high my feet almost leave the ground as he hooks the pantyhose around the bracket and effectively hangs me there. My tiptoes are on the carpet, tits pressed against the glass, and I'm helpless.

“Fuck, Lorenzo. The whole fucking neighborhood will—”

My protest is interrupted with another hard smack to my ass, this time with something that is not his hand. It stings and then I shiver with arousal again. Out of the corner of my eye I see a brown wooden cane in his hand, and a smirk on his face. “My ladies tend to fight a bit more than this, Sofia. Are you really dating me?”

I wince at his mockery. I am giving him what he wants, right? I told him I wanted him. What more can I do? I whimper as the cane slams into the backs of my thighs again, my pussy an unwilling accomplice in the beating. It drips down my thighs the moisture of desire and arousal and I can't hide how badly I really want him.

“N-no, sir, yes... I,” I manage to squeak out.

“What?” he says. “I didn't hear you.”

I cry out again as the cane hits me in the same spot, but it was a more playful swat. “Fuck,” I yelp, my ass stinging from the blows. He hits me again and again, all over my thighs, ass, and back, but it isn't as bad as it could be. I am so turned on, so wet and aching. I can't believe how low I'd stoop to feel safe, or maybe to feel sexually pleased.

“Fuck you,” I manage to say, but the anger in my tone is directed at myself.

He stops for a moment, and my body sighs in relief. I don't know why. Something about the pain feels good. I never thought I'd enjoy it, but it makes me feel alive. He runs his hand gently over my skin, between my legs, over my pussy lips. He flicks my clit with his finger and I cry out a little.

“Such a good girl,” he says, and his words send a shiver through me. I'm his, at least for today. I might hate myself tomorrow, but my pussy is screaming for the sweet release of

orgasm and if fighting him is what he wants, that's what I'll give him.

"You fucking piece of trash," I whimper.

"Ah, now you've got it," he grunts and I feel his body splay along the length of mine. My shoulders ache, hands starting to go numb, and his dick slides between my ass cheeks and thighs as he grips my pussy from the front side. "Tell me what you really think."

What sort of a sick fuck gets off on a woman verbally abusing him? I can't even take a breath before his dick is in me, thrusting upward. He smacks my clit hard too, and I wince. "Say it!" he growls, and I whine.

"You're a fucking piece of trash," I say, writhing against the restraint. The glass is cold against my tits making my nipples so hard they could cut it, and I shudder as he smacks my pussy again.

"Say it like you mean it!" he says, and his hand goes back to my clit, this time rubbing it.

"I do mean it!" I say, and he laughs.

"You hate me," he says, and he thrusts into me again, harder.

I don't, though. I don't hate him. I hate the fact that I'm tied up in his living room and that he's fucking me like I'm his property. I hate the way his body feels against mine. I hate that I'm enjoying every fucking second of it, my pussy clenching around his cock and milking him. And I hate that I'd stoop to this level for a basic human right—to feel safe.

"I hate you," I say, and he laughs. "I hate you so much, Lorenzo." But my tone betrays me. I'm so close to the edge if he touches one more spot on my body I'm done.

"Liar," he says, and his lips are on my earlobe, licking it. He bites down and I arch my back as a shudder goes through me. I'm so close to coming I'm almost in tears.

"I hate you," I say again, and he grips my hair tightly, pushing his cock in so deep it hurts. I gasp. "I hate you," I say again, and he comes, roaring like an animal. His hot seed floods me,



pushing me over the edge. I convulse and spasms, dangling from the damn pantyhose as if they were a life line on the edge of a cliff.

I feel his lips against my neck, his breath on my skin, and then he unties me and holds me up. I'm shaking from the experience, and my knees are weak. He remains there until I'm steady on my feet and then backs away and tucks his wet cock back into his slacks.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

I glare at him, unsure how to answer. I'm learning as much about him as he is about me, and now I know he wants me to fight him at least. I feel shame wash over me as I rub my wrists and the feeling slowly starts to come back to my hands. I'm not as ashamed of being naked in front of him now, but I do want my clothes. He stands between me and what I wore in here, and I eye it.

"Can I get dressed?" I ask, avoiding eye contact.

"Hmm.... Just thinking about our next date." He smirks as he tightens his belt and takes a step backward, letting me pass. I scurry over to my clothing, now not entirely there. I'm sure the panty hose are ruined now. So I dress without them as he continues talking. "I learned there is a fancy fundraiser for some new foundation. I'm assuming since you're chair, you'll be there. And since this entire arrangement is about building my reputation as an upstanding member of this community, I plan to attend, and donate generously. You'll be my date."

I freeze, staring down at my blouse as my fingers work the last button. He can't mean the foundation I started with Jen and Mike to raise funds for research into paralysis. I can't take him there. I can't be seen in public with this man, not at my own workplace.

"Uh... that's not a good idea." I finish the last button and slide my feet into my heels, then pick up my purse. My legs are still shaking, but I can't sit down. I'm not staying here.

"Oh, yes you can stop pretending to fight me now, Sofia. You don't get a choice in this matter. I'm telling you only as a

matter of courtesy. I'll be at your apartment at four p.m. sharp for the night. I assume you'll have nothing to wear, so I'll send a dress over. Don't worry, I'm fairly certain my hands have measured your curves well enough to know your size."

I turn and glare at him. "You're welcome," he says, winking.

"May I leave now?" I regret ever coming here. I should have known better than this.

"You may..." He walks nonchalantly to the coffee table and picks up his glass, then heads for the liquor cabinet. "Oh, and Sofia?" he says just as I get to the door. I turn and look over my shoulder at him. "Don't wear panties."

Seething, I stomp out and the giant of a man Lorenzo calls Norm is there with my coat. I glare at him as I take it and storm out of the house. Fuck's sake I have horrible decision making skills.

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## LORENZO

Sofia looks elegant tonight, dripping in diamonds and wearing the emerald gown I sent for her. Though, she acts a little less confident than I expected her to, but it plays into my plan nicely. As chair of the committee that organized this event, she has the spotlight. We've been photographed relentlessly all evening. I imagine being seen on my arm will affect her reputation a bit but not as much as it will bolster mine, which is the entire reason for this little excursion. I'm bursting into the world of medicine with one of the leading surgeons in the world on my arm and I can't wait to read the headlines.

Men and women rub elbows, each of them dressed in the finest gowns or tuxedos. The charity event is held in a grand ballroom with high ceilings and tall marble columns. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling, their sparkling lights reflecting off of the gold-trimmed mirrors that line the walls. The room is filled with tables draped in white linens, each one adorned with an exquisite floral centerpiece. Waiters move through the crowd, trays full of hors d'oeuvres and champagne glasses.

On the far side of the room, a large stage has been set up for a live auction featuring some of the most sought after items on the market. There's a limited edition sports car, tickets to an exclusive art show, rare works of art, priceless antiques, and even an exclusive getaway package that includes round-trip airfare to Paris. Anticipation is high and so are spirits.

We stop for yet another photo-op and she clings to my side, hands sweaty and teeth bared in a forced smile. “How much longer do we have to do this?” The event, an expensive, per-plate dinner with silent auction and wealthy donors will stretch well into the night, and she seems anxious to be free of me so soon.

“Just a little while longer, my dear,” I say, patting her hand with a smile. “We have to make an impression, after all.”

She stiffens and clings to me harder. I can feel the soft bulge of her tit on my bicep and it pleases me, not that she is anxious, but that she is going along with the plan. I feel her heart racing against my chest and I can’t help but feel a little enamored by her beauty. If I were a weaker man I’d be moved by such things, but the only thing I’m interested in tonight is the public image I am crafting—one of benevolence and compassion. I intend to donate to this cause for one reason, to change the public’s mind about who I am and what my business represents.

We find a spot to sit and rest our feet after hours of greeting men and women who lavish compliments on Sofia. She fidgets in her seat, sipping at her wine, and avoids eye contact with the other guests. It’s clear she feels the wrath of the press weighing down on her already, though she has no idea the influence I have over men and women these days and what having me in her corner will actually do for her career.

I lean in close and whisper in her ear, “Don’t worry. You are a beautiful woman and your talent is unmatched. I will make sure you get the recognition you deserve.”

“I will, or you will?” she bites back, pursing her lips. But her head stays held erect and her shoulders relaxed. Her eyes skim the crowd as she sips a glass of wine and then she narrows her gaze on me. “I’ve worked hard to build the public’s trust in my abilities and talents. In one night you’re ruining it. They’ll see me as connected to organized crime and never trust me again.”

I click my tongue and shake my head. “That’s not true, my dear. You are more than a pretty face with a good reputation. You have talent and you’re smart, and I’m sure people will

recognize that. I'm here to help you get the recognition you deserve."

We bicker over her fear of losing her good reputation while the night continues on around us, but the conversation is interrupted by a polite announcement from the stage signaling that the auction is about to begin. Sofia turns away from me and stands up, smoothing out her dress as she takes one last look around the room before heading toward the stage.

The audience erupts into applause as she steps onto stage and begins to speak into the microphone, introducing herself with confidence and grace. She reveals the history of the foundation she chairs and how her brother's accident and subsequent diagnosis of paralysis triggered her desire to aid in research for men and women like him. How the funds from the event will go directly to Bellevue's research into spinal cord injuries. She captivates the crowd, just as she has captivated me all evening and every word out of her mouth oozes charm and confidence. These people are eating her up and along with it, they are reshaping their idea of who I am and what I stand for, all because she came on my arm.

"Good girl, Sofia," I whisper beneath my breath and applaud along with them as the auction begins.

A gentleman with a blue cummerbund escorts her off the stage as the lights come back up and waiters begin passing out information on the items which are being auctioned. For a moment I think she won't return to my side, but she makes eye contact and darkness flashes through her eyes before she turns my way.

"I'd like to leave now," she says, her voice soft and calm. I take her hand in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my fingers, and we make our way out of the room.

Outside we both take a deep breath of fresh air, relieved to be away from the stuffy atmosphere inside as we wait for the car to come around. The night sky is filled with stars, twinkling like diamonds against a velvet backdrop. We stand there for a few moments in silence until Sofia finally speaks up.

“When you said I’d be dating you publicly, I thought you meant dinner at a restaurant, not this.”

I imagine such a public event like this shocked her, but there really is no other way. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, maybe you’d like to find your own ride home.”

Sofia huffs and I watch her face screw up into a glare but she says nothing. The limo pulls up and I open the door for her. She climbs in and scoots across the back seat and crosses her arms over her chest, which only makes her tits push up in a cute little pout. I sit next to her and shut the door and without asking, the driver pulls away.

“You can be as angry with me as you’d like, but we’ve made an arrangement, Sofia. You need me and I need you. Quid pro quo. My reputation for your safety. Unless you’d like to renege and you can hire your own bodyguards. I’m sure you’ll need them now. With my enemies knowing you’ve been on my arm they will assume I care for you, which makes you a target.”

Her eyebrows rise and she fidgets with her hands, wringing them together in her lap. “I’ll keep up my end of the deal.”

“Good, then I will keep mine as well. You can start by spreading your legs.”

Her head snaps my direction and she scoffs. “No.”

“Now,” I say, nodding at her knees.

“I’m not your blow-up doll.”

“No, you’re my date, and perhaps I want to make sure you’ve obeyed my orders.” I don’t need to see it to know she’s obeyed. I’ve smelled her arousal at times this evening, especially as she rose to take the stage, passing by me. She’s not wearing panties.

No, this exercise is about obedience and nothing more. She will do as I say or I will not uphold my end of the bargain and she will find herself on my bad side. Besides, a glimpse of her pussy is all I’ll get tonight. I have other business to tend to, though I’d fuck her now if I had the time.

“Fuck’s sake,” she grumbles, spreading her legs.

My sardonic laugh draws another glare, as do my fingers as they inch up her inner thigh until they dip into her moisture. “Ah, very good girl,” I tell her, sinking two fingers into her body. She hisses and claws the armrest as I stroke her insides, finding the rough patch that is swollen and craving me.

Our eyes are locked and I watch her squirm. Her chest rises and falls faster, breathing heavily, and I work her a bit before I pull my fingers away and suck them clean.

“Why’d you stop?” she asks, keeping her legs spread.

“We’re at your stop, dear.” I suck one last time on my finger before the car stops, and Norm opens her door. She glances at him then at me, confused and sexually frustrated.

“But...” Her pouty protest is genuine. She wants to fuck me. How adorable.

“Perhaps you’ll play nicer next time instead of complaining about your reputation. Now, out with you. I have work.” I flick my wrist, and Norm reaches in and grabs her elbow, hauling her out. The door remains open for a second and she throws the necklace at me hastily before stomping away. I can’t help but chuckle at her as he shuts the door and climbs back in to pull away.

“Hmmm...” I hum to myself and pull my phone from my pocket. I suppose it’s time to prove to her that what she is doing is worth the service I provide. I dial the number of one very unlucky soul who had the bad luck of crossing me. He owes me now, and I’m calling in his debt.

“Uh, yeah... Renzo?” he stutters, voice trembling.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Jimmy? You call me Mr. Gatti.” I hate this man. If I had it my way he’d be at the bottom of the Hudson Bay. I bet he’s shitting himself right now.

“Uh, sorry, Mr. Gatti. What can I do for you?”

“Jimmy, I have a job for you. I’ll send you a time and a place. I need you to show my friend Dr. Carter a good time, if you

know what I mean. Rough her up a little, but do not harm her. She needs to be scared.”

“What? Fuck, Lorenzo, I just got out of the pen. You can’t do this to me.” His sniveling and whining only irritates me more.

“And because of you three of my men went to the clink with you. Now agree to do this job or you’ll be dead before morning. Got it?” I have exactly zero patience for this asshole.

“Yeah yeah... Send me the info.”

“And don’t harm her. Do you hear me? Only to scare her. Just be prepared for the consequences. After this, we’re even.” I hang up and text him the details before I forget, then watch out the window as the city skyline stretches out across the bay. She’ll learn who to trust and it will lead to bigger and better things for her.

Now, to ensure the rest of my plans are in place. I’m not sure I’m content with just dating her.



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## SOFIA

The music blares through the speakers, as does the bark of the Zumba instructor's voice. Each of us do our best to remain in sync with the movements of those around us, but the few uncoordinated souls who can't keep up give the rest of us a chuckle. Jen falls in place beside me as we cha cha to the music, dipping our knee and spreading our arms like wings. It burns off so much stress and a lot of calories too, keeping me in shape. But I still can't get Lorenzo Gatti out of my head.

It's been a few weeks since I made the deal with him to date him openly while enjoying the benefit of his protection. I haven't had a run-in since that time, but I'm not ready to call the deal off yet. Lorenzo is an enigma, controlling and stoic most of the time, but a firecracker in the sack, and maybe I like having him around if for nothing more than the great sex. It remains a balancing act, though. I can't have him bringing my name down, but so far I haven't faced any backlash, especially not after he offered a six-figure donation to the foundation.

"Come on, ladies, move those hips!" the instructor shouts. She picks up the intensity, moving her arms in exaggerated circles as her hips sashay and I can't keep up much longer.

I'm drenched in sweat, but I don't mind. It's the only time I feel truly free, away from all the chaos of my life. A few feet away, Jen is also sweating and panting. She's a little bit more graceful than me, her movements more precise. But I can tell she's working just as hard to keep up with the pace of the

music. Her face is slightly flushed and her eyes are bright, betraying the joy that comes from dancing like this. I give her a quick smile before turning my attention back to the instructor and following along with the next move.

The gym is packed today with people of all shapes and sizes, and it's a sight to behold. Every treadmill is occupied, some with runners who are in the zone, their faces contorted in concentration as they push themselves to reach higher speeds. In one corner, two women are lifting weights side by side while encouraging each other on. Others are doing crunches and push-ups on the mats while a few brave souls take turns on the rowing machines.

The music keeps me going as I dance my way through the class, feeling more alive than ever before. The energy in this place is contagious—it makes you want to move your body and have fun with your friends. It's almost enough to make me forget about life for a while, caring for Calvin, worrying about his condition or depression, or thinking about the next good career move. It isn't enough, however, to make me forget that I have to see Lorenzo this evening again.

We've been on a few dates, dinner out, a Broadway premier, the fundraiser. Each of them seemed to be orchestrated specifically in coordination with a media presence. He's using my good reputation to raise his out of the gutters, and it's so obvious to everyone. My coworkers have cautioned me a number of times, but I have no choice. With the number of things that have gone wrong lately, I can only assume that the sudden lack of startling events in my life is due to the fact that he's had someone watching me.

“Phew!” Jen pants. “I'm about done!” Her shout over the loud music is enough to make me laugh. I can barely keep up with her, but she's always been a bit of an overachiever.

The instructor wraps up the class and we all take a bow in unison, stretching our arms out and bowing our heads. I feel exhausted, yet energized at the same time. We all head off to the changing rooms, ready for a shower and some rest before the day's obligations resume.

“That was fun.” Jen walks beside me, funneled by the herd of sweaty bodies toward the locker rooms.

“Yeah, thanks for inviting me. I normally do this by myself but it was nice to hang out with you.” I’m thirsty and watching a few other people in this group chug from their water bottles makes me realize how out of shape I am.

“Happy to have you.” Jen uses the hem of her t-shirt to wipe sweat from her face. “So did you do what Mike suggested? You got rid of Gatti?”

Mike, our boss, had made it a point to lecture me about the propriety of dating a man like Lorenzo. I know he has high hopes for me at Bellevue, and I have them for myself as well. But my career should be a product and demonstration of my abilities, talents and hard work. Not a reflection of the man I’m dating. Besides, I’m not really dating him. It’s a business arrangement and nothing more.

“No, I didn’t... It’s complicated.” I wince at my own tone.

Jen looks at me, her eyes narrowing in concern. “I know it’s complicated, but you need to be careful. Lorenzo Gatti is a dangerous man. His family is entrenched in organized crime and he has a long history of shady business dealings. You don’t want to get caught up in his world, trust me.”

I sigh heavily and nod, knowing she’s right. But I’m also aware that I’m already way too involved with him for my own safety or comfort. “I know Jen,” I say quietly. “But it’s too late now.”

She shakes her head and holds the locker room door open for me and a few women behind us. I make my way to my locker and spin the combination lock until it clicks and opens. My mood sours as I get my things ready for a shower. I can’t help but think about the mess I’m in and the consequences of continuing to associate with Lorenzo. Maybe I was wrong for making this agreement, but Jen would never understand the fear I have of what may happen to me, or worse, how Calvin would fare without me. I try to push aside my worries and take solace in the fact that at least I have a few moments of peace before heading back out into the world.

I take off my clothes and hang them up, storing away my shoes and jewelry before stepping into the warm water of the showers. The sound of water running drowns out the chatter of the locker room and it's calming. I close my eyes as it cascades down my body, washing away any negative energy that may still linger after the interaction with Jen. As I shampoo my hair, I take deep breaths, allowing myself to relax for just a moment.

I can't deny that Lorenzo's affected me deeply. The sex alone is enough to literally reset my hormones and help me calm down a bit. I never realized how stressed I get when I get so sexually frustrated and that man is a god when it comes to making me feel alive again. And although I'm not sure what else he may be able to offer me, I'm willing to explore our agreement further. Maybe if we can work out a more secure arrangement, it will give me the peace of mind I need to continue providing for Calvin without having to worry about my own safety or reputation. Me being his arm piece may be detrimental to me in the long run, but perhaps I can simply be his personal physician in exchange for the same benefits, or better ones.

There is a ruckus, voices shouting and women shrieking. I step out of the flow of water behind the thin sheer curtain where I hear someone screaming loudly. Then a man's voice booms out and reverberates around the ladies' locker room. I instinctively shudder and back against the wall, wishing I could faze through it. Why would a man come into a women's locker room? Fear spikes through my heart and I pray to god someone just calls security to chase the filthy pervert out, but the screaming intensifies and grows louder.

Rude, clamorous noises fill the locker room and reverberate through the plastic sheet that separates me from the rest of the shower stalls. I hear a man's harsh voice screaming my name and I tremble. The mask-clad figure tears the sheer plastic sheet back and reaches out to grab me by my long hair. I scream and protest loudly, trying to wrench myself free from his grip. My head hurts where he yanks me back so hard my head jerks backward as I continue to fight him off.

The other women in the locker room are now staring at me as though I am a ghost, their eyes wide with shock and fear. A few of them have phones in hand and terror on their faces as they stare at me, a woman being dragged away by an unknown assailant. My body is damp from a shower, my hair still wet from the water that has dripped down my skin and over my naked breasts. Exhaustion claws at my limbs, like savage talons digging into my muscles. I can only hope that one of them will call the police or gym security before the man drags me out of the locker room naked and dripping wet. He says nothing, but he does pull me so hard I fall to the ground; then he's on me, straddling me before I can protest.

"Stop it! No!" I scream as a horde of angry women surround us, beating the man with their fists and shoes, anything they can grab hold of.

Then the door slams open again, another man towering over the crowd. Norm strides in, his eyes blazing with rage. He dives into the heart of the chaos and fights off the attacker, pummeling him until he lets go of my body. The women help me to my feet as Norm continues to fight, beating the man up until he runs away screaming. There are a million voices asking me if I'm okay, but all I can do is sob and shake as I watch Norm. How did he get here so fast? Why was he here at all? I can't believe this is happening.

"Are you alright?" Norm asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Are you security?" one woman asks.

"Thank god you got here. Is someone going to stop him?" another asks.

"I'm okay..." I swallow hard and nod, but I'm not okay. Not even a little. My hands shake and I don't even know where my towel is until Jen wraps it around me and pulls me against her chest. I feel like everything is happening in slow motion, as if it's spinning, moving around me so fast I'm not sure I can keep up. "I—I need to sit." Jen guides me to the bench near our lockers as Norm follows, shooing women away from me. He shouldn't be here, but there is no way in hell I'm letting him leave my side now, not after what just happened.

“Do you mind, Brutus?” Jen snaps, but I shake my head. There are half-naked women everywhere, but his eyes are only on me.

“Following orders, Ma’am.” He folds his hands in front of himself and squares his shoulders, and I sigh in relief.

“It’s okay, Jen...” I pull the towel tighter around myself and let my shoulders drop. Jen backs away, moving to her own locker. The towel around her body keeps her covered but she hovers as if she can’t change here. I don’t blame her. I don’t want to dress in front of Norm either, but it’s better than being alone.

“I’ll be right back,” she hisses, taking her bag off to a changing room.

“Thanks, Norm,” I say with a shaky sigh. I can’t believe it. I can’t believe any of it. I feel like I’m in some kind of a nightmare or something. It’s so surreal, and as a doctor I know this is shock setting in. I take a deep breath and force myself to my feet. Norm stands over me as I dress and put my shoes on. He remains silent, but he is gentleman enough to look up at the ceiling until I clear my throat. “I’m ready... Take me home?” I ask him, because there is no way I’m getting on that subway now.

I don’t know how Lorenzo does it, or how Norm knew I would need him, but I’m thankful today that he was here. I shudder to think how differently that would have turned out for me. Maybe this deal with Mr. Gatti is one I need to entertain a while longer exactly as it is. If a man can target me inside a women’s locker room at the gym, they can find me anywhere. I need protection.

I just have to tolerate being used to bolster his reputation. I can live with that.

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## LORENZO

Things have been rocky with the business since I was shot. I spent more than two weeks in bed, and there have been more than a few missed payments, which Norm has been chasing up for me. I sit across from Tito, a man who owes me more than a few small favors and a large amount of cash apparently. His payments for the past few months have been short and now that I'm back in the saddle I'm cleaning house.

"It's twelve-hundred short, Tito." I click my tongue and lean back in my desk chair, watching him squirm in his seat opposite my desk. "Can you explain to me why you didn't give your full amount the past three times?" His payments, agreed upon in the interest of keeping his wife and kids out of this mess and just letting me run my business, are the only thing keeping him out of the hot seat.

He trembles, wringing his hands. He knows I'm not a man to be trifled with. His new leather coat and the wolf-stud earring he wears are both additions to his typical attire. My money isn't meant to lavish him with expensive accessories. He launders it to keep me above the table and receives the benefit of my protection—similar to how Sofia and I make certain exchanges.

"Uh... Lorenzo, I just..." He shakes his head. "I can pay it back. I swear. I'll get it to you over the next few months."

I narrow my eyes, studying him for a long moment before leaning forward. "That's not good enough, Tito. You know the rules." My voice is low and deadly, causing him to bristle. "You owe me the full amount, and you owe it to me now. I

gave you a chance to make things right, and you've failed to do so. You know what happens next."

I watch as he pales, his eyes wide with fear. He knows exactly what I mean. It's a simple enough rule, one everyone in our organization knows. If you don't pay your debts, you pay with your life. It's a harsh reality, but it's what keeps us in business.

"I-I can get it, Lorenzo. I swear, I can get it." His voice is shaking, and I can tell he's on the brink of tears.

But Tito has never failed me before this, and while the cat's away the mice play. I don't have to give him mercy, but it's easier and faster to punish him slightly and continue leaning on a man who has never gone astray before than it is to bring someone new in and have to teach them how to respect me.

"Come here," I order, gesturing at him. He stands and trembles as he approaches me, his eyes downcast. I reach out and grab hold of his earring, a smirk curling at my lips. "This is a nice little trinket you've got here," I say, tugging on it slightly. "Must have cost you a pretty penny, huh?"

Tito nods frantically, his eyes darting up to mine in terror. "Please, Lorenzo, don't—"

But I don't give him the chance to finish his sentence. I rip the earring out of his ear with a swift yank, relishing in the way he cries out in pain. Blood drips down the side of his face as I hold the earring up to the light, examining it closely.

"You know what, Tito? This could cover a good chunk of your debt to me." I smirk again, tossing the earring onto the table in front of me. "Consider it a down payment. Bring me the rest of my money by the end of the week, or I won't be so kind next time."

Tito nods, tears streaming down his face as he clutches at his bleeding ear. "Yes, Lorenzo. I'll get you the rest of the money. I swear."

I wave him off dismissively, already turning my attention to the next task at hand. Dealing with Tito is a minor annoyance, but there are bigger fish to fry in the world of organized crime. "Get out of my office."



I watch him retreat, blood running down his arm and dripping from his elbow, and in the doorway I see Sofia. Her eyes are wide with shock but her forehead is wrinkled in anger. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Sofia hisses as she steps into the room. “That was unnecessary, even for you.”

I raise an eyebrow at Sofia, amusement flickering in my eyes. “You’re one to talk, darling. You knew what you were getting into when you got involved with me.” I lean back in my chair, studying her for a moment. “But I suppose you didn’t come here to lecture me on my business practices, did you?”

Sofia’s eyes flash with annoyance at my dismissiveness, but her expression softens slightly as she approaches me. “I came to thank you for having Norm protect me, but after that display, I’m not so sure I want any part of this agreement anymore.”

The statement has me on my feet stalking toward her. There’s no way in hell I’m letting her out of our agreement. “I’m not sure you’re thinking clearly, Sofia. You owe me a debt, and I intend to collect. You knew what you were getting into when you agreed to this arrangement.”

Sofia stands her ground, her jaw clenched in defiance. “I never agreed to you hurting people like Tito. That’s not part of the deal.”

I take a step closer to her, my voice low and dangerous. “You don’t get to pick and choose which parts of the deal you want to follow.” I touch her face lightly and she flinches, but I don’t back down. “You’re mine, Sofia. And you’ll do as I say.”

She scoffs at my words, pushing me away. “I’m not yours, and you can’t control me.” I grab her wrist and pull her against my body. her coat is only in the way so I unzip it and tear it off of her. She gasps and tries to struggle away from me.

“Don’t act like this. Our agreement stands. You are mine in exchange for protection. I’ve done my part, and you’ll do yours.” I pull her over to my desk and force her to bend over it.

Sofia's breathing quickens as I trail my fingers down her back. My other hand moves to the waistband of her slacks, pulling them down harshly. She tries to squirm away, but I grip her hips tightly, holding her in place.

"You don't get to walk away from me, Sofia. Not now, not ever." I slide my hand between her legs, feeling the wetness between them. She shudders under my touch, unable to hold back a moan. I lean in close to her ear, my breath hot against her skin. "You like this, don't you? You like being told what to do. You're just a dirty girl who needs to be taught a lesson."

Sofia's body shudders as I rub my fingers against her. Her hips buck against my hand, begging for more. "No," she whimpers, her voice barely a whisper.

