



FURY BROTHERS

FURY

ANNA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HACKETT

FURY

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BOOK 1

ANNA HACKETT

Fury

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WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT ANNA'S ROMANCES

**The Powerbroker - Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby)
winner 2022**

**Heart of Eon - Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) winner
2020**

Cyborg - PRISM Award Winner 2019

**Edge of Eon and Mission: Her Protection - Romantic Book
of the Year (Ruby) finalists 2019**

**Unfathomed and Unmapped - Romantic Book of the Year
(Ruby) finalists 2018**

**Unexplored – Romantic Book of the Year (Ruby) Novella
Winner 2017**

**Return to Dark Earth – One of Library Journal's Best E-
Original Books for 2015 and two-time SFR Galaxy Awards
winner**

**At Star's End – One of Library Journal's Best E-Original
Romances for 2014**

**The Phoenix Adventures – SFR Galaxy Award Winner for
Most Fun New Series and “Why Isn’t This a Movie?”
Series**

**Hell Squad – SFR Galaxy Award for best Post-Apocalypse
for Readers who don’t like Post-Apocalypse**

“Like Indiana Jones meets Star Wars. A treasure hunt with a
steamy romance.” – SFF Dragon, review of *Among Galactic
Ruins*

“Action, danger, aliens, romance – yup, it’s another great book from Anna Hackett!” – Book Gannet Reviews, review of *Hell Squad: Marcus*



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MILA

Strong hands grabbed me from behind.

Adrenaline surged. *No.* I was no one's victim. I whirled and rammed my elbow back into my attacker. I heard a grunt, but I kept moving, my heart thumping hard.

I lifted my knee, ramming it hard into the guy's stomach, then I shoved him down. I wouldn't be anyone's prey. Not ever again. He hit the mats with a groan.

"Mila, excellent work."

As my instructor nodded and smiled, I straightened, bouncing a little on my feet. Around me, the rest of my self-defense class were grinning and nodding.

My "attacker" lifted his head. "Why did I volunteer for this again?"

Shay, the instructor, held out a hand and helped the young guy up. "Because you're my very good boyfriend, and didn't have a choice." Shay was a fit, thirty-something with a shredded body I envied. Her black, cropped sports top showed off her six-pack. Her blonde hair was in two long braids.

She looked my way again. "Mila, really great. You did everything exactly as I taught you."

I nodded, happy to hear her praise. "I have a great teacher."

Shay's smile widened. "And you're an excellent student."

Because I had no choice. I kept my smile pinned in place. I had to know how to defend myself. I wouldn't be caught out again.

"All right, everyone." Shay clapped her hands. "We're done. I'll see you at the next lesson."

I nabbed my water bottle and towel. Slinging the towel around my neck, I took a big swig of water.

The sounds of thuds, punches, and grunts echoed around the gym. Hard Burn was one of the most popular gyms in New Orleans. It was located in a large warehouse in the Warehouse District, and most of the space was filled with roped off boxing rings. A glass wall at the end separated the exercise equipment and weights.

I'd heard there was a wait list to get a membership here. Luckily, Hard Burn also ran some self-defense classes, and I'd managed to nab a spot when I moved here. It was perfect because I worked just a few doors down.

The gym was run by one of the notorious Fury brothers. People *loved* to talk about the five men. They weren't brothers by blood, but brothers by choice. I'd heard lots of stories about them, but the most common one was that they'd grown up together in foster care, then banded together to make a good life for themselves.

It probably helped that they were all rich and hot.

One of them also happened to be my boss. He owned the nightclub where I worked, and the bar next door, and two restaurants. In fact, he and his brothers owned the entire block.

Shaking my head, I watched two guys in gloves going at it with each other in one of the boxing rings. I'd gotten a job at the hottest nightclub in New Orleans because I'd heard the Fury brothers were tough. They protected their patch of the city, and stood up to the gangs, cartels, and criminals.

It made it the perfect place to hide under the radar.

"Bye, Shay." I waved. "I need to get to work." Glancing at my watch, I saw I had exactly fifteen minutes to shower, dress in my uniform, and hightail it to the club.

“Bye, Mila.”

In the ladies change room, I tapped the code into the locker and pulled out my backpack. The first thing I did was check my laptop was in there. It was a habit now. As I touched the cool metal, the pressure I always seemed to feel eased a little.

I also kept a stash of cash tucked into a pocket I’d sewed in the bottom of the backpack. My emergency fund. It was a little low right now, but I’d build it back up.

It took me two minutes to shower and dress. In the foggy mirror above the row of basins, I caught my reflection. It was still a jolt to see my dark hair. I’d dyed it black after I’d gone on the run, and it was half a step above horrible. I wrinkled my nose. Black didn’t suit me. I missed my caramel-blonde hair. I’d loved it, spent hours styling it.

Now, my harsh, black hair was usually up in a careless bun or ponytail.

Now, all I could do was hide and survive.

I fiddled with the shiny gold halter top. All the bartenders and servers at the club wore black trousers and gold tops. Well, the men got black shirts with gold stitching, but I was just grateful my top wasn’t low cut or strapless. The halter top was actually pretty comfortable.

After stuffing everything in my backpack, I headed out. It was a balmy summer evening in New Orleans. Growing up in Louisiana, I was used to warm temperatures and humidity.

I hurried down the street. I liked the Arts/Warehouse district. There were loads of art galleries and lots of places to eat, but it wasn’t quite as crazy as the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. Most of the old warehouses had been converted into galleries or loft apartments, and I really wished I could afford to live in one.

I walked past Smokehouse. The bar was running a brisk trade. I saw several groups sitting out on the front patio, sharing drinks and laughing. One table had a bunch of helium balloons in the center. Celebrating someone’s birthday. Another table held a couple clearly on a date, and yet another

one held a family with teenagers hunched over their cellphones.

All people going about their lives. Enjoying themselves. Doing things that normal people did. I'd been like that once. Just four months ago, actually, although most days it felt like a lifetime ago.

My eyes burned. All things I couldn't have.

Dammit. I sniffed. Feeling sorry for myself was a waste of energy.

I reached Ember, the name glowing in gold neon above a set of beaten-gold double doors. Reggie stood out front. There was only one bouncer on this early, and another would join later as it got busier, in addition to the security inside.

The handsome black man smiled at me. He was built like a linebacker. "Hey, Mila. Ready for a busy night."

"Always."

He waved me through.

It always felt like stepping into sin. Everything was done in luxurious black and gold. The floor was polished black, and one wall held a row of gold urns almost as tall as I was. Lights strobed across the dance floor. The long bar glowed with golden light, and off to one side was the roped-off, VIP area.

My favorite thing, though, was the ceiling. I glanced up. It was covered in a sea of gold flowers. It looked as though if a breeze blew in here, they'd all flutter down on us. It was totally the kind of club I would have liked to spend time in.

As I passed the bar, I called out hellos to the bartenders already prepping for the night ahead. I punched the code into the door leading to the staff locker room and wasted no time stashing my bag in my locker.

Showtime. It was Saturday night in New Orleans, and soon, the club would be hopping.

When I got back to the bar, Venus, the head bartender, appeared. She was mid-forties, tall, with her curly, black hair cut very short. Her halter top showed off super-toned arms I'd

kill for. She could make any cocktail a customer asked for, and managed the customers with an ease that I'd never, ever have.

"Mila, you're behind the bar tonight, but if the servers need help on the floor, then you're up."

"Got it."

"And you're okay to close tonight?"

"Yes. Happy to."

She blew out a breath. "Great, because Bryce has this dance concert tomorrow. First thing in the morning." She was a single mom to two boys. "If I can at least get a decent amount of sleep, I'll be mostly functional for it."

"I'm happy to close any time you need me, Venus."

"It's appreciated." The woman cocked her head. "Been working on any new cocktail recipes?"

I smiled. "Maybe."

Venus nodded. "Good. You have a knack."

I had a knack for mixing up new drinks because I'd also spent loads of nights at home, memorizing cocktail recipes. I'd lied my ass off to get the job here. I said I'd worked in clubs before, all the while praying my fake ID held up.

I wasn't Amelia Clifton, marketing guru anymore. I was Mila Clarke, bartender. Thankfully, I was a quick learner, and I'd picked up working the bar fast.

A large crowd of clubgoers surged inside.

"Time to water the thirsty masses," Venus said.

Soon, I was too busy to think of anything. I was grabbing glasses, scooping ice, pouring shots, and mixing cocktails.

"You can light me up any day, sweet thing."

Sweet thing? Really.

Leaning over the bar, I ran the lighter across the three tall glasses, turning the red cocktails from hurricanes into flaming hurricanes.

The customer licked his lips and smiled. He was already heading well toward drunk. I'd need to keep an eye on him and cut him off soon.

"I'll add that to your tab." I flashed him a practiced smile.

"Thanks." He reached for the glasses.

"And don't use that line again." I shook my head. "It's a bad one."

He wrinkled his nose and cocked his head. "I thought it was funny. The drinks are on fire. And you're hot." He gave a sheepish shrug of his shoulders. "I wanted to take a shot."

"Mila?" One of the other bartenders, Staci, leaned in beside me. "I need your help with an order."

"Sure thing." I gave Mr. Sweet Thing a nod, and turned.

"He's *never* gonna make it back to his friends without spilling those." Staci tossed her blonde curls back.

"Nope." I was pretty sure Mr. Sweet Thing would have cocktail all over his shirt soon. Such a shame. I noted that Staci didn't actually have another order. "Thanks for the save."

She rolled her eyes. "He was talking to your boobs."

I snorted. He totally had been.

"After years of working in clubs and bars, I can pick out that type as soon as they step in here," Staci said. "Easy life, enough cash to make him feel like a hotshot, and he thinks any woman slinging drinks would be grateful to let him get her naked." Staci sniffed. "No, thanks."

Staci was a veteran, so she'd know. Me, I'd only been bartending for four weeks.

Okay, three weeks, five days, and six hours, but who was counting?

Someone called Staci's name, and she whirled away.

There was an uncharacteristic break in the customers at the bar, so I quickly grabbed a cloth and wiped surfaces down. I

glanced around. The crowd was starting to build. It wouldn't be long before the club was pumping.

This was light-years away from my busy career in PR and marketing. Emotions hit me like a kick to the gut.

Sucking in a breath, I wrestled them back down. I thought time would help make things easier, but so far it hadn't.

My old life was gone. My challenging, corporate job was gone. My cute apartment was gone. My parents were...

The shot of pain almost made me double over.

I lifted my chin, fighting back the tears. That life was over. Now, I was a bartender. I rubbed the throb growing in the side of my head.

Just pour the drinks, Mila.

I threw the cloth back in the sink, scootching out of the way as one of the male bartenders, Eli, brushed past me. Time to get my focus back on work.

One of the servers, Jules, arrived at the bar. "Mila, need a Jack and Coke, one flaming Hurricane, and one blazing Vieux Carre."

"On it." I grabbed some glasses and set to work. I turned to the wall of alcohol and tuned out everything else. Flaming drinks were a specialty at Ember, and the customers loved them—especially the tourists.

I quickly made the drinks, lit them up, and slid them across the bar. Jules smiled and loaded her tray.

A large group of customers entered, all laughing and looking to party. Soon, it was too busy for me to think. My hands didn't stop. Glasses, ice, booze, slice of lemon, lighter to ignite the flames.

I spent the next hour slinging drinks. Some shifts I worked out on the floor—and let me tell you, carrying a tray loaded with drinks is nerve-wracking. I liked it much better behind the bar.

Suddenly, I felt a ripple go through the crowd, and my belly tightened. Without looking up, I knew what caused it.

Or rather, who.

Finally, I couldn't stop myself from raising my head.

And there he was, sauntering through the crowd like he owned the place. Which he did.

Dante Fury. Owner of Ember.

My hand curled around a bottle of Jack Daniels.

He wore tailored, black pants, and a black shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The shirt showed off the corded muscles of his forearms and his olive-brown skin, and the fabric strained against his biceps. He had black ink on one arm. He moved in a powerful, supple way, his stride sure and measured. It made me think of a warrior...no, a king in his domain. His hair was black, thick, and tousled. Like he often ran a hand through it. A dark, sexy beard covered a strong jaw.

He cut through the crowd like some sort of midnight predator. My throat got tight every time I saw him. He had an aura about him that made it impossible to look away.

He had this lock of dark hair that always fell over his forehead, and my hand desperately wanted to push it away.

Dammit.

I made myself look away, and set the bottle back on the shelf.

It didn't matter how sexy and attractive Dante Fury was. I was in hiding. I couldn't get close to anyone, or I could end up dead. Plus he was my boss.

My pulse skittered, and I couldn't help but look back at him. He was talking with one of the servers, Jessica. Checking in. He did that every few hours, chatting with the VIPs, talking with the staff, looking for problems.

Dante drew closer to the bar. I saw the way men eyed him, standing a little straighter and sucking in their guts. There was

no gut on Dante. His was as flat as a board, and was the perfect complement to his broad shoulders.

Women watched him too—hungry and dazed.

“God, that man is prime fantasy material.” Beside me, Staci let out a gusty sigh. “I’ve contemplated naming my vibrator after him, but I decided it was skeevy to call it Dante.” She eyed him. “Still, the man is *so* fine in that dark, dangerous, just know he’d pin a woman down and fuck her hard kind of way.”

“*Staci.*”

She rolled her eyes at me and grinned. “Come on, Mila. You’re quiet, but I’ve seen you eye-fuck the man when no one is looking.”

I choked, grateful that it was dim enough that she couldn’t see the heat in my cheeks.

Staci slapped me on the back. “No judgment here. He’s worth an eye fuck.” She sighed. “It’s a damn shame he never messes around where he works. Never flirts with the customers, never takes them back to his office, and that goes double for staff.”

In my few weeks here, I’d never seen a single hint of him flirting, or anything.

Staci leaned in. “I heard he was seen with some fancy assistant district attorney a couple of times. Figures he’d go for smart and classy.”

My stomach did a weird flip. And then I noticed Dante was heading our away.

I straightened. “How about we make some drinks?”

Staci leaned closer. “Are you blushing?”

“No.”

She grinned. “You *so* are blushing.”

“No, but I’m thinking about giving you a black eye.”

Staci laughed. I looked up and locked eyes with Dante.

He moved toward the bar, and I couldn't look away. Every single part of me shivered, filled with energy.

He had dark eyes. They looked like chips of obsidian. Deep, dark, unfathomable pools.

"Mila. How's it going this evening?"

Gah. It was all kinds of unfair that on top of his looks, he had a deep, panty-melting drawl with a touch of grit.

"Great." I managed a nod. "All good."

He cocked his head. "You sure?"

I felt a cold tickle down my spine. I always got the sense he knew I was hiding something. Like he wanted to know all my secrets.

I straightened. No one got my secrets. They were too horrible and too dangerous.

I knew Dante and his brothers stood up to the darker underbelly of New Orleans—the gangs, the mobsters, the criminals. But that didn't mean I'd bare my soul. Not when it could end with me with a bullet in my brain.

"Very sure." I pasted on a smile.

He watched me for a long second with those endless, dark eyes. "Are you closing tonight?"

My heart did a little jump. "Yes. Venus needs to get home. One of her kids has a dance thing tomorrow."

"Good. I've got some whiskey samples from a local distillery. I know you like your whiskey, so maybe you can try them with me? I need to decide if I want to stock them or not."

I nodded, my belly twisting. *Oh, hell.* A late-night close with Dante. "Happy to help. Oh, and I have a new cocktail creation I think the customers would like."

His teeth flashed white against his skin. "You and your cocktails."

"Hey, the Fiery Phoenix has been super popular." I'd made up the cocktail a week ago and the clientele loved it.

“I know.” He held up a hand. “You try my whiskey, I’ll try your new cocktail.”

I almost said ‘it’s a date’ but managed to stifle the words. It wasn’t a date. It would never be a date. “I’d better get these drinks made. Thirsty customers.”

I whirled away, but I felt his gaze digging into my back.

When I glanced his way again, he was gone. I blew out a breath and my shoulders sagged. I needed to definitely *not* get too close to Dante Fury.

The rest of my shift was a blur—tipsy customers, lots of drinks, sore feet.

And somehow, from time to time, I still felt Dante’s gaze on me.

Shaking my head, I reached for a cocktail glass. *You’re imagining things, Mila.*

DANTE

S tanding at the large window in my office, I watched the club through the one-way glass.

Mine.

As I took in the dark floor, the gold ceiling, and long bar along the wall—not to mention the clubgoers spending lots of money at my bar—I clasped my hands behind my back.

All mine, and I was fucking proud of it. I'd planned every detail, picked every staff member, managed every aspect. My staff was currently switching to clean-up mode, as closing time drew nearer. They were the embodiment of a well-oiled machine.

I wouldn't accept anything less.

Heading toward the low, wooden cabinet against the far wall, I reached for the decanter full of my favorite bourbon resting on top of it. I grabbed a crystal tumbler, and poured a splash.

I wouldn't have more than one, not while the club was open. I only indulged when I was at home, with my brothers. It was the only time I let my guard down.

Swirling the liquor, I turned back to the window. My desk was behind me, and I should be sitting at it, dealing with work. My laptop was open, and I'd been sorting through orders and paperwork.

I sipped and enjoyed the sweet, smoky burn.

Letting my gaze drift over the crowd, I took in the dancers on the dance floor, the people standing at high tables sipping their drinks, the small groups in the VIP area. Everyone was behaving, and I knew I could trust my security team to spot any trouble.

Movement at the bar caught my attention. My newest hire, Mila Clarke.

She moved well, and was good at her job. Organized and efficient. I frowned. I couldn't quite get a read on her. She didn't have the vibe of a seasoned bartender. The things that stood out the most were her bad dye job, and the fact that she was smart. Really smart. She hadn't had much experience at first, but she'd picked things up quickly. She was hard-working, I'd give her that.

She also had dark smudges under her eyes, and I wondered if she worked a day job, too.

The woman had high, thick walls. And she wasn't keen for anyone to penetrate them.

I understood that. Hell, I'd had my own version of that growing up.

My thoughts turned to her face. High cheekbones, perfectly shaped lips, and killer curves that her black trousers didn't hide. Plus, she had that glint in her gray eyes.

Sharp-edged secrets, but also a hint of challenge.

Like she was daring me to push her.

I muttered a curse and took another sip. She was my *employee*. One I suspected needed help.