"Then tell me no and I'll stop," I growl. I push my fingers inside of her, eliciting a whimper from her. "Tell me you don't want this."

"I don't want this!" Sofia yelps. Her body is shaking, a mix of fear and lust. I know she wants this, she just doesn't want to admit it.

"You're a bad liar, Sofia." I withdraw my fingers slowly, bringing them to my mouth and tasting her. She hisses and tries to move away, but I pull her back. "See? You taste so good, and you're still so wet. You don't want me to stop, do you?" She's so predictable. All I have to do is tease her sexually and she cowers. It's like I'm the master puppeteer and she does my bidding for a little orgasm. Well, it's time she learns a lesson about working with me.

I work my belt loose then my fly and she whimpers. "Just because I fuck you, doesn't mean you own me."

"Oh, but it does." I pull my rock-hard dick out of my trousers and tease her pussy until she's squirming and begging for more. "You will do everything I say. I don't think you want to test me." She whimpers when I slid my cock out of her.

"Just fuck me already," she groans, and I watch her holes squeeze. Her ass is too tempting. I push my dick against it and

thrust in hard as she yelps in pain. She gasps and moans, clawing at the desk and whimpering.

“Fuck... oh fuck... oh god.”

“Yes, good girl...” I tell her, thrusting. She keeps whimpering and moaning through the pain, and my thrusts become harder, and she moans and bucks against me. But this is a lesson, not a pleasure thing. Her soft yelps of pain turn to moans of pleasure, and as she begins to tense, I allow myself release.

I come, dumping thick strings of hot seed into her body as she begs me for more. And when I’m done, I pull out and watch her ass constrict and tense. “Oh fuck... make me come. I was so close,” she mewls. Her hand is beneath her touching her pussy, and all I do is position her panties back over her ass.

“Well, then you wouldn’t learn your lesson would you?”

“What!” she screeches as she looks at me over her shoulder. “You sick bastard.”

“Ah... seems my son has yet another admirer.” The tone of my father’s voice cuts Sofia off and she hisses and stands, frantically fixing her pants. “Leave them,” he tells her.

I tuck my dick away and zip up, rounding the end of my desk and watching her flounder with her slacks around her knees. “Drink?” I ask him, and she mutters a peep. I glare at her and he raises his eyebrows.

“Not right now. I have other things to do today, but Ms. Sofia here... What a lovely sight.” He checks her out as I pour a glass of whiskey for myself. There is nothing but sheer hatred in her glare and all I can think is that I should have stripped her naked too.

“Suit yourself,” I tell him, filling my cup. I turn to watch him inspecting her.

“Seems like you’ve got a great agreement going on here, Lorenzo. Prime example of the female body.” Dad clicks his tongue in approval and Sofia huffs, yanking her pants up. “Ms. Carter, I assume you’re holding up your end of this agreement well?”

Her chin drops as she buttons her slacks and snatches her coat off the floor by the desk where I dropped it. “I just came to tell Lorenzo that I can’t be involved with him anymore. It’s bad for my reputation and his illegal activities are going to catch up with him. Which means they’ll catch up with me.” She jams her arms into the coat and scowls at him. No one scowls at my father, but maybe she hasn’t learned her lesson yet.

He merely chuckles, as if she is a mouse in his maze. “I’m sure you will change your mind about that.” He slides his hands into his pockets and watches her zip up.

“I hardly think that.”

“You will when you see the promotion I’ve scored for you. Head of surgery sure sounds nice, or maybe head of trauma? How about a million dollars for your foundation?” Dad walks up to Sofia and curls a stray black hair around her ear. I know she’s not fond of the type of work I do, but if she knows what’s good for her, she won’t try to back out of our arrangement now. Not with my father getting involved. It’d be a shame.

“What are you talking about? I’m years from a promotion of that sort.”

“Ah, but I have connections.” He winks at her and cups her cheek. “And that brother of yours could really benefit from the research Bellevue can do with a million-dollar donation. What’s his name again? Calvin?”

Sofia’s eyebrows rise and she stiffens. “Leave my brother out of this.”

“Ah, but I’m trying to help...” He pats her cheek and walks past her, moving toward me. “I guess I will have that drink, son. And, Ms. Carter...think about it. You can’t really get a better offer anywhere else.”

Sofia glares at me and then storms out, heels clacking on the floor. In this game, Dad is always the winner. I’ve learned everything I know from him. And Sofia will come around. I’ll just give her a bit of time.

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## SOFIA

I sit with the little stir stick from the coffee machine in hand swirling the cream and sugar into the blackness of the brew and stewing over my predicament. Jen warned me not to be involved with these people, and I know in my gut it's not the right thing to do either, but if Norm hadn't been there last week in that locker room, things would be very different now. I went to Lorenzo's house to thank him but my attempt to politely distance myself from that life backfired.

"I'm telling you, Sofi, if you weren't involved with the bastard, that man wouldn't have come into the shower to begin with." Jen insists that Lorenzo is planning these random events that keep happening to me, but I can't see why he'd do that. She's just worried about me; that's all. Though, I am quite confused as to why I was the target in that shower room, when there were dozens of women around. According to the other ladies, the man came straight to my shower stall and yanked me out, not even looking at the others.

"I don't think so, Jen. Some of these things happened before his little arrangement with me. The attempted carjacking turned mugging is one of them." I shake my head and lay the stir stick on the sterile white table and look up at her deadpan expression. She's not convinced nor amused. Her vitriol for Mr. Gatti knows no end, and I can see why. But the offer his father made me is almost too good to be true. Almost too good to pass up. I just don't see how he'll pull it off.

"You have to admit it's suspicious." She slurps soda straight out of the can and purses her lips as she sets it down in front of

herself.

“I don’t have to admit anything,” I tell her, but I agree with her—a little. My insides are all sorts of messed up right now. Between the financial strain I live under trying to care for Calvin with all of his medical expenses and zero income on his behalf, coupled with the simple stresses of my career, and add to that the fact that I live in one of the largest cities in the country where crime happens daily, I feel like a little extra protection never hurt anyone. Taking advantage of the influence Lorenzo has is an act of self-care, in my opinion. Besides the fact that sex with him is amazing, even when he withholds orgasm like he did last time.

“Dr. Carter, may I have a word with you?” I hear the male voice and turn to see my boss’s boss in the door of the doctor’s breakroom. He has a serious expression on his face, and for a second I feel like perhaps I’m being called in for a reprimand, but I haven’t done anything wrong. I glance at Jen and shrug, then pick up my coffee and stand.

“Of course, Sir.” Dr. Holder is the department head and a very stern man, which may be the only reason for his serious expression and short tone. So there’s no reason to get bent out of shape or anxious. I follow him out the door and down the hall to the conference room. Dr. Mike Baker, my direct supervisor, is seated around the long wooden table, along with a few other faces I’m not familiar with, and a few I know well—Director of Medicine Thomas Kline is here too. I feel my chest constrict and there goes my attempt at not getting anxious.

“What’s going on?” I ask, standing awkwardly near the door as Dr. Holder walks over and takes one of the last two seats around the table. The only one left is at the head of the table where I’m certain I don’t belong. Dr. Kline stands and nods at me.

“Dr. Carter, please, come have a seat.” He gestures at the head of the table, where he should be seated, and I blanch.

“Uh... okay?” I hesitantly shuffle that direction, aware that there are many eyes following me. Suddenly, the blue scrubs

and white lab coat I wear don't feel adequate. I'm surrounded by suits and skirts and I want to melt into the chair as I sit down. Even the lighting overhead seems to dwarf me, the massive chandelier dangling over the table's center speaks of power and prestige. I'm not sure I've even been in this room before. My interview was conducted in Dr. Holder's office with Dr. Baker present.

"Dr. Carter, we won't waste your time. We know you're a busy woman and you have lives to save." Dr. Kline claps his hands together and clasps his fingers, letting them dangle in front of his body as he speaks. "The board has come to a unanimous decision. We would like to offer you the position of director of surgery, better known as the surgical chair." He holds his hand up as my jaw drops and continues. "Now I know this may come as a surprise, but there is no one better to fill this position."

My eyes scan the faces of the folks around me in shock. A few of them have smiles that reach their eyes, but a few of them are scowling—like Dr. Holder. It's his position I'll be taking if I accept this promotion, which makes me wonder where he'll even go. There is nothing higher for him here except to take Dr. Kline's place, and I don't see that happening.

"But I..." I attempt a protest but with a click of the tongue Dr. Kline cuts me off.

His wagging finger reminds me of my grandmother when I tried to sneak a few candies before Sunday dinner. I can't even look him in the eye. This is Lorenzo's father's doing. I can feel it. Someone my age with my experience has no business chairing an entire department, though I can learn quickly. And I'm not sure if I even want to accept this. I love surgery and saving lives. Trauma is my thing, not administration. I don't even know if I'll fit this position.

"Now, don't respond right away unless your answer is yes. We all know you may need time to adjust to the idea of earning that much more with so few hours." Dr. Kline chuckles and half the room joins him. The other half squirms uncomfortably and I swear I see fear in a few eyes. Antonio Gatti has gotten to them all somehow. This isn't how it's supposed to go. I'm

supposed to earn experience and wisdom from climbing this ladder, not be thrust to the top by power and money.

“Honestly, I do need to think about it.” I grip the arm rests of the metal and black leather chair and push myself back upward. I have to get out of this room before I say something I’ll regret. If I call them out, put the onus on them to make the right choice, they’ll remain faithful to an evil man in a very corrupt organization. It’s the only way this has come about. I’m not stupid. And if they do that, I’m not sure I can continue working at this hospital.

So the only choice I have is to step away from this scenario and think. If I play into Gatti’s hand, I’m no better than any of them. If I don’t, I’m not useful to him. Right now, they’re playing a game with me, pushing me to see what I’ll do, where my breaking point is. And I have one, but even I don’t know where it is. This may be it.

“Please, take the time you need. Dr. Holder is already looking at positions around the country. We need this slot filled immediately, though, so don’t wait too long.”

The flash of despair in Dr. Holder’s eyes tells me he’s been ousted and that his job search isn’t what instigated the sudden need for hiring a new chair. He’s being forced out to make room for me, to manipulate me into doing whatever Lorenzo wants me to do, and I don’t like it. I want to apologize to him, but I hold my tongue and nod politely.

“Give me two weeks,” I mumble, then make my way out of the room and back across the hospital.

I have a surgery to perform, which I may not be able to manage under the circumstances. I knew the Gattis were connected, but I didn’t realize how much so. And I never thought for a second they’d be able to intimidate or bribe the entire hospital board to forcibly oust a sitting chair in order to make space for me. The level to which they will go to have what they want scares me, and the fact that it’s me they want is even more scary. Why am I their target?

As I scrub in for surgery my mind continues to obsess about Lorenzo and his father. If I disobey them, refuse the position



and the arrangement between me and Lorenzo, will they kill me? Will they kill Calvin? To what lengths will they go to ensure I obey their orders? Will they come after me in public, or in the dead of the night when I'm locked in my home thinking I'm safe?

"You okay, Doc?" a nurse asks from beneath her mask. She holds a towel and a pair of gloves ready for me.

"Uh, yeah," I tell her, realizing I'm so distracted that I never even saw her walk into the scrub room. The front of my gown is doused in water and my hair is disheveled. In ten seconds she has me gloved, masked, with a fresh hair cover on and a fresh gown tied on, along with another pair of gloves.

It's time for me to do my job, which means I can't think about this anymore. I enter the operating theater ready to push it all away, and as I walk up to the table I see our patient just as the nurses begin rambling off the stats.

"Patient is male, forty years old, presented with pneumothorax, gunshot wound to the chest. BP is ninety over sixty and dropping, pulse ox is at seventy-two, ready for extraction." I nod at her, now fully focused.

"Scalpel," I tell her, holding my hand out, and with that I'm in my element. This is where I'm meant to be, in an operating room, not behind a pearly white desk. I can't take that job.

I just don't know how to tell Lorenzo that.

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## LORENZO

Heads turn as I walk through any door, but at this hospital even more so, especially after being seen in very public venues with Sofia on my arm. The ladies at the information desk don't even bat an eyelash at me walking straight past security, but the men with badges don't take too kindly to it. Norm follows at a close distance but keeps his weapon hidden, as do I. There's no need for violence.

"Mr. Gatti, only approved hospital visitors may come on the property." One of the guards stands with shoulders squared and chest puffed out, as if he intimidates me or thinks he can stop me.

I chuckle at his bravado, though, because any man who will put the honor of doing his job correctly in front of the sense of self-preservation innate to all human life deserves a pat on the back. I raise my hands in surrender and take a step back to slide my cell phone from my pocket. I press speed dial for Mr. Kline and wait.

"Dr. Kline, what is it?"

"Dr. Kline, this is Lorenzo, calling for a visit. Please speak to your security officials." The line clicks before I even get a chance to continue and both of the guards glance at each other as I slide my phone back into my pocket. In a matter of seconds, the first one reaches for his phone, buzzing in his pocket. He lifts it to his ear and only just lets the call connect before his face grows pale.

“Uh, yes, sir,” the man mutters before ending the call and pocketing his phone. “Right through here, Mr. Gatti.” He gestures past the turnstiles and metal detectors and I smile in satisfaction. Eventually people get the point and I wish I didn’t have to play games with them, but they all learn one way or another.

“He’s with me,” I tell them, jerking my chin upward in a gesture aimed at Norm. They allow him to come along, though I can see the hesitancy in their expressions. It’s not every day the prince of the largest organized crime syndicate visits the hospital, but today isn’t a normal day.

Sofia hasn’t answered or responded to my calls in a week and she even gave Norm the slip for three days in a row, which means I’m not upholding my promise to protect her, and my attempts to prove how well my protection works have been thwarted. I won’t have a loose cannon going off and bringing me down, so if I have to waltz into her place of work and make her listen to me I will. If it weren’t for the brother as a liability, I’d just sit on her couch and wait for her to come home. This way seems better though, because everyone will see me approach her. I have her figured out. This will be far more effective.

Making my way through the hospital toward the surgery unit, I realize I’m not certain of her schedule. So I make a stop near the nurses station on the fourth floor where I know the operating theaters are. A sweet nurse with a name badge that reads “Greta” sits behind the desk typing away at the computer. When she looks up at me with a smile that quickly turns to a trembling grimace, I know I’m in the right place.

“Hello,” I say, pretending to squint to read her name tag, “Greta. I’d like to see Dr. Sofia Carter. My name is—”

“Oh, I know who you are,” she stutters and licks her lips, then forces a smile. “We’ve heard a lot about you.” Her hand shakes as she reaches for the mouse and uses the scroll wheel to navigate the page. Her eyes flick over the computer screen and she nods a few times. “Dr. Carter is coming out of theater three. She has post-op checks for the rest of the day.”

“Amazing how just a simple request can be followed so easily. Thank you, Greta, for restoring my faith in humanity. Which way to theater three?” I ask, straightening my tie. The woman is still trembling as she points to my right and I bow from the shoulders as a gesture of thanks. If only everyone knew and understood who I am the way sweet Greta does, things would go much easier for people.

Norm starts to follow me, but I put a hand out, stopping him. He stops in place and I know he’ll be there when I return. I head toward the operating theater where I’ll find Sofia and wait. Several nurses come out, a few of them still with masks. I see a patient being wheeled out on a gurney at a different door and know it’s only a matter of time before Sofia comes out too. I glance at my watch. I don’t have time for this, and I almost storm the gates when she pushes open the door with a look of shock.

“Lorenzo? What are you doing here?” She glances around furiously and grabs my arm, pulling me into what looks like a washroom. There are two large sinks and racks full of towels, gowns, and different surgical supplies.

“Well you aren’t being very transparent about your decision or even your whereabouts at times, so I thought it prudent to visit you here. You realize that the agreement has not been terminated, and for a woman who is dating me, you aren’t acting like it.” She releases my arm and I smooth the wrinkles from the sleeve of my jacket.

“What the fuck are you talking about? You don’t own me, Lorenzo!” She’s flustered, and rightly so. For a man of my stature to visit her like this means something. Most people would be pissing themselves, but not Sofia. She’s more like wetting her panties in a different method, maybe aching for a release from her sexual tension. It’s been a while.

“Why have you purposely attempted to avoid Norman’s help? Don’t you realize how dangerous the city is? For three days you slipped his tail.” I wait patiently, keeping my expression and body language calm. My fingers want to turn to fists, but I refuse to be ruffled. She belongs to me and she will learn that very quickly without me being riled.

“Nothing happened. If I needed him I’d call.” She huffs and backs away a step. I swear it’s desire in her eyes, or maybe fear, but more likely desire.

“And you haven’t accepted the job...” I click my tongue. “It’s a shame really. Poor Dr. Holder is going to lose everything for no reason if you don’t just take the job.”

“How dare you!” She snaps, turning abruptly to turn the water on. She douses her hands in soap and scrubs furiously at them, as if she hasn’t already scrubbed them after surgery anyway. It’s an act to make me think she’s busy, when in reality she’s trying to avoid eye contact.

So I walk up behind her, pressing my body against hers from shoulders to knees, and I wrap my arms around her waist and breathe in the scent of her shampoo. “You know, Sofia, if you shirk your responsibility to me, you won’t receive the benefits.” As I say the words, I grind my pelvis against hers. I know it will get her going and that’s exactly what I want. She can’t get enough of me; it’s written all over her face every time we’re together.

She’s using me for the sex as much as I’m using her for the good name, and now I will get what I want. She grips the edge of the sink, leaving the water run, and I feel her shoulders stiffen. She may think I’m coming on too strong, but she doesn’t know that I could just order her to obey me and murder her if she refuses. I’m being nice here.

“Sofia, take the position.”

“And if I don’t?” she asks, pushing back against me. I take her hint, backing away.

“If you don’t, you won’t be able to afford to live in this town. You know that. Calvin’s expenses are only growing every month, and your salary only goes so far.” I adjust my tie and stand by the door as she rinses her hands and shuts the water off. “Besides, a man like me can pull strings. Just think of what I did to Holder.”

Grabbing a towel off a nearby rack she turns to me and scowls. “Are you threatening to get me fired?”

“I don’t make threats.” I narrow my gaze on her. “I make promises.” I open the door and stand there for a moment. “Dinner at my house at six p.m. Don’t be late. Norm gets flustered when he has to hunt you down.” And with that, I step out of the doorway and let the door swing shut. I don’t take no for an answer, and I’m not about to start.

Sofia will take that job and she will continue to keep the arrangement we made. Even if I have to force her to do it. I’m not above bloodshed to get what I want. If she can’t play nice, then I won’t either. I head straight toward the nurses station where Norm waits in the same place he was when I left him a few moments ago.

We saunter right past the desk with now three staring nurses, and to the elevator where we descend to the third floor. I turn right and follow the signs to the administrative suites where I’ll find Dr. Holder. My father paid him a hefty sum, nearly one year’s salary, to move on and find a new position. He has been given the best and highest recommendations from Dr. Kline and the board, and now he owes me.

I rap on the door lightly and hear him call “Come in.” So I push the door open, leaving Norm in the hall again.

“Ah, Dr. Holder,” I mewl and he looks up in fear. I like that I inflict fear everywhere I go. A lesser man may grow weary of it, but I feed off it, like a piranha in the water searching for blood.

“Uh, yes, sir,” he fumbles, standing to reach out his hand. No doubt he’s not happy about being pushed out, having to relocate to a new city with his family and all that. But I could care less.

“Sit,” I tell him, not even extending my hand. “Dr. Carter is reluctant to take the position. Encourage her to do so, if you know what’s good for you.”

He sinks into his chair and wrings his hands. “But I can’t make her do anything she doesn’t want to.”

“You can and you will. Or would you rather I have a talk with your wife?” I have all the evidence ready to plant in order to

frame him for something his wife truly wouldn't be pleased about. I narrow my eyes at him and he nods profusely.

“Yes, sir... I will try.”

“No, you will do. Now, I will be expecting a celebration call in a few days' time. Please make sure I'm not disappointed.”

“Yes, sir.”

I back out and let the door shut, then suck in a deep breath. Dinner will be interesting. And if Sofia opts not to show again, the hunt will be fun too.

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## SOFIA

I hold the sundress up to my body and press it along my curves. Jen tilts her head and eyes me but she doesn't look sold. "I'm not sure it's your color. Do they have it in blue?" She turns to the rack, sorting through the different dresses in search of the perfect dress herself. Both of us intend to go to the city festival next weekend for Memorial Day and we decided a while back to go shopping together for outfits.

So being our day off, we are at Hudson Yards with its star-spangled decorations to shop the sales in search of the perfect attire. And I think this dress is amazing, but apparently yellow isn't my color. I hang it back on the rack and for the third time today notice a strange man watching me. He's been in at least four of the stores we've visited and it's unnerving. I don't recognize him from anywhere else, but I don't like it.

"Something wrong?" Jen asks, picking up on my anxiety.

I turn my back to the man and blink rapidly to clear my eyes from the emotion that tries to well up. "Look at my face and nowhere else, okay?"

Jen's forehead crinkles in concern. "Alright?"

"And stay calm..." I relax my shoulders and lean on the clothing rack casually. The man can't see my face, but if he reads my body language hopefully he won't pick up that we're talking about him. When Jen's gaze is fixed on mine, I say, "There is a man about twenty yards away behind me." Her eyes shift and I quietly say, "Ah!" And her eyes snap back to



mine. “He’s been following us for about forty minutes or so. I’m not sure what to think.”

Her face calms, as if she’s realized she needs to play a little poker right now. “I see.” She picks up the dress I was just holding and holds it up to me again, then says “Hold this.” I do as she says, and she takes her phone out and nonchalantly snaps a picture of me holding the dress then immediately looks down at her phone, zooming in on the picture. “I don’t recognize him.”

I lean over and gawk at her phone where the man’s face is blown up to the size of the screen. I try to place him, but nothing rings a bell. I haven’t seen him around the hospital or Lorenzo. He’s not from any of Calvin’s appointments, nor is he a patient. I’m stumped as to why this man would be interested in me or Jen.

“I don’t think I feel comfortable being here anymore. Want to get out of here? I can just wear a dress I have in my closet.” I hang the dress back on the rack. Jen is right. It’s not my color anyway.

“Yeah, let’s go,” she says, putting her phone back in her purse. “But let’s not make it look obvious.”

I agree with her, so we browse a bit longer, and I see a few things I like, but I’m not about to stand in a line of dozens of people for another thirty minutes when I feel this way. It’s very possible this man is just one of Lorenzo’s goons who was sent to protect me but I haven’t exactly been compliant with his wishes. I ignored his dinner request the other day and kept my door locked when Norm came knocking, using the excuse that I was feeling ill.

That refusal to obey Mr. Gatti came with a warning call from him that I would attend the Memorial Day Festival with him or else, and all I want to do is disappear. Making this agreement with him was a horrible decision. People around me are suffering now because of it. Dr. Holder is a good man with a family and he loves this city and his patients. He doesn’t deserve to be put out for me like that.

“Are you okay?” Jen asks, hooking her arm around mine. She pulls me close because our mystery man is closer now, only fifteen yards or so but obviously following us still. I want to believe he’s my protection but there is a nagging fear I can’t shake.

“No... I’m not. I got messed up in something I wish I hadn’t.” I lay my head on her shoulder and walk awkwardly beside her as I take each step.

“Tell me everything.” Jen knows about Lorenzo attempting to court me, and even some of the protectiveness he has for me, but she doesn’t know the dirty details about everything and I’m not sure I can put it in words without sounding pathetic. “Tell me,” she says, nudging me.

“I made an agreement with him but it’s out of hand now. I’m not sure how to go back on it.”

“What agreement?” Her grasp on my arm tightens and I sigh hard.

“My safety in exchange for dating him, except I’m not liking the attention I’m getting from being seen in public with him.” I straighten and glance over my shoulder. The guy is still there and he catches my eye. He is definitely not my protection and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of Norm at all, though I rarely do. That thought is slightly comforting because maybe he’s still around, lurking and watching me, but maybe he’s not.

“What else?” Jen asks and I shake my head.

“Nothing else.” But as I say the words my gut churns. There is something else but I’m deeply ashamed to admit what I know. It’s clear at least some of the board members know about how Lorenzo is getting rid of Dr. Holder to put me in that position, but if I tell other people in the hospital there could be an ethics investigation. I could be put before a review board because I am dating the man who is pulling the strings. I can’t have that.

“Don’t lie to me, Sofia. You’re hiding something. Tell me everything.”

I avoid Jen’s gaze as we step out of the Yards onto the bustling sidewalk and turn toward the subway entrance a few blocks

away. The man is still there, still following. My heartbeat feels too fast, like I've been running but I'm keeping my pace even and steady. People are surrounding me right now, but it's only a small comfort. I've seen men attack a woman in the middle of a crowd before, much like that jerk in the locker room.

"Listen, I can't tell you how he's doing it, but he got Holder fired. They want to make me surgery chair. Me... I'm twenty-nine. People my age don't get made chair; they get told to climb the ranks. I'm skipping like seven promotions between my current position and chair. Jen, this is insane. He thinks he's going to move me around like a pawn in a game of chess and I'll be okay with it." I glance over my shoulder again. The man is closer now as we step into the subway entrance and descend with the flow of foot traffic.

"You need to get out of this deal, Sofia. Maybe he's just using you for optics, but when you don't play nice, or maybe you'll fail at being chair and get fired—then what?"

That stings but it's true. Without the years of experience needed to know enough to hold that position in the hospital I may very well fail. And if that happens, there is no telling what Lorenzo would do, or how badly patients may suffer. I swore an oath to do no harm, so how can I willingly rise to the seat of honor when it could cause people to suffer?

We swipe our metro passes and move through the turnstiles trying to duck lower in order to be seen as easily, and for the moment I think we've avoided the man. We follow the crowd and find a place to wait for the subway. Mine will be here in minutes, but Jen has a bit longer to wait.

"You're right, I'm just not sure how to get out of it all now. He's not the type of guy you make angry, Jen. I'm certain if I try to back out he's going to kill me, or worse, force me to do things I'm not okay with until I'm forced to turn him in. How do I defend myself against that?" My eyes continue to scan faces around me but I don't see the man.

"Then you leave town. Take Calvin and go to my cabin in the Catskills. You can take a leave from work and just lay low until the smoke clears. I bet Dr. Kline will help you find a

different place to work if you need to.” She pats my hand and offers a weak smile. “You need to get away from him, Sofia. It’s the safe thing to do.

The train swooshes into the station and the conductor starts making announcements. The doors slide open and people disembark and I offer her a fast hug before taking my spot on the train. A place out of town where I can lie low is a good idea, but I’m not sure how to get there, or what to tell people at work. If I just don’t show up for Lorenzo he’ll be furious. He knows how to manipulate people and hurt them. It’s what he does for a living.

I hug the pole and wait for the train to start moving but before the doors even shut I notice the man in the back of the car. He isn’t looking at me, but I’m sure it’s him. He’s not even shy about following me around. There are enough people on this train I could call him out and the men around me would likely rally to protect me, but if he has a gun I could also cause a major incident.

So I keep my mouth shut. I watch the doors slide shut and I hug that pole like it’s my life line. With my eyes closed I whisper a prayer that somehow this is merely Lorenzo’s guardian angel and that I’m not being followed by someone with nefarious thoughts about me. For all I know it’s the man who attacked me in the locker room. I heard he got arrested but who knows if he made bail and if he did I’d never recognize him. He wore a mask.

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## LORENZO

Sofia didn't get a new dress like I instructed her but she's here with a smile on her face for the cameras greeting everyone who approaches us with tact and grace. Though, each time the cameras die down and there is a lull in foot traffic our direction, she sinks into a sullen mood with a scowl on her face.

"You know, your lips will wrinkle like a seventy-year-old chain smoker if you keep pursing them like that." I rest my hand in the small of her back, guiding her through the crowd of folks gathered in Washington Square park for the festivities.

Vendors and food trucks clutter the area, sending their noises and scents wafting into the air. Children shriek as they run past and the sun beats down on us from overhead making my forehead moist with sweat. My polo and slacks are a bit formal for the event but I'm typically never seen in public without a suit. Sofia insisted I'd be out of place and now I see why.

Men and women waltz around in shorts and t-shirts sporting ball caps and sandals. Even Sofia's sundress is a little on the formal side but with the new title of surgical chair she looks elegant. I tighten my grip on her waist as I maneuver her toward a set of benches in the shade. There are so many faces here it's hard to tell what place will make the most impact but with the number of pictures taken today, I'm certain word has already gotten out that I've made my appearance with the charming doctor and the city will be informed.

"Let's sit," I tell her, gesturing at the empty bench, and Norm follows us, hovering and casting his own bit of shade wherever

he goes.

“Fine.” Sofia’s attitude needs some work and I may just have to show her how to respond to me properly again, but I tolerate it. She’s been decent enough for the cameras. Everyone is entitled to a bit of an edge in their personality.

She sits first and I snuggle in close to her, making it look good for anyone who is watching. With my arm draped around her and my body pressed along her side, I lean in and kiss her on the cheek, then whisper in her ear. “I hear you haven’t accepted that position yet. I expect a letter on Kline’s desk first thing tomorrow morning.”

Once she is surgical chair it will elevate her prestige to the next level. All manner of news reports will be written and aired about her, touting her masterful skill and fast rise through the ranks. She’s already a genius—the entire city knows that—but with my nudge she will be world-famous. And that’s what I’m counting on. Powerful men and women from all around the globe will flock to Bellevue for their treatment knowing the finest surgeon in the world will care for them.

“I’m not sure why you’re pushing this so hard. Isn’t it enough that I’m dating you? Your reputation has taken a boost since being seen with me at that fundraiser.” She edges away from me, arms crossed over her chest in such a way that it pushes her tits out slightly. I enjoy the view as I nibble on her earlobe making it clear to anyone watching that we don’t want company.

“You leave the whys to me and just do as I say. It’s part of our agreement.”

“No, our agreement was for me to date you publicly.” She’s speaking through a tight smile, which means someone is watching. I look up to see someone snapping a photo and pose, and when they walk away, I return to nipping at her skin. “And taking that position is directly harming someone I know and care about.”

“You don’t know Holder at all. Be lucky it wasn’t Baker. That twat knows nothing, barely graduated. How on earth did he get

that position anyway?” My tongue traces a line down across her neck and I bite the tender flesh just below her jaw.

“I know Holder has kids and I care about kids.” She harrumphs and pushes me away with her shoulder. “Besides, I’m not right for the job. I think Holder deserves it. I need to learn more first.”

I slide my hand across her lap and grip her opposite hip, pulling her hard into my chest. She stiffens and leans away from me and I growl from deep in my chest.

“I decide who deserves what.”

“No, hospital director Kline decides, the medical board decides, not some mobster with a plan to make himself look good by dragging me through the mud.” Sofia stands and looks at Norm. “You’re my protection right?” she snaps.

“Uh...” He flicks his eyes at me and I nod at him. “Yes, ma’am, I am.” Norm’s broad shoulders dwarf mine. If he wanted to he could pulverize me, but I saved his life. He’s loyal.

“Protect me from that maniac then.” Sofia snaps a finger out in my direction then storms off and I chuckle at her obstinance. Norm glances at me before following her and I slowly rise and stroll after them. She’s acting like a child and children get spanked, which is what I’m going to do to her when I get her alone.

After walking a few blocks, I send a message to my driver to bring the car around. Sofia is in a huff, weaving through the crowds like a lunatic just to prove some point that she’s upset with me. I’m doing her a favor, raining fortune and blessings on her which she’d never achieve on her own and she refuses to see my benevolence. She’ll realize it soon enough, but for now I can’t allow her to continue to behave this way or my men will begin to think I’m weak.

In less than five minutes the car pulls into view, headed our way moving down Fifth Avenue. Sofia doesn’t recognize it but I do, so when it swoops in and cuts her off, blocking the crosswalk, she smacks the hood and screams profanities at it

as if my driver were just another New York cabby with bad manners.

“You asshole! You almost hit me. I should call the police.”

Before she can get away, Norm is there, wrapping his muscled arm around her waist. He hoists her off her feet and walks to the back door, opening it with one hand then tossing her in with the other. He waits with the open door as I approach and I nod at him as I climb in.

“Thank you, Norman. We’ll need some privacy,” I tell him as I sit down. He closes the door and I see a very flustered-looking Sofia in a heap on the ground. She shoves the hair out of her eyes and looks up at me in a rage.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing!” She lurches toward the door but it’s locked, the child safety mechanism engaged as the car pulls back into traffic. She smacks the window and screams, “Let me out of here!”

I sigh and cross one leg over the other, folding my hands on my lap. “Your shouts are pointless, Sofia. The men will continue to drive around until I give the order to stop. You should save your breath.”

She spins around and glares at me again, eyes practically glowing red with anger. Her chest heaves as she tries to catch her breath and she slides onto the seat next to me. The rest of the limo feels like a void with us both sitting here, but I don’t mind her closeness. It will make it easier for me in a second.

“It was one thing for me to be with you in public. It’s nice if you want to make me your little fuck toy. But you can’t mess with my career. You understand? I am not taking that position.”

My hand has a mind of its own. I reach out and grip her neck hard, and instantly she gags and claws at my wrist. I squeeze until she’s gasping, her eyes blinking rapidly. She’s frantic, swinging her legs around to wrap around mine and choking on my grip and I wait until I know she’s close to passing out before I lessen my intensity.



“You are mine, and you will do as I say. Do you understand me?” I whisper, and she nods as she sucks in a breath. “I am not a man to be ignored, Sofia. I have tried to be patient with you. I’ve given you more chances and understanding than you deserve. If you were one of my men you’d have been flogged or killed by now.”

Her fingers still pry at my grip though I know she can breathe fine now. It’s raspy as she sucks in air, but she’s not suffocating. Her eyes stay plastered on mine, tears now leaking from their corners as I speak.

“Now what you’re going to do is listen carefully to me. I have provided you with a service and you must pay me back for that service. I do not accept cash. I accept your obedience. Is that clear?”

I loosen my grip more and she nods again, still clinging to my wrist. I see the look in her eyes change from fear to determination. This is where she proves to me that she will obey, her one last shot or I will take matters into my own hands and she won’t like what I decide for her. Her tongue flicks out across her lip and she whispers.

“Alright... I’ll take it... I’ll do the job.”

I push her, relinquishing her neck and relaxing back into my seat. She scrambles down the long bench to the other end of the limo and rubs her skin where my hand was. Her eyes are full of fire now, the sort I see when we fuck, when she’s desperate for that climax and she’ll say anything to make me give it to her. But it’s different. It’s a determination to keep her life. I’ll accept either, though I would have liked it to be the former.

“Open the fridge,” I order her, thinking a nice soda might do the trick. It’s a hot day, and she’s a bit sweaty. I want her to cool off.

“What why?” she asks, swallowing hard. She glances at the small fridge in the corner and then back at me.

“Open the fucking fridge.” I narrow my eyes at her and she obeys. “Get out a bottle of Coke now.”

With trembling fingers she pulls out a bottle of Coke and shuts the fridge. She looks around stupidly as if searching for a bottle opener or something, but she doesn't need one of those. At least not yet.

“Now take off your panties.”

“What? No. You fucking pervert.”

“Should I remind you that I'm not a man to be trifled with?” I raise my eyebrows at her and she whimpers, then obeys. She sets the bottle on the seat next to herself and reaches up under her sundress to grip her pink panties and slide them off. One of her sandals falls off as she does and she scrambles to pick it up.

“Leave it,” I snap, and she sits back in the seat. The car bumps along the roads. They know not to disturb me even if they have to drive out gas just to let me and Sofia have our moment.

She's learning now, moving more quickly to obey me without protest, and that pleases me, even if it is merely out of fear. I'd like there to be more to our relationship now but it is what it is.

“Fuck yourself.” There is no mistaking my words. The shock on her face along with the gasps of disbelief tell me I've hit my mark.

“What are you sick? I'm not doing that.”

“Yes, you are. You belong to me, and I have asked you to do something, now spread your legs and put the fucking bottle in your cunt and fuck yourself.” Just watching her squirm gets my juices flowing. I can feel my cock swelling and I haven't even seen that pretty little pussy yet.

Sofia throws the bottle at me and it bounces on the seat next to me. “Fuck you, Lorenzo. I won't do it.”

I chuckle and pick up the bottle, tossing it back at her. The rouge of her cheeks blossoming with arousal gives her away. She's intrigued and turned on. This little bitch loves to be bossed around and told what to do, and maybe she's a little mix with a kink or two as well.

“Pick up the bottle, put it between your legs, and fuck your goddamn pussy now.” I place a tone of anger through my voice and she trembles, eyes widening again.

I watch her shoulders square and her chest rise and fall more quickly, and when she picks the bottle up with shaking hands, I know she will obey me.

The way she spreads herself—and the moisture collected there that glints in the sunlight peeking through the darkened windows—tells me she knows how to self-pleasure. She hesitates for a moment, staring at the thick bottle between her thighs and then closes her eyes and pushes it against her opening.

“Shit, it’s cold.”

“Do it!” I snap.

Sofia shoves it in, pressing the bottle to her back wall in one thrust. Her body slides lower on the seat, her hips just on the edge and her head at an awkward angle along the back of the seat. It’s hot. She’s hot. It makes me rock hard, so I unleash my beast, taking it out of his cage to play. I stroke myself as she begins to thrust and massage her clit.

Her pussy on full display for me, I can see it clenching and relaxing around the bottle with each of her movements. She moans and grunts, and as the car bumps along, she pants a little. “It’s not working.”

“I didn’t say you had to come. I said fuck yourself.” I continue stroking, bringing a bead of precum to the head of my dick and holding myself on the edge. God I want to tap her ass right now, but she’s learning a lesson, a very valuable one at that.

She struggles, really going at it. I can tell she wants it, but it’s not going to work. It’s so hot I have to hold back, slowing my strokes to keep myself from shooting my load all over this car.

“Get over here,” I order, and she sits up and sucks in a breath. The bottle drops from her pussy and I say, “And bring the bottle.”

Sofia is ready for me now, hungry for climax and willing to be my fuck toy yet again. She crawls on her knees across the limo

and kneels in front of me, bottle in hand. Bits of gravel cling to it and she picks at them, but there's no time for that. I reach up and rip the shoulder strap from one side of her dress then the other. She gasps and sits back on her feet.

“What the hell! That's my dress!”

“Shut up.” I snatch a wrist, causing her to drop the bottle again, then tie the strap around her wrist and to the door handle.

“Hey! What the hell!” She smacks at my hands and struggles against my grip as I tie the other hand to the other side of the car. “What the fuck. No!”

“Oh god, you're going to enjoy this,” I growl as I pull her head down. She's helpless. I force my dick into her mouth and she moans and mumbles as I begin thrusting. Feeling her lips wrap around me is incredible. She sucks with such ferocity I can barely control it. I reach down and pick up the bottle then reach over her body and force it back into her pussy.

“Mmmm,” she groans, but I fuck her pussy and her mouth at the same time, and for good measure, I spit on my fingers and shove two in her ass. She's a trembling mess in less than three minutes and I feel her holes contracting hard. Her body tries to reject the bottle, but I force it in anyway, and when she's nearly flaccid I let go of them and grip her head, shoving my dick deep into her throat.

My body releases, spewing hot cum down her throat. She gags and strains against the restraints, but each time her throat constricts it milks me more, making this even more pleasurable for me.

Until I'm spent.

I lean back, sliding my hips back onto the seat and she hangs limp between the two doors. With my head resting backward, I close my eyes and let my body enjoy for the moment the post-orgasmic giddiness. Yes... I'd say she's learned her lesson.

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## SOFIA

**M**y shoulders ache; my wrists burn. I hang here like a piece of meat in a butcher shop with one tit dangling out of my torn dress and my pussy dripping down my thigh. Lorenzo sits there like the smug ass he is eating up the fact that even when he's a monster he turns me on. And fuck did he turn me on. What the fuck is wrong with me? How could I be so weak?

He moves, but I don't look up at him. I watch his hand reach for his cock, still hard and covered in my spit. He tucks it back into his slacks and zips up, then reaches into his pocket. If I wasn't restrained, I'd think he was going for my throat, but I relax knowing he needs me. At least for a little while. He slices through the threads that used to be my dress straps and looses my arms. I sit back on the floor, leaning on the bench seat and rubbing my tender skin. Then yank my dress up over my chest.

"What the fuck was that for?" I ask calmly.

"Are you complaining now? Because I seem to recall only seconds ago you were writhing in ecstasy."

God what I wouldn't do to smack that stupid smug look off his face. He owns me and he knows it. The only way to get away from him is to literally get away from him. If I'm in the same room with him my damn pussy takes control. Next he'll having me fucking Norm just to watch us and get his rocks off.

"I hate you."

“You don’t mean that.” He buckles his belt and scoots to the side. I watch him fold the center seat down, revealing a console with an ashtray and a box full of cigars. He pulls one out, snips the end, then reaches into his pocket and produces a lighter. “Cigar?” he asks, callously, as if he didn’t just try to choke me then force his cock down my throat until I couldn’t breathe.

I’d have let him if he asked, but he didn’t ask. He just took. And I hate that about him. I hate that he has that power over me, that I give it to him like it’s Halloween candy or something.

“No.” I push myself off the floor, fixing my dress and parking my ass on the seat farthest from him again. He knows he owns me. There isn’t even a way for me to deny it. Not when my own body betrays me.

“Suit yourself. It’s really refreshing after a good fuck.” He sucks on the cigar and rudely blows the smoke at me. The windows aren’t even open. I wave my hand in front of my face and scowl. Then I pick up my sandal and shove my foot into it, leaving the moist panties lying on the ground. After he fucked me with that dirty bottle I’m not putting those back on. I need a shower.

“I just wanted to say that—”

Lorenzo’s phone begins to ring and cuts me off, and I suck in a breath and glare at him as he answers it, ignoring me.

“Speak.... Yes... You were supposed to have handled this already. Yes, well if the job isn’t finished, you don’t get paid.” He sucks on the cigar again and watches me bounce with the car’s movement. “When it’s done, let the cleaners know. We can’t have bodies turning up this time.” He lowers the phone and scowls at the screen for a moment before looking up at me with a sardonic expression.

“You just told them to kill someone?” I curl my arms around my middle and wish I could melt into the seat. “I won’t be a part of this anymore, Lorenzo. You’re evil.”

“Have you so quickly forgotten our lesson?” He picks up his phone and presses it to his ear again. “Take us to the house,” he says, then hangs up again and I glance over my shoulder at the closed, tinted window that separates me from the drivers.

“I want to go home.” I sink into myself further and feel fear creeping back up. This was supposed to be a public outing, not a trip to his house. I have to go home and check on Calvin.

“I have a job for you.”

“I did my job for you,” I say dryly. As if sucking his cock isn’t enough for one day. He used me for fifty photo opportunities and all I want is to go home and wash him off of me.

“I say when your job is done, Sofia.” Lorenzo puts his phone in his pocket and stares at me for the remainder of the ride. When we arrive, Norm escorts us up the front steps into his ridiculous mansion of a home and I expect we’ll sit in the front room, but he clicks his tongue at me when I try to walk in there.

“This way,” he says sternly, and I follow him.

I glance in the room as we pass and see Antonio there and I’m flooded with relief that we won’t be going there after all. Nothing could be worse than seeing his father again. The man hasn’t made his donation to the foundation like he promised to, so I’m upset with him. But like his son, he’ll make it about how I haven’t accepted a job I didn’t ask for with consequences I don’t want.

“Here,” Lorenzo barks, stepping aside as he pushes a door open.

The instant the door swings wide I smell infection and blood. It’s a scent I’ll never mistake or forget. As a surgeon I smell it daily, though it’s normally mingled with the familiar smells of bleach and cleaner. And I’ve never smelled it this strongly anywhere besides an operating theater.

“What’s this?” I say, stepping into the room. I see a man prostrate on the bed, his backside exposed. There is a huge hole in his back, yellow puss seeping from it as it oozes blood.

“What the hell!” My medical training kicks in instantly. “Holy fuck, this guy is septic.”

“Fix him,” I hear from the doorway and glance over my shoulder to see Antonio there with a glass of some sort of whiskey in hand.

“What?” I spin around and shake my head at him. “I’m a surgeon, not a miracle worker.”

“Fix. Him.” He accentuates each word as a sentence as his jaw sets and he stares at me. “Or should we find another good doctor to help us?” He brings the glass to his lips and I feel like I’m staring into the eyes of the Devil himself. If Lorenzo is capable of doing what he’s done to me, threatening me the way he has, his father is worse.

I say nothing. I turn back to the wounded man and bend over him, examining his wound. “Was he shot?” The backside of his body looks as if it’s been blown to bits. He’s missing muscular and skeletal tissue necessary to sew him back up. He’ll never walk again as it is. I look up at Norm who also stands by the bed.

“Twelve gauge to the gut. The front side is just a small hole. This is the worst of it.” Norm pushes a cart next to me which I hadn’t seen yet. The room isn’t exactly sterile, but if I don’t act now this man will die. Even if I do something, there is a very high likelihood he will die anyway. I glance at the window and know I need more light. “Open the curtains,” I snap, and Norm goes to do what I’ve asked. The risk of infection is high too, but I have to worry about that later. I pick up a pair of gloves and put them on, then survey the tools. There are a myriad of things but no sutures, no staples, and nothing to clean the wound.

I struggle for a while, cleaning puss away from the infection site and mopping up blood. It’s a wonder he hasn’t bled out yet. His liver is intact, but his intestines have been perforated in multiple places.

“I need a needle and thread now.” While I wait for them I pick up a glass of water off the nightstand. There isn’t any real way to irrigate this, so I just use a bath towel already stained with



the man's blood, and the water from this cup to attempt to flush out fecal matter. It won't even matter if he gets the best antibiotics in the world if I sew this shit up inside of him.

I'm frantic, hands trembling as I dab at his internal organs. He doesn't even move. I'm not sure if they have him knocked out with a drug, or alcohol, or if the pain is so intense he's just blacked out. I don't know how long he's been this way but it appears perhaps a day at least. And despite my best efforts, without a skin graft, there is no way I can close him. So when Norm gives me the needle and thread, I stitch the perforated intestines shut and pack his wound with alcohol-soaked gauze.

When I step away, I'm covered in blood and shaking. I peel the gloves off and step away knowing his chances are almost zero. I toss the gloves and try to leave the room, pushing past Antonio, but he stops me with an arm across the door frame.

"He will make it?"

I pause, staring into the dark hallway. "You should have called me the instant this happened. There isn't anything more I can do. He needs the emergency room, antibiotics, real surgery. Christ, he needs a fucking skin graft."

Lorenzo watches me stand up to his father and quirks an eyebrow. Either he's entertained and waiting for the fireworks, or he's impressed that I'm not afraid.

"I told you to fix him."

"Get a fucking ambulance here and I'll do my best at Bellevue." I glare at him out of the corner of my eye and he yanks my arm and forces me to spin around and look him in the eye.

"You haven't done what I said."

"You haven't kept your end of the bargain. Where is the million dollars for the foundation?"

I hear the smack before I even see his hand move. My cheek burns as my head snaps to the side. I suck in a deep breath and keep my gaze fixed on the floor down the hallway. No one moves a muscle as Antonio takes another sip of his drink.

“He’s gone boss,” Norm says and I flinch. I knew he would die.

There is a moment of silence before Antonio speaks again. “If I wanted failure, I’d have brought in a veterinarian. Maybe you’re not the best doctor in the nation.”

“And maybe you’re a piece of work.” I raise my chin upward and meet his gaze. “Don’t call on me again.”

I turn and look directly at Lorenzo who now has both eyebrows tented. He is definitely impressed. I wonder if he would even stand up to his father like that. I take a few steps closer to him and when he is within earshot I whisper, “It’s over. I’m out.” Then I move on toward the front door and my freedom.

I retrieve my purse from the car where it was tossed hastily when Norm threw me in, and I set up an Uber for a few blocks from here. A short walk will help me clear my mind because I just stood up to the most notorious mob boss the city of New York has ever seen. Now, that mountain escape to Jen’s cabin is looking more and more appealing every day.

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## LORENZO

I stand in the doorway of one of my guest rooms knowing what my father has done. We all knew this man was going to die. No one survives a shot at point blank range to the gut from a shotgun when part of their spine gets blasted. Though, Dr. Carter did her damndest to try to save him. Our previous medical help would have written him off and injected potassium chloride to alleviate the suffering.

“Where do I put him?” Norm is already busy folding the edges of the comforter up around the man to haul him out. I’ll need a new mattress, maybe new carpet too.

“On ice for now. His body parts may be useful later on for some black mail.” I scratch my beard and glance at my father who has his own thoughts.

“Cut his fingers off and package them nicely. Just the right hand please. I have a message to send.” Dad backs out of the room with his empty glass in hand and heads toward the living room and a refill.

I follow behind him, thinking of how Sofia’s medical training just flips on like a switch as soon as she sees someone hurting. It’s a gut instinct that most first responders probably have. Hell it’s probably a knee-jerk reaction of humanity, except for people like me. I stand back watching them squirm like the insects they are, wondering if their suffering is so painful it’s leaving mental scars too. It’s what sets people like her apart from people like me. She’s a good human.

I’m a beast.

“Our doctor has a mouth on her, doesn’t she?” Dad enters the living room and his dark features are cast in light again. The room is in a state of chaos, probably from the flurry of activity when my men brought the dying Russian into the home. No one told Sofia the man wasn’t loyal to us. We simply told her to fix him and pointed her in the right direction. This is how I know she’s a good human.

“That she does,” I agree, joining him for a splash of bourbon, a nice dusty from the mid twentieth century, aged in a wine barrel at a vineyard on the west coast. The first sip is sweet but the bite warms my throat. “And when I fuck her and she fights back it’s sensational.”

“Well, I prefer my women docile—obedient even.” He turns to watch me over the rim of his glass with guile in his eyes. “Are you certain she is the one? There are a dozen more prospects across the country.”

When my father presented me with the idea of healing my reputation and fixing the family name by marrying into a good reputation I thought he was insane. My reputation of being a killer and a ruthless businessman is all I need. I control the players in this city the way a master plays chess, but it does have its downsides. It’s expensive paying off these reporters and police officials constantly. And behaving is out of the question.

But if I were married to the right person, a person who had something to offer besides money, I could keep my money and build my reputation as the benevolent overlord. Not the sadist who pulls strings. Sofia will change everything for me when we inevitably wed because all of humanity dies someday. Every human is vulnerable and fragile. And the only thing more expensive than paying for silence is paying for medical care.

“It’s a win-win...” I sip the bourbon again then continue. “Sofia wants a career. She wants to support her brother. She wants to cure humanity. When she sees the benefit behind doing as we say, she will comply.”

“But there are others,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

I've seen the others, middle-aged frumpy women who are either unattractive or already married. Sofia is a gem. "She is the one." I nod at him, my decision made for me the instant Norman delivered the good doctor to that warehouse to save me. They targeted her because of her expertise in medicine and on the word of a half-dozen other medical professionals already stolen off the street. Her name was on every tongue.

And when I opened my eyes to her beauty, I knew she was the one. There is no one else I will accept. And now that I know how fantastic she is through and through, I will settle for nothing less.

"So be it." He downs his drink and sets the tumbler on the counter. Turning toward the window, he asks, "How long until you enforce her cooperation then?"

I clear my throat. I've been patient with her for a long time now. I never intended to force her into marriage. I believed she would accept the agreement and everything would naturally evolve. I had to go and pick the one woman with a fucking moral conscience who wants to save everyone, even at the cost of her career. Her hangup over Holder losing his job isn't something I anticipated. Any other human would jump at the chance to have that position at her age, and her refusing it is a curveball.

"Give it time." I keep my back to the window but watch as the shadows darken his face even with the sunlight bathing his expression. My father is a shrewd man. He doesn't mess around, and he's taught me not to mess around either. But Sofia is delicate. There is a way to handle her that doesn't involve the same brute force tactics we've used on others.

"Make her comply, Lorenzo." He turns to stare at me, imposing his harshest expression. "This is not how we operate. You're growing soft on me." He narrows his eyes and I raise my chin a notch. He taught me respect and honor, but he also taught me to not take shit from anyone. And that "anyone" right now is him.

"I will handle this my way, and it will be done."

His nostrils flare as his jaw tightens. I expect a smack or even a harsh rebuke, but neither one comes. He's preparing me to lead and if he wants to have confidence in my ability to lead, he has to give me space to make these choices on my own. He's testing me, seeing if I will follow in his footsteps, but I'm not a follower. I blaze new trails and I know how to handle Miss Sofia Carter well enough.

Dad walks out without another word and I finish my drink. The way to Sofia is always through her heart or her pussy, but sex isn't working to convince her of the right choice, so it has to be her heart. I know this because when I put a bleeding man in front of her she acts swiftly, without coercion—or with minimal coercion. And the only thing that I know means more to her than anything else is her brother.

"Norm!" I call out, then I wait. I know he's busy, but this can't wait. A dead man can.

Moments later, Norman walks into the living room to join me. "Yeah, boss."

"Prepare the guest room as quickly as we can. We are going to have company soon." I turn to face him and he nods.

"Got a lot of cleaning. I have to call our guys. How quickly is quickly?" He stands with shoulders squared as usual. The man is painfully loyal. If I asked him to clean that room by himself in one hour with his own toothbrush he would, and then he'd brush his teeth with it when he was done. It's a funny thing—gratitude. He believes he owes me his life, and I am content with that.

"Forty-eight hours will suffice." I look down my nose at him. New mattress, new linens, new carpet. No trace of death. And get rid of that horrible scent."

"Of course, sir," he says as if making mental notes on what I'm saying. These are all standard things, but I learned a long time ago to never make assumptions that people will follow instructions blindly. Everyone needs a reminder.

"Anything else, sir?"

“Yes...” I breathe in deep and lay out my plan for him. “I’d like you to stop by Dr. Carter’s apartment after she is safely at work.” I wave my hand as I talk. “Leave Josh or Elden there to keep an eye on her... You focus on the brother. I want him packed up and brought here. Now, don’t forget anything he needs. His medications, medical supplies, bed—whatever his nurse tells you he needs.”

“We’re kidnapping her brother?” Norm narrows his eyes at me. This is a gutsy move for sure, but it is the only play I have left that doesn’t require force. Sofia must see that I am in charge and the only way to do that is by making her believe it in her heart.

“Yes, but they won’t think of it that way.” I grin. “You instruct his nurse that Calvin is being moved to my property at Sofia’s wishes so he will be closer to the finest care. We will spare no expense to make him and his nurse comfortable for the transportation. We will provide the best medical supplies and such.” I press my fingers together as I see the lights come on in Norm’s eyes.

“Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?”

I walk toward the window and look out, picturing what it must have looked like to my neighbors when Sofia’s tits were pressed against this pane of glass overlooking the street. All the things I’ve done to this woman and she keeps coming back for more. That’s how I know Calvin means more to her than anything in this world. If she refuses to take that job for me, I know she’ll do it for him.

“Yes, when the brother and nurse are safely in the van on the way here, go back and trash the place. Destroy anything that looks sentimental. Shred the couches, chairs, beds... Make it look like someone was very angry with her. Show her what her future without me looks like. Scare her... But don’t lay a finger on her brother. Understand?”

I turn back to Norm who is nodding. “Got it. I’ll finish the room now and have Mr. Carter and his nurse brought over first thing.”

This plan will work. Sofia's heart is too connected to her brother's for it to fail. And when I have her alone at my house, I will tell her of our impending wedding. The plans have been made already. We'll wed in June with only the wealthiest and most elite guests in attendance. With her as the acclaimed surgical chair and myself the humble benefactor who generously donates to end the suffering of thousands, my reputation will be cemented and I will gain new trust.

It's only a matter of time now. The web is set. I'm just waiting for my little butterfly to flutter by and become tangled in my plan.



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## SOFIA

It wasn't the smack so much as it was knowing a man died that got me. I stood there over him working on him, knowing there was no way he'd survive. I did my best. I did everything I was taught to do in training, though I had no pain meds to ease his distress, or an operating room to actually provide life-saving care. With my limited resources, I was doomed—and so was he—from the beginning. So why is it hitting me so hard now?

The water is scalding hot, nearly burning my hands as I scrub them for the third time. Three nurses have come in, scrubbed, and left this tiny little room already but I'm here, watching the water pour over my bright red skin, wondering if that man had been in my OR would he still have died? Did he die simply because I didn't have the right tools and conditions? Or did I make a mistake?