There was a knock at my office door. I took another swig of the bourbon and set the glass down.

Speaking of employees who needed help...

"Come in."

The door opened. The man in the doorway was in his early sixties, stocky and balding, and worked a ball cap nervously between his fingers.

“Hiya, Mr. Fury.”

“Eddie, I’ve told you a hundred times to call me Dante.”

The man nodded. “Yes, Mr. Fury.”

With a shake of my head, I circled my desk and sat in my chair.

“Take a seat.”

Eddie dropped into a leather armchair on the visitor side of my desk. “It’s Tommy again.” He pinched his nose, worry on his broad, weathered face.

Tommy was Eddie’s teenage son. He had one more year of high school left, and a scholarship lined up for college.

Unfortunately, a few of his friends were mixed up with a local gang called the Big Gs.

“He’s been hanging with his gang friends again?”

“Yes.” Eddie’s face creased with panic. “They’ve dragged him into a mess. There’s a girl.”

I nodded. “Ah.”

“She was scared, tried to get out.” Eddie smoothed a hand over his head. “She called Tommy and he went over there to get her. The gang, they’d broken into some shop. Someone took a video of Tommy. They said if he doesn’t commit to the gang, they’ll share the video with the police. His scholarship...” Eddie made a sound. “I want better for my boy.”

Eddie was the kind of father that had been lacking in my life.

Anger ignited. I hated people who preyed on others, especially the gangs. They promised a family, a sense of belonging, but it was all just to use people. They ruled with fear and violence. Growing up in foster care, I’d seen it too many fucking times.

“Who in the gang threatened Tommy?”

Eddie swallowed. “A banger called Evan Curtis, goes by Easy-C.”

I nodded. “I’ll deal with it.”

Relief crossed the man’s face. “Mr. Fury—”

I arched a brow.

“Dante...” Eddie’s voice was a little shaky. “Thank you.”

I rose and pressed a hand to Eddie’s beefy shoulder. “You’re a hard worker, a good employee, and a good man. Tommy is lucky to have you. He will go to college, I promise.”

Eddie rose. “Thank you so much. I can never repay you.”

“I don’t expect payment. Now, get home to your wife. I’ll deal with this tomorrow, and let you know when it’s done.”

Eddie nodded in relief and shuffled out.

I needed more of my drink now. Sipping, I stared at the paintings on the wall behind my desk—wild swirls of ink in black and gold. I needed to make some calls, and talk to my brother, Reath. He kept his finger on the pulse of the local gangs, and he would know this Easy-C.

Lifting my glass, I turned to the window. The last of the customers were leaving. Soon, I could get out of here and find my bed.

But first, I had a few whiskies to try, and an interesting woman to try them with.

Suddenly, the door to my office burst open. There were only four people in the world who would dare barge in without knocking.

Sure enough, it was two of my four brothers.

Colton had an arm around Reath, helping him inside. Reath’s gray shirt sleeve was soaked with blood.

“What trouble did you find?” I asked.

“I was minding my own fucking business,” Reath muttered.

I snorted. Reath never minded his own business. He was a former CIA...something. He'd been black ops, and that was shit he never talked about.

I was glad when he'd gotten out. We all were. Now, he ran his own small security company—Phoenix Security Services. He did security for all our businesses, and a few select customers. He was damn good at it. He also kept the local players from interfering with Fury businesses.

Reath dropped heavily into a chair.

“Don’t get blood on my furniture,” I said.

“It’s leather,” Colton said. “It’ll clean.”

With a sigh, I set my glass down, then went over and opened the cabinet. I pulled out a huge first aid kit.

“Shirt off,” I ordered.

Reath slipped off his ruined gray shirt, exposing brown skin stretched over hard muscles. Black ink covered Reath’s back—the intricate image of a rising phoenix. Colt and Reath couldn’t look more different. Colt was six-foot-three and packed with lean muscle. He had a neat beard, a near-permanent scowl, and tattoos on his forearms.

He was a bounty hunter. A good one. Years spent in foster homes and on the street had made him good at sneaking around, and tracking things—namely people—down.

Reath was a few inches shorter than Colt—same height as me—but more muscular. He didn’t know who his biological parents were, but he had some African American ancestry. He had brown skin, black hair he kept cut ruthlessly short, and a face that always caught women’s attention. We’d teased him for being so pretty his entire life.

He also had this easy, liquid way of moving that made him seem relaxed. He wasn’t. He could move faster and fight dirtier than anyone I knew.

Right now, he also had a knife gash on his muscled bicep.

“It doesn’t look too deep.” I pulled out an antiseptic wipe and started cleaning it.

Reath grunted.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I was checking out a few leads. I got jumped by a junkie with a knife who wanted my wallet.”

The junkie had picked the wrong guy.

“Is he still breathing?” I pulled out the glue.

“Yes,” Reath muttered unhappily.

“Through his broken jaw,” Colt added as he poured himself a drink.

I glued up the cut. Reath’s dark skin had a collection of scars—knife wounds, a couple of puckered gunshot scars, old burns.

I blew out a breath. We’d all worked out our demons in our own way, and Reath had done it working for Uncle Sam. At least he wasn’t flying around the world to God-knew-where, to take on the bad guys anymore.

“I need your help with something,” I said. “A banger called Easy-C is trying to jack up Eddie’s kid, Tommy.”

Reath’s dark eyes flashed. “He’s part of the Big Gs. Yeah, I can deal with him. You coming with me?”

I smiled. “Fuck, yeah.”

My brother nodded. “I’ll find him and let you know.”

No questions asked. The Fury brothers took care of their own, and I always knew my brothers had my back.

They were the only people I could count on.

A pair of clear gray eyes, swimming in secrets, filled my head.

Who could Mila count on?

“You’re closing up now?” Colt asked.

“Soon.”

“Want to come to mine for a drink?”

“I’m in,” Reath said.

I packed up the first aid kit. “I have a few things to finish up here.”

Colt glanced at Reath.

Reath raised his brows. “Those things include a cozy drink and chat with your newest bartender?”

I forced my face to stay expressionless. “I often check in with whoever is closing.”

“Mmm.” Colt flashed a rare smile. “Nothing to do with the curves and the pretty face.”

The thought of my brother noticing Mila’s curves and face had me stiffening.

“I think it’s those turbulent gray eyes.” Reath pulled his ruined shirt back on. “You’ve had a few cozy drinks with her.”

Damn security guards had big mouths. “We talk, that’s it.”

Reath snorted. “Not like you to lie to yourself, Dante.”

“Fuck you two. You know I don’t dabble with my employees.”

My brothers shared another annoying look.

“You don’t dabble with anyone,” Colt said.

“Oh, and you do?” I stood. “Get out of here. Before I kick your asses.”

They were both grinning as they left. *Assholes*.

If Mila needed help, I’d help her, but that was it.

I didn’t get involved with women, especially not ones who worked for me. End of story.

MILA

When the club finally closed, I was exhausted. The security guards ushered the last of the tipsy customers out. One by one, the rest of the staff headed home, too.

I tallied up the night's takings on the computer screen at the bar, trying to ignore my aching feet. Another good night.

"Catch you later, Mila." Staci, in a fluffy jacket, stopped beside me. She slung a huge handbag over her shoulder.

"Night, Staci."

Venus was right behind the other woman, checking her phone with her car keys in hand. "Thanks again for closing, Mila."

"Not a problem."

"I owe you."

I smiled. "Enjoy Bryce's dance thing."

"I will, after I get a few hours of shut-eye. And I do owe you. This, and for babysitting the boys last week."

Grinning, I shook my head. "Hanging with your boys was fun. I didn't mind at all. Any time you need me, I'm there."

Venus cocked her head. "Jessica said you looked after her little girl on your day off, too."

"Have you seen that cherub? It was no hardship."

"Well, it's appreciated. You need anything, you let me know."

I kept my face relaxed and friendly. “Sure.”

Venus waved as she headed to the employee exit.

The place fell quiet. It should have been creepy, but I enjoyed it. I knew the security guards stayed until the last staff members left. I was safe. I could just breathe.

I bagged all the cash from the registers. One of the security guards would lock it away in the safe. I glanced at the door to the back offices. No sign of Dante, and I wondered if he’d forgotten about meeting up and had headed home.

Wrinkling my nose, I pulled out a cocktail glass and mixed up my latest drink. I enjoyed creating something new. It wasn’t quite like developing marketing campaigns or putting together special events, but it was something.

This drink was a New Orleans favorite, with a fiery twist. I pulled out a stick of cinnamon, and poured the whiskey.

“Hey.”

His voice made me close my eyes. Then I turned and smiled. “Hey.”

On the other side of the bar, Dante hitched one hip on a stool and set three bottles of whiskey down. “It was a busy night.”

“It’s always a busy night. You run a great place.”

He smiled. “I have a good team.”

I leaned against the bar. “So, what’s this whiskey?”

“Up and coming local outfit called Bayou House. Making rye whiskey, and a name for themselves.”

I knew Dante liked to support local businesses. I grabbed two glasses and set them down. We’d done this a few times at close. He’d get new drinks from suppliers, and asked my opinions. These quiet times, chatting about the club, were some of my favorite little moments.

“When you first started here, I wouldn’t have picked you for a whiskey drinker,” he said. “I’m usually good at guessing what people drink.”

A quick smile hit me. “My dad *loved* whiskey. My mom always had plans to make my old bedroom into a library and reading nook. After Dad retired, he beat her to it and turned it into a bar. She was so mad.” Grief hit like a one-two punch.

Dante was quiet for a moment. “You lost them?”

Swallowing, I met his gaze. “They died.”

“I’m sorry.”

I nodded, needing to change the subject. “Okay, pour. Let’s try these babies.”

Dante poured and I sipped the first selection. I nodded slowly. “Not bad, but nothing...”

“Special.” He set his glass down.

“Exactly. Not much interesting happening.”

“I don’t offer mediocre at Ember.”

I laughed. “Okay, Mr. Snob.”

He cocked his head and that maddening lock of hair fell over his forehead. “It’s not being snobby to like quality.”

“Says the rich guy.” I’d liked quality, too, but running for your life put things in perspective. I now bought my clothes from thrift stores, and I sure as hell didn’t drink high-end whiskey.

He poured from the next bottle. “This is one of their special editions. Heavy on the rye.”

I knocked it back. “Mmm, better. But I still think what you stock already is the better choice.”

“Tough crowd, but I agree.” He poured the final whiskey. “This is their premium blend.”

Sipping, I let the flavor hit, and moaned. “Oh, now, this is good.”

Looking up, I saw Dante staring at me, his glass halfway to his mouth.

“Dante?”

He shook his head, then knocked his whiskey back in one go.

It wasn't easy pulling my gaze off his strong throat.
“Excellent flavors in this one.”

“It is good. And expensive.”

“The good stuff always is, right?” I held up my glass.
“This one is the winner.”

He leaned back on his stool. “I’ll order a case. Now, you mentioned a new cocktail.”

“Let me finish it. Get ready to have your mind blown.”

I felt him watching me as I finished making the cocktail. I grabbed the lighter and smoked the drink, charring the stick of cinnamon.

“Smells good.”

“It tastes good too.” I circled the bar and sat on the stool beside him. “It’s a twist on a Sazerac. But with smoked cinnamon.”

Dante raised a dark brow and took the glass. Our fingers brushed, and I struggled not to suck in a breath.

I watched him sip, my gaze on his lips. Jeez, I really, really needed to get a handle on this attraction.

He made a sound and my belly clenched. “This is good, Mila. Really good.”

I beamed at him.

“Put it on the cocktail menu.”

“I will.”

“Needs a name.”

I tapped my lips.

“How about the Molten Mila?” he suggested.

With a snort of a laugh, I shook my head. “I was thinking the Smoked Cinnamon.”

“Done.” He pushed off the stool, and suddenly, only an inch separated us. I felt the heat off his big body, and his woodsy cologne surrounded me.

Stilling, I lifted my head. He was staring at me, something intense and predatory about the way he focused on me. Tension seemed to crackle around us.

Then he stepped back, breaking the weird spell. “I have a few things to finish up.”

“Right. And I need to get home.” Away from my far-too-sexy boss. Far, far away from temptation.

“Good night, Mila.”

I didn’t let myself watch him walk away. As quickly as I could, I put the glasses in the dishwasher, then hurried to the staff locker room.

Tearing open my locker, I grabbed my light jacket, backpack, and keys. I didn’t bother to check my phone. It was a burner, and there was no one to call me.

Grief and pain mixed with my tiredness. I slept badly these days. Thank God for caffeine. It was the only way I got through my shifts.

That, and the small, little doses of Dante Fury. Just being around him made me feel...something. Something more than all the horrible emotions that I dragged around with me.

I rested my forehead on the locker. That man was way out of my league. I couldn’t have Dante, for about a thousand different reasons. I couldn’t have anyone. I was alone.

One day at a time. Survive. That’s all I had.

DANTE

R eath pulled up at the curb and cut the engine.

We both climbed out of his black Chevy Suburban. It was a Phoenix Security Services SUV. Reath owned a bunch of them for his team to use.

I never liked visiting this part of the Ninth Ward. This dilapidated area ruled by the gangs wasn't safe for anyone. "Which place?"

"That one." Reath nodded his head at the run-down house two doors down. The paint was faded and peeling, and the front porch sagged.

"And he's only got two guys with him?" I asked.

"Yeah, his top two lieutenants. I'll go around the back."

I nodded, then checked my Heckler & Koch VP40 handgun, and slid it into the waistband at my lower back. Reath dissolved into the darkness. He was damn good at it. The CIA had honed the skills he'd already acquired during his childhood. For most of his life, Reath had had lots of good reasons to be sneaky.

I strode through the sagging metal gate. At the front door, I didn't knock, just lifted my foot and kicked in the door.

"What the fuck?" The exclamations came from deeper in the house.

I quietly stepped into a darkened bedroom and waited.

A disheveled white man came hustling down the hall. I reached out and grabbed him, and slammed him into the wall. He dropped his handgun. I whirled him around and swept his legs out from under him. My punch knocked him out, and I left him in a crumpled heap on the dirty floor.

I strode down the hallway like I didn't have a care in the world. I knew Reath would have taken care of things.

When I entered the dingy living room, my lip curled. What a dump.

An unconscious body lay on the floor. Easy-C sat in an armchair, his hands gripping the sides so hard it looked like it would crack. He was a good-looking black man, with several tattoos running along his arms. He was scowling, but sweating, too. Reath leaned against the wall, gun in hand. He looked like he was at a fucking garden party.

"Hello, Evan," I said.

He looked at me, hate burning in his brown eyes. There was fear there too. People in New Orleans knew the Fury brothers were not to be fucked with.

"I want you to leave Tommy Leblanc alone."

Easy-C jerked. "That punk wanted—"

"Be quiet."

At my lethal tone, Easy-C clamped his mouth shut.

"Give your phone to my brother."

He hesitated.

"Now!" I barked.

Reath pushed off the wall. "If you're waiting for your guy out back to rescue you, he's not coming." Reath's tone was almost bored.

With a sullen look, Easy-C handed the phone to Reath. My brother didn't even ask for the code to unlock it, he tapped and swiped and cracked it himself.

I knew he was deleting the video of Tommy.

“Tommy, his father, and all his family are under Fury protection.” I stepped closer. “Come near any of them again, and my next visit won’t be anywhere near as pleasant.”

Easy-C just glared.

I leaned down, smelling perspiration and weed. “Next time, you won’t even see us coming. Understand?”

He shifted on the chair, but gave a nod.

“I want to hear the words, Evan.”

“Understood,” he gritted out.

I stepped back. “Good. I’d hate to need to call Abbott and invite him over to my restaurant for lunch and a chat.”

All color leached from Easy-C’s face at the mention of the head of the cartel that supplied the Big Gs with their drugs and weapons.

“I heard he likes the soufflé your chef makes,” Reath said.

“He loves it.”

Easy-C was looking at the floor now.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

When Reath and I got back to the SUV, my brother laughed. “That was fun.”

“Tommy Leblanc is going to college.”

“Hell, yeah.” Reath started the engine.

“Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime, Dante. You know that.”

Leaning back in the seat, I dusted off my shirt.

Reath pulled onto the street. “So, how was your after-hours date with your girl?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. I don’t date.”

“Mmm.”

“Don’t pull that inscrutable shit with me, or play your mind games.”

I ran a hand through my hair. I knew the best thing was to stay the fuck away from Mila. For her, and me.

I had my brothers, and that was enough. I kept my interactions with women brief. Dinner, fucking, no repeats.

It was all I had to offer, and I knew my limits.

MILA

“Ninety-nine bottles of booze on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of booze.”

I grinned over at Eli. The young bartender had dark skin, a cute face, and a wide, happy smile. He was a college student, and only worked weekends at Ember. He was putting himself through college.

“Don’t take up a singing career,” I said.

It was Sunday afternoon. Ember wouldn’t open for a few hours, and we were neck-deep in stock take.

I hid a yawn. Another day of not sleeping. I’d had a few catnaps, and the rest of the time, I’d been hunched over the ancient laptop I’d bought at a pawn shop. When I wasn’t working, I was digging up everything I could on my old boss and who the hell he might be working with. The person responsible for my parents’ death.

The person hunting me.

My old boss had gotten mixed up in something really bad. I hadn’t heard much of the conversation I wasn’t meant to hear, but I’d heard drugs, shipments, and money.

Blowing out a breath, I tried not to go back there. To the moment when I’d gone in after hours to the office to get a file I’d forgotten. Hearing my boss talking to...someone. To accidentally knocking something off a desk.

The men who’d chased me had been working for whoever my boss had been working with. Their faces haunted my

dreams. I'd scoured loads of news stories about drug dealers and criminals, trying to find their faces.

One had a tattoo on his forearm. That design was burned into my brain. Some sort of snake. I'd spent hours trying to find out what it meant or who might have inked it.

I shivered and forced the memories and attached emotions away. I had to keep them locked down or I couldn't function.

Another yawn hit, and I couldn't stop this one. I definitely needed another coffee.

"Mila, thanks for helping out today. I know you're on tonight." Venus leaned against the bar, a box of liquor in her toned arms.

"No problem, Venus. I'm always happy for the extra shifts." I smiled. "And the bigger paycheck."

"Amen to that, sister," Eli agreed.