I've lost patients before, very sick ones, ones who lost too much blood, even a few children. But I'd never seen something so grotesque and graphic. The image of his back split open, oozing pus and blood, organs exposed and bone matter peppered through the filth—it gave me nightmares last night. And now I can't focus. My hand trembles in the flow of water and I grasp it with my other hand to stop the shaking.

I blink hard, pushing the thoughts away again. This is my OR. It's my hospital. Surgery for this person has been scheduled for two days now. I'm just putting a rod and six pins in a teenager's femur after a bad basketball accident. I can do this. It's routine. I've done a million of these or something.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and replay the surgery in my head. Closed reduction, then incision from just below the femoral head descending four inches into the femur. Insert the rod using x-ray guidance. Fix the screws in place. Hold the bone in place as I make an incision four inches below the break location to... Who the fuck am I kidding?

My hand shakes again and I grip the edge of the sink, leaving the water running. My stomach churns and my shoulders tense. Even with my eyes closed and my breathing deep and steady, I can't see anything except that infection. I can't do this surgery. My hands are shaking too badly. My patient could suffer because of my emotional state and I can't put them at risk like this.

I shut the water off and pull the mask off my face. I don't know any of the perioperatives, so I step out of the scrub room and pull my phone out of my pocket, shooting Dr. Baker a 9-1-1 message. Within seconds my phone rings and his name shows on my screen's caller ID.

"I got your text, Sofia, what's wrong?" We often use the code to indicate a lesser emergency, but considering my patient is already drugged and waiting, I know this one is important.

"I can't do this surgery. Fourteen-year-old boy, broken femur. He needs a rod, but my hands are shaking. I have to recuse myself. Can you send Larkin in?" Larkin is a damn good surgeon and I know he's free right now. I saw him sitting in the lounge room ready to clock out for the day just before going to scrub in.

"Sure, what's wrong?"

"Can I come to your office?" I bite my lip. The more I am open with my boss and friends, the more they will understand what I'm going through. Unfortunately I can't exactly be very forthcoming because to do so would be to admit ethical violations.

"Yes, of course. I'll call Larkin now, and meet you in my office in fifteen minutes."

Baker hangs up and I shove my phone in my pocket and toss the hair net into the garbage as I strip off the gowns and foot covers. I operated on more than one person outside the hospital. I slept with a patient, even if I was coerced into doing the operation that wasn't sanctioned by the hospital. I accepted favors from a mafia crime boss and now with this whole thing about the promotion to surgical chair, it's too much.

Skating the line between propriety and the abyss of evil makes my stomach roil even more. I punch the elevator button and wait for it to arrive at my floor. Baker knows something fucked up is going on with the promotion; he has to. And Jen knows about my arrangement with Lorenzo too, though I should never have told her. Her offer to escape to the cabin in the mountains is tempting, but it will never work.

I step into the elevator and push the button for the third floor and the doors close. As I descend I think about how running to that cabin would only infuriate the Gatti family. Antonio isn't the sort of man to let me off the hook. I'd never be able to come back here and New York is my home. Where would I work? Because if I skip out on work for a month or two, my position will be filled. And even then, when I come back it isn't like the major criminal organization will just leave and I will have peace. They'll be on my doorstep immediately to get their payback.

The bell dings and the doors open on my floor. I step out and immediately see Jen standing at the nurses station filling out paperwork. Her head pops up as I stroll past. She leaves her things and falls in step beside me, hooking her arm through mine in usual fashion.

"You look pale, what's going on?" Of course she joins me. She's my best friend. She'd never let me walk past when I'm feeling like this and not say something.

"I..." I can't explain to her but I don't have to. She knows me too well.

"It's him again. Isn't it?" She clicks her tongue. "You need to leave town. Go to the cabin, girl. I swear you'll feel so much better."

I lay my head on her shoulder as we walk and when we get to Baker's office he's already there waiting. I nod at Jen who seems to understand I have to do this alone, and stays outside the door while I walk in and shut it. Baker takes a seat behind his desk and I hover by the door, hugging my stomach.

"I'm feeling ill. I can't do surgery today."

"What the hell is going on Carter? This mess with Holder and being surgical chair is a little insane. Now you're too ill to do surgery?" Baker stares through the office window at Jen who lingers like a lost puppy. "What the fuck does she want?"

I sigh and turn to open the door, letting Jen in. "She knows everything, okay, so I just need to be honest now. I'm struggling."

Jen walks in and shuts the door, then takes my hand. She squeezes it hard and gives me the moral fortitude to blurt out the whole mess to Dr. Baker—the kidnapping, the surgery on Lorenzo, the way he made his little arrangement, the promotion, his donation, the promise of a million dollars from Gatti Senior and finally the man who died at my hand. When I'm done, I sink into the chair and cover my face. I'm not crying, but only because I'm so emotionally overwhelmed I've become numb to it all.

"I told her to call the cops. I know Gatti has to have some on his payroll, but not the whole force. They can help her get out of this arrangement and—"

"No." Baker cuts her off and I look up at him in surprise. His scowl isn't one of anger. He looks stuck, frustrated, and defeated. "You can't call them."

"What—why?" Jen slides into the chair next to me as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I don't even look at it. I pinch the fabric around it, finding the power button to silence the call.

"Because I know this game. Gatti is pulling strings. It's the reason you're getting that promotion, right?" He pauses briefly but I can't even give my answer before he continues. "He's a powerful man. If you push back by calling the police you'll be dead before you sleep tonight. Cops are off limits."

“Then what do I do?” My fingers knot themselves in my lap and my phone buzzes again. I ignore it again, pinching the button through my slacks pocket.

“You go to the cabin,” Jen says, turning to face me. She rips the wooden arm of the blue leather chair and purses her lips. “It’s a good plan. You can contact the FBI or something, get witness protection. You’d be relocated away from here and get a new job...”

I sigh and let my shoulders droop. Calvin can only receive the level of care he needs in this city. The trial he’s supposed to do starts in less than a month, and I can’t take that from him. He needs the chance to walk again. If the trial works, he could be on his feet by Christmas. I could give him his life back in a way surgery would never do for him.

“Cabin?” Baker asks and Jen tells him all the details about her cabin in the Catskills. I’m numb though, only partially hearing the plan they’re cooking up for me while I stew over how to care for my brother. If I left and he stayed behind, Antonio would kill him. I know it. I can’t do that. But I can’t take him away from NYC. There is no better option for care.

And while Antonio terrifies me to my core, Lorenzo isn’t altogether evil. He has his charm about him. Sure the way he controls me, the physical domination may prove to be a bit too much, but I know he will do as he says. He keeps his word. He will make sure his father gives that million dollars for research and I know Calvin can benefit from that research. My heart is torn right down the middle and my phone buzzes again.

“Maybe you should get that,” Baker says, leaning back in his chair.

Reaching into my pocket I dread the sight of the screen. My gut tells me it’s Lorenzo. I haven’t accepted the promotion as he warned me to. When I left his place yesterday I told him I was out. And I mean it. I’m out. I can’t go back there. I can’t operate on one more person outside of this hospital. I can’t have sex with him as glorious as it is, and I can’t date him openly anymore. Most of all, I will not submit to his father

ever again. Any man who strikes a woman is worse than the Devil himself.

But the caller ID doesn't say Lorenzo's name. It says NYPD is calling. My heart leaps into my throat as I swipe right to answer.

"Hello? It's Sofia Carter." My hand trembles a bit worse now as I hold the phone to my ear. I close my eyes to shut out every external stimuli that I can, focusing on the baritone that rumbles through the phone.

"Ms. Carter, we received a call at your number that someone had broken into your apartment. We are here now and things are pretty messed up. We'd like you to—"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes!" I don't even stop to tell Baker what happened. I lurch out of the seat and blurt out, "I gotta go," as I race out of the room toward the elevator. Jen follows on my heels like a yapping dog. I stop by the lounge to grab my lab coat and purse, then dart back out to the sound of her asking me questions.

"What's going on? Who was that?"

"Someone broke into my unit. I have to check on Calvin."

"I'll come with you."

"You have to work." I punch the elevator button and jam my arms down the sleeves of my lab coat. My heart is racing. I won't even bother with the subway. I used to be a runner. I can just run the seven blocks or so to my place faster than the damn train.

"You're not thinking clearly. What if he's there? What if they do something to you?"

"It was the police," I tell Jen, turning to face her as I sling my purse over my shoulder, cross body. "They're not going to pull something when the cops are around."

"You don't know that." Jen stands in my way as the doors slide open, but I push past her.

"Go work. I'll call you." As soon as I'm in the elevator I push the door close button and it dings. In minutes I'm on the street

running. I weave through the foot traffic and dart across streets when they are clear of traffic, not waiting on the walk sign. My only thought is Calvin.

What have they done to him? Is the nurse safe? Did they take anything? I know this was Lorenzo. It has his stench all over it. I never took the promotion, so Kline never called to confirm that Lorenzo's little scheme is working. So they've acted now. They're going to bully me, make me feel like I'm not safe in this city again. They'll continue to push and push until I do what they want and I'm not fucking doing it. Holder deserves that job, not me.

By the time I get to my apartment, I'm winded and sweating. I see the splintered wood scattered in the hallway and step over it into my unit. The place is trashed. Sofa cushions are sliced up, dishes broken over the entire kitchen floor. The cops stand in the middle of the chaos talking as I enter and look surprised to see me. My bookshelves are emptied onto the floor; every surface where something was laid is empty. I wade through it on my way toward the hallway.

"Where's Calvin?" I ask, numbly, but I can't even hear a response if they say one.

I turn into his room and see it's empty too. His bed is torn back, covers on the ground. His dresser drawers are empty, television screen shattered. I cry out a deep, heart wrenching sob, and fall to my knees. "No!"

"Ma'am, we'd like to ask you some questions?" The officer standing behind me touches my shoulder and I flinch and crawl away.

"Where is he? What did they do?"

"Ma'am the unit was empty when we arrived. Only the mess here..." The man, he's the same one who was here for the first break in. The one who was at the car-jacking attempt turned mugging. His sardonic eyes and sadistic smile twist the knife deeper. He's working for Lorenzo. I know it. "You..." I hiss, lurching off the ground. "It was you. You're working for him."

I push my finger into his chest and his expression shifts. “You fucking did this. Where did they take my brother!” I’m screaming now, pounding his chest with my hands but he simply grabs my wrists and pins them against my body.

“I’d be careful how I act, Miss. Mr. Gatti doesn’t like when people rebel against him.” He says it so quietly I know he’s trying to hide his words from his buddy in the other room.

“Mark my word, Mr.—” I glance at his name, embroidered onto his shirt “—Thatcher, I will have your fucking job.” I spit in his face and yank my hands away from his grip, then shove him hard enough for him to back up a few steps. He chuckles as if I’ve merely annoyed him, but I can’t waste time on him at all.

I know exactly where they’ve taken Calvin and I can only pray that they’ve been gentle with him and his nurse. I can only assume she’s been taken too, as Lorenzo wouldn’t have the first clue how to care for a paraplegic.

I step past the dirty cop and march back up the hallway past the second officer who looks shocked. “Your buddy is dirty. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll request a new partner.” I glare at him as I stumble over some broken furniture and move toward the door.

He lets out a breathy grunt and I ignore him. This apartment and the belongings inside of it mean nothing to me without Calvin. The landlord will close up and fix the door again, but my focus has to be getting my brother back. Jen is right. We can’t stay here. Even if I have to move to Los Angeles or even another country, I have to get Calvin and get out. There will be new trials, new drugs. Hell, I may be able to keep him in the trial with an alias and by letting his nurses do all the transportation, but one thing is for sure. I have to leave New York now, or Lorenzo will kill us both.



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## LORENZO

The room is perfect, the natural sunlight illuminating it brightly enough the lights aren't even on. It's midday.

I'm waiting for Sofia to get the call that her brother is missing, her home ransacked. And the nurse is quite pleasant with me, thankful and appreciative the medical equipment we've secured for Calvin is state of the art. Her tight blonde curls jostle on top of her head as she nods and smiles at me.

"I knew Sofi was dating you but I had no idea how generous you are. She's so lucky to have you here to provide for her and Calvin like this." She's a bit older, mid-fifties maybe, and has the look of a mother. I can see why Sofia approves of her for caring for Calvin, who is sleeping soundly, also thankful for my care.

"I do my best to take care of things, yes."

"Well, I think the news reports have you all wrong, Mr. Gatti. You have such a big heart." As she speaks she organizes Calvin's clothing into the sleek modern dresser that matches the entire bedroom suite. Norm went all out, replacing everything in the room with brand new furniture. Sofia will stay with me, but Calvin has a very nice spread here and I completely approve. He even prepared the nurse's room too, since we will hire round the clock care for him now.

"I think I hear our guest of honor coming now," I tell her, winking. I back into the hallway as I hear the front door open and Sofia lay into Norm. Shutting the door after me, I leave the nurse to her organizing and walk down the hall to the living room.

Norm stalks behind Sofia, whose shoes squeak on the marble. She's angry and I knew she would be. I have violated her in the most severe way without laying a hand on her body. Her heart is now putty, ready to be molded to fit my demands and I have plenty of them.

I don't even have to speak to Norm to have him move out of the way. His sixth sense of my presence kicks in and he steps to the side as I approach. Sofia is there, dressed in her dark blue slacks and cream-colored blouse. Her lab coat hangs open in the front. She is damp with sweat, cheeks flushed in rage, and hair disheveled.

"Sofia, so good of you to join me." As I stalk toward her she backs into the room. She knows my touch is her addiction and I know when she's captive to her own anger she's pliable.

"You sick bastard, what did you do to my brother?"

"Calvin is fine, sleeping peacefully." I catch a glimpse of Norm standing in the doorway again as I walk over to the sofa and sit down.

Sofia darts at me, bringing her fists down on me in a rain of fury. I hold my arm up, letting her assault me and see Norm tense and take a step toward me too, but I shake my head, holding him off. He is right to feel protective, but Sofia can't hurt me. These blasts can only do so much before her hands hurt.

When she ceases her attack, I pat the sofa and smooth my hair down. "Come sit. Let's chat."

"Take me to him," she growls and rounds the end of the couch. She's cute when she's angry and I am getting aroused thinking of how much fun it will be to stamp this anger out of her yet again.

"Sit."

"Fuck you."

"Sit. Down. Now." I straighten and glare at her and she looks away, crossing her arms over her chest. Feisty rebellious sex is one thing. Open defiance will earn her a place in the hot seat and she doesn't want to be there. "Now, Sofia."

Her jaw tightens but she sinks onto the far end of the couch and keeps her arms folded over her chest. “You destroyed my home.”

“This is your home now.” I angle my body to face her and she scoffs.

“I will never live with you.” The words roll off her tongue laced with malice and every ounce of hatred she can muster, but I see the look in her eye. She likes the idea of being my toy.

“You will sleep in my bed. Fuck me every night. Eat breakfast with me when I wake, and greet me when I return home every evening.” I stand now, ready to make my message loud and clear.

“You think you own me? You think I’m going to play house with you?”

“No, you’re going to marry me. And I am going to have a lineage with you that spans the ages...” Her eyes, still hazed over with hostility, look up at my face.

“I will never have your children.”

“How do you know you’re not already pregnant?” As many times as we’ve had sex over the past four months, there is no doubt it’s only a matter of time anyway.

“I get the shot. It’s not possible. You can’t force someone to love you.” She curls into herself, as if me standing over her intimidates her. Or maybe she’s trying to hide the fact that she likes the idea of being mine.

“No, but you can force them to marry you, and if you don’t want to obey me, I will have no choice.”

Her chin drops and her eyes narrow. “Is that what this is? You think I’m going to be your wife? You think marrying a prestigious, highly acclaimed doctor with a title position at an internationally famed hospital will fix your reputation to the point you’ll be untouchable.” She stands abruptly, her body so close I can smell her shampoo. And when she turns to storm out I catch her wrist.

“No, I think I have found the woman who can best me at my game and I want to learn how she does it.”

Sofia freezes, her body turned away from me. I hold her arm behind her back, slowly twisting it around until her wrist folds in my grasp, and her elbow curls up. I press it into the center of her back and whisper in her ear. “Except, I don’t let anyone best me. And now you’re going to learn what happens when you directly disobey an order.”

Her head drops and turns to the side. Out of the corner of her eye she glares at me and snarls. “So you’re going to fuck me again? ‘Punish’ me for rebelling, when you know your cock gets me off? Is that what you’ll do? You think that’s a punishment?”

A rumble of a chuckle rattles up out of my chest as I nip her ear. “You are mine, whether you like it or not. Calvin will not get the treatments he needs or go through the trial you want if you disobey me again. Do you understand?”

She nods tightly but her breath hitches as I bend her wrist down harder. Then I grip her hip and pull her body against mine so she can feel the bulge of my erection. I get so fucking turned on by her rage it’s not funny.

“Do you understand, Sofia?”

She whimpers. “Yes.”

“Then you need to learn your lesson.”

I spin her around to face me and grip her throat. I know she hates it but I also know it gets her hot. I push her into the wall, slamming her head back against it. Her eyes widen and she keens as I grip her throat tighter. Her body fights mine, cocking her hip to the side to push away from me. I back off, but just slightly. Norm watches as things escalate but knows better than to stare. Out of the corner of my eye I see him turn his back to us, but I know I won’t convince him to leave now, not after she struck me.

“Fuck you,” she grunts and I let go of her throat.

I grab her by the hair and press my body against hers to hold her in place. “You will obey me, Sofia,” I say in her ear. “If

you don't, Calvin gets nothing.”

“You lying fuck!” She tries to wrench away from me. “He'll get whatever he needs! I won't let you do this!”

“No he won't,” I say and pull her against my body. She acts as if she doesn't know where to put her hands so I help her. I hold her wrists together, trapping them against her midsection. “And you know I'll make good on that promise.” I lean down to her ear and whisper, “And you know you will let me.”

Sofia squirms and wrestles against my grip but I'm far stronger than her. She needs the release of sex to tame her into submission, so that's what I'll do for her. If only to enjoy it myself.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Sofia?”

“What the hell do you think?” she asks, glaring at me with flared nostrils.

I force one of her arms behind her back and use my other hand to pinch and pull on her nipple. She continues to glare at me as I roll the hard bud between my thumb and finger. The fabric of her shirt and bra are in the way, but soon that won't be the case. “No?” I ask, releasing her nipple and moving my hand down her slacks to her pussy. I rub my fingers inside of her. “Is this what you want me to do?” I grab her hair and force her head back, looking her in the eye. I laugh and use my free hand to undo her pants and unzip them. Sofia clenches her teeth and looks away from me.

“Look at me.” I say, tugging on her hair. She looks at me. Her eyes are glistening with unshed tears. “You can't stand it that I do this to you, can you?” I pull my fingers from her pussy and see the moisture dripping from them. I suck them clean and use my other hand to push her slacks down on one side. She's weak. Cowering to me because her pussy burns for my cock and she hates how it does.

“I hate you.”

“But you don't.” I reach for her shirt. I tear it with one hand, ripping it open. The buttons scatter across the floor and I yank the shirt right off of her. “You hate that you can't make your

own choices. You hate that I am micromanaging you. But you don't hate me."

"That's not true." She says, but she knows it is.

I toss her bra to the side and pull her pants down the rest of the way. Her panties join the rest of her clothes on the floor, and I turn her around to face the armchair. I pull her arms up and tie her hands to the arm rests using her bra and her panties. I slide my belt through its loops and secure her one foot to a chair leg. She's helpless now. And yet, she's still beautiful. Her back is arched, her spine is long and straight, her hands are secured and her legs are spread open. I run my hands from her knee upward toward her pussy along her inner thigh and she shudders.

"You like this." I say, running my finger in between her pussy lips.

"I don't." She says.

"You're wet." I say. I run my finger up and down her wet slit, using her juices to lubricate my way. I run my finger along her pussy lips and to her clit. I rub it in circles. She gasps.

"You. Need. Me. To. Control. You," I say. "You're a naughty girl. A whore. You have to be taught a lesson." I slide two fingers inside her and her back arches. She gasps. I trace her rigid, swollen erotic zone. She whimpers and clenches and she's helpless to do anything except learn her lesson. "I control you now. Say it."

"You control me now," she says.

I pull her hair hard and thrust my fingers up inside of her. I'm rough with her, because she needs to learn.

"You're my whore. Say it," I say, my fingers still inside her.

"I'm your whore."

"You're my little whore. I own you. Say it," I say, pulling her hair harder.

"You own me." She says.

“I own your pussy,” I say, pulling her hair and thrusting my fingers up inside of her. She gasps. “I own your ass.” I pull her hair harder and thrust my fingers harder. She gasps. “I own your clit. I own your mouth.” I work her fucking pussy so hard she’s panting and clawing at the arm rests.

“I own your body. Say it.”

“You own... my body...” Sofia’s words come out between moans, so I push her further. My hand against her ass creates a delightful smacking sound and leaves a red print where it connects.

“Ah...” Her pussy clenches, little asshole too. It’s erotic and I want to see it again. So I brought my hand down again, making another red mark. “Fuck,” she hisses, squeezing my fingers. I know she’s ready.

I leave her dangling there, bent over the back of that chair in nearly full restraint as I unzip my slacks and pull my cock out. “You’re taking the promotion.”

“Yes,” she whimpers.

“You’re marrying me.”

“Fuck...” she moans...

“Say it.”

“Yes,” she mewls and I watch her pussy constrict again.

“Now beg...”

I stroke myself and wait for the magic words to part her lips so I can part her folds and claim her pussy as mine yet again.

“Please, please, please,” she moans, begging. I know she wants it, but I want to hear her say it.

“What do you want?” I ask, rubbing my cock against her pussy.

“Fuck me,” she moans.

“You want my cock in your pussy?” I ask, rubbing against her.

“Yes,” she gasps.

“Say it. Tell me you want my cock in your pussy.” I watch as my cock glides across her pussy lips.

“I want...” she moans. “Your cock... in my pussy.” She says it and I push into her, hard. “Shit!” she squeals, her pussy feeling like it’s on fire.

“You like that, huh?” I thrust again, this time going deep. “You want it deeper?”

“Oh God,” she moans. “Please, fuck me deeper.”

I thrust hard into her, pushing the chair forward with each thrust. She moans louder and louder, the chair pushing into the desk as I thrust. I reach under her and smack her clit hard. Her pussy clenches around me. This is going to be incredible.



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## SOFIA

If I could just touch my clit I'd have come a dozen times by now. Lorenzo's cock is so massive it feels like he'll go straight through my cervix, and fuck if I don't want to feel him deeper in me.

"Say it... Say you want me again."

"I want you," I mutter, and grip the armrests so hard my hands hurt. My pussy clenches, and when he growls out my name I come hard. I shudder and convulse. My free leg shakes, and it's a good thing I'm bent over this chair or I'd crumple to a heap.

He smacks my ass hard, driving the orgasm on, and I whimper and arch my head back. He's incredible at this, pushing my buttons until I'm tipping over the edge into ecstasy over and over.

"Fuck, fuck," I sob.

"Again," he demands, and spanks me again. "I want to hear you scream."

I can't. I'm spent, but I don't want him to stop, either.

"Again!"

"I want you," I whimper between spasms, and his hand comes down on my ass. I hear him growl and grunt and I know he's close too.

"Fuck, you're so fucking hot like this," he says into my ear, and I feel his thumb against my ass. "You'd look amazing with my cock in there." My head falls forward and my breath

comes in panting gasps. He forces his thumb into me and I gasp, and then I feel him release. His hot explosion floods me, and then he pulls away. He yanks my hair back hard so I'm looking at him over my shoulder, and he's panting, chest heaving.

"You're mine," he growls. "Fucking mine."

My head drops the instant he lets go and I dangle over the chair listening to the sound of his slacks being zipped as his cum drains from my body and runs down my inner thigh. My entire body is limp and weak, even after he loosens the restraints and lets me go. I wobble to my panties, but he points at the sofa and glares at me.

"But..." I whimper in protest, but his nostrils flare. I can't say no to him. He has this power over me I can't resist. It's like a spell cast on my mind making it impossible for me to rebel against him. The power he has is hypnotizing. I stumble to the couch and sit, feeling the moisture between my legs dampen the leather.

Lorenzo walks to the liquor cabinet and pulls out two glasses and a bottle of amber colored liquor. As he pours a few fingers into each one, puts the cork back in the bottle and sets it to the side, then picks up the glasses and comes toward me. He sits and hands me a glass. With a shaking hand I take it. Even my arms are weak from the exertion.

"Thank you," I mumble, bringing the glass to my lips instantly. The yoyo I've just been through has me confused and overwhelmed.

Lorenzo stole my brother right out from under me and brought him here without my permission. His arrogance is astounding, and I can't seem to stand up to him. Every time I do, this happens. He overpowers me, manipulates my body into desiring him, and crashes down around me with wave after wave of demands until I'm a blubbering mess, begging him to fuck me into submission.

"I'm not staying here," I tell him as I down the liquid and set the glass on the table. Norm still stands as a sentry in the

doorway, blocking my access to the rest of the house. “And I want to see my brother.”

“You don’t get a choice, Sofia. You will do as I say. And if you’re good, I will allow you to see Calvin. I’m sure it will be good for his mental state.” He sips his drink like a fucking dictator and I glare at him and cross one leg over the other, hugging my arms over my tits.

“At least let me get dressed.” I glance at my clothing and blink hard. There seems to be two pairs of slacks on the ground over there, not one. But Lorenzo is wearing his clothing.

“In good time...” He peers at me over the rim of his glass as he sips more, and asks, “Would you like another drink?”

Something is wrong. I never feel this tipsy after only one drink, even when I’ve not eaten all day. “My head...” I feel dizzy and I press my hand to my forehead. The room is spinning now, and I feel like I might pass out.

“Ah, yes, that would be the rohypnol kicking in.” His stupid smirk is irritating as fuck. I’d smack it off his face if I could see straight.

“You fucking roofied me?” I sway and grip the edge of the sofa to hold myself upright. “How?” I watched him the whole time. There is no way he put something in my drink that fast. All he did was take the glasses out and pour the drinks.

“You aren’t very observant, Sofia. Now, just be a good girl and go to sleep. I promise, tomorrow will be better.”

I blink my eyes hard and begin to fade. He had this entire thing planned. I just know it. He had the drug in the bottom of the glass before he even pulled it from the cupboard and he fucked me into submission so I’d drink with him. I’m such a fool.

“You planned it all. Didn’t you? Every attack, every time something bad happened to me. You planned it all so I’d come running to you for protection.” I glare at him through my fog. “I’m leaving and I’m taking Calvin with me,” I tell him, standing, but my body comes down harder than I can force it upright and my world is swallowed in his darkness.

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## LORENZO

Sofia crumples into a mess on the floor and I finish my drink before moving. Norm glances over his shoulder at her but turns back to the hallway. She should have learned her lesson weeks ago, but it's clear I have to take stronger measures to ensure she remains compliant with my desires.

"Norm, please carry Dr. Carter to my bed." I set my glass down and glance at hers. Having the rohypnol in the glass before she even came into the home was a fabulous idea, given to me by Norm. I'd just as soon have kept her tied to the chair and returned to fuck her every so often, but this way works too. It allows me to get a bit of work done this evening before turning in. She'll be sleeping all day and likely through the night with that much in her system.

Norm glances at her clothing, but passes by it and lifts her up, dangling her over his shoulder. The brute of a man can heft her body with one arm and I have always been impressed. His barrel chest is the size of my dresser.

"Sir," he nods, then vanishes into the hallway with her. I follow behind after pouring myself another drink. Sofia is a delicate flower, one that needs pruned and fertilized, but a flower all the same. How else could I describe the beauty of her benefit to my life against the backdrop of her stubborn streak? Soon enough those thorns will be plucked, however, and she will only bring good things.

We climb the stairs and turn down the hall. Norm flips on the light as he walks into my bedroom and with his free hand turns

down the bed before dropping her onto the mattress. He covers her and she rolls to the side with a humph.

“I don’t get it, boss,” he says, standing over her. “There are hundreds of women who would die to be on your arm. Why this one? Why her?”

I chuckle and pull up the armchair that sits by the reading desk in the corner of my room. The deep green crushed velvet shimmers in the light as I sit down and relax with my drink.

“Well, Norman, when you’ve been around as long as I have, you begin to truly appreciate the finer things in life. One of those things is a woman who isn’t afraid to defy you.” I sip the glass and watch him squint his eyes in confusion.