My halter top and black pants were in my locker. I'd change later when it was time for the club to open. For now, I got to enjoy the freedom of my cut-off denim shorts and white T-shirt. I didn't have many clothes these days. My days of indulging in designer dresses and shoes were long over. My mom had loved shoes. We'd been the same size, and often shared.

Thinking of my mom made my chest tighten.

"Ugh, this spreadsheet is messed up." Venus had set the box down and now tapped on the laptop we were using to log all the inventory.

"I can take a look." I bit my tongue. Crap, maybe I shouldn't offer. What bartender was good with spreadsheets?

"Yeah?" Venus' brows rose. "You got a secret fetish for annoying spreadsheets?"

I laughed. "Um...no. I used to help my dad out. He hated computers."

There. That sounded plausible. Better than *I have a degree from Duke, and once had a thriving corporate career in PR*

and marketing.

“All yours.” Venus turned the laptop toward me.

I pulled it closer. Mmm, I could see it wasn’t laid out in the best way. As I worked, the others kept counting bottles and chatting. Then I heard the click of heels.

Clarissa Landry appeared. She was a bubbly, twenty-something blonde who took care of Ember’s marketing. I’d looked at the club’s website and social media, and Clarissa did a great job.

She was frowning, staring at her phone. As always, her gorgeous hair was styled. Her hair and makeup were always pristine.

“Hey, Riss.” Eli leaned his elbows on the bar. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Clarissa waved a hand. “Dylan’s picking me up shortly.”

Dylan was her husband. They were college sweethearts.

“He has something special planned for dinner tonight.” Clarissa smiled. “He’s so sweet.”

I felt a small pang of jealousy. The pair was so in love. I half expected to see little love hearts floating around Clarissa’s head whenever Dylan picked her up. “That doesn’t sound like a problem.”

Clarissa slumped dramatically against the bar. “It’s not that, it’s this charity thing.”

“Ah,” Venus said.

Eli nodded, clinking bottles as he repacked a box of vodka.

My fingers stilled on the keyboard. “Charity thing?”

“Dante runs it every year,” Clarissa said. “He raises money for a charity called Northstar. They provide financial assistance to kids coming out of foster care.”

“Oh. It sounds like a good cause.”

“It’s *such* a great charity,” Clarissa said. “Do you know how little support these kids get when they exit the system at eighteen?” She shook her head. “Northstar helps support them getting jobs, finding places to live, going to college.”

Eli lowered his voice. “Yeah, Dante and his brothers were all in foster care. I heard they grew up rough.”

“We don’t, gossip, Eli,” Venus said. “Not about the boss.”

“Right.” Eli nodded. “I just think it’s awesome what he does to help other foster kids.”

“That’s why this event has to be *awesome*.” Clarissa threw a hand in the air. “Last year, we did this carnival thing. Rides, games. It did so well. The year before we did the gala dinner. It was okay, but nothing special. I wanted this year to be outstanding.”

My insides tingled. This was my thing. I’d organized so many events at my last job. “But?”

“I have the ballroom at the Hotel Monteleone booked. For next Saturday.”

Eli whistled. “Fancy.”

I knew of the luxury historic hotel in the French Quarter. It had been run by the Monteleone family for generations.

“Well, I *had* it booked.” Clarissa pulled a face. “They had a water leak today! The ballroom is damaged, and they have to do restoration.”

I gasped. There was nothing worse than losing your venue one week out.

Clarissa collapsed against the bar. “I’m so screwed. What am I going to do?”

My mind ticked over. I scanned the empty club. “You have the hottest club in New Orleans right here.”

All eyes swung my way. I tried not to fidget.

“I used to help my...dad plan stuff at his business.” I met Clarissa’s wide stare. “Have your event here. Make it

exclusive.” I snapped my fingers. “This is New Orleans. A masquerade.”

Clarissa’s eyes sparkled. “A masquerade. Oh my God, that’s perfect.”

I smiled. “Right. You can run a silent auction, maybe get local businesses to donate items.” It might be tough with such a short deadline. As my thoughts turned over, I tapped a finger to my lips. “No, you can auction off the boss.”

Venus choked. Eli and Clarissa both laughed.

“What?” Venus said.

“You all have dirty minds.” I rolled my eyes. “A dance. The winner gets a dance with him.”

Clarissa clapped her hands together. “I love that idea! And all his brothers come. I can auction them off, as well. Thanks, Mila.”

“Sure thing.”

Dylan entered the club, hands in the pockets of his jeans. He was a slim, attractive guy, with brown hair and glasses.

“So, I’ve got to run,” Clarissa said. “But Mila, you are a *gods*send. Thank you for the idea.”

“My pleasure.”

As Clarissa hurried off, I turned back to the spreadsheet. The others counted bottles and I entered the info.

Finally, I turned the laptop back to Venus. “All done. I fixed the formulas that weren’t working. And I tweaked it, so these columns automatically add up. You don’t need to do it manually anymore.”

Venus leaned forward, brow creasing. “Mila, this is amazing. It’s so much better.” The woman cocked her head. “It’ll save us so much time. You’re a fairy godmother today.”

I froze. *Crap*. Had I given too much away? I managed a smile, then blew on my nails, and made a show of buffing them on my T-shirt.

Venus laughed. “Eli, get this woman a drink.”

I grinned at him. “You know what I want.”

The young bartender groaned and shook his head. “One Shirley Temple coming up.”

“Go take a break, Mila.” Venus pulled some more bottles out of a box. “I’ll finish up these last boxes. It’ll be opening time before we know it.”

I took my drink from Eli. “Cheers.”

Taking a big sip, I enjoyed the cool fizz of the red drink. I headed toward the employee door, and tapped in the code. Soon I’d need to change into my halter top, and do my hair and makeup. Then I needed to dredge up some energy for my shift. I took another suck on the straw and enjoyed the sugar hit.

In the back corridor, I turned a corner and slammed into something hard. Most of my drink hit my chest and I gasped.

That’s when I realized I’d run into someone. A hand clenched on my elbow.

“Shit, sorry—” My gaze locked on a broad chest covered in a black, button-down shirt. A now wet shirt.

I looked up into dark, dark eyes.

My heart lodged in my throat. “Dante.”

His gaze flickered. “Mila. First drink I’ve had thrown on me for a while.”

His fingers were on the bare skin of my elbow, and I felt tingles up my entire arm. “God, sorry.”

“You all right?”

“Yes. My shirt, not so much.”

He looked down and went still.

I looked down, too. Oh, shit. My white shirt was now wet, red, and mostly transparent. My simple cotton bra did nothing to hide my hard nipples. *Kill me now.*

Dante made a low sound and I felt them pebble even more.

Shit, shit, shit. “I’m so sorry. Your shirt’s all wet.”

“It’s fine. I have another one in my office.”

“Me too.” I pressed my arm over my chest, my insides shriveling with embarrassment. “I mean in my locker. I have my uniform.”

His brows creased. “You’re working tonight?”

Why did he sound pissed? “Yes, I—”

“But you came in early to do inventory. And you worked last night.”

I swallowed. “I promise I’m not taking up too much overtime. I like the work.” Translation, I needed the money.

“You look tired,” he said.

Right. Tired, shirt soaked with red stain, and my nipples on high beam. I was the hot mess to his dark gorgeousness.

He looked like a dark god who could do whatever he wanted. And whoever he wanted.

Crap. The lack of sleep was really getting to me.

“I’d better change. Sorry again.” I quickly brushed past him.

But I felt his gaze between my shoulder blades all the way to the staff locker room.

DANTE

The night was in full swing.

The paperwork stared at me. It was the worst job I had to do as a business owner. I checked the invoices, signed off on a contract, and studied a quote for some renovation to Smokehouse, the more casual bar I ran next door to Ember.

I did the damn paperwork because the businesses were mine. I'd conceived the ideas for them, done the hard work to create them, then made them a success.

Me, who no one had ever thought would succeed. I had harsh memories of my father backhanding me, calling me useless, before he'd take his belt to me.

Useless piece of shit.

My mother had never done a thing to stop him. Just watched with tired eyes, downtrodden, always in a hurry to find her pills.

Mama needs her pills, Dante. Just one or two to make me feel better.

Then one day, she'd left. Left me there with that monster.

I realized that the papers were clenched in my fist. I relaxed, and laid the paper flat on my desk and smoothed it out. Well, I'd made it. I'd eventually ended up in a long string of foster homes, but I'd come out the other side. A huge reason was because of my stubbornness.

And my brothers.

I glanced out the one-way window of my office. The club was packed. I should finish off the paperwork, but I rose, drawn there to the glass.

My gaze found her instantly. I muttered a curse. Mila moved gracefully through the crowd, a tray of drinks in hand. She still held the tray cautiously, not with the ease of a seasoned server. She smiled at a table of customers and started handing out drinks. My gaze moved over her. The halter top showed slender shoulders and toned arms.

In my head was the memory of her wet shirt clinging to full breasts and hard nipples. My cock stirred.

“Fuck.”

Turning away, I headed back to my desk. I needed to kill this growing interest in my employee. Maybe I needed to get laid.

Grabbing the remote, I turned on the TV beside my desk.

“It has been a long-cherished desire of mine to serve my state. To look out for the best interests of the great people of Louisiana.”

Some distinguished-looking businessman was throwing his hat in the ring to become governor. I hated politicians. I was yet to meet any with integrity. This fucker with the white teeth, salt-and-pepper hair, and an insincere look wanting to be governor was no different. Chuck Edwards III, what the hell kind of name was that?

Growing up like I had, I’d gotten good at spotting selfish assholes. Chuck had it stamped all over him. Grown up with everything, expecting everything to swing his way.

My office door flung open, and I scowled. Reath, clad in the black leather jacket that he almost always wore, even in summer, strode in. He looked no worse for wear after his misadventure the other night. Our other brother, Beauden, sauntered in after him.

Beauden gave me a chin lift.

“You could knock,” I said.

“Why?” Reath sprawled on a couch. “You’re only ever doing paperwork in here.”

Beau leaned against the wall. He was a bruiser, and always had been. He looked like the former mercenary he’d once been. He had the big, heavy muscles of a boxer, a collection of tattoos up his arms, but could be quick on his feet. His face was one step past rugged. His nose had been broken a few times—once by me when we were teenagers at a new foster home, working out dominance. In return, Beau had broken two of my ribs.

I smiled at the old memories. All of us had met as wild, angry, young teenagers. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

“How’s the gym?” I asked.

“Good.” Beau nodded. “Busy.”

That was Beau. A man of few words. His dark hair was long and definitely hadn’t seen scissors for a long time. Beau headed for my bourbon and poured a splash.

I leaned back in my chair. “Not that I don’t love seeing you, too, but what’s up?”

“Salazar is encroaching on our territory,” Reath said darkly.

I stiffened. Carlos Salazar was the local head of one of the Mexican cartels. The Moreno Cartel supplied a chunk of the drugs in New Orleans—hell, in most of the South. They usually stuck to their own business, but I knew Salazar was ambitious. Colton hated them. His biological sister had overdosed on Fentanyl supplied by Salazar’s group.

My brothers and I fiercely protected our block of New Orleans. We had agreements in place with all the major players in the city. And we weren’t afraid to defend what was ours.

“They’ve come into our territory?” I asked.

“Not yet, but they’re nipping at the edges. Some drug deals, some of their girls turning tricks.” Reath scowled.

“Might be time to send a message.”

Fuck. I nodded. “Let’s get Kav and Colt in on this as well. We’ll make a plan.”

“After dinner tomorrow?” Reath suggested.

We always tried to eat a family meal together on a Monday.

Reath’s lips quirked. “Let’s make it early, before you go to work, and old men like Beau go to bed.”

Beau sipped his drink. “Fuck you.”

“Sorry, I prefer blondes, and breasts,” Reath said.

Beau wandered over to the glass, scanning the club below.

We needed to deal with Salazar before things escalated. I wouldn’t have my employees or customers put at risk.

“Shit, Dante, there’s a fight brewing,” Beau said.
“Actually, two.”

“What?” I shot to my feet. I knew my security team would handle it.

“Your security guys are busy with the first one, so haven’t seen the second one. Your server is trying to defuse it, but these guys are out for blood.”

If anyone knew a fight, it was Beau. I made it across the office in a millisecond. Down below, I spotted the commotion on the dance floor. Several of my security guys were wrestling several men and a woman under control. But Beau was right, over by the high tables, two guys were shoving each other. They bumped into a woman in a tight dress, and she fell against the table, knocking glasses to the floor.

Dammit.

Then Mila stepped between the two men, her hands raised, trying to talk them down.

My heart lodged in my throat. *Fuck.* The little idiot. I needed to get down there.

I hadn't even had the chance to step away when one guy took a swing at the other. With a surprisingly agile move, Mila blocked his hit. But his opponent surged forward, fist flying. The first guy shoved Mila.

It sent her right in the path of the other guy's fist.

The blow slammed into her head. She was falling as I sprinted for the door.

MILA

Son of a bitch.

Pain exploded through my cheek. Clutching my face, I fell on my ass. Hard.

The two guys were going at each other, grabbing each other's shirts. They each shoved the other, and knocked over another woman, who fell with a short scream into her friends.

Where the hell was security? They were usually fast. These idiots were really going to hurt someone. I shifted and pressed my hands to the floor. I felt a sharp sting and bit my tongue.

Dammit, I'd put my hand on some broken glass.

I pushed to my feet. I was angry now. Not all of it was at this pair of macho assholes. It was all the bitter anger that leaked in at just how shit my life had become.

“Stop it!” I grabbed one guy’s arm, careful to keep my knees bent a little and body loose like Shay had taught me. “You’re going to hurt someone. Cool it down.”

One growled, and the other one whirled. My heart flip-flopped. He was totally fired up, his eyes glittering. I wasn’t even sure he saw me.

He lifted a fist.

Suddenly, a hard body pressed against my back. A strong arm reached past me and grabbed the man’s wrist.

“You hit her again, and I’ll end you.”

Dante's deep voice shivered through me. His words made me swallow.

The bloodlust leaked out of the fighting men. They looked around and one winced.

"Things got out of hand—"

"You *hit* her," Dante snapped. "And she's one of mine."

Two other men shouldered in. I knew they were Dante's brothers. I'd seen them in here before. One was a handsome black man with hard eyes. Reath Fury. Four months ago, I would have said he was just a good-looking guy. Now, I knew better. He hid his dangerous well, but it was there.

Reath grabbed one of the men. Dante's other brother, Beauden, was a big, rugged man and owned Hard Burn. He looked like he should be kicking someone's ass in some dark, underground cage fight. He gripped the other man by the back of the neck and hauled him off his feet. I saw several security guards shoving though the crowd, heading our way.

"This is *my* place," Dante said to the two customers. "Apologize."

One ran a hand across his mouth. "Sorry, man. Look—"

"Not to me," Dante bit out. "To her."

I felt Dante's hand on my hip. My brain couldn't function. I felt that touch in places where I shouldn't.

The customer met my gaze. When he saw my face, he winced. "Shit, I'm really sorry."

The security guards arrived, urging the rest of the customers to get back.

"You'll pay for damages," Dante said. "Then we'll discuss assault charges with the police."

Both men blanched.

My insides shriveled. I didn't want the police involved. My fake ID was good, but I was laying low. I didn't need the police looking into me in any way.

I ran a hand down Dante's arm and gripped his wrist. It was thick, strong. "I don't want to press charges."

His brothers traded a glance. I spun, and realized how close Dante and I were standing. I was pressed up against his big, muscular body.

His scent wrapped around me, and I took in a deep breath, sucking it in.

"Mila."

I felt the vibration of his words and met his gaze. "No police." My words were barely more than a whisper.

His dark gaze bored into me. Then it ran over the side of my face and darkened even more.

"Please," I whispered.

"Get copies of their IDs," he said to his security guards. "They'll pay for the damages. And a lifetime ban from Ember."

The men stiffened.

I grabbed Dante's shirt. It was a harsh ban. He'd banned people before for bad behavior, but never for that long for a fight. Only people caught dealing drugs or harassing women got lifetime bans.

"Dante."

A muscle ticked beside his mouth. "Fine, you pick."

"A six-month ban?" I said.

"Twelve months." He nodded at the guards and his brothers. "I need to get ice on Mila's face."

He took my hand and dragged me across the club. People were staring. I saw Staci nearby, her eyes wide.

We passed Venus at the bar.

"I need to deal with Mila's injury," Dante told her. "She's done for the night. Cover her."

"Sure thing, boss."

I expected him to take me back to the staff locker room. I knew Venus kept a first aid kit in there. Instead, he pulled me up the stairs. My stomach clenched. The stairs to his office.

He towed me inside, and my nerves were suddenly tempered by curiosity. I'd never been in his office before. It was totally Dante—dark, sexy, classy, but also had a hint of an edge. He had three beautiful, inky paintings on the wall behind his desk, done in swirls of black and gold.

He led me to a black leather couch against the far wall. My gaze moved from the glossy, black desk, to the huge, plate glass window.

He had a bird's-eye view of the club. *Wow*. It was obviously one-way glass because I'd never noticed it from the other side before.

"How bad is the pain?"

His question snapped my gaze back to him. He crouched in front of a mini fridge built into sleek cabinetry. His black trousers pulled tight over his very fine ass, and a tingly sensation sprang to life in my belly.

"Mila?" He rose and turned my way.

I ripped my gaze off his body. God, here I was, ogling my boss.

"It's not bad," I said. "I've—" I cut myself off.

He came closer, his face tight. He had an ice pack in one hand. "You've had worse?"

"I haven't been abused or anything." I hunched my shoulders. The men hunting me had gotten close once. I'd taken a few hits that had ached for days. "It was only once, and it sucked."

Dante sat beside me, and the couch dipped. He gently pressed the ice pack to my face. "Taking a blow always hurts."

I couldn't look away from him. Damn him for being so attractive, mesmerizing. I wondered how many blows he'd taken in his life. "Someone hit you?"

His lips quirked. “My brothers have hit me on several occasions, but I hit them back.” His smile dissolved. “But when I was younger, and couldn’t defend myself, I took some blows.”

God. “I’m sorry.”

“In the past now.”

Getting hit as a kid would never entirely be in the past. That left scars.

He shifted and that dark lock of hair that taunted me fell across his forehead. I’d always dated clean-cut guys before. Ones who wore suits to work, styled their hair, talked about their stock portfolios. I was pretty sure Dante never put product in his thick, black hair. And while I was sure he had a healthy stock portfolio, it wouldn’t be a subject he’d bring up on a date.

It was a hell of a time to realize that I was way more attracted to a man with dangerous, sexy edges.

“You need a painkiller?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. I swear.” I cleared my throat, trying not to get lost in his spicy, sandalwood scent. My mother used to burn a pretty sandalwood candle, and I’d always loved it. “I can go back to work.” I had two hours left of my shift.

“No. You’re done. Breaking up a fight is enough.” He paused. “You did good out there, although, you should have gone straight to security.”

“Those guys knocked over some women. I was worried they’d hurt someone.”

“They did. You.” His face suddenly changed, morphing into something hard and dangerous. “Is that blood on your top?”

Glancing down, I saw a smear of red on the fabric. *Crap.* I hoped it washed out. “It’s nothing. I put my hand on some broken glass.”

“Show me your hand.”

“It’s fine—”

“Mila.”

His tone warned me not to argue. I blew out a breath and held my palm out. His warm fingers brushed over my hand and my lower belly pulsed.

God. I had to fight pressing my thighs together.

Without a word, he rose and pulled out a first aid kit from the cabinet. Then he stopped, picked up a fancy crystal decanter and poured a drink.

“Here.” He held the glass out to me.

I sniffed it. “Bourbon?”

“It’s a good one. You’ll like it and it’ll take the edge off.” He pulled out some tweezers, then leaned over my palm and pulled a tiny sliver of glass free.

I winced and took a sip. The bourbon was smooth and smoky.

He deftly cleaned my hand and put a Band-Aid over it.

“Venus told me you improved the inventory spreadsheet.”

I tensed, then shrugged a shoulder. “It was nothing.”

“I took a look. It’s good.” His gaze met mine. “And Clarissa went from the depths of despair to once again all excited about the charity fundraiser. She told me you gave her the idea to have it here and make some changes.”

My mouth was dry. Why was everyone so damn chatty?

“You’re smart, Mila. I picked that up the first time I talked to you. You picked up working here very fast.”

I stiffened. Apparently, he’d seen through some of my lies. My pulse pounded hard. “I like the job.” I needed the job.

“You’re no bartender.” His fingers brushed over my wrist. Could he feel the crazy beat of my pulse?

“I am now.” I tossed back the rest of the drink. Now it burned. I set the glass down on the coffee table. “I’m going to finish my shift.”

“I can help you, Mila.”

I met his dark eyes. God, a part of me wanted to lean on him, trust him.

My throat closed. Trusting people hadn’t worked out very well for me. “I don’t need help.”

“Yes, you do.” He kept stroking my skin.

I dropped the ice pack down next to my empty glass. “Thanks for the drink and the ice. I’m going back to work now.” I kept his gaze, daring him to argue with me.

He stayed seated, watching me. “I take care of what’s mine, Mila.”

My heart did a weird stutter. “I’m not yours.”

He rose, lithe and powerful. “Yes, you are.”

MY HAND WAS STINGING, and my face was throbbing.

Dante was right. I should have gone home. I served another customer, and slid the glass of wine and a cocktail across the bar.

One more hour. The crowd was already starting to thin out. Then I had a date with some Advil and a packet of frozen peas.

I wiped my hands on my thighs, and looked up at the next customer. “What can I get you?”

The guy in a grey suit smiled at me. “Two Scotches, please. The good stuff.”

“Coming right up.” My gaze flicked to the guy’s friend. They both looked like twenty-something businessmen. But when I focused on the slim man in a black suit, the world caved in around me.

Cory Rivers.

He’d worked for my old boss. Been his right-hand man.

I quickly whirled away, my heart doing its best to pound out of my chest.

He'd been looking at his phone, not at me.

Cory had been ambitious, and often a snob. He liked working for one of the wealthiest men in Baton Rouge. He didn't pay much attention to other staff members like me.

Did Cory know that his boss was a criminal, in bed with some bad guys?

Trying to calm my roiling stomach, I reached for the Macallan with a shaky hand. *Make the drinks, don't make eye contact.* This is the last place Cory would expect to find me, and thanks to my crappy dye job and lack of my once-stylish wardrobe, I didn't look anything like my old self.

I poured the drinks and set the glasses on the bar.

"Thanks." Cory's friend handed over his credit card.

I did the transaction fast, without looking up.

As the pair walked away, I let out a long breath. It was dark in the club, with just lights strobing on the dance floor. There was no way Cory would recognize me.

I rubbed my sore cheekbone and risked a glance.

Just in time to see Cory looking my way. My insides froze. Slowly, I made myself turn away.

He wasn't looking at me. He just happened to be looking toward the bar.

Like a robot on autopilot, I served another customer. Then, I surreptitiously scanned the crowd, and couldn't see Cory anymore.

You're overreacting, Mila.

God, I hoped so.

I served another customer, then found Venus beside me, her arms crossed over her chest.

"You okay?"

I nodded.

“Time for you to call it a night.”

“But I have—”

She touched my arm. “Girl, go. You’ve earned it. We all have two days off to relax. Get some ice on that cheek again.”

Ember was closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Those were the days when I spent most hours on my laptop, and going to self-defense classes.

“Thanks, Venus.” I hurried to the employee door, scanning around for Cory. It took me two times to get the code right. Was he watching me?

In the corridor, the sound of the club was muffled, and my anxiety eased a little. In the locker room, I found some Advil, and took a bottle of water from the fridge kept stocked for staff. After a few swigs, I rested my forehead on my locker. The metal was cool on my flushed, throbbing skin.

Was I panicking for no reason?

Should I run? I groaned. The truth was, I didn’t have the money. Buying a piece-of-shit car and a good fake ID had cleaned me out. It was taking time to rebuild my emergency fund.

I drew in a deep, steadyng breath. I’d do my job and be cautious. I didn’t look like Amelia Clifton anymore.

Pushing away from the locker, I straightened my top. Time to go home.

DANTE

With my arms crossed over my chest, I stood at the window and watched Mila down below. She had a faded, worn jacket on—one I could tell came from a thrift store—and her backpack over her shoulder. She was skirting the dance floor and heading for the employee exit.

Seeing that asshole hit her, seeing the swelling on her cheek, the blood on her shirt...

My fingers flexed.

I'd wanted to pull her close. Let her feel my strength, my resolve. Show her that I could protect her.

My fucking brothers had been right. I'd been telling myself not to get involved with Mila, but I'd been lying to myself.

I wanted her.

The shadows under her eyes looked even darker today. Would she sleep tonight?

I pulled out my cell phone and tapped a number. It only rang once.

“Yes, boss.”

“Reggie, walk Mila out to her car,” I ordered my head bouncer.

“On it.”

Having her in my office, so close...

Fuck. What was it about her? She was attractive, sure. And she would be more so, if her hair wasn't dyed that godawful black. I spent far too long wondering what color her natural hair was.

Those gray eyes of hers were like storm clouds, filled with pain she couldn't hide.

I knew that pain. I'd seen it in the mirror growing up, whenever my father had slapped me around, when my mother hadn't protected me, when she'd abandoned me. When I'd been all alone, knowing everyone always left, and you couldn't, shouldn't, let anyone matter.

But I wasn't that desperate kid anymore. I'd found my brothers and forged the life I wanted. I was proud as fuck about that.

Part of me wanted to help Mila Clarke find a way out of her pain and desperation.

And another part of me just wanted her. I'd caught glimpses of the warm woman under the hard shell. What would she be like if she could just be herself?

I clasped my fingers behind my back. At the mention of the police, she'd stiffened against me. She was in some sort of trouble, but I'd known that from the moment I'd hired her.

I could have Reath run her. My mouth flattened. She'd hate that. I'd prefer she trusted me enough to share herself.

My cellphone vibrated. It was Reggie.

"Yes?"

"Dante, Mila's car won't start. Not sure what the problem is, maybe the battery. She said she'll get an Uber—"

I had a million things to deal with at the club, and some work to take care of for the restaurants, not to mention I needed to put some space between us. "Keep her there. I'll drop her home."

"Got it, boss."

I scooped my keys off the desk and headed down into the club. The music was loud, and the crowd was happy. I caught Venus's gaze. "I have to go out. You got things?"

Ever efficient, she nodded. She was good at her job, and I paid her well. "Sure. Everything okay?"

"Yes."

I headed for the employee exit. Two women in short dresses and very high heels, edged in front of me. One tossed her hair back, and the other smiled, posing in a way I guessed was supposed to show off her good side.

I ignored them. I'd seen variations of it every night at the club, and wasn't interested.

As I neared the employee exit, I saw Reggie inside, talking on his radio. I frowned. "Reggie, you didn't stay with Mila?"

"Sorry, boss. A few rowdy customers need escorting out. She's by her car, and heads up, not too happy about getting a ride home."

Figured. Asking for help was not Mila's strong suit. I hurried to the exterior door. It had a reinforced glass window in the center so you can check outside before you opened the door. I kept the employee parking area well lit.

When I stepped outside, a warm breeze tugged at me. It was the middle of the night, but still warm. I saw Mila's piece of shit Toyota, but I didn't see Mila.

Where the hell was she? I scowled. If she'd called a cab or rideshare, I'd be pissed.

I spotted movement along the back wall of the club, in the shadows where the security lights didn't quite meet.

"Leave me alone!"

Mila's raised voice made my muscles lock.

"Hurt me and you'll regret it." There was a slight tremble under her fierce tone.

I broke into a jog, trying to stay quiet. As I neared, I saw a big, dark shadow had her pinned against the brick wall.

Fury surged through me. *Motherfucker*.

“My boyfriend will come after you,” Mila said.

The man shoved her harder against the wall and her head rapped against the bricks. I gritted my teeth and moved closer, hands curling into fists.

“My boyfriend’s Dante Fury.” She gripped the man’s thick wrist, twisting and wriggling. “He’ll track you down and eviscerate you.”

The man hesitated.

That was all I needed. I surged forward and gripped the back of the man’s shirt. Yanking him away from Mila, I tossed him to the ground.

He cursed and when he looked up at me, he froze.

“You don’t touch what’s mine,” I growled.

The man leaped to his feet. He was big, broad, with a plain face and heavy eyebrows. I swung and my fist collided with his gut. The man grunted and doubled over.

“Not so easy when your opponent isn’t half your size, is it?” I taunted.

The man staggered back, shot one look at Mila, then the asshole turned and ran.

I bit back a curse. I wanted to chase him down, but I wouldn’t leave Mila unprotected. I whirled.

She was leaning against the wall, sucking in some deep breaths. She lifted a hand to push her hair back and I saw it was shaking.

“Mila, are you all right?”

She nodded. “I didn’t even see him coming. He grabbed me and dragged me back here.” Her face screwed up. “I froze, dammit. All my self-defense lessons, and I fucking froze.”

She was taking self-defense classes? I didn’t like that at all. That she had something she felt she needed to defend herself from.

I watched her bite her bottom lip, emotions churning in her gray eyes.

“He didn’t hurt you?”

She shook her head, then held up a hand. “I need a second.”

I could see her trying to process it all, trying to hold herself together.

Fuck that. I strode to her and pulled her into my arms. She went stiff for a second, then slid her arms around me and held on tight.

She was the perfect fit.

“You’re safe now,” I murmured.

“I am *not* going to fall apart.” Her voice was shaky.

“Fall apart if you want.”

“I...can’t.”

I held her harder. “You can. I’ll hold you together.”

She shuddered against me, her hands gripping the back of my shirt. But she didn’t cry or fall apart.

Finally, she stepped back and lifted her chin. “Thanks, Dante.”

“Just doing what a good boyfriend does.”

There was enough light for me to see her cheeks go pink.

“I...that just came out. I realized he was too strong for me to get away from. Inside, when those men who were fighting saw you, they were so scared. I figured that guy might know who you were.”

I cupped her cheek. “It was a good plan.” I frowned. “Did you know him? Did your past finally catch up with you?”

Mila’s gaze dropped to the ground. “I didn’t know him. He didn’t say one thing to me.” She met my gaze and swallowed. “He had to just be some random asshole attacker, right?”

My instincts told me she wasn't telling me the entire truth. She didn't know the guy, but there was more going on here.

She wasn't safe.

I tucked a strand of that horrid black hair back behind her ear. "I'll look into it."

Panic flared in her eyes.

"Talk to me, Mila."

"It's safer if I don't."

She tried to step back, but I held on. An idea was turning through my head. One she'd planted there. One where I could keep this woman safe until she trusted me enough to let me help her.

"It was a good idea. Telling him that you're mine. He'll tell whoever he works for about it."

Her eyes widened. "I hope he doesn't work for anyone. And like I said, it just came out."

I nodded. "I propose we let people know that you belong to me. I know you're running from something, Mila. I'm not going to let it catch up with you."

Now her mouth dropped open, then closed. "I don't think I understand."

I cupped her shoulders, hating the worn jacket she wore. I made a note to buy her something better. "We'll pretend we're dating. I'll let it be known you're mine. No one would dare touch the woman of one of the Fury brothers."

"What?" she squeaked.

"You'll be my girlfriend."

Mila blinked at me. "You don't have girlfriends. You don't date."

I cocked a brow.

She made a sound. "You're hot and rich, Dante. People talk about you. You don't date, and never someone from work."

I smiled. “I guess that’s because I’ve never met the right woman. We’ll have to sell that. We fell for each other, and it was love at first sight.”

She shook her head. “This is crazy.”

I squeezed her arm. “It’s going to be all right.”

“I don’t buy that baloney for a second,” she muttered.

“For now, I’m taking you home.”

She huffed out a breath. “Dante—”

I leaned in close, and her mouth clamped closed. “You got hurt on my watch.” I gently cupped her injured cheek. “Someone just attacked you outside my club, and you’re shaken up.”

“That’s not why I’m shaken up. It’s your outrageous idea —”

“I’m taking you home.” I took her elbow and headed across the lot. She fell into step beside me. “And as of now, we’re a couple.” I glanced down at her. “A fake couple.”

“I’m too tired to argue with you right now. But I’m going to.”

We’d see. I led her to a nearby warehouse on the far side of the lot.

She frowned. “What’s this?”

“My place.” I thumbed the remote on my keys. The corrugated metal garage door started to slide open. My warehouse was four stories tall, and I’d renovated it into a home. My brothers had all done the same to buildings close by.

The warehouse next door was Colton’s, and it connected to a house in the center where we had family meals. Our housekeeper, Lola, lived there. The warehouse behind it was Reath’s. Beauden had an apartment over his gym, down the block. And the office tower on the corner of the street belonged to my final brother, Kavner. He ran his business empire from there, and lived in the penthouse.

“So you own a chunk of downtown New Orleans?”

I smiled. “The entire block. With my brothers. We work hard to get what we want.”

We walked into the garage, shoes echoing on the polished concrete floor. Lights clicked on, illuminating my three cars.

Mila gasped.

Neatly parked in a row were my red Ferrari 812 Superfast, my refurbished, black, 1969 Corvette Stingray, and my latest acquisition, my new gray Aston Martin DB12.

I led her to the Aston.

“Fancy,” she said.

“It’s new.” I opened the passenger door. “Hop in.”

She slid inside, taking it all in.

As soon as I got in the driver’s side, I started the engine, gunned it, and pulled out of the warehouse.

“How’s the cheek feeling?”

“It’s fine. I didn’t need a ride.”

“You’re getting one anyway. You should get used to asking for help sometimes.”

“You don’t strike me as someone who asks for help very often.” She clasped her hands in her lap. “I can take care of myself.”

“Mmm. What’s your address?”

She told me and my gut tightened. It wasn’t too far away, in Tremé, but not the good part. It wouldn’t be safe at night.

Finally, I pulled up in front of an older house converted into four apartments.

Mila swiveled in her seat. “Don’t get out. I don’t think you should leave your fancy car unattended around here.”

“No.” I knifed out and stalked around the car. I opened her door. I knew no one would touch my car. Everyone knew who it belonged to.

Mila shot me an annoyed look, and I fought not to smile. I followed her up the cracked concrete walkway, scanning around.

I hoped the asshole who'd cornered her in the parking lot was just a random attacker. But I wasn't planning to take any chances. The idea of pretending we were together was making more and more sense.

Soon, I was even less happy when I discovered she had a ground floor apartment. She unlocked the door and flicked a light on.

It was small. The best thing I could say was that it had original, hardwood floors, but the rest of it was old and rundown.

There was a pocket-sized kitchen and living area. A table with only two chairs. French doors led into a bedroom.

She whirled to face me. "Thanks for the ride."

Eying her front door, I scowled. "You need a better lock."

She snorted. "I'd go for hot water that lasts longer than three minutes, first."

Irrational anger welled. I hated the idea of her staying here. My hands flexed. My place was much more secure, and had lots of hot water.

Shaking my head, I reached out and cupped her cheek. "How does this feel now?"

She stilled. "It's a little tight, but there's no pain."

I stroked a finger over her skin, and she sucked in a breath. I cocked my head, felt the tension curling around us. I realized she was breathing in my cologne.

Fuck. My cock tightened.

I should step back.

I should leave.

Instead, I kept stroking my fingers gently over her cheekbone. I saw her eyelashes flutter.

“Mila...”

She pressed her hands to my shirt, her palms warm.

“You smell too damn good.” She sounded mad about it.

I crowded closer, until her back hit the wall.

She lifted her gaze, and I saw heat in her gray eyes. I knew I should leave, but I’d never been good at following the rules.

“If we’re going to convince people we’re a couple, we need to be comfortable touching each other.”

She made a sound, but didn’t move away. “We aren’t together.”

Lowering my head, I saw her chest hitch. “We’re pretending we are.”

“No, we aren’t.” Her voice wasn’t very convincing. Then her fingers twisted in my shirt, and she pulled me the rest of the way.

Our mouths meshed. I took over, forcing her mouth open, exploring her. She tasted good, felt good. She made a hungry sound, pressing into me.

Fuck. Desire exploded. White hot.

Angling my head, I went deeper. The taste of her hit me hard. She kissed me back, tongue stroking mine. *Damn.* The kiss was wild, stripping away my tightly held control.

A shout from outside, followed by laughter, broke the moment.

Mila stiffened, then sidestepped, pulling away from me. She ran a hand through her hair, not meeting my gaze. “You’d better go. Thanks for the ride.”

I stared at her for a beat. One thing I was good at was biding my time. “I know you have secrets.”

Her chin jutted. “And they’re mine to keep.”