“You want her to rebel?” He steps back, folding his hands in front of his waist.

“Tell me, Norman. If you had blind spots would you want someone to tell you about them?”

He glances at her and nods. “Yeah, of course.”

“And if you had weaknesses would you want someone to shore them up? Make it so that you are strong in every area. Someone you could trust because you had refined them and taught them how you prefer to be treated.”

“Yes, of course.”

I sip my drink more and sigh. We both watch her sleeping for the moment as I allow my questions to sink in through Norm’s thick skull. Some things should never need to be explained. When I select someone to join my family I don’t like being questioned. In this case, however, I can see why both he and my father would believe some other, more compliant woman may be better for me.

“Sofia adds something that only she can bring to the table. She resists bringing it because she values her morals over my propositions. But she’ll come around, just like every other person we’ve brought into this family. Now, if you would, tell my father I’ll see him now.”

Norm nods and walks out, leaving me to finish my drink and watch my blushing bride to be. She snores lightly, hugging the blanket tightly to her chest. This little pawn is now in position to take the king and the one in one thousand chance of that happening is now guaranteed. Sofia only has to say I do at the altar I've prepared for her and this entire kingdom is hers—checkmate.

“Ah, I see you have a prize... Sleeping beauty is it?” Dad struts into the room puffing on a cigar and I finish the drink in my hand then stand and set the empty glass on my dresser.

“Sleeping beauty indeed. Sofia is a handful, but nothing a little magic can't handle.” The scent of his tobacco smoke filters through air and its sweet pungent aroma meets my nostrils. “We'll be wed before month's end now. The plans are set.”

“Good...” He nods and sucks on his cigar. “The invitations are sent then?”

“In the mail... And when the guests see what a magnificent bride I have, they'll surely praise the day you conceived me.”

Dad chuckles and then his expression grows serious. “It isn't enough, son, for her to be on your arm at events. We must make them see you hold the power of even the most prominent hospital in the country. Right now, you control the strings behind the scenes. Dr. Kline cowers in fear of you. But when you wed Ms. Carter your authority is cemented. Do you understand that?”

“Ambulances will be sent when you say they will. Surgeries performed only when you allow. Your enemies will grow sicker, your allies will have the best healthcare available. And you, my boy, will own the city. I built this organization to where it is. We own the markets, the streets, and even the police. But you are taking this to the next level. People will not breathe without your consent.” His mordant smile amuses me.

“Yes, well one thing at a time. An empire isn't built in a day, and first we have to make Sofia Mrs. Lorenzo Gatti.”

Then, we'll make power moves in this city the likes of which all of our enemies will be awestruck over. And when they need something—anything—they will be forced to bow before King Lorenzo.

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## SOFIA

**A** loud noise wakes me with a start. I open my eyes to blackness. It's night, and I have no idea where I am. Someone is thumping around in the room, and I feel disoriented and scared. This isn't my bed. I don't have silk sheets. And it smells like a man, not the familiar lavender fragrance of my calming spray I use at night.

I lay perfectly still and listen to the noises. It's a man, and it sounds like he's undressing. Fabric rustles, then I hear a zipper. He grunts and mutters something under his breath. His words are slurred too. It's Lorenzo. I can tell by his voice.

I pinch my eyes shut as it all floods back to me. The sex in his living room, tied over the chair, the way he gave me a drink which he openly confessed to having put rohypnol in. The sick bastard drugged me to knock me out. I wonder how long I've been sleeping. I turn slowly to look for an alarm, but there isn't one. No way to see what time it is even.

He stumbles into another room and the light that pours out into the darkness is almost blinding. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to it and I see his naked ass as he vanishes around the corner into the room. As I sit up the cool air wafts across my skin and I realize I'm naked too. They didn't even have the decency to put my clothes back on after I passed out. God I hate them.

I need to get out of here, to find my clothes and phone, then get Calvin and get out. If my damn car was fixed I'd have driven here and I'd have a way out, but after that carjacking I haven't had the money to repair it. It's at some damn garage,



wherever they towed it, and I'm stuck with no transportation. But Lorenzo has to have a car. I'll just have to find the keys.

Shivering, I push myself off the bed and stand. My head spins a little, a side effect of the drug he gave me. I've seen it a dozen times, women come into the ER with hours of their day gone after having been drugged and even assaulted at times. I won't let him do it to me again. I'm not sticking around long enough to give him a shot. I walk toward the door but before I get my hand on the knob, he walks back into the room and looks up at me.

"Where are you going?" he asks, voice so slurred I can't make out what follows it. He sways with each step and gets hold of my wrist.

"I was going to find my clothes." That part isn't a lie. I need my clothing. He keeps his house like a fucking ice box and I'm cold.

"Well you don't need clothes in the middle of the night." Lorenzo tugs on my wrist and I relinquish my hold on the door knob, following him to bed. If I fight him too much he'll sober up and never let me out. But if I go along with him, maybe he'll pass out and give me a chance to get out of here with Calvin before anyone is the wiser.

"You're right, I don't." He leads me to the bed where he sits and pulls me against his naked body. His hands rest on my hips as he nestles his face between my tits and breathes my scent in.

"Mmmm, I like you naked. Makes me want to fuck you."

I roll my eyes. It isn't that I don't like the sex. Don't get me wrong, it's always incredible. I just don't have patience for this tonight. I want him to go to sleep so I can find my brother and leave. My plan is to seduce him when he's half asleep and then make a mad break for the door.

"Then fuck me." I tell him as I turn and plant my ass on his lap and grind back and forth on his cock. He's limp now, but it won't take long. His fingers dig into my hips and he pulls me down.

“I’ll fuck you when I’m ready, Sofia, and you’ll like it.” His hot breath on my back sends a shiver down my spine. Even when I give him what he wants he still finds a way to be the dominant one. Fuck I love when he dominates me.

“Spank me,” I tell him. I remind myself that I’m seducing him so he will sleep, but my body is actually getting aroused too. And fuck if I don’t find myself wanting to get off one more time before I run. The things this man has done to me, the way he has treated me, and I still want him to fuck me. I need to have my head checked.

“You’re not in control here, Sofia.” I feel his lips at my ear and shudder. His hand slides around my hip and between my legs, and as I part them so he can touch me, I feel exactly how much I want him to fuck me. My pussy drips with moisture for him. Why does my body betray me? He’s a monster and I’m not safe here.

“But I’ve been a bad girl, Lorenzo,” I whisper. His fingertips brush over my clit and my hips jerk in response. “That’s why I want you to spank me.”

“You’re already so wet for me.”

I want him to stop talking and start fucking. “Because of the spanking...” I gasp as his fingers circle my clit and then slide into me. He’s going to fuck me and I’m going to let him. His cock is starting to harden beneath me, so I reach past his swirling fingers and help it along, squeezing and stroking him as he swells. “I like when you punish me like I’m a bad girl.”

Another shudder runs through me as his fingers withdraw from my pussy and then slap my ass, a little harder than he intended. A little pain mixed with my pleasure is good. “It’s no fun when you go along with it,” he growls. I know that tone. He groans and spanks me harder, making me cry out. The spanks are getting harder and harder, and I wonder if he’s doing it on purpose to rile me up so I’ll fight him. Is he intentionally not giving me what I want? He’s supposed to spank me, and then fuck me, and then let me leave. I can’t be here when the sun comes up.

“Fine...” I snap, and I stand, forcing his fingers off of my body. I stomp toward the door and he’s on me like a predator, pinning me against the wall.

“That’s more like it...” Lorenzo grabs a handful of my hair and pulls so hard my neck arches upward. Then he bites my shoulder and I feel when his teeth break the skin. He’s usually rough, but never like this.

“Ouch!” I yelp, and push off the wall, making him stumble backward. His hand comes down on my ass hard, letting out a loud smack and I yelp again. “Fuck.”

“That’s right.” He grabs my arm and pushes me onto the couch. “You’re mine. You don’t walk away.”

“I don’t belong to you.” I try to push him off of me, but he’s relentless.

“You’re not going anywhere.” He growls, grabbing me by the arm and shoving me toward the bed.

“Yes I am.” I glare at him, and try to wrench my arm from his grasp. He’s not listening. Something has shifted in him. I don’t know what it is, but it’s terrifying. I’m no longer in control of the situation. He drops me on the bed and grabs my hips, pulling me up to my knees and then pushing my head down to the mattress. Finally we’re getting somewhere. I just need him to expend his energy and pass out already.

“You’re mine. You don’t walk away.”

“I don’t belong to you.” I try to push him off of me, but he’s relentless. He climbs on top of me and grabs my wrists, pinning them behind my back with one hand. I can’t break his grip, and I can’t squirm away.

“You do as I say.” He spanks me again and I gasp for breath. I fight harder, and he holds me there tightly as his dick slides through my moisture teasing me. “You’re going to be a good girl for daddy, right?” He runs his hand up the back of my thigh and then digs his fingers into my skin, squeezing hard. I try to nod, but the position I’m in doesn’t allow it.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” He smacks my ass again and I clench my teeth, trying to keep myself from crying out again.

“Yes daddy.” I whimper as he slides his fingers between my thighs, and presses his thumb inside me, spreading my juices around before pulling it out and sliding two fingers into my hole.

“Good girl.” He pulls his hand away and I feel the head of his dick pressing against me. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” He pushes into me hard, and I feel my body opening to him. He’s so big, and he grabs my ass, spreading me open to take as much of him as possible. He’s filling me up in ways I never thought possible. I can’t move. I can’t breathe. I can’t do anything but lay there while he takes what he wants.

He fucks me so hard I can’t breathe, and when he finally lets go of my wrists, I reach for my clit to rub it. My body tenses when a thumb sinks in my ass and I shudder.

“That’s right. Make yourself feel good.” He pulls my hips back, and my fingers rub against my sweet spot with every thrust. I feel myself building, and my back arches, pushing my ass back against him. I want him to take me harder. I want him to hurt me. I want him to make me come harder than I’ve ever come before.

“That’s my girl.” He groans, and I feel him swell inside me.

My body jolts, the internal coil of my groin snapping as orgasm crashes over me. I convulse and gasp and he thrusts a few more times before I feel his heat flood me. He pumps into me again and again, and I ride the waves of pleasure until I’m weak.

He slides out of me and crawls across the mattress, collapsing onto his pillow, and I fold the blanket up over him. Hopefully he just passes out and I can get on with my plan. I linger on the bed watching him. He tugs the covers over his shoulder and fluffs his pillow, then snaps, “Shut the light off.”

“Of course,” I tell him, slipping off the bed and tiptoeing to the bathroom. I step inside and close the door until it’s barely

cracked. Within seconds, he's snoring. Now is my chance to sneak out.

I turn the knob as quietly as I can and then push the door shut so it's latched. Lorenzo's cum is dripping down my inner thigh, and when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror I see a bruise across my stomach—probably from that damn chair—and blood running down my chest from a love bite on my shoulder. I scowl and reach for toilet paper to wipe it up. It's partly dried there, and I don't have time for a shower, not to mention I don't want to wake him up. I scrape at it with my fingernail, but soon get frustrated. I don't have time for this.

After relieving my bladder, I shut the light off and feel my way to the door. The cold marble tile on the walls is smooth, chilling my fingers to the bone. The door creaks as it opens too, which disturbs Lorenzo's snoring briefly, but he pulls the blanket tighter and continues sleeping.

My heart is racing at the idea that I may be caught, but it doesn't stop me from creeping to his bedroom door and opening it. The entire house is so fucking cold I'm shaking like a leaf. It's dark too, but I manage to find my way to the stairs and head down. No one is awake. It's the middle of the night. Still, I feel embarrassed that I'm completely naked and traipsing around this place like I own it.

I see a hint of light coming from under a door and tiptoe over to it. There are no sounds coming from the other side, so I open the door. It's Lorenzo's office, which only proves I'm turned around in the dark and a bit lost. I hurry into it and rifle through things, emptying drawers and opening cupboards. There are no keys anywhere, but it doesn't deter me. I keep searching until I fear someone will come find me, and finally give up. I'm too cold to fuck around with this.

Now that I have my bearings, I head for the living room where I left my clothes, hoping they are still there. But when I walk in, I see nothing but the normal furniture and rugs. The light from the moon streaming in the picture window is enough for me to see by and it pisses me off. How on earth can I leave this fucking place if he took my shit?

I huff and decide to search this room too. I pull open drawers in the end tables and empty their contents onto the tabletops as quietly as I can. Then I move to the bookshelves, but only find dust and cobwebs there. Without my phone I can't even call an Uber to come get me.

Finally, when I move to the small stand near the door I find a set of keys. I have no clue what sort of car it is or where I'll find it, but I have a way out. Now I need Calvin and some clothing.

I plunge back into the darkness of the hallway and tiptoe up the hall. There are so many rooms in this place I have no way of knowing which one he's in. I stop and press my fingers to my forehead and think. And as I do, I hear snoring, heaving snoring. It's Calvin. I can hear my brother's loud freight train rumbling and it makes me grin. I follow the sounds down the hallway to the door right next to Lorenzo's office.

Calvin doesn't stir as I open the door and walk in. He continues rumbling the air in a peaceful slumber, so I head for the dresser and start opening drawers. Most of them are empty, but I do find one drawer with fresh boxers and t-shirts. They're Calvin's, likely brought here with him because Lorenzo thought he had the perfect plan to make me stay with him. I quickly throw them on and then search the closet. His wheelchair is here too—perfect.

I wrestle the thing out of the closet and open it up, then gently wake Calvin. “Hey, bud, we have to get out of here.”

He blinks and yawns and shakes his head. “What? Why?”

“Just be quiet okay? I'll explain everything later.”

Calvin has zero ability to help me, and it takes me the better part of a half hour to get him settled into the chair and ready for transport. Getting him to the front door is easy, but hauling him down the stairs out front is a nightmare. I have to take them one step at a time and my arms and legs burn and shake by the time I'm done, but once I get him on the sidewalk it's smooth sailing. I take the keys, stored in the pouch on the back side of Calvin's chair, and push the lock button.

In the distance, several cars down, lights flash. I'm home free. All I have to do is load him in the car and I am out of here. I can call Jen, find out where the cabin is, and hide. Even if I have to fly to Iceland to get away from this family I will. No one threatens my brother, least of all Lorenzo Gatti.

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## LORENZO

**F**irst light comes early when I don't get into bed until the wee hours of the morning. But my body awakens me as usual. I have a built-in alarm clock that never allows me to sleep past seven a.m.

I rub my eyes and turn over, expecting to find Sofia curled up next to me, but she isn't here. The covers are turned down and the mattress is cold. She's been gone for a while it seems. The bathroom door is open, light off, which means she isn't there either. I'm not too worried about it. Wherever she is, I'll find her and we'll have a talk about manners.

I roll out of bed, my cock standing on end. I have to piss and I'm starving. So, yawning, I head for the bathroom. My dick sways with each step until I'm leaning over the toilet holding the bastard down so my aim is true. My head thrums with pain, the noise of my piss barreling into the shitter so loud it hurts my ears. I close my eyes and lean my head on my forearm, braced on the wall above the toilet. When my bladder is empty, I return to the bedroom and throw on a pair of shorts.

My phone, buried somewhere in my clothing from yesterday, vibrates, and I sort through it to find the screen lit up. I've missed several messages from Norm, and a few from my father. They'll wait until I've had my coffee and something salty to ditch this hangover.

Phone in hand, I head downstairs, taking the steps at a jog. There's a bit of ruckus going on in my office and I hear my father shouting at someone. He never shows up this early, but I'm not surprised he's here. He thinks he owns this place too,



and I let him do as he pleases knowing his time is short and one day I'll own it all.

Ignoring the shouts I head straight for the kitchen. Coffee is brewing and I smell bacon frying before I even open the door. My cook stands with her back to me as I enter but she greets me with her familiar "Morning, Mr. Gatti," as I head directly for the coffee point.

"Has Ms. Carter been through here?" I take out a mug and fill it with the hot brew from the pot, then turn and sip it as I lean back against the counter.

"Oh, no, sir. I haven't seen any guests this morning." She glances at me with a side-eye and I grimace. If she hasn't had coffee, perhaps she's gone straight in to visit with her brother. I know she was very adamant about seeing him last night.

I pull out my phone and open the home monitoring system app as I stroll back toward the kitchen door, muttering, "Call me when the food is done," to the cook as I walk out. I pull up the camera view of Calvin's room and I'm shocked to see his bed empty, covers turned down. "What the fuck?" I mutter and look up as I hear footsteps ahead of me.

Dad strolls out of my office and across the foyer toward me. "Your little toy has done it again, Lorenzo, and you need to get her under control."

"What are you talking about?" I put the phone in my pocket. I'll have to look into that more later.

"I mean, Norman's car is gone, taken right off the street. The keys are missing." Dad shakes his head and grunts out a sigh. "She really is a match for you though. Just as stubborn and headstrong as you always were as a boy. Perhaps you'll have strong sons to take over for you when it's your turn to go." He walks past me into the kitchen and I move straight toward my open office door.

When I walk in, I see Norm hovering over the computer on my desk. I take in the sight of my office. It's trashed. Papers and pens litter the floor in front of every piece of furniture. The

things on my desk are messed up, and it looks like someone came in here to steal from me.

“Sir,” Norm says, not even looking up. He stares intently and I round my desk to see at what. He’s reviewing the same footage I was just looking at.

“What happened?” My head still pounds with pain, but the coffee is helping a little. I was never stupid enough to believe Sofia would lie down like a well-trained dog to obey me, but I never thought she’d steal a car and flee in the middle of the night.

“I’m trying to see what time she left. She took my keys right off the stand in the living room and her brother too.”

“What?” I set the coffee down and barge out the door of my office and into the next room where Calvin is supposed to be. His bed is empty, just like on the monitor, and his closet stands open. The wheelchair is gone. “Fuck.”

I cram my hand through my hair and let out a growl of rage and frustration. Then I swipe my hand across the nightstand, pushing everything on it to the floor. The lamp shatters, and the box of tissues tumbles across the floor. She’s gone?

“Sir, she left around three a.m. it appears.”

Livid, I lunge at him, shoving him with both hands hard until he stumbles backward. His sheer size dwarfs me, but I don’t cower. “You let her just fucking waltz out of here with your keys, Norm.” He knows he shouldn’t fuck with me. He knows me well enough to know I will hurt him—badly.

“Sir, I—”

“You fucking find her now. You get your fucking ass out there on that street and find her. You bring her back here and you do it now.” I shove him again and he bumps into the wall. His jaw tightens, nostrils flared, and he turns his head to the side. He’s angry with me, but this is his fault. “You left your fucking keys out in the open. What the hell have I taught you? You know nothing now?”

“I’ll make it right, sir.” His voice is tight and his shoulders square. Norm doesn’t make mistakes like this, and maybe I’ve

been too soft on him, but so help me if he doesn't bring her back, I will gut him as quickly as I would any other soldier.

"Now, Norm." I walk out the door past him and head straight up the stairs to get dressed. The pain in my head fuels my anger even more. I have never been so furious in my life. No one has ever had the audacity to defy me like this. Not a single soul. And Sofia will pay.

I strip the shorts off and find boxers, then dress in a suit and head back downstairs. On my way, I make a call to one of my men, giving strict orders to find her and bring her back, and when I walk into the kitchen, Dad is seated at the table eating breakfast. He stabs his fork into a bite of eggs and brings it to his lips with a smug look.

I sit across from him and the cook sets a fresh cup of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. I pick up a fork and stare at the plate, still enraged. Though I blame myself partly. I had far too much to drink and if I'd have been more alert, I'd have noticed her leaving.

"The city is large and it's easy to disappear, but we'll find her." Dad sips his coffee and sets his fork down. "Now, eat. We have a lot to get done today."

I have a bite of eggs and pick up a strip of bacon and shove it in my mouth. The crispy meat crunches between my teeth as I chew and I look up to meet his gaze.

"Norman has to go, Lorenzo. He's weak. He might be loyal, but if he is stupid, your kingdom will fall. Cut him loose." Dad picks at his tooth with the tip of his tongue. I had a feeling something like this would happen eventually. He has never liked Norm. But I won't just cut him off. His loyalty is worth too much.

"I'll handle it," I grumble as I shove another bite of eggs into my mouth. I won't allow anyone to make decisions for me, not even him.

"You're only as strong as your weakest—"

"I said I'll handle it!" I glare at him and his eyebrows bounce up and down one time before he uses his napkin to wipe his

mouth.

“Mmm...” He stands and nods then turns to the cook. “Thank you for breakfast. It was delightful.”

Dad strolls out without another word, and I glower at my plate of food. If Sofia thinks this is getting her out of our arrangement she’s wrong. As soon as I find her I’m taking her straight to the altar. And if she refuses to wed me, things will get violent.

I will have my way.

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## SOFIA

The beauty and peace of this little cabin perched on the side of the mountain is breathtaking despite the rain that's been falling all day. I carry my cup of tea and head toward the living room to check on Calvin, who is strapped into his wheelchair and watching game shows on TV. The wood floor creaks beneath my feet, but the place is sturdy, made of giant logs stacked upon one another and dovetailed at the corner the way old cabins always are.

The deck out back overlooks the Catskill Creek in the valley below. With all the foliage of the summer months, I can't see the creek at all, but I bet it's beautiful in late fall when the colors shift and the leaves fall. And I can only imagine how picturesque it is in winter when the creek freezes and snow blankets the mountain side. Jen is a saint for allowing Calvin and I to come up here. She even loaned me her car just in case Lorenzo's car has a tracking unit in it.

"Hey, Cal, need anything?" I shuffle toward him and he looks at me from the corner of his eye. Even he has been feeling better, slowly coming out of his depression. He thinks we are on a vacation here, that I got a bonus and some time off. It's a total lie meant to protect him from the awful truth, and maybe he suspects something, but I'm not planning on breaking the façade until I hear from Dr. Baker about the possibility of a new job elsewhere.

"A drink would be okay," he says, slicking his lip with his tongue. "These old reruns are getting boring too. Maybe we can find a different channel?"

I've been caring for him alone for the past ten days. The most challenging part is getting him in and out of the bath alone, but thankfully he prefers a sponge bath over the real thing. Having his nurse here would definitely speed up every process, but this has given us time to bond. Besides, without work I feel entirely useless, as if I have nothing to do and no purpose in life, so taking care of Calvin has been a good distraction to that.

I set my tea down and flick through the channels until he grunts approval. It's the I Love Lucy show with Lucille Ball. He chuckles before I even put the remote down to reach for his glass of water.

"I love this one..."

I smile and lift the cup to his lips, placing the end of the straw in his mouth. He sucks in, having a long drink. His lips are chapped; maybe he's a little dehydrated. And his body is frail, underweight and pale too. His muscles are atrophied from being in this damn chair for so long, and I feel like his spirit has undergone a similar decay. I know he feels even more useless than I do right now, so I can't complain. All I can do is continue to search for a new job and ask Dr. Baker for his help in facilitating Calvin's completion of the trial in a few weeks.

"I am thinking of having a hot bath. Will you be alright for a while?" I readjust the chest strap holding him upright and he angles his chin up to look at me and smile.

"Of course, you deserve some time to relax."

I pat his shoulder and set his drink down, then collect my tea and head for the bathroom. The giant soaker tub is large enough for two people, but unfortunately it doesn't have jets. That would make it perfect. Still, I start the water to fill it while I strip my clothing off. I leave the door open so I can hear Cal if he needs me, knowing he is stuck there behind the TV until I'm finished here.

With my tea perched on the edge of the tub, I add a hefty dose of bubble solution beneath the flow of the water and set it back on the counter. I get a towel so I can dry my hands and use my phone while I soak, and I drape it over the edge near my

phone. Then I open the blinds to the window so I can watch the scenery just beyond the walls of the cabin. There is an option to open the entire wall and make this bathroom part of the deck, but it's way too much work just to soak alone.

I climb in, sinking into the water as it continues to fill, and watch a pair of cardinals out the window flitting about. It brings a smile to my face because I heard once that if you see a cardinal it means someone who has passed away is watching over you and keeping an eye on you. I think of my parents and their tragic deaths and feel a bit emotional. Dad would know what to do right now, how to help me. As a retired police officer, he had so much wisdom. But I'm alone to deal with this situation on my own.

Sighing, I draw some of the bubbles up to cover my chest and watch the birds fly away. For a late evening in June it's growing dark early, probably due to the cloud cover which I suddenly feel matches my mood. I shut the water off and relax back into the water and close my eyes. I can't stay in this cabin forever. It's not feasible. I need to make money, and even though Jen is generous enough to allow me to use this place free of charge, eventually I will be out of savings and won't have a way to buy food or toiletries. Calvin's medications are expensive and that trial alone will eat up half my salary for July—if I get a salary.

I have to go somewhere, though I know I can't go back to New York, at least not as myself. Lorenzo will find me and while I don't think he personally will kill me, his father definitely will. The man is evil personified. I wouldn't be surprised to find out they've been harassing people I know to get to me.

As if on cue, my phone rings. I rise up in the water to look at the number. Jen helped me get set up with a burner cell since my phone is at Lorenzo's house with my purse and the last outfit I wore. I never found it that night I escaped, so I had to replace it. No one has this number except for her, though, so when I see her number flash on the screen I dry my hands and pick the phone up.

“Hey, girl...” I settle into the water again. She’s called a few times to check in, so this isn’t a shock or anything.

“Uh, Sofi, we need to talk.” Jen sounds rattled and it makes the hair on my arms stand on end. I submerge them in the water as far as I can without letting the bubbles get on the phone.

“Sure, what’s wrong? Did something happen?” I’ve had ten days to let the tension of the last four months out of my body, but with one sentence she’s managed to bring it all back. I feel my shoulders tighten as she continues.

“They killed that man... The one who followed Gatti around all the time. He’s dead...” The phone chimes, indicating a text message, and I pull it away from my ear to look at the screen. Jen sent a picture from the newspaper of Norm. His face on the front of the New York Times next to the headline of “Shocking Death being Investigated” makes my skin crawl.

“They what?” Lorenzo killed his right-hand man? He loves Norm. Why would he do that? If he killed Norm for letting me escape, what will he do to me?

“There is no story on how it happened, but the body was found floating in the Hudson. Sofi, this is fucked up, and it’s freaking me out.” I can picture her looking over her shoulder as she speaks to me. “Freaky shit has been happening.”

Norm is really dead? That sick fuck actually killed him because I stole some keys and left the house? My throat constricts and I press my eyes shut. This can’t be happening. I can’t carry the weight of that guilt on my shoulders the rest of my life. How could he do that to Norm?

“They followed me, Sofi.”

“They what?” My eyes snap open and I sit up straighter. “What happened?”

“Gatti and some older man with dark hair followed me from my apartment to the coffee shop on foot, then took the same subway car as me to work. They never looked at me, but they knew who I was. They walked behind me all the way to the hospital, and they watched me go right in the doors. What if



they hurt me because they want to get to you?” She sounds terrified.

“Come to the cabin. Stay with me.” I can’t believe this. Why are they going after people who have nothing to do with their little plan? Norm I understand, but Jen? She’s innocent.

“Yeah, I think I will.” I can hear the trepidation in her tone. “Do you guys need anything? Because once I come up there I’m staying.”

“Uh, maybe some toilet paper.”

“Alright, give me a bit of time to get my affairs in order. This is insane. I can’t have the mafia following me around.”

“I’m so sorry I dragged you into this, Jen. I swear we’ll figure it out.”

She hangs up before saying goodbye and I stare at the screen as the call ends and my home screen appears. Then it goes black as I sit in shock, shivering as the air conditioning chills my exposed damp shoulders. I knew the Gatti family were into some horrible shit, and I knew Antonio was a horrible person, but Lorenzo? He’s not evil like his father, just misunderstood. I know with enough time and patience, I could have shown him how to run his business without killing and harming people.

When movement outside the window catches my eye I turn my eyes that direction. It’s a crow, perched on the deck railing, staring right at me. The beady eyed bird’s head tilts and angles, but its eyes stay fixed on me. The omen of death is enough to make me reach up and snap the blinds shut, but even with my movement the bird stays in place. He’s out there staring at the window and I am in this damn bath shaking, scared of a ghost.

“You’re safe here, Sofi... Try to breathe. He can’t get to you if he doesn’t know where you are.” I set my phone down and try to relax again, but that part of this bath is ruined. Now I have to make a plan. I can’t stay here forever and if he comes looking, he’s going to find me. I have to get away for real, before anyone else I love gets hurt.