For now.

“Ice that cheek again, and lock the door. Good night, Mila.”

MILA

After I locked the door, I leaned my forehead against the battered wood. I let out a long breath. As I stood there, I heard the purr of Dante's car as he drove away.

I'd just kissed Dante Fury.

Or he'd just kissed the hell out of me.

What the hell was I thinking? That was the problem, I hadn't been thinking. It was hard to do around a man as magnetic as he was.

You'll be my girlfriend.

As of now, we're dating.

No one would dare touch the woman of one of the Fury brothers.

This wasn't happening. Pretend to be Dante's girlfriend? Touch him, have him touch me, and try to pretend it was fake?

I was certain that had disaster written all over it. I chewed on the end of one fingernail. For a second, with him close, bringing me home, caring for me, it'd felt so damn nice. I hadn't had anyone to lean on for a long time.

He smelled good, felt good, had all that dark strength and authority.

I released a shaky breath. If he knew what I was running from, the trouble I could bring his club and the people who worked there, he'd toss me out fast.

But wasn't that why I'd gotten a job there? Because I knew the Fury brothers stood up to the gangs, the criminals, and the corrupt?

He was offering to be in a fake relationship to keep me safe.

My stomach turned over. The guy who'd grabbed me outside Ember, hadn't said a word. Had Cory recognized me and told someone? I frowned and rubbed my temples. Was it just random? Was Dante overreacting?

I straightened. I couldn't afford to depend on anyone. Only myself.

Trusting someone meant ending up dead.

When I was back at work on Wednesday, I'd tell Dante thanks, but no thanks. A fake relationship wasn't happening.

I pushed away from the door and grabbed one of my two rickety dining chairs. I dragged it into my bedroom, checked the French doors, then wedged the chair under the door handle.

All-too-familiar anxiety rolled in. I hated being alone, wondering if tonight might be the night the assholes hunting me might finally track me down.

I left the lights on and headed for the bathroom. Stripping off, I checked my cheek in the mirror that was rusted around the edges. I probed the swelling and winced. I'd lied to Dante, it did hurt. It was a low-grade throb, and I had a growing headache. I'd probably have a bruise in the morning.

Turning on the shower, I quickly stepped in. I couldn't waste what little hot water I'd get. I showered until it went cold.

I pulled on some leggings and a T-shirt. I never slept in pajamas anymore. It paid to be ready to run.

In the bedroom, I grabbed the baseball bat resting against the wall. I'd picked it up at a thrift store. I settled into the center of the sagging bed. Ugh, I felt wired, edgy. I knew I'd never get to sleep. Probably I'd get my laptop and do some

more searches. I wanted answers as much as I wanted to survive. I usually passed out around eight in the morning, and got a few hours of sleep, if I was lucky.

My attackers had broken into a place I'd stayed in soon after I'd run. I bit my lip. It'd been just a week after they'd murdered my parents.

God, I missed mom and dad.

I pressed my face to my knees. I felt so alone.

All because I'd overheard something I shouldn't have.

I clutched the bat more tightly.

Survive. That was my only mission now. Stay hidden, keep breathing, survive.

DANTE

The first thing I heard when I opened the door was childish laughter, followed by several deep chuckles. I walked into the shared house where we all hung out and ate together.

We all had our own places, but this house always felt like home. I smelled lasagna and smiled. Lola made the best lasagna I'd ever tasted.

We always tried to have Monday-night dinner together. It was the one day of the week that was quietest for most of us. Ember was closed, although I'd probably drop by Smokehouse later.

As I headed toward the back of the house, I wondered what Mila was doing today. Was her face hurting?

I'd called Reath earlier to ask him to follow up on the asshole who'd attacked her outside the club. Hopefully, he'd found something.

When I strolled into the open-plan kitchen, dining, and living area, I was assailed by light and noise. The entire place had been renovated, with a huge island, long dining table, and cozy couches in front of the big TV. Lola's very green thumb was evident in lots of house plants, that gave the space pops of lush green.

The TV was on, tuned to the evening news. Lola was bustling around the kitchen, and Beau was sitting at the island with a beer in hand. Colton and Reath sat at the table.

“Uncle Dante!” A slim pixie of a girl dashed my way.

I scooped her up. “There’s my best girl.”

Daisy smacked a kiss to my cheek. “Prickly.” Her nose wrinkled. “Yours is worse than Daddy’s.”

Colton sent a smile her way. “I can grow it longer, short stuff.”

“No!” Daisy cried in horror, but then ruined it with a giggle.

She was a pretty little thing, with shiny, brown hair. Colton was technically her uncle. It was his biological sister who’d given birth to Daisy, but Chrissy had been a drug addict. She’d disappeared into the life, and Colton hadn’t seen her for years. She’d apparently tried to get clean, and managed it when she’d accidentally become pregnant. But after Daisy was born, it hadn’t stuck. When the little girl had been one, Chrissy had OD’d. When Colton had found out that he had a niece who’d be going into the system, he’d pulled every string he could to get custody.

He was the only father the little girl had ever known. Plus, she had four uncles who she had wrapped around her small fingers. And Lola, our sixty-year-old housekeeper, who doted on her.

“Did you grow an inch since I saw you?” I put her on my hip. At seven and a half—Daisy insisted on the half—she was still easy to carry around.

“No, Uncle Dante, I only saw you two days ago. But look.” She smiled.

I noted a new missing tooth. Her gappy smile was as cute as hell. “Did the tooth fairy pay up?”

She leaned closer and whispered. “Uncle Dante, *Daddy* is the tooth fairy.”

“He is?” I raised my eyebrows. “But he doesn’t have any wings or wear a pink tutu.”

Daisy’s giggle was sweet and infectious. She always brightened my day.

“I’d pay to see Colt in a tutu,” Beau said.

“Fuck you,” Colt said.

“Daddy! No swearing, remember?”

This was new. Colton had never managed to curb his swearing around Daisy. I was pretty sure some of her first words had been curse words.

“I can swear if I want to,” Colt grumbled.

“No, Macy said she’ll set up a swear jar. She said we’ll be millionaires in under a month.”

Colt scowled and sipped his beer. “Macy works for me. She does what I say.”

Macy Underwood was Colt’s latest receptionist/office assistant for his bounty-hunting business. He tended to scare them off with his less-than-shining personality.

Still, Macy was a ball of energy and optimism, who’d stuck around for six months. And she didn’t seem intimidated by Colt’s growls and grumbles.

Beau opened a beer and handed it to me.

“Everyone at the table,” Lola ordered, taking a tray of lasagna out of the oven.

“Fuck, that smells good,” Colt said.

“Dad-dy.”

I tipped Daisy closer to Colt. “Give him a hit, sweetheart.”

Daisy gently smacked the back of Colt’s head.

With a mock growl, he pulled her out of my arms and pressed a kiss to her neck. He tickled her, generating more giggles.

Smiling, I took a seat at the table. “Where’s Kav?”

“On his way,” Reath said. “He had a meeting run late.”

Beau sprawled in a chair at the head of the table. “He always has a meeting running late.” Beau shuddered. “Thank God I don’t have to go to meetings.”

“The perils of being a billionaire businessman with your fingers in all kinds of things,” I said.

Lola set the lasagna down in the center of the table. There was already a bowl of salad, and a plate with some garlic bread, beside it. I cooked a little—I certainly didn’t starve—but Lola’s food was something else.

I heard a door close somewhere, then confident footsteps, and a second later, Kavner strode in. As always, he was in one of his designer suits.

“Uncle Kav!” Daisy beamed at him.

Kav set a bottle of wine down on the table, and gave Daisy a kiss. “Darling, I missed you.”

“What about the rest of us?” Colt asked.

Kav shrugged a broad shoulder. “I tolerate you guys.” He pressed a kiss to Lola’s cheek. “It smells fabulous in here.”

She smacked his flat stomach. “You need to eat more. You work too hard.”

“We all work hard, Lola,” I protested.

“I know. Now, you’ll all eat.” She sat across from me and served up a plate for Daisy.

Kav slipped out of his suit jacket, then found a bottle opener.

“You and your wine,” Beau grumbled.

Kav pointed the opener at him. “You can keep your beer, peasant. This is a 1994 bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa. Harlan Estate. Sublime.” He poured a glass, sipped, and closed his eyes.

Soon, we were all seated at the table, eating, trading banter that was punctuated by giggles and questions from Daisy.

Family. I’d never had this growing up, but the five of us had been determined to make the life we wanted for ourselves.

“Daisy, time for a bath,” Lola said, rising.

A mutinous look settled on the little girl's face. She hated missing out on anything.

"Dai," Colt said, his steady gaze on his daughter. "No arguing."

"But it's summer vacation."

"You still need to sleep."

She crossed her arms. "When I'm big, I'm *never* going to sleep."

I fought back a smile. "Sweetheart, trust me, when you're young, you want to stay up all night. When you're an adult, you're counting down the hours until you can go to bed."

"Hear, hear." Beau lifted his beer.

Colt gave Daisy a hug. "Go with Lola. After your bath, I'll read you a book once you're in bed. Your choice."

My niece sniffed, then gave a long-suffering sigh. "Okay, Daddy."

"Good girl."

"So, Dante, how's your girl?" Reath asked.

I forked up some lasagna and took my time eating it.

"Girl?" Kav's brows rose. "Dante never keeps a woman around. Once he's had one, that's it, they don't exist for him anymore."

"This one works for him," Beau said. "Pretty, smart, on the run from something. She does self-defense classes at the gym."

I glanced at him. "She works out at Hard Burn?"

"Just attends Shay's classes for women." Beau looked at the others. "She put herself between two guys fighting at the club, and our brother here nearly broke some Olympic records getting down there to save her."

"She was also attacked by some guy in the parking lot outside the club," I added.

My brothers all paused. None of them had time for men who attacked women or children.”

“Is she all right?” Beau asked.

“She’s fine. She shook it off. Said she didn’t know him.” I set my fork down and looked at Reath. “You find anything?”

Kav leaned forward, his gaze glued to my face. “Holy shit, you like her.”

I ignored him and focused on Reath.

My brother leaned back in his chair. “Only a brief glimpse of him on the cameras. Not enough to ID him.”

I frowned. We had good lighting and a good security system at the club.

“Means he was either lucky,” Reath said. “Or he knew where the cameras were.”

Which would mean he was there specifically for Mila. “There’s nothing that says he was after her specifically.” But I didn’t like it. At all. “I want you guys to spread the word around...that Mila is mine.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“Yours?” Kav said.

“That we’re together. And that she’s under my protection.”

The four of them all traded looks.

“It’s to keep her safe.”

“So...it’s fake?” Reath asked.

“Yes.”

Reath raised his brows. “She agreed to this.”

“Mostly.”

Beau smiled. “You are so fucked.”

I glared at him. “She’s my employee, and she’s running from something. Whether that asshole last night was after her specifically or not, I’m keeping her safe.”

Colt nodded. “I’ll spread the word.”

The others all nodded too, and I felt something settle inside me. Now I just needed to convince Mila. “Can we talk about what we’re actually here to talk about now?”

“Not yet.” Kav gripped my arm. “Dante, you never let a woman get too close. You keep all your emotions locked down. I’m happy about this.”

I blew out a breath. “It’s not real, Kav.”

“Sure.” He was grinning.

“I’m going to help her, whether she likes it or not.”

“Good,” Reath said. “Want me to run her?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want her to trust me, for her to tell me her story.”

Kav smiled. “Wow, he’s really gone for her. This should be fun.”

“If you’re done ragging on me...” I arched a brow. “Time to talk.”

I felt all my brothers’ attention sharpen.

“Salazar is pushing our boundaries,” Reath said.

“Testing us,” I added.

Reath set his drink down. “I’ve heard murmurs from an informant that Salazar and his men might try to get drugs into your club, Dante.”

I growled. “Not happening.” I’d worked too damn hard to keep that shit out.

Beauden nodded. “I take it that we need to send a message.”

Nodding, I took a sip of my beer. “Salazar is ambitious and trying to make a name for himself with the higher-ups in the cartel back in Mexico.”

“Suggestions?” Kav sipped his wine. He’d rolled his sleeves up, showing off muscled forearms. He might spend

most of his time in the boardroom, but he made use of Beau's gym, and knew how to handle himself.

Reath tapped a finger on the table. "I suggest we come at him from a few angles."

"Hit them where it hurts," Kav said. "The money."

"Cut off their drug supply?" I suggested.

"Or rather, their sales." Kav's face sharpened. The same look he got when he went in for the kill on a business deal. "The Colombians are always trying to push out the Mexicans. I'll make a few calls, and make sure Salazar and his men get more attention from the port authorities, and the Colombians less."

Most of the drugs came through the port. Kav owned various shipping businesses, and had a lot of contacts. With Salazar's shipments targeted and held up, it meant the Colombians would make more deals with the local drug dealers. I'd prefer no drugs, and from the muscle I saw working in Colt's jaw, I knew he felt the same. But we'd all learned a long time ago that we couldn't save the entire world —just our little corner of it.

Kav leaned back in his chair. "I'll make some calls."

Reath nodded. "I'll call Broussard and get him to put a little more pressure on Salazar."

Detective Simon Broussard was a cop friend at the New Orleans PD. I smiled. I bet Salazar would just love being raided by New Orleans' finest.

"Alexei Malenkov goes to my gym," Beau said.

Reath stiffened, and I raised a brow. Malenkov was a top-level enforcer for the local Russians. Not Mafia, per se, but like us, they protected what was theirs.

"I'll have a chat with him," Beau said. "There's no love lost between his people and Salazar's."

This could work. We squeeze Salazar from a few sides—and mess up his business—which would make him look bad to

the Moreno Cartel. He'd feel the pinch. With a nod, I looked around the table. "Don't fuck with the Fury brothers."

"Hell, yeah." Colt clinked his bottle against mine.

Once, we'd all been angry, helpless teens. Beau was the oldest, then me, then Kav and Colt, who were only a few weeks apart. Then Reath. We'd all endured bad family situations, then bounced around foster homes and seen too much shit. That was life. For most people, life wasn't nice, wasn't pretty.

The Tuckers had taken us in. They'd "specialized" in dealing with unruly boys. But the older couple had possessed a mean streak a mile wide. Living in that house had caused all five of us to bond. After we'd stopped Harvey Tucker from beating Reath one night, we'd vowed to have each other's backs. We'd all been covered in blood, and we'd all joined hands.

We'd decided to be brothers, not because we shared the same blood, but because we'd spilled it to survive.

"We need the same last name," Reath said. "So we're really brothers."

I nodded. "Yeah. When we're old enough, we can legally change it."

Reath swiped his hand across his bleeding nose. Tucker had done a number on him, and his eye was swollen shut. "Before I go and join the military." There was a glint in his dark eyes. "And learn to be a badass. The meanest badass ever."

Beauden gripped Reath's shoulder. "That's my title."

At almost eighteen, Beau was already the tallest and widest of us all. His knuckles were busted from taking our foster father down. "I might come with you, Reath. Think I'd look good in a uniform."

"I'm going to college," Kav said. "I want to learn how to make money. Lots of it."

If anyone could do it, it would be Kavner. He was smart and cunning.

“We need to pick a name,” Colt said. “Something that means something.”

We were all still breathing hard, fueled by our anger at Tucker. I’d heard Reath’s screams as Tucker had beaten him. Again. He’d beaten all of us, but for some reason, had loved to pick on Reath. Anger had empowered the rest of us to smash down the door to the basement, and take Tucker down, once and for all.

Now, the five of us were on the run. We were out in the world, and we weren’t going back to any foster home. Beau would be eighteen soon, an adult. I’d just turned seventeen. All we had was each other, and our fury at the crap life had dealt us.

I paused.

That was it.

The thing that drove us, pushed us, motivated us.

I looked up. “Fury. We’ll be the Fury brothers.”

“Who wants to play some poker?” Beau said.

Beau’s question drew me out of the old memories and back to the present.

“I’m in,” Reath replied.

As I looked at my brothers, I felt love and pride. We’d made it. We had each other.

Of course, my thoughts turned to sad, gray eyes. Who did Mila have? And what the hell was she running from?

MILA

After a few days off, I was feeling a little refreshed.

Daytime napping had helped, but not having a car had been a pain. I'd caught the streetcar to the library, and spent some time digging into who I thought might be behind my parents' murders. I'd visited a few tattoo places to see if anyone recognized the snake tattoo one of my attackers had inked on his arm. If anyone had seen it before, no one was talking.

I'd also gone to two of Shay's classes at Hard Burn. I had the sore muscles to prove it. I hated that I'd frozen up when that asshole had surprised me near my car. It wasn't going to happen again.

The last thing I'd done was call a few auto places about my car, but they were all too expensive.

I hopped off the bus and headed down the street. Wednesday night was usually quieter at Ember. It was usually more couples on dates, fewer groups out to party.

I'd put Sunday night behind me. Getting clocked by those fighting idiots, seeing Cory, getting accosted by the guy in the parking lot. None of it existed. My nose wrinkled. Except for the bruise on the side of my head that I'd mostly covered up with makeup. It had deepened and turned some ugly shades of purple.

And I was definitely putting the scorching attraction to Dante Fury and his crazy idea to pretend to be together behind me.

That kiss...

Even now, days later, my pulse fluttered. Lying in my bed, I'd re-lived every second of the hottest kiss of my life. With my fingers between my legs.

As I neared the front entrance to Ember, I blew out a breath. *Focus, Mila.*

"Hey, Reggie."

The bouncer lifted a big hand. "Hi, Mila. Enjoy your days off?"

I pinned on a smile. "Sure thing. You?"

"Yep. Did some fishing on the lake."

"You going to lie about how big that fish that got away was?"

Reggie let out a booming laugh. "It was huge, I swear."

I grinned at him.

"By the way, your car is out back. It's all fixed."

I jerked to a halt. "Fixed? But I haven't found a mechanic yet."

"The boss man sorted it out for you." Reggie fished around in his pocket and held out my keys.

As I took them, a bunch of emotions shot through me. "Right. Thanks."

How dare he butt in more than he already had? I didn't have the money to pay for the car right now, and he'd gone and spent it for me. *Dammit.*

He's helping you, Mila. I wrestled all my feelings into some sort of control. I was so used to taking care of myself, to not lean on anyone. Still, the man could have asked first.

I headed straight into the employee locker room, then dumped my bag in my locker. Quickly, I changed into my halter top.