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## LORENZO

I consider myself a patient man but I'm done with patience, and mercy, and second chances. Kline and Baker stand in front of me while I sit at the head of the conference room table on the fourth floor of Bellevue Hospital, overlooking the great city of New York. The Hudson Bay shimmers in the sunlight, leaving rippling fingers of light on the ceiling overhead. Kline is obstinate, glaring at me with fury. But Baker is weak, wringing his hands in fear next to the older, wiser man.

"I've been more than generous with this place. My donations have gone unnoticed." I press a finger into the mahogany table and lean my head to the side. "You have no surgical chair. You have no specialized trauma surgeon. You have no fucking clue where she is!" My voice rises in tone and volume with each sentence. I look at Lord, my new right-hand man, promoted when Norman had his little accident.

Lord rolls his neck, cracking it loudly. The door is locked, the blinds to the rest of the hospital closed off so no one can see us, but they can definitely hear. I'm not worried. Kline and Baker are going to tell me what I need to know and then I'm going to leave peacefully.

"Where is our good doctor?" I splay my palm on the table and purse my lips, waiting for a response.

"Carter is in the wind. She requested a leave of absence." Kline acts like he's not intimidated, but I see fear in his body. It shows up in the vein throbbing on his forehead, the sweat

beading across his upper lip. I'll never break him, but Baker? Child's play.

I nod at Lord who moves swiftly, gripping Baker by the back of the neck and slamming his face forward until it smashes into the table. He shouts and comes up with blood gushing from his nose, both hands scrambling to cover it.

"Holy fuck, man," he whimpers and Kline shifts nervously on his feet.

"Maybe Mr. Baker here knows where she is..." I sit straight up, both feet planted firmly on the floor and nod at Lord again.

"Mr. Gatti, I assure you neither of us knows where Dr. Carter is. We were only told she is taking time off." Kline adjusts his tie and Lord snatches it from his hand, sliding the knot all the way up to his neck so tight he gasps and grips Lord's wrists. "Please, we don't know."

"Mr. Baker, please tell me where Dr. Carter is." I stand, watching as Lord tightens the knot around Kline's neck. The man gasps and claws at Lord's grasp as his face turns red.

"I don't know, man. Please, stop this..." Baker has his face covered, blood running down his arms and ripping from his elbows. "Let him go."

Lord watches me for direction and I nod at him. He pinches harder, tightening the knot further. Kline drops to his knees, letting guttural gasps for air escape. His face is so red it's comical, like a cartoon character whose eyes are bulging.

"Looks like Kline needs a little help, Baker." I tap my finger on the top of the table and turn my gaze on him.

"Listen, we honestly don't know. Sofi said she wants her brother to go through with the trial in July and I offered to help. Besides that, I know nothing. Jen will know. She'll tell you where Sofi is." Baker squeals like a fucking pig and I nod again at Lord who lets Kline fall to the ground in a heap, sucking in air like it's a line of snow off the table.

"Thank you for the information gentlemen. We'll be going now." We walk toward the door and I look back over my shoulder at Baker. "Where will I find this Jen?"

“Second floor... doctor’s lounge.” Baker uses his sleeve to dab his nose and I’m certain we’ve made our point.

I follow Lord to the elevators and then toward the doctor’s lounge. The signs point us in the right direction, but before we even get there we are met with a flurry of activity. A woman with fear in her brown eyes ducks her head and stares at her phone, rushing past us toward the exit. There is a door directly into the parking garage at the end of this floor. I know because I’ve seen it myself on the surveillance footage from the day Sofia was attacked near her car. That has to be Jen, and she has to have been warned by Baker.

“This way,” I growl at Lord and he turns to follow me this time. We walk faster, trying to match her pace, but she glances over her shoulder and takes off running. “Fuck.” I gesture at Lord and we take chase. Doctors and nurses stare at us as we pursue her out the door of the hospital into the heat of the June temps.

Jen weaves through cars and vanishes for a second. I think she’s climbing into a car but I hear no doors shut. So I stop and let Lord continue the chase. Trying to calm my breath, I lean against a parked SUV and listen. I hear his footsteps and the engine of a car somewhere in the garage on another level. Then I hear whimpering. She’s close.

Walking silently, I creep forward, checking between cars as I go. When I get to a large panel van, I stop and look beneath it. I see a woman’s feet there on the other side and know I’ve got her. Lord is off somewhere, so it’s just me for now.

I pull the gun out of my waistband, and hold it in front of me as I swing around the van and point it at her. I have no need to use it if she responds the correct way but if she resists me, she’ll learn as quickly as Dr. Kline how she shouldn’t cross me.

“Please, don’t shoot!” Jen cowers, holding hands up in front of herself. She drops her cell phone and her arms shake. Large tears stream down her face smearing her mascara as I jerk the tip of my gun upward.

“Come here.” I remain there by the van, just out of sight of the cameras. If Kline knows what’s good for him he’ll have security erase this footage.

Jen moves forward, no cell phone, no bag, no car keys. The only thing she has is her stethoscope draped around her neck but off balance. It teeters on the edge of sliding off and she quivers in fear as she moves closer to me.

“Please, don’t hurt me. Sofi just wanted out. She’s scared.” She sniffles and blinks out more tears and as soon as she’s close enough, I grab her wrist and pull her into me putting the gun into her rib cage.

“Hands down,” I tell her, hooking an arm around her side. She complies, glancing at her phone on the ground behind her. “Walk with me nice and steady now and you won’t be hurt.”

Jen hesitates but moves with me. We walk away from the row of cars toward the elevator in the far corner of the garage. It allows street access for people who are merely in town to do some shopping. Hospital staff use the other elevator, and after the scene we caused chasing her, I don’t want to ruffle any feathers.

On our short walk across the garage Lord comes back into view, gun in hand searching. When he sees me with Jen, he falls into step beside me.

“Jennifer, I presume?” The gun grinds against her ribs and she whimpers.

“Yes.”

“Good, you are going to tell me where Dr. Carter is.”

I press the elevator button with the tip of the gun and she squirms in my sideways embrace uncomfortably. “Please, don’t hurt her. She just wants to take care of Calvin.”

“I have no intention of hurting her,” I tell her as the doors slide open and a few folks walk out. They offer confused expressions but continue walking away as we board the elevator. With Lord safely tucked inside the carriage with me. I pull the emergency stop button and let Jen scurry away.

The doors shut on us and Jen cowers in the corner, crying and covering her face. Lord puts his gun back in its holster and stands with hands clasped in front of him as if waiting on an order.

“I will definitely hurt you if you don’t tell me what I want to know.” Holstering my weapon in the back of my waist band I straighten my suit coat. I don’t like having to run, and I seriously don’t like getting blood on my good suits, so I’ll leave the dirty work to Lord now.

“What? What do you want? Hasn’t she done enough? She saved your life.” Jen is feisty like Sofia. I can see why they get along. These New York women are mouthy and loud, and I’m shocked I even found one I can tolerate. I’m not pleased with the one standing in front of me though.

“Where is she?” I narrow my eyes on her and Lord steps forward, menacingly.

“She’s hiding. I’m not telling you where she is.” Jen lashes out at me with her words and Lord gives her a hard smack across the face.

“Where?” I ask again, and she spits at his feet. Lord again corrects her, this time with the back of his hand. Her head whips to the side and she covers her face, crying harder.

“I’m not telling you...” This time she hides her eyes, keeping them turned downward and away from me.

Lord doesn’t even have to await my word this time. He moves in, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look up at me. His grip is tight, but not on her throat. She will need to be able to cough up the location for us, so damaging her vocal chords is counter productive.

“Where. Is. She?” I’m beyond the point of losing patience. If she can’t tell me, I’ll return to Kline and Baker.

Jen whimpers and writhes against Lord’s grip and the tears never stop. She smacks at him, kicking out with her feet and digging her nails into his arm so hard she draws blood but he refuses to let up.

“Where!” I scream, and she pleads.

“Please... Okay. I’ll tell you... I’ll take you there. Please don’t hurt me.” Lord releases his grip on her and she slides to the ground in the corner of the elevator curling into a ball.

“Get up,” I order, pushing the emergency stop button back in. If she’s taking us there we aren’t finished with her but just for good measure, Lord is going to teach her a lesson so the next leg of this journey will go more smoothly. I turn to him and say, “I’ll call Dex for a ride. You bring her to the house.” I glance down at her. “After her little lesson.”

Jen wails and cries out as the elevator doors open and I step out. I turn to see Lord unbuckling his belt, a hungry look in his eye. This is right up his alley and exactly what he gets off on. Jen will learn her lesson and we will go collect Sofia this evening.

Lord looks up at me as he pulls his dick out of his jeans and as the door slides shut I see him reaching for the emergency stop button.

I have a few arrangements to make before we pick up my bride to be. He better not take too long.

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## SOFIA

When Jen sent the text that she was coming and would be here by lunch, I went into high gear. I cleaned the entire cabin, maybe better than it had been cleaned in years, and then I fed Calvin and got him nestled in his bed to watch his afternoon soap operas. He promptly fell asleep which left me to make lunch for me and Jen.

The little finger sandwiches are probably a little fancy for a simple lunch to welcome her to her own cabin, but she's been very generous to allow me and Calvin to shelter here as we wait out the storm surrounding my life. The least I can do is make her feel at home the instant she walks in. So I pour two glasses of wine, set the sandwich platter out, and sit down to wait.

It's a sunny day today, though it will rain at some point. I've learned that the leeward side of this mountain getaway overlooking the river below gets rain at least one time each day for about ten minutes at a time. That has kept me busy on more than one occasion, betting against myself on what time the rain will arrive. Today, though, seems like it will be an evening shower, with the sun in full force warming the cabin.

I peek out the front window again, but see nothing. So I nervously make another pass round the living room picking things up. I left the remote lying on the arm of the tweed sofa, so I put it back in the basket on the TV stand. And my tea mug from morning tea still sits on the table in the breakfast nook in the corner of the room. I carry it to the kitchen and grab a rag to wipe the ring left behind from condensation.



Once I've inspected everything, I peek again at the driveway, a steep meandering blacktop that winds its way up the hill toward the garage to the east of the cabin. I hear a low rumble, indicating a car is approaching, and I know it's her. No one else knows I'm here and from what Jen has told me, no one bothers the cabin, except the cleaning crew after the place has been rented out to Airbnb guests.

It's been almost two weeks since I've seen anyone other than Calvin, so my chest squeezes warmly at the thought of having company to talk to. I let the curtain fall shut and walk to the door and thrust it open. Sunlight bathes the deck out front and I step out of the climate controlled cabin into the warmth of the summer air. The car sounds like it's straining to make the climb, which is understandable considering the incline. The steep eight-percent grade was hard for Jen's car when I drove up here. She intended to bring a taxi, and I'm sure those things aren't any better.

A sleek black sedan with tinted windows appears on the winding drive below and I walk toward the edge of the deck as it vanishes behind the row of trees to snake its way around the back side of the cabin and finally circle around to stop near the front. The stairs creak as I descend, arms folded over my chest in anxious anticipation. It's not a long drive, but I have a feeling Jen will be ready to get out of the car and into the cabin. She told me how she felt afraid, and this place represents safety for both of us.

Except when the car rolls up, and the driver comes into view, I get the feeling something is very wrong. It's not a twenty-something young person driving an Uber that I see. It's a man in a dark suit with dark aviator sunglasses and a stern expression. My shoulders tense, my body stiffening, and my blood runs cold. It can't be...

The car stops short of the deck and for a second I think about running back inside, locking the doors, and calling 9-1-1, but I remain in freeze mode, staring at the dark car as the back door opens. My mind wrestles against itself, arguing how this has to be Jen, not Lorenzo, how I must be fooling myself, my eyes

playing tricks on me. I take a tentative step backward and gasp as I see Jen flung from the car.

She collapses on the leaf-littered blacktop and cries out. Her face is bloody, her shirt torn. “Sofi, run!” she grunts but before I can even turn to go, Lorenzo steps out of the car, gun in hand, pointed at me.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to do that if I were you.” He steps over Jen and walks toward me a few steps, but he keeps his distance.

I shake, horrified at what I’m seeing. My mouth gapes, and my hand slowly rises to cover it. Tears force their way up to my eyes and they brim there, waiting to be given permission to fall.

“What the hell?” I want to run to her and find out where she’s bleeding, but Lorenzo stands between me and her. “What did you do to her? Why did you do that!”

The front door of the car opens and the guy with the suit and glasses, whom I don’t recognize, steps out and walks back toward Jen.

“Please,” she whimpers, “please just let me go now.” The man ignores her pleas for relief and grabs her by the back of the head with a handful of hair, hoisting her up to her feet. Her pants are covered in blood, her hands bound behind her back.

“Holy shit,” I mumble. I take a few hasty steps toward her and Lorenzo clicks his tongue, reminding me he has a weapon.

“You might want to stop there, Sofia. You have done enough harm to your friend.”

“What do you mean, you sick pig! I didn’t do that.” I shudder and hug my arms over my chest as I take in her wounds. The gash on her forehead is deep. The blood seems to be coming from her groin, as if she started her period and they gave her no sanitary napkins.

“Hmmm, well you left us no forwarding address or phone number. We had to use our means to find you.” Something on the gun clicks beneath the tip of his thumb and he slides it into

his pants. “I’d have thought you learned your lesson about me, but perhaps not.”

“Let me tend to her wounds...” I take another step closer to her, but the man holding Jen whips out a knife and puts it to her neck, which he exposes by pulling her hair back hard.

“This is a nice little hide away. I hope you had a refreshing time here before our wedding.” Lorenzo steps toward me and I back away. I can’t get to her and help her because he’ll just grab me.

“I’m not marrying you, you bastard.” As addicted as I am to his cock, there is no way I can marry a man like this.

“You don’t get a say, Sofia.” He snaps his fingers and the man in the suit draws a fine line across Jen’s neck with the knife, cutting her deep enough to draw blood, but not deep enough to kill her.

“Stop!” I plead, giving those tears permission to fall.

“Sofi, I’m so sorry... They were going to kill me.” Jen stumbles as the man shoves her forward, then she races toward me. I open my arms to her but she runs right past, onto the deck then into the cabin. I turn to watch her briefly, hearing the lock click, before I feel Lorenzo’s hand grab my bicep and squeeze hard.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Sofia,” he growls in my ear and the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stand on end. I jerk my arm hard and it connects with his gut, and just as I do, I feel something strike my head.

I wince, my knees giving out, and reach for the back of my head as I fall. Everything spins around me for a second before I black out.

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My head throbs and it hurts to move. I feel nauseous too, as if I’ve had too much to drink. But I don’t remember drinking anything. What I remember is panic, and fear, and Jen... covered in blood.

I force my eyes open, not knowing where the deafening hissing and whirring sounds are coming from. Wherever I am it's dark. Weight pins me down on a mattress, though I'm free to move. I blink a few times and let my eyes adjust to the tiny amount of light and my gaze is drawn to a bright red light along the dark wall. It says "Exit" in bold letters, illuminated in the pitch-black space.

Pushing myself upward, I come to a seated position and feel inertia make me sway. It's an odd feeling, not knowing if it's coming from inside of me, like vertigo, or from outside of me, like I'm in a vehicle of some kind. I decide on the latter and lean along a wall as I rise and put one foot in front of the other, moving toward the red sign.

Everything starts to come back to me, Jen being assaulted right in front of me, Lorenzo holding a gun to my head... He hit me hard too. I must have blacked out. My pulse races and I move faster, feeling along the wall until I find a metal latch. I pull it and the door pops open with blinding light piercing the darkness.

"Ah, you're awake." I push it farther open to see Lorenzo seated casually with the man in the suit. They have a game of cards laid out on a table between them, cigars in hand. I blink hard, rubbing my eyes against the brightness as he continues. "I thought you'd rest peacefully until we landed, but I'm glad you're up. You can help pick our new venue. Adelina was just telling me how wonderful the vineyards at Tenuta di Fiorano are this time of year."

I lean hard against the side of what I can only assume now is the fuselage of a plane, and my eyes scan the narrow space. A woman with dark wavy hair smiles at me. "Ciao, bella, I'm the wedding planner." Her accent is thick, and I can't hold it in any longer.

Vomit rises up and out of my mouth dousing the carpet in tea, red wine, and the remnants of my breakfast. Where is Calvin? And why am I on a plane?

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## LORENZO

Color swatches and invitation samples lie strewn about on the table that bridges the gulf between me and Sofia. She sits with her knees curled to her chest, staring out the large picture window. The view is exquisite, stretching down the hillside across the gardens and fountains that speckle them. Her dark hair is mussed, unbrushed for the past week, and she refuses to wear anything other than the outfit she wore here.

It's a shame really, because I've provided her with only the best wardrobe money can buy, and fitted to her body perfectly too. This moping and obstinance will end soon enough, because I will make it so.

"Please select which fabric you like best for your dress so we can move forward." Adelina tries again in vain to get Sofia to speak up and I've had my fill of her silent treatment.

"I choose the white satin. It's traditional and her creamy complexion will warm substantially. Don't you think?" The wedding planner looks up at my words and mutters a breath of protest before she responds.

"Sir, the bride typically chooses the dress herself." Adelina's cheeks warm, and she forces a polite smile.

"Usually, that is correct." I sit forward and push my jacket open in front so it doesn't wrinkle. "If Sofia will not choose, I will choose for her."

Adelina nods and avoids eye contact. She is the best wedding planner in Rome, and though I will spare no expense, I may terminate her for simple ignorance. People do their homework

when signing up to work with me. It doesn't matter that I'm in Rome; my reputation precedes me. Or it should.

“Sofia, I'm not asking again. Sit up, or you'll regret your choice to sulk.”

Sofia glares at me but her legs unfurl and her bare toes touch the ground. The shirt she wears, a light pink blouse, is wrinkled. Her eyes are cradled by puffy bags from lack of sleep. In New York she had the liberty of stealing a car and driving away. Here, on my home turf, she knows no one, and can go nowhere without being tracked. Even if she discerned a way to escape, I'd find her in moments. I am king here.

She curls her arms around her middle and hangs her head. I'm not amused.

“We can do this another time if you're not feeling well.” Adelina begins collecting the swatches and cards and I hold a hand out to stop her.

“We have no more time. We are set to wed in four days.”

“But, sir...”

I glare at her and she freezes, her hand shaking. Sofia's active refusal to be a part of planning our nuptials enrages me and this woman is about to get the brunt of it.

“I'm not marrying you, Lorenzo.” Sofia turns to the wedding planner and says, “You can go. We don't need your services anymore.”

Before she even has the words out of her mouth, I'm on my feet and around the table. I grip her hair tightly, forcing her to her feet. She whimpers and whines, clawing at my lapels as she stands next to me trembling.

“Ms. Riccio, we need a moment.” My eyes stay glued to Sofia's face as Adelina drops the swatches and scurries from the room. All I see is red, my vision colored with the blood I'd like to spill right now. I can feel her breath on my cheek and I can practically hear her pulse racing through her neck, like a little bunny whose life I'm close to snatching.

“I hate you.”

“I don’t care.” I shove her down hard and she topples to the couch behind her. Her pink cheeks match the hue of the flowers on the upholstery. “This isn’t a game. Unless you want to end up like Norman, you will do as I say.”

“You’re saying you’ll murder me? What? Slit my throat if I don’t say I do? You want to do that?” A hasty hand swipes across her face, shoving the hair away and I bring my hand down hard across her cheek. Her head whips to the side and blood drops to the sofa below, coloring the flowers in a darker shade of red.

“I’m saying, I get what I want when I want it, and if you don’t give it to me. You will be punished.”

She whimpers again and covers her face, and there is just something about her posture that turns me on. Her refusal to submit to me gets my juices going because I know how much she likes it when I dominate her.

“Fuck you,” she mutters, not looking up at me, and I grab a handful of her hair to make her look at me. Rage shimmers out of her eyes behind the tears of pain.

“You will...” I look up at the door and call out, “Adelina, we’re ready for you.” This is the perfect opportunity to remind Sofia who is in charge and why she will be marrying me regardless of her protests, and at the same time, teach Adelina why working with me is dangerous.

“I have to get back to New York. Calvin needs to be in that trial. It starts in ten days.” Sofia grips my wrist but I don’t relinquish my hold on her.

“Calvin is going to rot in that bed if you keep refusing to do as I say.” I feel my cock swelling before I even have the zipper down.

“Shit... What are you doing?” Sofia scratches at my arm, squirming on the couch to get away and I tighten my grip.

Adelina steps into the room, trembling, and Lord appears behind her, nudging her forward. Her eyes go wide as I pull my dick from my pants and stroke it, and she turns in haste to retreat, but Lord is there, blocking her path.

“Come sit...” I order, turning my attention to Sofia.

“Now, we will teach Ms. Riccio a valuable lesson about what happens to people who defy me.” I stroke harder, making sure my cock is fully erect.

“Fuck you,” Sofia spits, clenching her jaw shut. I let go of her hair and my dick to use both thumbs to pry her mouth open, and she digs her fingernails into my skin attempting to stop me.

“Ah now, you enjoy this, just remember that.” With Sofia’s mouth pried open, I jam one finger between her teeth so she can’t bite down, then force my cock into her mouth. Adelina stares in horror as I begin thrusting, sliding my dick deep into Sofia’s throat. I watch Sofia’s eyes tear up as she gags on my cock. The way her throat constricts is intense, milking me. Adelina tries to turn away, but Lord is there, keeping her in the room, forcing her to watch me.

“Suck it... don’t just gag on me.” I thrust harder, feeling Sofia start to loosen up. Her hands stop clawing at me; they splay on my thighs and her throat relaxes. Her lips soften too, closing around my girth and sucking me. “That’s it... deeper,” I growl, watching my length slide in and out of her mouth, her neck bulging as I push deeper into her. The tears continue rolling across her cheeks, but her hand reaches between her legs, and I know I’ve got her.

“Mr. Gatti, I...” Adelina protests, but Lord pushes her closer. She stumbles forward, covering her mouth in shock as I continue to fuck Sofia’s mouth. I pay no attention to her, but Sofia’s eyes open. She looks at Adelina, and I have a feeling she’s being strangely turned on by the woman watching her suck me like this.

I slow my thrusts and grab her face. Sofia looks up at me and blinks several times. I’ve seen that look, the one she gets when she wants me to dominate her. I’ve seen the way she begs me with her expression to beat her and choke her. The very fact that her fingers are inside her slacks right now touching her soft little clit tells me she’s so fucking turned on by the idea that I’d force Adelina to watch us, I almost come in her mouth.



“Get up,” I growl, pulling my cock from her mouth. Sofia gasps and wipes her face with the back of her hand then rises slowly. I grip my dick and stroke slowly, keeping my arousal high. “Get naked.”

Sofia, cheeks flushed dark red with lust, glances at Adelina, whose mouth is still covered. The woman has tears in her eyes, and she looks like a scared little mouse about to be stepped on by an elephant. I don't give a fuck if someone watches me take what's mine and play with it, but I can't stand the idea that Sofia would be aroused by anything other than me.

“Don't look at her. Look at me!” I grab her chin as she begins to unbutton her jeans and make her look into my eyes. Her gaze is hazed with desire, which she tries to blink away. Her fingers fumble with the zipper, but soon she's shoving her jeans down. She steps out of them with great difficulty, as they cling to her calves tightly. When she pulls her blouse off and frees her tits, Adelina sobs and covers her face.

Lord grips Adelina's hands and pins them behind her back, covering the woman's mouth with his hand and turning her to face us again. Sofia, not seeing any of that, stands in front of me in silence. She's not fighting back, but I don't expect her to now. She knows what I expect and like a good little whore, she's going to give it to me.

Her defiance as she squares her jaw and shoulders only spurs me on. I grip her pussy and jam two fingers into her, thrusting upward as I pull her closer. The gasp of pleasure coupled with the push she gives me sends a shockwave of hunger into my groin.

“Don't fight me,” I whisper as I begin fucking her with my fingers. Sofia whimpers, her head dipping, as she puts both palms against my chest and pushes softly. I thrust into her over and over and feel the moisture slicking her slit beautifully. “Tell me you want me.”

“Fuck you,” she mutters, but it's through a pant and a moan of pleasure.

“Tell Adelina how bad you want me to make you come.”

“Shit...” she hisses, then arches her head back.

“Tell her what happens to women who don’t obey me, Sofia. Tell her you’re my bitch now, that I fuck you when I want where I want.”

Her body begins to writhe around me, clenching my fingers. She’s grinding on my hand, needing release, and I’m going to withhold until she does as I say. I slow my movements, only to hear her whimper as she grips my lapels and clenches her jaw.

“You are my fuck toy, say it.”

“Oh god,” she moans, now thrusting her hips against my hand as I stroke myself slowly to keep my dick hard.

“Say it. Say you’re my fuck toy.”

“Fuck... Lorenzo... I’m your fuck toy... Make me come.”

“Good girl,” I groan and thrust my fingers into her so hard she begins shuddering, trembling around me. Her body convulses in a fever and I look at Adelina, who can’t look away now. She’s taking it in stride, and I can’t have that. She needs to understand who I am, because she clearly does not yet.

I pull my fingers from Sofia’s sloppy pussy and the orgasm ceases almost instantly. “Bend over,” I order, and she whimpers and turns slowly.

My dick is ready to take her, but only when I know it will teach them both that I get what I want.

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## SOFIA

Lorenzo's hands are too strong to fight, and right now I don't want to fight him. I want to feel him fill me up, even if it means letting him fuck me while that woman watches. I bend over the back of the couch, gripping the hard wood as I stare into her eyes. She looks scared and in shock, but she's not trying to get away anymore. And Lord, Lorenzo's new muscle, stares straight ahead, looking at the row of bookshelves along the wall. It appears maybe he's done this before, but not with me.

"This will never do..." I glance at Lorenzo over my shoulder as he picks up a fabric swatch and uses it to wipe my pussy. He's rough, making me so dry it almost hurts. He shoves the material into me too, like a sponge that's meant to soak up my moisture and keep me from feeling any pleasure.

But when he rams his cock deep into me, I moan anyway. It's thick and dry, and I feel every single millimeter of his length like sandpaper. And he feels thicker too, like a fucking soda can, not a human dick.

"Fuck... God, it's... Ow," I stutter, tightening my grip on the back of the couch. I clench my jaw as he starts thrusting, and his hands dig into my hips. I want to say it's too painful and push him off, but I'm so turned on I can't stop myself. My pussy aches for this, to be fucked and filled, and torn in two by his cock.

There's something about the way he takes what he wants from me that pushes me to the edge and has me dangling there begging for him to ravish me. I can feel my pussy tighten

around him, gripping and pulling, trying to make him come, even though he won't. He's not going to let himself find release until he's ready, until he's done with me, and I can't control myself.

"Please," I whisper, turning my head until my cheek is pressed against the couch. I stare at the woman again, and she's looking at me with such a strange expression. She's afraid, but I don't think she knows what she's watching. I don't know myself, what this little game is that he's playing, why he dominates me like this and wants her to watch.

"Please, what?" Lorenzo says, sounding amused.

"Please make me come," I beg, knowing I shouldn't. I shouldn't give him exactly what he wants. But I can't help myself. He fucks me harder. His cock jams into me, like he's trying to wedge himself inside me. He's pushing and pulling, holding my hips so tight he'll leave bruises. My pussy screams in pain with each thrust, but it's addictive. I need him to make me come.

The wedding planner watches in horror as I whimper and plead, and the hard smack of Lorenzo's hand on my ass makes her jump with fright. Lord forces her to watch still, even as she takes a step back into him. He's a brick wall, unmoving as Lorenzo drives into me. I cry out, the noise so ghastly it scares me too.

"Who owns you, Sofia?" he growls and I whimper.

"You own me," I whisper.

"Tell her," he orders.

I turn my head, watching the wedding planner as I moan, "He owns me." I try to keep my tone even, but there is too much pleasure flooding my body. His cock is making me raw inside and out.

"Good girl," he purrs and I feel him swell inside me.

"Please, please, please," I beg, trying to reach my orgasm.

"Tell her you're my fuck toy." He pounds harder, shaking the whole couch. "Tell her you deserve this."

I cry out, feeling like I'm going to come apart at the seams. "I'm your fuck toy," I whine.

"Tell her!" His anger unleashes on me with another hard smack to my ass.