When I hit the bar, Venus waved. "Okay, Mila?"

“All fine.”

“You took a pretty big hit the other night.”

I snorted. “I’m tough.” It seemed Dante hadn’t mentioned the guy in the parking lot to anyone.

Venus’ dark gaze was piercing. “My good-for-nothing ex-husband used to hit me. Doesn’t matter how tough you are, it still hurts.”

I swallowed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, I kicked his ass out and I’ve never seen him again.” One of the bartenders called her name and she turned away.

Getting to work, I ran through the pre-shift checklist. There was no sign of Dante. He wasn’t always there on quiet nights. My chest tightened. No way. I was *not* disappointed.

I headed out from behind the bar to do a final walk-through of the main floor before we opened the doors.

“Hey, boss,” Venus called out.

Spinning, my heart jumped into my throat.

And there he was. As always, he was dressed in black and looking far too attractive. He was so intensely masculine, and I couldn’t look away. I loved the contrast of the elegant tailored shirt that emphasized his wide shoulders and slim waist, to the rugged line of his jaw and that thick, dark hair.

He called out to the others behind the bar, but he was scanning the club. His eyes locked on me.

Oh, God. I felt his gaze hit me. Felt heat wash through my body.

He crossed the club with his ground-eating strides. “Mila.” He cupped my cheeks. “Did you get some rest?”

“Dante.” I pulled in a quick breath. “Like I said before, we aren’t doing this.”

He stroked his thumbs across my cheeks, and I barely bit back a moan.

A faint smile tipped the edges of his lips. “We’re doing this. I’m spreading the word that you’re mine and under my protection. From now on, everyone needs to believe we’re a couple.”

I hissed. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“This isn’t up for discussion.”

I made a sound. “God, you’re bossy. And I heard you fixed my car without asking me.”

Now he smiled. “If those were questions, then the answers are yes, and yes.”

He didn’t look very sorry about it. “They were statements.”

A serious look crossed his face. “The mechanic couldn’t swear to it, but he said it looked like your car had been tampered with.”

For one second, my heart stopped. “Tampered with?” To leave me trapped, alone, in the parking lot.

His fingers tightened on me. “So we’re officially together.”

I shook my head, fighting the feel of his fingers on my skin. “I’m not your type.”

He leaned closer, and that tantalizing sandalwood scent hit me.

“I don’t have a type.” He touched my hair. “Although I seem to have a growing fondness for smart, tough women with badly dyed hair.”

I choked out a laugh. “I hate this color.”

“So, change it back. You need to be careful, but you don’t need the disguise anymore.”

“Because I’m Dante Fury’s woman?” *Damn.* I liked the sound of that. Too much.

Don’t get used to it, Mila. It’s not real.

“Yeah.” He lowered his head and gently kissed my lips. *Oh.* It was enough to light a smolder in my belly. I gripped his arms, my fingers digging in.

Then he deepened the kiss. The taste of him hit, and I made a needy sound. He pulled me closer, but I was already pressing into him.

I forgot where we were, and with everything swirling around me, that this was fake. For those few seconds, there was only me and Dante.

When he lifted his head, and looked to the left, I followed his gaze. My stomach tied itself into knots. Several staff members were all staring at us, wide-eyed.

He’d done that on purpose. I groaned, then dropped my head to his chest. He pressed a hand to my back and rubbed gently.

“It’s going to be okay.”

I gave a small laugh. “Sure. No one’s going to pepper *you* with questions, you’re the boss.”

He took my hand. “We’re doing this. You can trust me, Mila.”

Something trembled in my chest. What if I did lean on him? He had very strong shoulders, he had resources. Maybe I could trust him?

He squeezed my fingers. “Now, come on.”

“I still think this is crazy,” I whispered as we crossed the club.

“Oh, my God, you guys are together!” Staci’s excited voice broke the moment.

When I lifted my head, all of Ember’s staff members were staring at us. I sent him a glare, which made him smile.

Dante wrapped an arm around me. “Seeing Mila hurt gave me the push I needed.”

“I’ll give you a push,” I muttered under my breath.

He gave a low laugh, then he kissed me again. All I could do was cling to him. The man was a very good kisser. By the time he was finished, I felt a little dazed. When I looked up, Venus was glancing at us, a little shocked.

Dante ran a thumb over my lips, then pulled away. “Keep an eye on her for me.” He leaned closer to Venus and lowered his voice. “If any customers are overly curious about Mila, or ask questions about her, I want to know about it.”

Venus’ gaze narrowed, but she nodded.

He shot me another dark, scorching look. “Come and see me later.” Then he headed for his office.

I released a shaky breath. I was used to my life feeling off-kilter, but this kind of felt like I’d been caught up in a whirlwind.

Everyone turned to look at me and my stomach locked. “I’ll...go and check if the kitchen needs anything.”

Thankfully, the doors were opening soon, and everyone had work to do. I felt people watching me, which I hated. Venus kept giving me a look, like she could see right through all my lies. When a loud group of women entered the club, heading straight for the bar, I sent up a small thank you. One was wearing a white veil and a pink sash. Bachelorette party.

“We all need some flaming cocktails,” a brunette called out.

I got busy. More customers filed in. It was a good crowd for a Wednesday, and I just let myself focus on the work.

“Mila.” Staci appeared and hip bumped me. “You have been holding out on me. You and Dante.” She was grinning.

“Um, it just happened suddenly.”

“Girl, grab that man, ride him hard, and don’t let go.” She hurried off to serve some drinks.

As I made drinks, every now and then, I’d scan the club, searching for Cory or the man who’d attacked me in the parking lot. No one looked familiar or was paying me any attention.

Slowly, my muscles relaxed.

“Hey, Mila.”

My heart jolted, until I saw it was Reggie on the other side of the bar.

“Boss wants to see you in his office.”

I felt every muscle tense. “Tell him I’m fine. I’m sure he’s just checking up on me.”

Reggie grinned. “He said you’d say that. He also said it’s your break. He’s expecting you.”

Shit. The man was so damn bossy.

“Fine.” I told Venus I was taking my break and stomped back to the employee area.

DANTE

Waiting for Mila, I paced my office, hands in my pockets.

I'd forced myself to stay away from her during her days off, and had her piece-of-shit car repaired. Kissing her downstairs, putting on a show for the staff, it had taken everything I had to keep myself in check.

There was a knock at my office door. "Come in."

Mila stepped inside, the light glinting off her gold top. She took a few steps, then curtsied. "I'm here, as ordered."

That tart tone made me want to smile.

She crossed her arms. "Has anyone ever told you that you're bossy?"

My lips curled. "Maybe."

"It's not a compliment, Dante."

I walked toward her, and saw her tense up. "It is to me. I vowed a long time ago to be in charge of my life."

She sighed. "I wish it was that easy."

There it was again, the tantalizing hint of her secrets.

Her chin lifted. "I'll pay you back for my car."

"No, you won't."

Something fired in her gray eyes. "Dante—"

"Sit, I'll get you a drink."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she just huffed out a breath and headed for my couch. “I shouldn’t. I still have a couple of hours left of my shift.”

“Just a small one. Don’t worry, I won’t tell the boss.”

She dropped onto the leather. “You have the good stuff up here, so sure. Why not?”

I poured us both a bourbon. I handed her a glass and watched her sip, then close her eyes and enjoy it.

Sitting, I held my glass up. She bumped hers against it. Our fingers brushed.

Her gaze jerked to mine.

Damn. I already felt desire hitting my gut. I’d spent time with beautiful women before, often taking them to bed. But this felt different.

Like comparing a whisper of smoke to a raging inferno.

“What did you do on your days off?” I asked.

She took a quick sip of her drink. “Nothing exciting. Cleaned, bought groceries. You probably did something glamorous.”

With a snort, I took a sip as well. “Hardly. I worked.”

She frowned. “But Ember was closed.”

“But Smokehouse and my restaurants weren’t. Luminosity and Wildfire.”

“I know what your restaurants are called, Dante. Everyone in New Orleans, hell, in all of Louisiana, knows.” Her fingers curled around her glass. “So, you’re a workaholic.”

“Some would say that.” I waited a beat. “You’re in trouble, Mila, and I am going to help you.”

She looked down at her drink, then sat back. “I think you have a hero complex.”

“What?”

“You need to save everyone. I hear the stories.”

“Really?” I disliked anyone talking about me.

“I know you help out your employees. Like Eddie. I heard you got his kid out of a bind.”

I flexed my hand. “I don’t like to see people preying on others. And I like to keep my little corner of the world safe and orderly.”

“Maybe not a hero complex, a control complex.”

“I grew up with very little control, so I’m strongly motivated to ensure every aspect of my life is how I like it.”

She stared at her glass. “You were in foster care.”

“Yes. My father was abusive, and I ended up in the system.”

“That’s who hit you?”

It wasn’t a subject I talked about. I nodded.

She reached out and took my hand. “No child deserves that. What about your mother?”

I shrugged. “She didn’t do anything. I think a part of her was happy he picked on me and left her alone.”

Mila’s gasp was sharp. “A mother protects her child.”

“Only people who had a good one say that. I survived, and, like I said, I ensure my life is exactly how I like it.” I leaned closer, my fingers closing around hers. “That includes whatever shit is swirling around my employees.”

Her sad, gray eyes pulled at me.

“You can’t control everything,” she said quietly.

I set my glass down and pressed a hand to her knee. “Mila, tell me who’s after you. Let me help you.”

“You are helping me. With this fake dating thing, and by giving me a job.” She hunched her shoulders. “I like working here. I need the job.”

I released a breath. She was so untrusting. I got it, more than she realized.

She rested her hand over mine. Her fingers were long and delicate, her nails short. I stroked the skin at her wrist, and she sucked in a breath.

The air charged around us.

“Dammit,” she muttered under her breath.

The next second, she set her glass down, and launched herself at me. I caught her and my gut hardened.

Our lips met. She kissed me, but I took it over in an instant. She tasted sweet, like berries and bourbon. I slid a hand into her hair, my tongue in her mouth. She moaned.

Need pumped through me. Nothing about this felt fake.

“This is your fault,” she said against my lips. “If you hadn’t kissed me at my place, I wouldn’t have known what this was like.”

“You kissed me.”

She bit my lip. “I did not.” She moaned. “This is fake. Just for show.”

I growled. The fuck it was.

“It’s been so long,” she whispered against my lips.

“What?” I ran my hand down to her ass and squeezed. I’d dreamed about this ass.

“So long since anyone’s touched me,” she confessed.

Those words hit me hard. I rolled, pinning her to the couch beneath me. “I’ve been watching you.” My words were a growl.

“I know. I could sense it.” She bit my bottom lip.

I crushed my mouth to hers again. I slid a hand under her top and closed it over one breast. She made a sound and arched into me.

Fuck.

Need and lust hit me. I kept kissing her, didn’t have a choice. She ground her body against mine. I moved my mouth across her jaw and slid a hand between our bodies.

“What are we doing?” she panted.

“Whatever the hell we want.” I cupped her between her legs.

She cried out, and I loved the sound. I wanted to fucking spend my life ensuring she made that sound every day. I took her mouth again, taking my fill of the taste of her. I stroked the seam of her black pants.

Her hands dug into my shoulders. “*Please.*”

“Say my name,” I growled.

Gray eyes, filled with hunger, met mine. “Dante.”

The sense of satisfaction I felt was huge.

Then, there was a knock on my office door.

We both froze.

“Dante?” It was one of the security guards. “I’ve got the security report you wanted.”

Reality crashed back in. Dammit, we were at the club, where there were far too many interruptions.

“Shit.” Mila shoved at me. “I need to get back to work. Off.”

I rose and she scrambled up, straightening her shirt.

She swallowed. “This can’t happen. Our...thing is just for show.”

“It’s happening.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t mess around with women at the club, or people who work for you.”

“Looks like I’m breaking my rules for you.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m paying you back for my car, and...”

I advanced on her, and she backed up. When she bumped into my desk, I pressed my hands to the wood on either side of her hips.

“You aren’t paying me back, and when you’re ready, you’re going to tell me what you’re running from.”

Her eyes sparked. “Stay out of my business.”

“I’m already in it. And I’m staying in it.”

Her jaw tightened. “You are so freaking bossy.”

I smiled. “I really want to kiss you again.”

She released a breath. “And too freaking attractive.”

My smile widened.

The knock sounded again.

“Hang on,” I said.

Mila took that moment to duck under my arm and stride across my office.

“Mila, will you come up to my office at the end of your shift?”

She paused with her back to me.

“You can trust me,” I said quietly.

She huffed out a breath and her eyes met mine.

My gut tightened. I saw it. That inkling that she might finally lean on me.

“Fine.” She pulled open the door. Reggie stood there, eyeing us, and clearly picking up on the tension.

“I can come back,” he said.

“No, we’re done.” With that parting look, Mila jogged down the stairs.

For now.

MILA

My lips still tingled from Dante's kisses.

My brain was telling me to steer well clear of the far-too-tempting man. But everything else wanted to run back to his office and climb his fine body.

Jeez. I pressed a hand to my flushed cheek. For a second back there in Dante's office, in his arms, I'd felt...safe.

With a shake of my head, I pushed open the door and exited the employee area. The familiar sounds of the club washed over me.

I wasn't safe. I couldn't let myself forget that.

I couldn't get close to anyone. No matter how badly I wanted someone to fuck me, to make me forget the shitshow of my life, to hold me, I couldn't take that risk.

But maybe Dante Fury could help me.

Hope. It welled inside me and tightened my throat. Maybe, after months of being alone, I could trust him.

"Mila." Venus looked my way. "All right? We've got lots of thirsty bodies."

I waved a hand and got back to work.

My body was still humming with desire, and I bit my lip. I grabbed a glass and slammed it down on the bar. The customer in front of me jolted, and I managed a smile. Blood was pumping through my veins. I could still feel those big, strong hands on my...

Enough. I had work to do.

After pouring some shots and making some cocktails, I evened out a little.

I'd finish my shift...then I'd go to Dante's office and see.

I wasn't going to admit it, but I kept glancing at my watch. Counting down the minutes to the end of my shift.

Sucking in a breath, I made a decision. I was going to tell him. For the first time in so long, I was going to share the nightmare I'd been living for months.

Reggie appeared, talking into his radio. His brow was creased. It wasn't often I saw Reggie disgruntled.

"Everything okay, Reggie?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Always some demanding asshole who wants to see the boss. Hate the ones who throw their weight around, think they're better than everyone."

"I'm pretty sure Dante can handle himself."

Reggie just grunted.

I started cleaning up the bar.

"Mila," Venus called out. "You can finish up."

Finally. A few minutes later, I punched the code into the employee door and headed toward Dante's office. I was smiling. For the first time in a really long time, I felt light.

Dante's office door was ajar, so I pushed it open. Then I stumbled to a halt.

My mind blanked. He was standing in the center of his office, with a statuesque redhead in a gorgeous, sleeveless, black dress wrapped around him. They were kissing, and her hand was tugging at his belt.

I stepped back and Dante lifted his head. I saw something cross his face.

Yeah, probably pissed I just caught him in a clinch. God, I was truly an idiot.

Never brings women back to his office. Right.

I knew no one could be trusted. Apparently, I learned my lessons the hard way.

“Mila—”

I held up a hand and walked backward.

“Oops,” the redhead drawled. A satisfied smile crossed her perfect face. “I should have locked the door.”

“Jasmine,” Dante growled.

So, he knew her. *God*. My stomach felt sick, and my skin flushed hot, then cold. I whirled.

“Mila, wait!”

I had no intention of waiting. I ran down the stairs.

It took me seconds to grab my stuff from my locker. I clutched my keys in one hand as I pulled my jacket on. I hurried toward the door. With every step, I expected Dante to appear.

But he didn’t. I didn’t want to think about what he and his redhead were doing.

I felt a dull ache growing right in the center of my chest. I had been ready to trust the asshole. I slung my backpack over my shoulder. Deep down, I knew I shouldn’t feel betrayed. He’d said he’d pretend I was his, it wasn’t real.

My stomach clenched. For a few moments there, it had felt like the most real thing in my life.

I let my mind go blank. I’d think of absolutely nothing until I was locked inside my apartment.

At least it was a blessing that I had a working car, because I didn’t have the money for an Uber. As I headed out of the employee exit, I scanned the parking lot warily. My gaze moved to Dante’s warehouse.

No thinking about Dante Fury.

I reached my beaten-up Corolla. It had seen far better days. We both had.

After unlocking the doors, I slid inside. I cast a quick glance at the back door of the club. No Dante.

Before I could start the engine, a hand sank into my hair and yanked my head backward against the headrest.

With a yelp, I blinked against the sting on my scalp. There was someone in the backseat!

“You’re dead, *chica*,” a deep voice breathed in my ear.

An arm banded around my throat.

They’d found me.

“The other idiot they sent couldn’t finish the job. But I will.”

Fear, panic, and anger surged inside me. I was so damn sick of being afraid.

I jammed my fingernails into the guy’s arm and scratched. He cursed and his arm loosened.

That was all I needed.

Heart pounding, I ripped myself free and threw myself out of the car. I stumbled, but caught myself. I heard him, sensed him coming after me.

I broke into a sprint, but I hadn’t gone far when he grabbed my hair again.

Crying out, I twisted, trying to get free.

The man grabbed my arm. He was strong, and I glimpsed dark hair, a hard face, and ink on his neck. He hauled me backward, my feet dragging on the ground. Adrenaline hit my system.

“I get a very big payday for taking care of you.”

Shay’s voice echoed in my head. *Trust your instincts. Present yourself with confidence. Keep it simple.*

I started to struggle. I threw my body around, and heard him grunt. He cursed in Spanish, and his arm tightened, cutting off my air. My vision swam.

I wasn’t going to die here, dammit.

My attacker kept dragging me backward. I heard a noise and saw he'd popped the trunk of my car.

No. If he got me in there, I'd be dead.

I scratched his arm again. If I could get free, I could knee him between the legs.

"Puta!"

I heard a snick, then I felt a prick on my cheek.

"Be still, or I'll cut you."

Oh, God. Fear was the most horrible emotion. It was paralyzing, and emptied your brain. Made you feel helpless. My vision narrowed to a point.

But I still had anger inside me. I dug deep and found it.

I stomped on the asshole's foot. I felt another sting on my face, and I tried to wriggle free of his grip.

"You're dead," he growled.

There was no sound, but suddenly he was gone.