"Fuck!" I yelp. The way he thrusts is so demanding, my tits are crushed between my weight and the back of the couch.

"I'm his fuck toy. I deserve this." Pain seeps into my tone which only seems to make his movements more aggressive.

I let go of the couch with one hand and reach beneath my body as I feel his hands wrap around my throat. His fingers dig in and make my pulse feel like it's shooting into my brain. I ride the wave, letting him have his way, knowing I can't speak anymore. But I keep my eyes open, watching the woman watching us. He groans and I feel the first pulse of his cock, the first hot jet of his cum. He grunts louder with each pulse, his cum filling me up, burning me from the inside out.

I start to come at the same time, but I'm not sure if I'm making the noise or if it's him. It's a cacophony in my ear drums, the moans and the ringing in my ears. His body ices over, his muscles tightening and his breathing stops. My body is on fire, but it's a good kind of pain. I'm burning up from the inside out. I can't breathe and I'm not sure what to do with my hands. I don't know if I should take them off the back of the couch or keep them there. He's still inside me, and his grip around my neck is so tight I almost pass out, and then he stops.

He pulls out and I feel a gush of liquid down my thighs. I'm winded, sucking in breath after breath as I collapse on the couch and turn around. Blood drips from his cock, staining his trousers and I look between my legs at the mess he's made of me. My own blood pools with his cum on the inside of my thigh and runs to the sofa beneath me, staining it. I look away, ashamed how much I enjoyed the sex when this is the result.

Lorenzo stands over me like some proud peacock with a stiff dick covered in my juices and blood, and I want to lash out at him, but god only knows what he'll do next.

“Now, we are ready to continue.” He tucks his dick away, zipping it up, then wiping his fingers on another swatch of material.

I feel the one he stuffed inside of me, but I don't even want to think of retrieving it right now, not with the wedding planner watching. I pick up my panties and she comes into view, giving Lorenzo a wide berth as she sits back in her seat at the end of the table and staring at me in horror. This was all some stupid lesson he intended to make me feel embarrassed or something. Well it didn't work. I'm not embarrassed.

My eyes stay fixed on her terrified expression as I slip my panties on and then pick up my blouse. I shrug it on and Lorenzo sits back down to continue wedding planning. But as I pick up my jeans to put them on, he clears his throat and speaks.

“Your assistance is no longer needed, Sofia. You may go sit with your brother.” My gaze flicks to his and I scoff.

“I thought you wanted my help?”

“Your presence is better elsewhere now. Ms. Riccio understands her place and I can finish things up. Go bathe. I'll have you for dinner tonight.” His eyes thin to slits and I glare at him, then glance at her. She seems truly paralyzed with fear, but there is nothing I can do to help her now. Besides, Lorenzo has eyes for only me, or so it seems. He won't lay a finger on her now that Satan is sated. She has nothing to worry about other than his picky decisions about stationary and fonts.

I button my pants and move toward the door, feeling the dampness and sting between my thighs. Maybe part of his plan was to force me to change into the ridiculously posh clothing he bought for me. My jeans and panties are now clearly ruined by bloodstains, and I doubt I'll ever see them again once I have a bath.

Something tells me that when Lorenzo said he would have me for dinner, he meant I was on the menu, not as a guest. Part of me is excited about that and part of me wants to get on the first plane back to New York and hide in the concrete jungle hoping he loses interest.

I breeze past Lord, who has taken his place outside the door where he was before that whole fiasco, and head down the hall. My legs are weak in the knee, an effect he has on me when he fucks me like that. And my neck hurts too, from him squeezing me. The first time he did it I thought he was going to kill me. But he doesn't truly hurt me, at least not permanently. It's like he gets off on feeling my pulse in my neck, like he has to come close to taking my life as a means to push his body over the edge.

I rub it nervously, remembering how tightly he squeezed. Why do I let him do this to me? His dominance is a drug, and I'm a fucking helpless addict of his thick cock. I'm weak. I'm not Dr. Sofia Carter, prized surgeon. I'm a fucking whore for him and I hate myself for it.

Turning down another hallway in this sprawling mansion, my mind shifts to Calvin. Lorenzo is such an ass for pinning my love for my brother against his threats to wed him or else. If I don't give in and marry the bastard, Calvin will never get entered into that trial, and I'll never know if he could regain his ability to walk. He's all I really have, and I promised him a long time ago I'd never stop trying, that I would do what it takes to make sure he can walk again. Is this what it will take?

The doorknob clicks beneath my hand as I turn it. Calvin's eyes shoot my direction as I step into his room. He's seated in his chair near the window. His nurse isn't here, though I was shocked to find Lorenzo had paid her a very hefty sum to come along with us. She believes this to be a vacation for the family and a happy event. I've been threatened to keep it that way.

"Hey..." I shut the door behind myself and join him, resting on the window seat. The thin foam cushion is covered in more cream and floral upholstery, just another disgusting bit of lavish interior decorating that makes me hate this place. This window overlooks an expanse of lawn where the pool and hot tub bask in sunlight. The entire place feels more like a Tuscan resort than a home, but I suppose this is how billionaires live.

"How are you? You look tired." Talking is the one thing Calvin can still do—that and feel. He loves me, but I can't let

him get involved in this. Lorenzo will only use my brother's compassion against me.

"It's jet lag." I smile at him and pat his knee. He has some mild sensation in his lower extremities but cannot move them at all.

"Where's the nurse?" The cavernous room feels warm but empty at the same time. Calvin's four-poster bed is made, though it still remains in the upright position. Yet another expense not spared for Calvin at the hand of Lorenzo. He thinks I paid extra to have this special multi-position bed brought into our vacation villa. It's a silver lining to the charade Lorenzo is pulling. Calvin feels we're better off than we are and has relaxed a bit with his stance of feeling like a burden.

"She went for my afternoon meds...." He narrows his eyes. "There's something else." If he could capture gaze and force me to look at him he would, but I stare out over the lawn and watch birds flit about.

My mind goes to the threats again. Lorenzo will make sure Calvin gets no treatment if I rebel against him. But if I go along with him, agree to marry him... Calvin will get his treatment, and I can always divorce him later. Right? But Antonio never held up his end of the bargain. The large donations never came, at least not to my knowledge. Yes, I was hidden away for a while, but I doubt he even cares. These men get what they want and they kill whoever stands in their way.

"What do you think about me getting married?" I refuse to look at Calvin. I don't want him to see the trepidation in my eyes. Marrying Lorenzo isn't high on my "want to" list, but if it means Calvin gets the treatment, it will be worth it. I'd happily throw my reputation in the shitter for him.

I turn to look in his eyes and he asks, "Is it something you want to do? Are you in love?"

My heart swells at his question because I love someone so deeply I'd die for them. It's just not the man who will force me to marry him. Or maybe there is some bit of a connection



there, as perverted and polluted as that may seem, but it's not the type of love that spans the ages, that sweeps you off your feet and makes you see stars.

"Yes." I answer simply, because the reason I would marry him is for love. Because I love my brother more than my own life.

"You want to be married?"

If marriage is synonymous with Calvin's healing, then emphatically, yes. "I do."

"And it's the man, the stern one who paid for this trip?" Calvin's eyes search me and I keep my expression placid so I don't alarm him.

"Yes," I say, nodding. "Lorenzo."

For years, my brother has been isolated from just about everything. He doesn't care about the news or local headlines. He knows nothing of Lorenzo Gatti and the life of organized crime I will be marrying into. I want to keep it that way.

"Then I approve." He smiles at me, and I only wish the smile I give him in return was real.

This isn't at all how I envisioned my future, marrying against my will, and god only knows what will happen next. Will I be forced to give up my career? Birth his heirs? Will he even stay faithful to me? Or am I just one of his whores? Is he fucking that wedding planner right now?

My cheeks burn and I turn and watch the birds outdoors again. I'll marry him, but only for Calvin's sake.

My brother is worth this, and if I have to tell myself that a million times, I will. It's what motivates me to move forward.

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## LORENZO

The plans for the wedding are finalized; I sent the planner away once she finally got my message and understood that I was in charge. Though, it took a bit of coaxing to get her out of her shell once Sofia left the room. The woman shook like a leaf in the wind and I didn't fault her. I'm a terrifying man. Sofia put on a good show for her too, letting me fuck her so roughly over the back of that couch. Adelina couldn't stop staring at the blood on the couch. I even caught her looking at the blood stain on my slacks too.

Now, with the ceremony set and everything prepared, I have one last thing to handle, and that is to ensure Sofia won't give me any trouble. It would be a shame if I had to put her in her place in front of so many people at our nuptials, and in such a public way. Rome should be a good experience for her, not humiliation. It's up to her however.

I make my way through the house with Lord at my heels. He's been following me everywhere since we got here and I don't mind. Norman was a good soldier, and I regret having to punish him in such a drastic way but if I show myself as a weak man I'll be walked on. He understood that. I saved his life, and he served me for a time, and then I took it. Plain and simple.

"Wait here," I tell Lord as I come to my bedroom door. I know Sofia is here. I have cameras on every square inch of this place because the wall paper alone is worth thousands of dollars. I value the things I own, and Sofia is one of them.

Lord lingers outside the door as I let myself in. The room is empty, but the bathroom light is on. I hear soft music playing from the bathroom too, and I know she must be there. I slip out of my soiled pants, preferring a pair of drawstring pajama pants for comfort. And I leave my shirt and jacket in the hamper in my closet as I pull a t-shirt on. There, in the hamper, I see Sofia's jeans and blouse, panties too. And the scrap of cloth I used to help enforce my authority is doused in blood, tossed in the wastebasket by the nightstand. I imagine the scent of her arousal on it and pause there to think about how she felt as I drove that swatch into her tight pussy. So good, so hot.

I hear water slosh and my ears tune into it. Sofia is in the bath, how nice. I head that way, ready to have the discussion with her, well, more of an announcement. It's not like she gets a say in this anyway. She will marry me and then we will return to New York as one, and I will make decisions for her that suit my needs. It's that simple.

I walk around the bed and step into the doorway to the bathroom. I push the door open all the way and lean on the doorframe. Sofia looks up at me with melancholy eyes. A glass of wine sits on the stand next to the claw-foot tub. Her eyes look glassy, as if she's had a fair bit to drink already. Then I spot the half-empty bottle on the sink. Her body is mostly submerged, hidden beneath a thin layer of bubbles that float on the surface, as if hiding from me.

"Do you need more wine?" I ask, seeing her glass is nearly empty now. Sofia blinks slowly and turns away, not answering me. Her despondence is a turn off, but I'm not here to get more enjoyment out of her. She's a wilted flower, suffocating in the arid wilderness of her own emotion. I walk toward her and pick up the glass and fill it, then put it into her hand.

She drinks deeply, devouring the entire glass and holds it out for me. So I fill it again, and her eyes lock on mine. Her hand hovers in midair, as if waiting for me to take the glass and consume it myself or dispose of it, but I set the bottle on the stand and lower myself to my knees on the charcoal travertine.

She says nothing as I pick up the bar of soap from the soap dish and plunge it into the water, but her eyes stay fixed on mine. I create a lather of suds on a washcloth and begin to sensuously wash her arms, starting at the wrists and slowly working my way up. As I move, I feel her muscles relax and the tension in her body dissipate. Her skin is soft and smooth under my hands, like silk. I take care to be gentle but thorough as I cleanse her of the day's dirt and grime.

I move on to her neck next, massaging away any knots or tightness she may have there. Her shoulders are tight, so I begin to knead and rub them, using my fingertips to apply pressure and help her relax. As the muscles loosen, I move on to her back, washing it with long, gentle strokes. She sits up, but her shoulders droop. My hands glide over her skin as if they have a mind of their own, caressing and soothing her in a way that no words could ever do, claiming her as mine with every touch.

I move to her chest and she lays back, allowing me to continue. I take the warm cloth and softly rub it over her skin, wiping away any remaining dirt or sweat. I use both hands to wash her tits, my fingertips kneading them as I work. A soft moan escapes her lips that part as her eyes shut. I move my hands with expert precision, pinching and twisting each nipple carefully to an erect peak that can't be hidden beneath the bubbles.

Then I start at her toes and work upward, washing her legs. I use the cloth to make sure all areas are completely clean, paying special attention to the sensitive parts of her body such as behind the knees and inner thighs. As I move up toward her crotch, she gasps and arches her back in anticipation of what's to come.

My hands pause just before touching her most intimate area, allowing her to spread her thighs to me. Her eyes flutter open again and look into mine. I'm gentle as I touch, washing her silky folds. The amount of blood she shed earlier today indicated to me that she had torn substantially. I'm sensitive to that as I wipe her clean, but even after the cloth is out of my grasp and floating in the water, when my fingers touch the

slips of skin around her entrance, I feel her moisture. It's thick and sticky, clinging to her and refusing to be washed away.

"I..." she moans as I touch her hooded nub, but her legs spread for me.

I begin to massage her, working her up. My fingers knead and stroke her clit, my palm pressing against her mound as I rub in circles. She pants in pleasure; it's clear on her face. Her hips rock into me, pushing herself further and further into my touch. I can feel the heat radiating from her core. She is drunk and pliable beneath me. Her pussy tightens around me. Sofia moans louder with each caress, like my fingers have magic in them, drawing soft gasps from her lips.

Her hands reach for my wrist and grip it as her body rises and falls to meet my thrusts. I watch her chest pound, her tits appearing and disappearing beneath the bubbles. The water sloshes but remains within the confines of the bath.

"You're a good girl, aren't you, Sofia?" Her lips remain parted, but she says nothing.

My fingers continue their work, drawing pleasure from her pussy. I can feel her wetness on my skin as the water washes away the soap bubbles. I watch her eyes roll back in ecstasy as she breathes heavily and writhes beneath me. She grips my arm tightly, like a lifeline, as I send wave after wave of pleasure through her body.

I can sense she is close to climaxing so I focus all my attention on her clit, pressing and rubbing with just enough pressure to make sure she gets exactly what she needs. She's mine and I take care of my things, especially after a day like today. She had to learn a hard lesson, and she took it well, better than I expected.

"That's it... Good girl."

Her cheeks flush, her lips darkening to a deep red. She's frantic now, grinding on my palm so hard I may cut her with my fingernails, but she doesn't seem to mind. She seemed to enjoy being fucked hard over that sofa, being torn open until her pussy was smeared with blood, and my pants permanently

stained with her body fluids. She likes it rough, so rough I can beat her, and cut her, and choke her. But she likes this too—me on my knees next to her with only my fingers to get her off.

“That’s it, baby, come for me now.” My words seem to be the trigger she needs. “Be my little whore and clench around me. Pretend my fingers are my cock and milk me.” I keep working her up, drawing pleasure from her pussy until she’s boneless beneath me. Her body tenses beneath me, and her breathing becomes ragged.

Her inner walls clench around my fingers and she rocks against me. She’s lost in the moment, completely unaware of anything else. I continue to fuck her as she writhes, not yet at climax. I can feel the tension in her muscles building and her breathing becoming faster and faster until finally, with a loud moan, she comes undone. Her body tightens, her thighs squeezing my wrist as she throws her head back. I keep rubbing her, watching every inch of her skin, marveling at the beauty that is Sofia in the throes of orgasm. She rides out the waves, shuddering and moaning until the last one passes. Then I slowly pull my hand away, leaving her there in the bathtub, panting and exhausted from the pleasure I just gave her.

I lean forward and press a gentle kiss to her forehead before standing up. The water has gone cold now but it doesn’t seem to bother either of us.

“Time to get out,” I say, rising. I offer her my hand and help her out of the tub. I take the towel draped over the side of the tub and dry her off before wrapping it around her body. She stands up and looks at me with pain in her eyes; I can feel the strange animosity-laced connection we have as I rub the towel over her skin to dry her. She hates me for what I’m doing, but depends on me to make things happen. She loathes that I’m forcing her to marry me, but craves the security of how I dominate her and take control.

Sofia has been so out of control in her life, the dominant female who needs a man to come remove the obstacles she’s tried to get over her whole life. She’s tired. I see it in her eyes. Tired of caring for everyone else. It’s why she likes when I am in charge, because my shoulders are strong enough to carry the

burden and she is weak in that aspect—forced to raise her brother from a young age. She leans into me because she's tired.

“To bed now,” I tell her, turning her. I take another towel from the back of the door and carry it. As she moves to the bed, I use it to massage her hair and get most of the moisture out of it. She pauses and lets me work her scalp and massage it.

Then she turns her head and says, “I’ll marry you.” It’s such a defeated tone I’m not sure if I should be pleased that she is finally relenting, or infuriated that she’s broken. Where is my wild mare? Where is the vicious fighter who draws the monster out of me?

“I see.” I finish drying her hair and drop the towel on the floor, then remove the one draped around her naked form.

“I need Calvin in that trial. It starts in three days now.” Her chin nearly touches her shoulder as she looks at me from the corner of her eye.

“We will have but consummated our marriage twenty-four hours before that time, Sofia.” I grip her by the arms tightly and kiss the back of her head.

“Swear it.” She remains limp even as she says the words, and I know her spirit is broken. But it will return. The fight will come back. I will draw it out of her like a vampire brings blood to the surface.

“It is done already. You are my queen, and I live for you now.”

She pauses there, watching me in her periphery. She’s thoughtful for a moment before climbing into bed and pulling the covers up. “I’m sleeping now.”

And finally, things are as they should be.

I turn off the light, strip off my clothing, and climb into bed behind her. My cock is hard, but I won’t bother her again tonight. I’ll save it for my wedding night. She’s going to need me fresh.

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## SOFIA

The dress is too tight, loaded down with beads and jewels on it which I swear are real. The thing is so heavy I can't even lift it myself. I have to have three women carry the train as I walk. The hairdresser is annoying too, refusing to put my hair down how I like it. Lorenzo ordered an up do so it's what is being forced upon me.

The dressing room I'm in is the size of a small ballroom. The walls are painted a deep, regal red with gold trim and accents. Two large mirrors hang on opposite walls, and between them is an elegant vanity table with a matching chair next to it. Soft light fills the room from two crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, giving the area a warm and inviting glow. I haven't seen the actual sanctuary of this place, but if this is anything to go by, Lorenzo spent a fortune on just the venue.

My dresser stands to one side of me, helping me adjust my gown as necessary while I stand in front of one of the mirrors. She's wearing a navy blue dress uniform that matches her eyes perfectly, her long chestnut hair tied back into a neat braid, reminiscent of an airline stewardess. And her lips are puckered into a pout as she fidgets with the zipper, trying to zip it up all the way. There is a bit of material jammed in it so it's stuck fast.

"What a pain in the ass," she moans, jerking on the zipper pull.

I focus on my reflection though. The dress is breathtaking. The beading and jewels cover the entire bodice, from the neckline all the way down to the waist. The skirt is a beautiful white tulle with a delicate lace overlay that flows into a long train



behind me. I feel like a princess in it. It's probably the most expensive thing I've ever touched, let alone worn. I swear these are real diamonds on the bodice, not just paste.

My hair has been swept up in an intricate braided bun, and a few tendrils have been left loose to frame my face. More gems dot my hair and sparkle in the light overhead. My cheeks are flushed pink from all of the nervousness, but my eyes still look forlorn. You're doing this for Calvin... I remind myself as I turn and see the wedding planner enter the room.

"They're ready for you out front, Sofia."

Adelina looks as on-edge as me. I'm sure it isn't every day that she plans a wedding for a mobster where the bride is being forced to wed against her will. She looks as if she wants to bolt, her dark brown eyes wide and her short black hair disheveled. She's wearing an expensive black skirt suit that looks as though it cost a small fortune. Her slim figure is accentuated by the tailored fit of the suit, and her ruby red lips are pursed in an expression of unease. I can tell she's trying to be brave and supportive for me, but I know she would rather be anywhere else right now.

"Yes, okay..." I breathe, sighing. I'm signing my life away today, just giving in to Lorenzo's selfish demands, all so that Calvin can get on that plane tomorrow and be back in the states to start his trial on time. The new medical procedures have to work for him, and I can't stand in the way. Me marrying Lorenzo is the only way to make that happen.

I make my way to the entrance of the cathedral's sanctuary where Lorenzo is waiting for me. As I approach, following Adelina, my eyes meet his, and a shiver runs down my spine. He's dressed in a black tuxedo, and his slicked-back hair makes him look even more menacing than usual. He's the epitome of power and control, and I can't help but feel like a lamb being led to the slaughter as he notices me

"Sofia, mia cara," he murmurs, taking my hand and planting a kiss on the back of it. "You look absolutely stunning today."

I try to keep my face expressionless, but I can feel my cheeks burn. He's so infuriatingly charming, and I can tell he knows

it. I want to pull away from him, but my feet are rooted to the ground.

“Thank you,” is all I manage to say before Adelina makes her way into the sanctuary with a relieved look on her face. Her job will be over when this day ends, but I’m signing my soul away. I’ve made a deal with the Devil, and it’s immutable.

My gaze follows her as she walks away, and then I turn back to Lorenzo who is still holding my hand in his own. His eyes meet mine and he smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. It never does. He’s Satan incarnate; why would he have genuine happiness over the idea of marrying me? He knows this isn’t what I want. He knows he’s imposing his will on me.

“It’s time, Sofia,” he says softly.

I take a deep breath and nod my head, letting him lead me into the cathedral. The aisle is lined with white roses and the entire sanctuary is filled with people here to witness my misfortune. I can feel their eyes on me as I walk down the aisle, arm-in-arm with Lorenzo. He looks proud to have me by his side, but all I feel is shame. Shame for giving in so easily, for not fighting harder for what I wanted.

I’m furious and terrified for my future and my career as a surgeon, knowing what I’m giving up so Calvin can have the opportunity to walk again. I want to scream out, to run away from here, but I know it won’t do any good. Lorenzo has all the power here, and if I don’t go through with this wedding he will make sure Calvin doesn’t get on the plane tomorrow. The thought of it makes my stomach roll with nausea and my head spin. I lean on Lorenzo harder as we make our way down the aisle to the front.

The priest stands beneath an arch of roses, woven together around a brown wicker garden arch. The altar is adorned with white and pink roses, lilies, and baby’s breath. Candles in tall glass vases flicker around the room, adding a soft light to the otherwise dull atmosphere. I feel my heart sink even further as I take in the sight. I always thought my wedding day would be a joyous occasion, but instead it feels like a funeral for my

dreams. The pit of my stomach feels like acid burning through me.

I take my place next to Lorenzo at the altar, trying to keep my breathing steady and my gaze focused on anything but his face. The priest begins speaking in Latin, and I'm barely able to make out any of his words. They ring hollowly in my ears. Everything around me is a blur; all I can focus on is my own fear and anguish, the dull thud of my pulse against my eardrums. I squirm and glance over my shoulder. If I run, will he stop me?

His lips quirk up in a small smile, and I can feel a warmth radiating from him despite the coldness of his skin. My head drops in torment. If I run, I can't save Calvin. Lorenzo will follow me. Defying him again will mean death.

He nudges me. "Sofia, mia cara," he says softly. "This is our destiny."

The words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I can feel the tears start to well up in my eyes. This isn't what I want; this isn't how it's supposed to go. Fear lashes at my throat, constricting it and Lorenzo's polite words turn harsh. "Knock it the fuck off, Sofia." His low growl and the way he possessively clasps my arm against his side terrify me. I want to run, to scream, but I can't. I'm trapped.

The priest continues the ceremony, and my heart beats faster as he asks us to speak our vows. I can hardly hear myself say them, they come out in a whisper, and when Lorenzo repeats his own after me, I know it's over. We are now bound together for eternity, and there is nothing I can do about it.

My vision blurs as tears start to fall down my cheeks. I don't even realize Lorenzo has reached up to wipe them away until his thumb brushes against my skin. His voice is gentle now, a stark contrast to the hardness of just moments ago. "It's alright," he says softly. "Everything will be alright."

But I know he's not just talking about the wedding. He's giving me a veiled threat, one that says if I don't comply with his wishes, he will make sure I suffer the consequences. His

voice is calm but there's an underlying edge to it that sends shivers down my spine.

I nod silently and try to put on a brave face as we turn away from the altar and walk back down the aisle together, three women in tow, holding my train up.

The reception is a blur. I drink far too much champagne and Lorenzo has Lord carry me to the limo where I pass out. Hours later, I think—I'm not sure how much time passes—I find myself stripped naked, lying on his bed at his home.

The room is bright, as if extra lighting has been brought in, or maybe it's just how much I drank at the wedding reception. My head throbs and my vision is a bit blurry. I'm covered, but I feel the warmth of the blankets on my bare skin. My body doesn't feel like I've been assaulted, though I wouldn't put it past him to fuck me while I was passed out.

I blink a few times and roll over to find Lorenzo standing in the door to his private bathroom. He wears only a towel draped around his waist and tucked into itself. The way his body is chiseled from training, you'd almost never know he had been shot a few months ago. Only the brightness of the pink scar running down his chest reminds me of that. Those were better days—before I met him.

"It's our wedding night," he says gruffly, dropping his towel. He climbs into the bed with me and slides beneath the covers. His cock presses against my ass but I turn away from him, uninterested. I say nothing.

I stare at the wall blankly, wondering if he will keep his promise now. Since the moment I learned my parents had died and that Calvin was barely hanging on to life, I have taken care of my brother and put him first. Fucking the Devil was never supposed to be part of that, but I've been his whore for months now, addicted to his cock. Only, now that I'm married to him and it's my right as a wife to seek pleasure from his body, I want nothing to do with him. The risk and thrill are gone. The fight just left me. I don't want it anymore.

Lorenzo's hand pushes between my thighs, searching for my moisture, but it isn't there. I'm lethargic, unmotivated. He rubs

my clit while grinding on my backside, and all I can do is lie here and pray he makes it fast.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asks, grabbing my hip so hard I wince.

“Ow!”

He turns me over and rises up over me, pinning me down with his hips. His hands grab my wrists and push them against my chest. “We’re married, so now you don’t fight me? You agreed to this.”

I turn my head away from him and close my eyes. “Get it over with,” I mutter, only to receive a hard smack to the cheek before he climbs off the bed.

He paces the floor at the foot of the bed and I pull the blankets back over my body. I have no intention of giving him the satisfaction of fucking him the way he likes. If he wants it he will have to take it. I watch him, though, hard dick going limper with each step. Maybe he’s realizing that I’m not his toy, or maybe he’s having a heartfelt revelation that he’s been treating me horribly.

Or maybe he is planning my murder. I don’t care. As long as Calvin gets on that plane; that’s all that matters.

“What the fuck is wrong?” He stops and stares at me with an angry glare etched on his face.

“Is Calvin on the plane?” I blink slowly again and he huffs.

“On the way to the airport. I don’t break my word. When I say I’m going to do something I fucking do it.”

Part of me feels a semblance of relief from him that he is keeping his word. I know he’s not the monster his father is, but he isn’t a saint either. Deep down I wonder if he knows the right thing, or if being raised by a maniacal sadist has warped his ability to empathize with others. After all, he did protect me, even if those attacks were staged to make me afraid. And he may get rough during sex, but he has never hurt me.

I slowly get to my knees beneath the blanket and toss it back, putting my ass in the air. I bury my face in the pillow and wait

for him, but I grow cold and start shivering and he never touches me. I look over my shoulder at his scowl.

“Is this what you want?”

“No, that’s not what I want...” He glares at me and walks to his dresser where he pulls out some shorts and a t-shirt. He dresses hastily as I roll back to my side and cover up. “You know, you ought to be a bit more thankful for what I’m doing for you.”

“You don’t get it do you?” I ask, clutching the blanket to my chest. I see confusion mixed with rage in his gaze before he storms out and slams the door.

A draft created by his movement breezes over me and I shiver and snuggle farther under the blanket and cry softly. Calvin is where he’s supposed to be now. That is the only important thing. The rest of this is just something I have to tolerate until hopefully one day I’m reunited with him.

Hopefully...

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## LORENZO

I t's been three days and Sofia is unanimated—lethargic. She hardly gets out of bed except to use the toilet and eat. The melancholy in her eyes exhausts me. I keep to myself. I have far too much to do to coddle her fragile emotions. She'll learn soon enough that the wife of the mafia prince has to have a backbone of steel, and as of right now she's a limp jellyfish.

Standing on the patio overlooking the gardens, I breathe in the warm summer air. It's nice to get away from the city and return to my roots here in Rome for a while, but I can't stay forever. My father will have work for me, and if I remain here, my men will forget who I am and things will go awry. But I'll enjoy it while it lasts, and when it's time, I'll return with my bride.