I pitched forward, and fell on my hands and knees.

I heard the thud of flesh hitting flesh, and a grunt. I looked back, and my heart jumped into my throat.

Dante had my attacker on the ground, punching him. His face was a dark mask, his mouth a flat line.

I heard shouts, and saw security guards running over.

With a shove, Dante dropped the groaning man on the ground and straightened. "No one comes into my territory and hurts my woman."

A shiver ran down my spine.

As the guards hauled the man up, I saw blood on his face. His nose was broken.

"Call Reath," Dante ordered the guards. "I want this asshole in a holding room."

Then Dante crouched beside me.

“I’m okay.” My shaky voice belied the words.

He didn’t say anything, just slid his arms around me and lifted me into his arms. “You are now,” he murmured. “I’ve got you.”

My pulse did a crazy dance. “Put me down.”

“No.” His voice was firm.

With no choice, I slid an arm across his broad shoulders and held on.

DANTE

Blood was still pounding through my system. Seeing that asshole attack Mila, pulling a knife on her...

I swallowed a growl. I felt her shaking in my arms.

“I’ve got you.” I headed across the lot to my warehouse. I wanted her safe and secure.

Still holding her, I pressed the remote in my pocket. Once the garage door opened, I strode in and headed for my elevator.

“Dante...”

I hated hearing that wobble in her voice. “Shh, Mila. Just hold on.”

With a choked sound, she buried her face in my neck.

Damn. That felt good.

Especially after she’d witnessed that stupid fucking play by Jasmine.

I stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the top floor. When I walked into my living room, lights clicked on. They illuminated the kitchen at the far end of the large space, done in dark grays, with touches of brass. There was a large dining room table to one side—big enough to hold my family if we ate at my place—and a huge couch on the other, close to the glass sliding doors. They opened up onto my rooftop deck. They also offered me a great view of New Orleans that I loved.

I set Mila down on the couch. Her hands were grazed, and her pants were torn at one knee. My jaw tightened.

“You’re safe now,” I told her.

She looked up, her eyes wide. Her hair was tangled around her face, and there was a small cut from the bastard’s knife on her cheek.

“No, I’m not.” Dejection filled her pretty features.

She was shaking, so I grabbed the dark-green throw blanket resting over the back of the couch. Lola had made it for me. I wrapped it around her.

Straightening, I quickly strode to the kitchen and pulled out my first aid kit. I also found a bottle of whiskey and poured three fingers into a glass.

“Drink.” I handed her the glass, then sat on my coffee table —it was sturdy wood with an industrial edge and touches of brass.

She turned the glass around in her hands. “I want to go.”

“No. We’re going to talk, and I’m going to clean your wounds.”

“I...can’t trust you. I almost...” She shook her head.

My mouth flattened and I gritted my teeth. “Then all you need to do is listen.”

She took a sip of the drink. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Yes, I do.” I took one of her hands and cleaned the scrapes. “First off, Jasmine.”

“I have *no* interest in talking about *Jasmine*.” There was a bite to her words.

“You’re making assumptions.”

Mila barked out a laugh. “Right. You have a beautiful redhead wrapped around you in your office, where you’d not long before kissed me, and I’m reading it wrong.”

I gripped her chin. Gray eyes churning with emotion met mine.

“For a second, I forgot this was all fake,” she said. “Just for show.”

I ignored that. “You said it. She was wrapped around me. Was I holding her? Was I kissing her back?”

Mila paused and I could see her thinking. “You’ve been with her before.”

“Yes. We had dinner once. We fucked once. It was mediocre, and didn’t merit a repeat. Clearly, Jasmine wasn’t so happy about that.” I stroked along the smooth skin of Mila’s jaw. “I have no interest in Jasmine. Right now, my mind is full of a sweet, smart woman whose natural hair color I am desperate to discover.”

Mila swallowed. I moved onto cleaning her other hand. I checked her knee, but thankfully her trousers had taken the worst of it.

“I’m not really hurt,” she said.

“I know you’re not used to someone looking after you.”

She looked away. “Not anymore.”

“Cheek next.”

She touched the cut and stared at the blood on her fingers. “It’s okay.”

“We have no idea where that asshole’s knife has been.” I leaned in and her breath hitched. My brain went back to my office, to the feel of her under me. To the sweet, tart taste of her mouth.

I forced myself to focus on cleaning the cut. It wasn’t deep. “This shouldn’t scar.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s twice you’ve been attacked, Mila.” I tossed the wipe on the coffee table beside the first aid kit. “Did you know him?”

“No.” She licked her lips. “I’ve never seen him before.”

She was giving me part of the truth. She might not know him, but she knew why he'd attacked her.

"I have to go." She started to rise.

I pressed a hand to her knee. "No, you need to share."

There it was. The flash of fear in her eyes.

"I don't know him."

The phone in my pocket vibrated. I knew it meant that Reath was on his way up. "I know you're on the run and hiding something."

She met my gaze. "I need to go."

My gut contracted. I knew if I let her walk out, she'd run. I'd never see her again.

That was unacceptable.

"Let me help you." People usually tripped over themselves to ask me and my brothers for help. But Mila was the total opposite.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Reath stalk in. He moved silently, and Mila didn't notice him until he stopped beside me.

She jolted.

"Mila, you remember my brother, Reath."

She nodded.

"The asshole's name is Ernesto Lopez," Reath said.

I narrowed my gaze. "That was quick."

My brother's white smile flashed. "I've got him in a holding room at my office. I convinced him it was in his best interest to talk."

Reath had been through interrogation training. He was good.

"He's a local free agent who likes to do dirty work for the right price. He said he got a call. Anonymous. He was told that someone had seen a woman working the bar at Ember. He was

instructed to get rid of her.” Reath paused. “Since the first guy sent fucked up.”

My anger spiked, and I saw Mila close her eyes.

“He threatened you.” My voice was low, vicious. “Told you he was going to kill you.”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“Mila, it’s time to talk.”

She opened her gray eyes. “I’m sorry. Sorry I brought this trouble to your place. Let me go. You’ll never see me again.”

I growled and grabbed her hand. “It’s too late.”

“What?”

“You’re mine now.” I looked at my brother. “We always help our people.”

Reath nodded.

Mila’s face crumpled. I was sure she was about to cry, and I sat beside her. She sucked in a deep breath, holding the tears at bay.

“I know your ID is fake,” Reath said. “It’s a good one, I’ll give you that. But Mila Clarke doesn’t exist.”

I threaded my fingers through hers. She stared at our joined hands.

“Mila was my nickname. My mother called me that.” She pulled in a shaky breath, and lifted her head. “My real name is Amelia. Amelia Clifton. I’m from Baton Rouge.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“At the beginning.” I squeezed her fingers.

“I grew up in Baton Rouge. I have a degree in marketing and PR from Duke. I worked for a successful, family-run business in Baton Rouge for several years.”

Ah. That made sense. I knew she was smart, and the degree didn’t surprise me.

“I enjoyed my job. My boss was an influential, wealthy man. I liked him. He made all of us feel like family.” She got a

faraway stare in her eye. “One day, I accidentally left a file at the office that I needed. I went in late, after hours, to get it. My boss was there in his office, talking with someone. I didn’t see the other person, and they didn’t hear me come in. God.” She rubbed her forehead.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. Nothing’s been okay since that night. I overheard them talking about shipments. Chuck, my boss, was complaining about what he had to do, and not wanting to risk getting caught with drugs. The other man told Chuck to shut up, and do his bit or he could kiss the money goodbye, and his government seat. The guy sounded scary.”

Something clicked in my head. “Chuck Edwards III. He’s running for governor.”

She nodded. “I wasn’t sure what they were talking about, but I knew it wasn’t good. I turned, and that’s when I knocked something off a desk.” She shook her head. “It was so stupid.”

“What happened next?” Reath asked.

“I heard the man with Chuck say that if someone was here, they needed to be dealt with. I ran. Chuck was shouting. I took the stairs. Two men chased me. I think they were guards who worked for the man Chuck was talking with.”

Her voice cracked.

I slid an arm around her. “Remember, you’re safe.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I got to my car and got away. I drove around. I didn’t have enough information to go to the police. Just a snippet of a conversation I’d overheard involving my well-respected boss who’s a pillar of the community, and two unknown men chasing me. I went home. To my parents.”

She went silent and her face twisted with pain.

“Mila?”

There was a stark look in her eyes. “Their house was on fire when I got there. I saw those two men in the crowd. They killed my parents.”

Fuck.

MILA

I felt wrung out.

Seeing Dante with that woman, the attack, then talking with Dante about my past. I'd kept everything locked up for so long, including my grief and worry.

"I knew they'd come for me. I didn't go to my apartment."

"Smart," Reath said.

"I emptied my bank account and left the city. I called a college friend, Laura. We were close. Her parents had a vacation house out near Lake Charles, and she said I could use it."

Memories crowded in. I felt like I was drowning. I hated the feeling.

Then I felt a soothing stroke on my wrist. The sensation made me look up. Dante's eyes were like a deep well. I could so easily fall into them.

"What happened?" he asked.

I looked away. "I was there for a day." I'd cried for hours, and watched the news reports about my parents. "I saw myself listed as a missing person, and suspected of embezzling money at work. I was wanted for questioning in the murders of my own parents." The guilt over their deaths was all-consuming. "I was asleep when the two men broke in. My friend sold me out for ten thousand dollars." I'd been terrified. I'd gone from deeply asleep, to fighting for my life in a blink. It was part of

the reason why I can't sleep now. "They beat me pretty badly
___"

Dante made a low sound.

"I got lucky," I continued quickly. "I hit one of the guys in the head with a lamp. He crashed into the other man, who cracked his head on the corner of a side table. I got away. I knew I had to disappear." I lifted my chin. "My boss had betrayed me, my best friend had betrayed me, and my parents were dead."

"So you came to New Orleans," Dante said.

I nodded. "It was easier to disappear here. I sold my car. I got a good fake ID, and I bought a new car."

Dante made a sound. "A crappy one."

"That was the point."

His lips twitched, and I couldn't look away from them.

"And you got a job at Ember," Reath said.

I saw speculation in Reath's gaze. Dante could be intimidating, but Reath was a little scary under the handsome exterior.

"I'd heard that the Fury brothers had a reputation for standing up to...the criminal element. I thought being here might be a safer option." I curled my legs up under me. I suddenly felt so cold. "I saw a man in Ember the other night. He worked at Chuck's company. I didn't think he recognized me."

Dante cursed. "You thought wrong. You should've told me."

"I hoped I was wrong!" I shook my head. "And this is my trouble, not yours."

He leaned closer, and my pulse jumped. "Not anymore." He rose. "You need to get some rest. And I need to talk with Reath."

"Dante."

“Rest, Mila. Do not move your ass off that couch.”

“You drive me crazy.”

“Ditto.” He shot me a hot look, then stalked after his brother. The men crossed the living area and disappeared through a door.

I pulled the blanket tightly around me and fought back a shiver. I leaned back against the couch cushions.

My eyes burned from tiredness and stress, but I knew sleep wouldn’t come. If I did drift off, the nightmares always took the opportunity to attack.

I’d almost died tonight. A violent shiver wracked my body. I had no doubt that if the man who’d attacked me had gotten the chance...

Dante strode back in, alone. His dark gaze swept over me, then he detoured to the kitchen.

It was a hell of a kitchen. A large island was topped with gray stone, and the gray cabinets had wood-and-brass accents. What I could see of the appliances, they looked expensive.

Dante opened a cupboard. “You like grilled cheese?”

“Who doesn’t?” I watched him pull out some bread and cheese, and then set to work at the counter.

Oh, my God, my sexy-as-hell boss slash fake boyfriend was making me food.

“Dante, I’m not hungry.” There was no way my jittery stomach would tolerate food.

“You’re going to eat.”

There was that bossiness again. I scowled at him. “Does everyone follow your orders?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

“Well, you’re going to be really disappointed.” Rising, I wandered over toward the counter and hitched myself up on a stool.

Once the frypan on the huge stove was hot, he grilled the sandwiches. A few minutes later, he set two plates down on the island. The tantalizing scent of cheesy goodness hit me. He sat beside me and picked up his sandwich.

“Mmm. This cheese is from St. James Cheese Company. A local place here. It’s so good.”

I licked my lips. “You have a cheese obsession?”

“No, I just like good quality.” He took a bite, then made a satisfied sound.

My belly jolted for a different reason. I huffed out a breath. “Fine.” I snatched up the sandwich and took a bite. I moaned.

“Told you.”

I glanced at him. “Fine. Gloat.”

I’d almost finished the entire sandwich when exhaustion hit hard. I almost felt drunk.

“You need to lie down.” Dante sounded exasperated. He helped me off the stool and led me back to the couch. I laid down, trying not to focus on how close my head was to his thigh.

“I don’t sleep well.” My voice was slow, a little slurred. “After that attack at the lake house, I know I’m not safe...”

“You’re safe now, Mila.”

I felt a tug on my hair and realized he was playing with it.

“I have an excellent alarm system. Reath is good at what he does, and we have twenty-four-hour security guards who monitor our block.”

“The Fury brothers protect their territory.” I closed my heavy eyelids.

His dark sandalwood scent hit me, and I pulled it in. His fingers stilled, then resumed stroking my hair.

“We do. Sleep now. I promise, I won’t let anyone disrupt your sleep.”

I realized I was drifting off. I did feel safe.

Don't get used to it, Mila.

"I'm determined to know what the real color is."

I wasn't sure what his murmur was about, but as he kept stroking my hair, I fell asleep.

DANTE

I watched the gentle rise and fall of Mila's chest. Stroking her hair, I wished again that it wasn't dyed. Now, at least, I knew why she'd done it.

She made a soft sound. At least she was relaxed. For the first half hour of sleep, she'd been tense, restless.

But obviously her brain accepted the fact that she was safe here.

Fucking Jasmine. A muscle ticked in my jaw. Pulling that stunt had been beneath her. I'd told her numerous times I wasn't interested, but she wasn't a woman used to hearing no. But for her to pull her shit and for Mila to see it...?

If Jasmine had held me up a moment longer, that killer might have taken Mila. Right now, she could be dead.

My jaw worked. It was over now. Mila was safe. And the cutting words I'd lashed Jasmine with should cure her infatuation.

I looked down at Mila's face. She'd been through so much. My jaw tightened. I rose, and tucked the blanket securely around her. She'd be more comfortable in a bed, but I didn't want to risk waking her. She desperately needed the sleep.

I walked to the stairs and checked that the security system was set. Then I headed down to the next level. It held the bedrooms and my home office.

Stalking into my bedroom, I pulled out my phone, and undid my shirt one-handed. I slipped the shirt off and tossed it

on a chair.

The far wall was brick, and crossed with black metal beams. My bed had a gray headboard and was topped with a black cover.

The call connected.

“How’s she doing?” Reath voice came through the line.

“She’s asleep. Your guest?”

“I’ll keep him sweating until tomorrow, then I’ll call Broussard.”

“We can’t tell the police about Mila. If this asshole boss of hers has implicated her, the police might have to take her in.” There was no way in hell anyone was taking her away. “I need you to run Chuck Edwards.”

“Already on it, Dante.”

Pressing a hand to my hip, I gazed out the large windows. “She’s been through hell.”

“I know. And you’re stepping in to change that.”

“Yes.” I paused.

I could practically hear Reath raising an eyebrow. I knew my brother well.

“I’m keeping her safe. Whatever shit she’s faced, it’s over.”

“Good.”

“And this isn’t fake.”

Reath’s low laugh came over the line. “The only people who believed that were you and Mila.”

“You aren’t going to give me shit?”

“I’m just glad you’re being honest with yourself.”

“She’s a risk, Reath.” My mother had abandoned me, my father had beaten me, I’d survived Harvey Tuckers beatings. Letting a woman close... I shook my head. “Mila’s been through so much. She’s vulnerable.”

“Is she a risk worth taking? We haven’t gotten where we are without a few risks.”

“When did you get so fucking smart?”

Reath made a smug sound. “I’ve always been the smart one.”

I laughed. “If you were here, I’d punch you.”

He was quiet for a second. “I just pulled up at her place in Tremé. Shit. The front door’s open.”

Dammit. My hand tightened on the phone. “And?” I pictured Reath heading up the broken walkway.

“Place has been ransacked.”

I cursed. Then I made a split decision. “Pack up all her shit. Whatever’s not wrecked. Move it here.” Reath’s low chuckle made me growl. “I need to keep her safe.”

“No argument from me.”

“My place is safe.”

“And where exactly will she be sleeping?”

“Just do it, Reath.”

“You know I will.”

“We need to find out who Edwards is in bed with. It’s the only way to eliminate the danger to Mila.”

“Whatever this is, it isn’t good.”

“When have we ever shied away from tangling with assholes?” Especially ones who targeted innocent women.

“All right. I’ll let you know what I dig up. And I’ll have my guys bring her stuff to your place this afternoon once you’re awake.”

I glanced out the window again. The sun was rising. It was time to rinse the club off, put down my blackout blinds, and get some sleep.

“Thanks, Reath.”

“You know you never have to thank me. Anytime, Dante.”

I headed into my bathroom. One wall was still brick, but the rest had been covered with gray, cement tiles. There was a large, dark-gray, free-standing tub, and a huge shower framed by glass.

Memories of the way Mila had fought off her attacker hit me. She'd survived so much and lost her family.

But it hadn't broken her. She was made of pure steel.

I respected that. I'd seen too many people grow up in shitty situations who ended up joining the gangs, dealing with drugs, and hurting other people.

Later, after she got some sleep, I knew she'd pull it all together and soldier on. She had no idea how attractive I found that. Like a queen lifting her chin and facing the enemy head-on.

It was how I'd lived my entire life. Facing off with whatever shit it threw at me.

Now I had money and power to deflect a lot of the crap. I stepped into the shower and let the hot spray hit me.

I wanted Mila to trust me.

I wanted her in my bed.

Cursing, I closed my hand around my cock.

In my head, I was back in my office, my mouth on hers, feeling her writhing against me. Slapping one hand against the tile, I gripped my cock tighter with the other.

It was far too easy for me to picture those lips of hers on mine, on my skin, around my cock.

With a groan, I stroked harder. I imagined her on my desk, naked for me. Moaning my name as I made her come.

My gut and balls tightened. I could almost feel her rake her nails down my back, and how tight her sweet pussy would be.