My phone rings and I reach into my pocket to answer it. "This is Lorenzo."

"Signor Gatti, it's the hospital. We received word that Calvin has arrived and his trial is scheduled to begin tomorrow morning. We wanted to let you know so that you can make arrangements for Sofia accordingly. She may wish to receive regular updates about his progress."

"Thank you for the update. I appreciate the call. And my special arrangements... have they been sorted out with Dr. Kline?" The sun is setting in the horizon, casting a warm orange glow over the gardens and its inhabitants—the birds flitting from tree to tree.

The man on the other end of the line pauses before responding. “Yes, Signor Gatti, we have arranged everything according to your instructions. Our guest is in the air now and expected to land at LaGuardia in seven hours.”

I nod in approval, thankful for their thoughtfulness and attention to detail. “Thank you very much for your help. Please let me know if there is anything else I should be aware of or if there are any changes in Calvin’s condition.”

“Of course, Signor Gatti,” he responds with a reassuring tone. “We will keep you updated on any changes and take care of everything.”

I hang up the phone and return my gaze to the gardens below me. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, trying to relax my mind and prepare for what lies ahead when we return in two weeks. My father will expect me back and I’ll meet with him and his associates to discuss our strategy for expanding my territory. He hasn’t handed over the reins yet, but he will, and when he does, I will have more power and reach than he ever did, or his father before him.

As I turn to head back inside, I catch a glimpse of Sofia through the window. She’s still lying in bed, staring blankly at the wall. I feel no sympathy for her; she knew what she was getting into when she agreed to marry me, even if she agreed merely out of a desire to do what was right for her brother. The life of a mafia princess isn’t for the faint of heart, after all, but I know she has what it takes inside of her. She just has to see the benefits of it, and when we land in New York, she will. I’m counting on it. I won’t wait forever for her to adjust to being my wife, learning to obey.

I will show her the power and respect that comes with being a mafia princess, and she will soon learn that there is a certain strength and confidence that comes with being in control of her own destiny. She will be taught the importance of loyalty and obedience, but also the value in making decisions for herself when necessary. I will not coddle her; instead, I will challenge her to be the best version of herself that she can be.



I have faith in Sofia's ability to adjust and thrive in this new life—if anyone can do it, she can. Still, I'm determined to do everything in my power to make sure she succeeds, and so I plan on making sure she is off to the best start. Kline has already put the measures in place. Now she just has to walk into them.

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## SOFIA

The plane taxis from the runway toward the terminal. Ever since Lorenzo told me we were returning to New York, my spirits had been higher. For the last two weeks I've been bedridden, lethargic, and depressed. Though, Lorenzo seems to understand that he may have claimed my body as his, but my heart and soul were tarnished in the exchange. I'm not myself and I won't be until I see that Calvin is okay.

"Can we go to him right away?" I ask, staring out the window at the passing trucks and planes on the tarmac. Our plane rolls up to the jetway and stops and the passengers breathe a collective sigh, knowing the journey is over. The ten-hour flight wasn't terrible, but I'm ready to be off the plane and stretch my legs.

Lorenzo remains stoic and speechless. He's been sour with me since our wedding night when I offered my body for his pleasure but didn't fight back. I know he's not pleased with me, but I don't have the energy to fight him anymore. Everything feels like a struggle and I just want to get this over with. He got what he wants, and now for as long as I can tolerate it he will have it.

We reach the terminal and grab our bags. Lorenzo leads me toward the exit, his grip on my arm tight and unyielding. He strides purposefully, as if he knows exactly where we're going and how to get there. I tire and slow, then I trail behind, my mind spinning with thoughts of Calvin and the ordeal that awaits us when we arrive at his hospital room. The time away from him has been restful, but I want to be close to him now.

As we exit the airport, the sweltering New York air hits me like a ton of bricks. I pant, regretting not bringing a bottle of water. Lorenzo doesn't seem to notice and keeps walking, pulling me along with him. We make our way to the parking lot where our car awaits us. Lorenzo opens the door for me, and I slide into the back seat, grateful for the air-conditioning in the car. The mediterranean was so nice I almost forgot how stifling the city can be, and congested too. Smog pollutes the air making it difficult to breathe.

Lorenzo climbs in after me, and the driver starts the car and pulls out of the lot. The only sound between us is the hum of the engine and the occasional honking from other cars. My mind drifts back to Calvin and the accident that put him flat on his back. I lost so much more than my family that day. I lost my identity, who I am, what I want. My drive to achieve left me, and now I don't know who I am—besides Calvin's caretaker and Lorenzo's sex toy. Maybe he thinks I'm more, but I will never feel like it. That type of man uses people. I'll never be anything more.

I try to shake off the thoughts, but they cling to me like a thick layer of dust. Lorenzo notices my discomfort and places a hand on my knee, rubbing it gently. I flinch at the contact, not wanting to be touched by him. But Lorenzo doesn't seem to care. He leans in, his breath hot on my neck, and whispers in my ear, "I can't wait to get you back in my bed."

My stomach churns at his words, and I push his hand away from my knee. "Not now, Lorenzo," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I want to see Calvin." I grit my teeth, holding back the urge to scream at him. Lorenzo doesn't understand what I'm going through. He's never been in a situation like this. He's never had to watch someone he loves wither away in front of him. He's never had to give up his dreams to be a caretaker.

Lorenzo pulls back, his expression turning sour. "Fine," he says, his tone cold and clipped. "But don't forget who takes care of you. Who pays for everything."

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath before responding. "I haven't forgotten," I say, my voice steady. "But that doesn't

mean I owe you anything. You chose to take care of me and Calvin. That was your decision.”

The car falls into silence once again, tension thick in the air. I stare out the window, watching as the city passes by in a blur. Relief untangles the knot in my stomach when I see the hospital come into sight. I’m grateful for the distraction that Calvin provides from my tumultuous thoughts. He’s the only one who truly needs me, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure he’s comfortable.

We park in the parking garage and make our way into the hospital. The trial is being hosted in the educational wing, where our younger interns and residents receive their training before doing rounds. The foundation brought in some of the best doctors in the world to try these new treatments, and I’m hopeful that Calvin will finally begin regaining some motor function.

Lorenzo leads the way now, as if he knows exactly where he’s going. I’ve worked in this hospital and visited this wing more times than I can count, but I don’t know where Calvin is, so I follow him, gripping his bicep. We pass a cluster of doctors hovering over a computer screen, then the nurses station where friendly banter is taking place, and finally we head down the patient hallway. We pass room after room where the doors are shut or curtains drawn, and when Lorenzo ducks into a room, my heart flutters.

He slides the curtain back to reveal a few nurses and a doctor I don’t recognize standing over a bed where Calvin sits upright. My hand drifts upward to cover my slack jaw as he turns his head to look at me and smile—something he previously couldn’t do.

“My god,” I mutter and push past Lorenzo and the Asian doctor who has his back toward me. He scoots to the side as I plop on the edge of Calvin’s bed and take his hand. “Oh my god...” I say, more loudly.

Calvin beams with pride as he asks, “How was the honeymoon?” as if it were the most natural thing to say.

“What? My god, Cal, look at you.” His chest strap is in place, but it’s not lashing him down the way it used to. “You can sit? You can turn your head?” I glance at the doctor who is smiling and nodding. He bows at the shoulder and I turn back to Cal.

“It’s great, right?” I haven’t seen him this happy in months, a year maybe.

“How? Oh god...” I’m overtaken with joy, unable to speak.

“Ms. Carter, I presume?” The doctor walks around where I can see his face and extends his hand. His accent is thick, but I understand him. Lorenzo stands near the curtain, not venturing farther into the room. I take the doctor’s hand and grasp it lightly.

“Dr. Carter, yes.”

“My name is Dr. Ayaka Kaneko. I am the head of neurology for the University of Tokyo Hospital.” He bows as he says it and I’m confused. His name isn’t on the roster of doctors involved in this study. “I am overseeing your brother Calvin’s recovery and he is making vast improvements.”

Still not understanding, I turn to Calvin who fills in the gaps. “There was a large grant, in the amount of ten million dollars, supplied to Bellevue two weeks ago, the day after your wedding. The board voted; they offered to give those funds to research into neurological advancements in the field of paralysis and brain stem injuries.” He beams and tears well up. “They hired Dr. Kaneko to come all the way here to administer the trial treatments, and I was awarded a scholarship in your honor to undergo further testing. It’s working, Sofi...” He blinks and tears stream down his cheeks.

I can’t help but feel my own emotion well up at the sight and begin crying as I cover my mouth again. My heart is bursting with joy and love, and I can only think of one person with that much power and money who would care enough to do this.

My eyes turn to Lorenzo whose face is still drawn in a scowl. I stand and move to him quickly, draping my arms around his shoulders and squeezing him. He remains stoic, with his hands

clasped in front of his body between us, but I sob into his chest.

“You did this...” I mutter, sniffing and letting the tears out. My brother can sit up on his own. He can turn his head. The trial was hopeful that these results would happen over months of treatment, but it’s been two weeks. This is beyond what the trial could do.

I look up at Lorenzo’s stern face and he says. “I keep my word, Sofia.”

“But you did this...”

“Dr. Kaneko is the best in the world. He did this. I merely supplied the encouragement and means for Dr. Kline to entertain bringing him here.”

I lavish kisses on him, smearing my tears across his cheeks and lips in a fervent display of love and gratitude. I fully intended to keep him at his word that he would give the money he promised—or that his father promised rather—but I never expected such miraculous results. In fact, they would never have happened without Dr. Kaneko, and he would never have come without Lorenzo’s generous donation.

He grips my hips and holds me back, and for a moment I see a twinkle of mirth in his eyes before he scowls again. “If you’re quite finished we can get on with things. We have to stop by your flat to pick up your essentials before we head home.

“Home?” I ask, wiping my eyes.

“Yes, our home. And Calvin will join us next week where I’ve prepared an entire wing of the home for his care.” He nods at Dr. Kaneko. “The good doctor will have his own room as well. And when Cal is ready, we can supply him with the means to get reestablished in the workforce.”

“He may never regain use of his legs, but I am hopeful he will regain full motility from the waist upward.” Dr. Kaneko bows and it brings another wash of emotion across me.

I cling to Lorenzo filled with gratitude and admiration for this man. He kept his word and he did so in a way that excelled my

expectations. Love flooded me and I kissed him again, but this time his lips met mine in a crash of affection.

“Thank you,” I whispered, placing my forehead against his.

“Now, shall we consummate our union?” he growled, so low only I could hear it.

“Yes, sir... I am yours, remember?”





# EPILOGUE

LORENZO

Dad and I stand near the back wall of the large lecture hall watching Sofia in her element. It's been three months since we returned to New York, and after reluctantly accepting the surgical chair position at Bellevue, Sofia is flourishing. Things have really turned around for me, and her brother has full use of his arms again, though he is working on gaining strength now.

"She's really something," Dad says, leaning closer so he doesn't disrupt her lecture on hospital safety policies.

"Yes, she is," I reply, my eyes fixed on her as she moves confidently across the stage. Her voice is clear and concise, and she commands the attention of everyone in the room. The respect her for her talent and passion, not for my name, though that does have its caveats. I've had to assign her a protection detail for real this time. She's become somewhat of a celebrity and with it has come a target on her back from my enemies.

"And she's settled in just fine." His chin dips as he nods at her. She fields some questions and expounds on policy and procedure.

The new programs they've opened up within the hospital for patient anonymity in treatment—all by my instruction—aren't quite within her realm of authority as surgical chair but with Kline under my thumb, Sofia practically runs this place anyway. What I say goes, and she carries out my orders as good as any soldier I've ever trained.

“You’re certain our comrades will be anonymous here. We can’t have a slip up. We’ve hinged our entire dynasty on this, Lorenzo. If we take heat over this, we’ll lose everything.”

“Yes,” I reply. “It’s a safe program. We have tight security protocols in place to make sure no one can access the patient information without proper clearance.” And only Sofia and I have that clearance, other than the trained soldiers I have implanted in the hospital staff to ensure our information isn’t leaked or hacked. I take a deep breath and explain further, “The program is designed for both the safety of the patients and the staff. It ensures confidentiality while also providing an extra layer of protection against any potential threats.”

Dad nods, satisfied with my explanation. He smiles at me before turning back to Sofia, watching her. I’m watching her too, the way her skirt brushes over her knees. The way her blouse dips in front low enough to see a hint of what I get to see every night now. Her body is a masterpiece, but her mind is the real treasure.

When she finally got in line with our plan—which ultimately stemmed from our first encounter, where she demanded cleaner safer conditions for stitching me up—we started making things happen. Now, no mobster in the city will have to go to some dark alley for surgery again. Not even our enemies. And since I hold the reins, we get to decide who lives and who dies—at least those who use the program.

Sofia refuses to work in our systems and insists that we keep things legal—in as much as pertains to her and her line of work—which is why we came up with the idea for the program. Everything stays above board; she stays happy, and my influence continues to grow. It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement she seems happy enough to go along with, besides the fact that the sex is incredible and she’s growing on me.

The lecture wraps up, but Dad and I remain at the back of the room as we wait for all the doctors and department heads to filter out. Sofia collects her things from the podium behind which she stood part of the time, then gathers her lab coat and

tablet, and looks up to see us. It's our cue that she's ready to speak with me.

We descend the steps and I greet her with a kiss to the cheek and grab her ass for good measure. She snickers and swats at me, then accepts a kiss on each cheek from my father.

"Hello, Mr. Gatti, it's nice to see you." Her smile never fades now. Following that ordeal where she laid in bed for two weeks straight and the shock of seeing her brother even slightly mobile, Sofia has fully rebounded. And Dad followed up on his end of the bargain too. Another massive donation was given to the hospital in her name directly out of his bank account in the Cayman Islands.

"Sofia..." he growls, and nods at her. "We have a very important patient to discuss with you."

Her eyebrows rise, her curiosity piqued. "Of course sir. What can I do for you?"

Dad takes a step forward and places his hands on his hips. He looks down at her with a serious gaze, then begins to explain. "We have a patient under our care; the Major Archbishop Anthony Di Lereto. His condition is... fragile and we need your expertise to help him recover." Dad emphasizes fragile, but what he really means is urgent. He cut a deal with the wrong person and lost a few fingers over it, and we need someone to sew them back on—quickly.

"Yes, of course." Sofia looks at me with a tight smile. While she respects my father and appreciates his financial support, she still gets nervous when he comes around. This patient however, is at the top of our list and given his prominence in the church, he plays a crucial role in helping us atone for our sins, for lack of a better word.

"Could you give us a moment?" I ask my father, and he nods.

When he walks away, Sofia tucks into my chest. "I thought you said we'd stay on the up and up?" She hugs me and sways, knowing I'm a sucker for that grin.

"I know, I know," I say, rubbing her back. "But this is different. He's important, and we need him on our side."

I slide my hand down over the curve of her ass and squeeze again. She moans softly against my neck and nips at the skin. “Then tonight I get to be the dominant one.” The smirk on her face is enough to make me hard. I lean in and kiss her deeply, tasting her lips and feeling her tongue dance against mine.

“You think you can tame the devil?” I bite her lower lip hard and taste the copper tinge of her blood on my tongue.

“I think we’ll find out.”

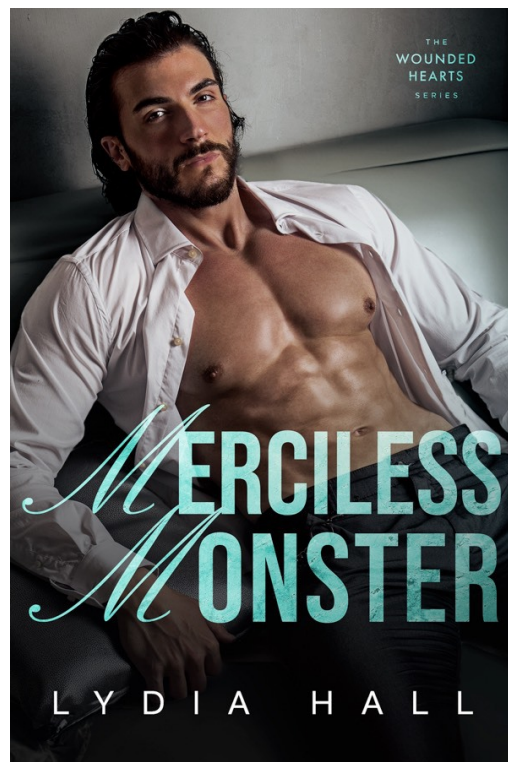
“Tonight, you’re in charge,” I say, my voice low and husky. “Whatever you want, you get.”

She grins at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh, I want it all,” she says, and I can only imagine what she might think up.

It worked out better than I expected, despite the few bumps we had. I knew Sofia would come around, and she has. We leave the lecture hall, following in my father’s footsteps the way I have my whole life. But I’m going to pave a new path and she will do it with me. The future may be uncertain, but one thing is clear: I’m falling hard for this woman, and I can’t let that distract me. Something tells me her inner demons have only been dipping their toes in the water. I can’t wait to find out what sort of untamed beast lies within her.

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## EXCERPT: MERCILESS MONSTER



**I** have to bear the consequences of sleeping with a merciless monster.

Dante is the father of my child.

He has no idea I kept that secret after our sizzling night in Italy.

It was my best friend's wedding and he was her cousin that I couldn't resist.

Dante looked like a strong man who would protect me.

But a relationship couldn't be in the cards.

I had to get back to the US.

Little did I know that I was carrying a part of him along.

Not just his child... but also the dangerous world he can't escape.

If I've got an unspeakable secret, Dante has a few of his own.

Ending up in the same city as him five years later would remove all veils.

It would force us to confront the truth.

And it would push him to protect his new family with everything he's got.

But first, could this merciless monster find a way to forgive me for a mistake that would change his world forever?

### **Mia**

Another wedding. Swell. I'll be the one again, dressed in an outfit that makes me look like I've stepped off a set of a Disney movie—and I'm not talking about being Cinderella either. No. I'm one of the ugly stepsisters, dressed in a turd. Oh, well.

I exaggerate for effect. The dress isn't that bad. I'm just so sick and tired of being the one who catches the bouquet for no bloody reason every time. Where the hell is my Prince Charming? What did I do to piss off the Fairy Godmother?

Of course, I am happy for Gina. Plus, I'm going to Italy! I've always wanted to walk the narrow, cobbled streets of Venice and Sicily. Who knows? Perhaps I'll meet my Romeo. Crazier things have happened.

“What's with the sad face, mio amico? Tell me you're not still pining after that loser of an ex of yours,” Gina comments while we're doing the pharmacy's inventory.

It's midnight, so the place is all but deserted. Occasionally, someone in need of an emergency item pops in briefly, but for the most part, Gina and I are left to fly solo.

“No. I most certainly am not!”

“Good. That guy doesn’t deserve you, Mia. He never did.”

“When am I going to learn?” I remark more to myself than to my best friend.

“Hey, you’re a bad boy magnet. I get it.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I’m serious. You’re like Sandy in Grease. You just won’t be satisfied until you find your Danny,” she chuckles.

“I wish. I could do worse than John Travolta.”

Gina and her fiancé graciously paid for my ticket to Italy. They’ve also arranged accommodation for me with Gina’s family. I was overwhelmed when she handed me the envelope with the flight ticket inside. Granted, I’d just broken up with Sam, the man I thought I’d spend the rest of my life with. So much for that fantasy.

Sam and I were together for almost two years. It wasn’t a perfect relationship by any means, but then again, what relationship is? I feel silly now that I know the truth about him. Rotten cheater.

“I know it’s been a tough year for you, M. You deserve better.”

“I can’t believe we’ll be in Italy in less than two weeks. I can’t wait to meet your family, Gina.”

“They’re Italian. You know that, right?”

“Duh!” I laugh.

“Okay, don’t say I didn’t warn you. They’re loud and opinionated, and they will feed you to within an inch of your waistline.”

“Perfect.”

Gina looks at her watch.

“Ugh. Will this torture ever end? I’m tired. I don’t know how I let George talk me into doing the graveyard shift. I should be in bed right now, snuggled up against Jeff’s tight buns.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you? Anyway, I’m used to the late nights.”

“Uh-huh. You’d make a great vampire. Pass me that box over there, please.”

“Look, I’m good with blood, but I think vampirism is a bit of a stretch,” I laugh.

“Hey, don’t knock it til you’ve tried it.”

“Has Jeff been to Italy?”

“No. He’s looking forward to it. I just hope my family doesn’t scare the crap out of him. He’s so very English.”

“It’s a crazy match. Isn’t it strange how opposites attract? I would never have put the two of you together.”

“Yup. Jeff’s the butter in my espresso, that’s for sure. But it works.”

“You’re so lucky, Gina. He’s a wonderful guy.”

“Jeff isn’t perfect. But he sure is perfect for me.”

“He’s a prince compared to the guys I seem to attract.”

“Sam is a master manipulator, M. Even I fell for his bullshit. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I guess. Anyway, he’s history. Thank God. Can you believe he had the nerve to send me flowers for my birthday?”

“What! He’s such an asshole. As if flowers could make up for what he did. Honestly, I don’t know how you’ve managed to keep it cool. I would have gone full Italian vengeance on his ass.”

“Does Jeff know about the extent of your Sicilian verve?” I giggle.

“Oh, yeah. Why do you think he’s so good to me? One dinner with the famiglia was all it took. My brothers gave him the hairy eyeball, and that was that.”

I laugh as Gina runs her thumb across her throat and sticks out her tongue. She’s such a nut. I love her so much.

“It’s a pity Georgio is too young for you, M. How nice would it be if we were related?”



“You’ve just warned me about them, and now you want me to join the crazy. Yeah, I don’t think so. But thanks for the offer.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You’re way too Californian for the Fontanas. Too vanilla, dare I say.”

“Way too much.”

I just turned twenty five. My plan was to be married by now. Maybe even pregnant. But I don’t know if that’s ever going to happen. I’ll probably end up an old maid with twenty cats, the way my luck has been going. Damn you, Sam!

It’s 4 a.m. when the next team arrives. I’m too wired to sleep, so I go to the bakery around the corner from my apartment for a fresh donut and a mug of hot chocolate. The orange glow of sunrise will brighten the horizon soon, welcoming the morning runners as they make their way along the promenade.

I love the ocean. It’s my happy place. There’s something about the salty scent in the air and the sound of the waves crashing onto the shore that resonates with my soul. My mom says I used to sit in the shallows for hours when I was a toddler, staring out to sea and grabbing handfuls of beach sand. I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t either swimming in the ocean or surfing the break.

It’s been a little difficult lately to get to the beach. Working the graveyard shift at the pharmacy takes it out of me. But it pays the bills.

Another spectacular California sunrise.

See. It could have been worse. You could have had your heart broken inland, away from all this beauty.

\* \* \*

“Oh, wow! Your village is gorgeous, Gina!”

The flight took forever, and we’ve just stepped out of a cab after a long drive, but I am instantly smitten with Sicily. It feels like I’m in a remake of an old gangster movie. The cobbled street and the sandstone colored buildings seem as if they’ve been here since the dawn of time.

“Welcome to Erice, my friend. She’s a beauty, alright.”

“Why would you ever leave such a place?”

“It’s too small for me. I like the hustle and bustle of city life. Besides, California is just far enough away from my nutty family,” she winks.

“Oh, my goodness! Look at that beautiful cathedral. I’m in love.”

“Erice isn’t known as the City of a Hundred Churches for nothing. This medieval town was once a sacred place dedicated to the goddess of fertility, Venus.”

“No wonder you have such a large family,” I chuckle.

“Yeah. I’d be careful if I were you. Erice does things to a woman’s fertility. One kiss, and you’re in danger of giving birth to an entire litter.”

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll be sure to keep my legs crossed while I’m here.”

“Yeah. You do that.”

Jeff looks like he’s about to fall asleep on his feet. Not ideal, seeing as he’s the man of the hour. I imagine Gina’s extended family is super excited about meeting the man who stole their Gina’s heart.

“Are you ready for this?” I whisper to the man, who looks like a deer caught in the headlights of a pantechicon.

“I guess we’ll find out together,” he whispers.

“You have the advantage here,” I whisper back. “You speak Italian. Unless you say otherwise, I plan on smiling and nodding.”

“Stick with me, kid.”

A rush of noise bursts forth from the medieval building as Gina’s family approaches us as soon as we exit the cab. Everyone is talking all at once. Gina wasn’t kidding. It looks like the whole village is here to greet us. I’m overwhelmed, so I stand back and wait for the chaos to subside.

Gina pulls me into the family and introduces me to her aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends who have all gathered for

this momentous occasion.

“Come! Let’s eat,” one of the older women announces and grabs me by the arm.

I’m not complaining. I’m starving, and whatever they’ve prepared smells wonderful.

“Are all these people family?” I ask Gina once the storm of chatter has subsided a bit.

“Most of them. My wedding is an event, so everyone who’s ever known me and my family is here to celebrate. I’m the only daughter, so it’s a big deal.”

“This is quite something,” I grin. “I had no idea you were a minor celebrity.”

“What can I say? I’m the golden girl.”

“Poor Jeff is surrounded by a horde of old women. He looks rather nervous.”

“Yeah. They’re probably grilling him about impregnating me as soon as possible,” she laughs.

“Poor guy.”

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room. It overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. You’re going to love it.”

“How old is this house?”

“Older than time.”

“It’s so beautiful, Gina.”

“I’m so happy you are here to share it with us, M.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving me something to look forward to this year.”

“Oh, come now. It’s going to be a great vacation. You’re going to have a great time. No more sad face. Okay?”

“You got it.”

I'm all settled in in no time, so I go downstairs. I pass Gina's mother on the staircase.

"Hi, Mia. How are you, my love?"

"A little tired from the trip, but excited," I say, kissing Gina's mom on the cheek.

"When did you get here?"

"Two days ago. It's good to be back home."

"Do you miss it?"

"I do. But I get itchy feet. I'm already looking forward to my next trip abroad."

Gina's mom is a doctor. She travels all over the place, working with doctors without borders. She gave up her practice after Gina's father passed. She's a lovely person. I could talk to her for hours.

"You must be so excited to see Gina walking down the aisle."

"I am. I just wish her father could be here to see his baby getting married."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's alright. Thank you for being such a good friend to my Gina."

"Are you kidding? She is like the sister I never had."

"We love you, sweet girl. Come on. I could eat a horse on toast. Let's go rummage through the pots."

\* \* \*

"Good morning, you beautiful human. Are you ready to get hitched?"

"Oh, absolutely. How did you sleep, M?"

"Like a baby. You?"

"Good, considering it was my last night as a free woman."

"Oh, stop it. You can't wait to be Mrs. Barlow."

"Mrs. Gina Barlow. Can you bloody believe it?"

“Come on. Let’s get your warpaint on so we can hand you over to your groom.”

“You owe me, you know.”

“Yes, and I will be eternally grateful that you’re not making me wear an awful bridesmaid dress. I’ll try and return the favor one day when I get married.”

“You’d better. I was really into those poofy purple dresses with the serious shoulder pads until you squealed.”

“Sure you were. How’s Jeff?”

“He’d still be drunk off his ass if my brothers had their way. I dragged him off to bed at midnight. He clearly doesn’t have the legs for our locally brewed tippie. I must say, though, that his Italian gets better the more he drinks.”

I laugh hysterically at the mental image of Bridezilla Gina dragging Jeff off to bed. I’m sorry I missed it.

“What time are we leaving?” I ask as we head down to breakfast.

“Noon.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Not as much as I thought I’d be.”

“You’re going to look like a princess in your wedding dress.”

“I’d better, considering how much I paid for it.”

“Pittance, considering.”

Gina comes from a wealthy family. Not that she lords it over anyone. She’s humble and generous. I couldn’t be her friend if she were any different. I hate pretense. Wealth is great as long as you’re not a dick about it.

I decide to go for a walk after breakfast while Gina talks to her mom and aunt. I stop at a shop and buy some pistachio gelato. It tastes divine. I keep an eye on the time. It wouldn’t be right for the maid of honor to be late on the big day.

Okay, it’s time to marry Gina off, Mia. Who knows? Your very own Prince Charming may be waiting for you somewhere in

the crowd of celebratory guests. If not, a good shag would do just as nicely.

**[Read the complete story here!](#)**

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