“Fuck.”

My orgasm hit, fast and hard. My cock pulsed, my come splattering the tiles.

Dropping my head under the water, I took a second to catch my breath. Yes, I wanted Mila. Beautiful, confident, courageous Mila.

But I realized that I didn't just want to fuck her.

Tonight, I'd protected her, fed her, watched her while she slept. My jaw tightened so much I thought my teeth would crack. I didn't keep women. The most important woman in my life hadn't given a shit about me. I kept my emotions locked down for good reason.

Never again would I be helpless.

I turned off the water. This thing with Mila wouldn't last forever. I'd get her safe, I'd convince her we should enjoy ourselves, then she'd go back to her life.

And I'd continue to live mine, just how I liked it.

MILA

I could smell bacon cooking.

Jerking awake, I sat up and blinked. Confused, I glanced down at the comfy couch, watching as a blanket fell off me.

Turning my head, the sexy warehouse came into focus. Original brick walls, polished concrete floor, and kick-ass masculine furniture. The place was gorgeous.

As was Dante cooking in his sleek kitchen.

He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that hugged his muscular chest. Dante Fury in casual mode. My mouth went dry.

He glanced over as he was serving up eggs and spotted me.
“Hi. Sleep okay?”

“Yes.” Shit, I had slept well. I didn’t remember waking once. I rose and touched my hair. It was a tangled mess.

Then I remembered. *The attack.*

Panic was like acid in my throat. I touched the cut on my cheek. “My backpack and keys?” Crap, my laptop. If I’d lost that, I would have lost all my research.

“Over there.” He nodded his head and I saw my backpack sitting on a chair.

I raced over to it, and felt the straight edge of the laptop inside. I released a shaky breath. When I looked up, he was watching me.

“Um, I’m just going to use the bathroom.”

He pointed to a door with a spatula. “Through there. There are new toothbrushes in the drawer.”

I headed into the powder room, taking my backpack with me. It was done with a more masculine flare—with one brick wall and lots of gray tile. I found the toothbrushes and brushed my teeth. Then I tried to tame my hair into a messy bun. Wrinkling my nose, figured it was a lost cause. I still wore my rumpled work pants and halter top. I’d rushed out of the club too fast to change.

Pulling the halter top off, I found a simple blue T-shirt in my pack. Setting my shoulders back, I headed out.

“Bacon and scrambled eggs okay?” he said. “You probably realize by now that working night club hours messes up meals. This is early dinner, but also sort of breakfast.”

“It’s great. Thanks.” I sat beside him at the island. I stroked a hand over the smooth stone, studying the flecks in it.

“You didn’t wake up?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe it, actually.”

“You were clearly exhausted. And add in the adrenaline crash, I’m not surprised.”

I grabbed a fork and speared some eggs. Then I set the fork down and swiveled to face him. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I don’t want your thanks, Mila.” He lifted his mug and sipped his coffee.

That’s when I saw his knuckles were torn and swollen.

From protecting me.

My gut cramped. He’d gotten hurt. For me. God, what if that guy had stabbed him?

Everything inside me tensed. My parents had died because of me. The thought of Dante hurt, bleeding... No. It wasn’t something I could handle.

“It’s best if I go, Dante. I don’t even know who’s hunting me. I don’t want to put other people at risk.” I didn’t want to put him at risk.

When I'd first gotten the job, the Fury brothers hadn't been real people to me. Now I knew Dante.

He grabbed my wrist, and I gasped. He tugged me off the stool so that I stood between his strong thighs. My gaze snagged on the way the dark denim hugged his legs.

"You are not going anywhere," he growled.

"Dante—"

"Listen." He pressed a hand to my jaw. "You said you knew my brothers and I stood up to assholes. We do." He stroked a finger along my jaw, and I fought back a shiver. "You can't keep running. I'm going to help you."

Wrapping my fingers around his wrist, I tried to calm the rapid thump of my heart. "What if you get hurt?"

He stilled, just staring at me.

I swallowed. Was he even breathing? "Dante?"

"You're...worried about me?"

I frowned. Something was going on and I wasn't entirely sure what it was. "Yes. I don't want you to get h—"

Before I could finish, he yanked me forward and his lips crashed down on mine. The kiss was hard, fast, a little furious. I gripped his shoulders and my lips parted. He dove into my mouth with his tongue. Everything about the kiss was firm, hard, demanding. God, I loved it. The heat, the need, it all washed over me.

When he lifted his head, I saw the lines of his face had hardened. My heart was thumping hard.

"It's been a long time since any woman has worried about me."

My pulse jumped.

"But don't worry, I'm pretty tough, Mila."

Trying to lighten the moment, I rolled my eyes.

He tipped my head back. He was so close, and he smelled so good, looked so good. Jesus. I couldn't let myself get too

attached to this man.

“They’ll try again, Dante.”

His face turned serious. “I know. They ransacked your apartment.”

“What?” My pulse went haywire. “Oh my God.”

His hands curled around my shoulders. “Just breathe.”

“God.” I managed to pull in a shaky breath.

“I took care of it.”

“How?”

“I packed your stuff up.”

I frowned. “Packed my stuff up?”

“Yes. Because you’re moving in here with me.”

I froze, feeling my eyes grow huge. “No.”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t move in with Dante. I couldn’t have Dante around me all the time, looking gorgeous and smelling so good. I’d fall for him. That was the last thing I needed.

“You’ll be safe here, Mila. I will spread it far and wide that you’re mine, and we’re living together. My brothers and I will find out who is after you.”

The sensation of not being alone almost knocked me over. A part of me wanted that. Someone to lean on, to help me.

He toyed with my hair. “You’ll keep working at the club, and stay here when you aren’t on shift.”

“I stepped into something big, Dante. They won’t stop.”

He nodded. “And I will protect you.”

Then his phone beeped, and he pulled it out. “That’s Reath’s guys with your stuff. We’ll get you moved in, then we’ll get ready to head to the club.”

He slid off the stool, tapped my nose, then sauntered off. My gaze fell to his ass before I made myself look away.

What the hell had I got myself into?

DANTE

With a hand pressed to Mila's lower back, I walked across the parking lot to the back door of Ember.

The sun was still up, but it would set soon, and New Orleans would kick into party gear. The city never needed much of an excuse for a party.

Mila was stiff, looking straight ahead. I knew she was still trying to process everything.

Scanning the lot, I saw one of Reath's guys. He leaned against the wall, just looking like an employee out for five minutes of air. He gave me a chin lift and I nodded.

Reath and I had agreed to increase security until we knew for sure Mila was safe.

Suddenly, Mila stopped and spun. "Dante, we don't have to do this. Pretending we're—"

I cupped her cheeks, and heard her breath hitch. I knew she felt this crazy connection between us, as well. Like some part of us recognized the other.

I gave a mental snort. I didn't believe in luck or fate. You made your own luck, and you always had to be careful who you trusted.

But I knew I couldn't stop myself doing whatever I had to in order to keep this woman safe.

She was mine. She just hadn't realized that yet.

I pressed my lips to hers. I nibbled, tasting her. Her hands gripped my arms and she leaned into me. Mila's brain overthought everything, but her body responded to mine quickly and easily.

"I think it's too dangerous for you to be on the floor." When the club got packed, I didn't want to give anyone a chance to get close to her. Just the idea of her hurt and bleeding made my jaw lock. Not happening.

She frowned. "I can stay behind the bar."

"No."

Her eyes sparked. "I'm going to do my job, Dante. I can't just—"

"I want you to work with Clarissa. She needs help finalizing the charity event. Especially now that the plans have changed, and it's only a few days away."

"Oh." I saw the war of emotions on her face. "That's not why you hired me."

"This is a better use of your skills, and it keeps you safe."

"I don't want to step on Clarissa's toes."

"You won't. I promise. She's eager for the help." I took Mila's hand and towed her inside. My staff was busy prepping for the night ahead, and Clarissa was sitting at the bar, tapping on a tablet.

When we neared the bar, Venus looked up, worry on her face. "God, Mila. Are you all right? We heard some guy pulled a knife on you."

"I'm fine, thanks, Venus."

"Good. I was worried."

Eli leaned on the bar. "You're not hurt?"

Mila shook her head and tried to pull her hand away. I held tight.

"Nothing major." She cleared her throat. "Dante's been taking care of me."

I slid an arm around her waist. “And I’m going to keep doing that, because Mila is moving in with me.” I heard a few gasps, but I focused on tipping her chin up and kissing her. “Venus, you’ll unfortunately be short a bartender. Mila will be helping Clarissa from now on.”

Clarissa clapped her hands together and darted over. “Oh, God, this is *awesome*. I’m in desperate need of the help.” She took Mila’s hand. “And can I just say, you and the boss man look so good together.”

Mila gave the blonde a weak smile.

“There’s a chance whoever attacked Mila will try again,” I said.

Everyone’s attention sharpened, and Eli looked pissed.

“I’m adding extra security. If anyone asks about her, you let me know immediately.”

There were nods all around.

I locked my gaze on Mila’s and she stared back at me. I wanted to kiss her again.

Then Clarissa pulled her away. I didn’t want her out of my sight, but it was enough to know she was safe in the club.

MILA

When I was little, I loved watching *The Wizard of Oz*. I'd desperately wanted Dorothy's red, glittery shoes, and secretly, I'd always wanted to be a witch, and have a magic wand. I'd peppered my dad with questions about what it would feel like to be caught up in a tornado.

Well, now I knew.

My life felt like a hurricane had hit. Hurricane Dante. I was standing in the middle of it pretending to be in a relationship with Dante Fury.

Except every time we touched it didn't feel pretend. It felt far too real. The lines were so damned blurred I couldn't see them at all.

"This masquerade is going to be *amazing*." Clarissa sat on the corner of her desk. "Here are the announcements I had sent out with the new location and masquerade details."

The woman was a ball of energy. We were in her office in the back room. There were two desks in here, and Clarissa's desk was all kinds of messy. My hands itched to tidy it.

I glanced at the invitation. "It's perfect." It was a heavy cream, with gold-foil edging, and a little fleur-de-lis at the top.

"Offering up all the Fury brothers for a dance was a stroke of brilliance." She smiled. "And adding in what Dante and his brothers have offered as donations, it'll be a success."

"Oh?" I couldn't help but get excited.

“Dante’s offering meals at Luminosity and Wildfire. Plus, exclusive use of Ember on a Monday night for a private event.”

“Nice.”

“Beauden’s offering boxing lessons at Hard Burn, with him as the trainer. He rarely trains anyone himself. Colt’s offered to take someone out for shooting lessons. Apparently, he’s an excellent shot. There’s a security system install from Phoenix Security Services. Reath only works with a few select clients, so that’s huge. A weekend away at the Fire Bay Lodge. That’s from Kavner. He owns the exclusive resort.”

“He’s a billionaire, right?” Everyone had heard of Kavner Fury.

“He’s *so* gorgeous. The man can wear a suit.” Clarissa rolled her eyes back.

I chuckled, then slapped a hand over my mouth.

Clarissa grinned back. “I heard that. I’m so happy you can laugh with everything that’s going on. Although having Dante Fury all googly-eyed over you must help.”

I snorted. “Dante? Googly-eyed? Have you seen the man? That word does not apply.”

“I certainly have seen him. And the way he watches you... mmm.”

“Stop it.” I sat back. Dante looked at me that way because we were pretending to be together. “You sure I’m not cramping your style helping with this? This is your event, and _____”

“No.” Clarissa grabbed my arm. “Gosh, no. I need the help. I love brainstorming, and talking in general.”

“You do a brilliant job at the marketing for Ember. You don’t need the help.”

“I do.” Her eyes lit up. “I haven’t shared yet because it’s still too early, but I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, you’re having a baby? Congratulations.” I hugged her.

Tears welled in the other woman’s eyes. “These are happy tears, don’t worry. This happens all the time.” She waved a hand. “Morning sickness is blergh. Zero stars. Do not recommend. Luckily, I’m mostly fine in the evenings, but Dante promised me some help for the charity event. And that help is you.” She put her hands together like she was praying. “Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.”

I couldn’t stop laughing. “Okay, okay.”

“Now let’s talk food.”

We got busy bouncing ideas off each other, and very quickly, I realized I was having fun. Every now and then my mind wandered, surprisingly not to my troubles, but to Dante.

And how much I liked his kisses.

It’s a fake relationship, Mila. I couldn’t let myself forget that. No matter how much he lit me up. Made me feel warm when I’d been numb for so long.

“Okay, I think the food needs to be high end,” Clarissa said.

“Agreed. The theme is fancy, luxurious. Definitely high-end.”

Clarissa tapped her pen against her lips. “The Ember kitchen won’t cut it. We need the chef from Wildfire.”

“Dante’s restaurant?”

“Right. There’s a three-month waitlist to get a table there. But we need Chef Remy Marcelle to do the food for the masquerade.” Clarissa popped out of her chair. “Let’s run it past Dante, then go over and see Remy. He should be doing dinner prep about now.”

“All right.”

“One question,” Clarissa said.

“Yes?”

“Tell me that Dante’s kisses are mind-blowingly divine. I’m busting to know.”

I shook my head. “I don’t kiss and tell. And divine is not a word I’d use for Dante’s kisses.”

Clarissa gasped. “You can’t leave me hanging. That’s cruel.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Hypothetically, they’re too hard for divine to apply. Try, hot, rough, sexy.” I felt myself blushing.

“I hate you,” Clarissa breathed.

“You’re married, remember?”

“I know, I know, and I love my man. But a girl can still wonder when her boss is as scorching hot as Dante.”

I slid my arm through hers. “Come on. We have food to organize.”

We headed up to Dante’s office, and I felt a little flush of nerves. Last time I’d walked in here had not been a *happy* event. I blocked all memories of the lush Jasmine from my head.

Clarissa knocked.

“Come in.”

As always, his deep rumble made me shiver. He was standing behind his desk, the sleeves of his black shirt rolled up, looking at a paper in his hand.

God, he was forearm porn at its best. How could forearms turn me on so much? He had a tattoo on one—thorny branches mixed with flames.

“Hey, boss.” Clarissa breezed in.

“Hi.” His gaze went straight to me.

“We’ve decided since the masquerade is going to be fancy —” Clarissa turned the word into ten syllables “—the food needs to match. Can we use Chef Marcelle? His food would be perfect.”

Dante strolled around to the front of his desk and leaned back against it. “I think that’s a great idea. I’m sure Remy would love to be involved.”

“Yes.” Clarissa pumped a fist in the air.

Dante leaned forward and caught the belt loop of my pants, then tugged me to him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, yourself.”

He pulled me closer, so our bodies pressed together. My pulse went crazy. “I’m working,” I murmured. “This is sexual harassment.”

That slow smile of his ignited tingles all over. “Take it up with the boss.”

“God, you two.” Clarissa fanned her face. “Come on, we’re going to pop over to Wildfire to talk to Remy.”

Dante frowned. “I don’t want you leaving Ember alone. I’ll come with you.”

I wanted to argue, but he was doing so much to keep me safe.

The office door opened. Reath stood there, his handsome face serious. “Sorry to interrupt. Carlos Salazar is here. He wants to see you.

Something flickered across Dante’s face. Something dangerous.

“I figured he’d be dropping by soon. Reath, get one of the security guards to escort Clarissa and Mila over to Wildfire.”

“Sure.”

I turned back to Dante. “I’ll see you soon.”

He ran a thumb over my lips. “Count on it.”

DANTE

Carlos Salazar blew into my office like a Tasmanian devil. Small, noisy, and angry.

I'd known that he wouldn't like our little plan against him. But he needed to learn that there are consequences to his bad decisions.

"You." Salazar glared at me. Two of his goons were standing in the hall. Reath's men were with them, their arms crossed and bodies alert.

"Carlos, always a pleasure." I leaned back against the edge of my desk.

Salazar wore an expensive suit, but it didn't look good on him. He was short, a little round in the gut, with black hair threaded with silver, and a moustache. He always wore a thick gold chain around his neck. It was awful.

"I know it's all you, and your fucking brothers."

I raised a brow, straightened, and headed for my decanter. "You sound like you need a drink."

"I want nothing from you."

Hotheadedness like this didn't mix well with business, especially with the illegal kind. I'd seen blustering idiots like him before. Trying to prove how important they were.

I poured two Scotches and turned.

"Sit." I let the order bleed into my voice, and held out a glass.

A muscle ticked in Salazar's jaw. He took the drink and sat in a chair.

I sipped, taking my time. "You've nipped away at the agreements we had in place with your organization. Surely you expected retaliation?"

Salazar froze.

I sipped again. "Yes, we knew what you were doing. I want you to stay out of my establishments, and keep well away from Fury territory. You mess around in my business, then I mess around in yours."

He shot me a mutinous look.

Unconcerned, I swirled my drink. "You will back off to your agreed territory, and steer clear of all things Fury."

"Or?"

Stepping closer, I lowered my voice. "Or I will really make you regret it. You think we don't want to get our hands dirty? Push me, and I'll show you how dirty I can get."

Now I saw a flash of fear on the other man's face.

Good. Men like Salazar only understood fear and power. I'd seen plenty of them growing up.

"Fine," he spat.

Reath stepped into my office. The look on his face made my gut tighten.

"My men will see Salazar out," my brother said.

The drug dealer rose and slammed the glass down on my desk. He stalked out, muttering under his breath. I noted with some amusement that he gave Reath a wide berth.

"He's not going to give up," I said.

"Nope." Reath shook his head. "Pricks like him let their ego rule them. He's got to prove how big and important he is. You need to watch your back."

"You'll keep an eye on him?"

Reath nodded.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did some digging on Chuck Edwards III.”

I tensed. “And?”

“I think Mila needs to hear it.”

“Shit. Okay.” I sighed. “I saw her smile tonight. She’s helping Clarissa with the charity masquerade, and she looked happy.” The real Mila shining through. I knew this would drag her back into her nightmare. “Can we do it tomorrow?”

“Sure. Bring her to my office.”

I’d take her to hear whatever Reath had to share, then I’d think of something to take her mind off everything.

“We’ll get her free of this shit, Dante. She’s tough to have survived this long. She’ll keep surviving.”

I wanted her safe. I wanted her to have the chance to do more than survive.

Nodding at Reath, I made a mental vow. Whatever it took, however long it took, Mila Clarke would be free.

“I’ll bring her tomorrow.”

Reath slapped my arm. “We’ll get your girl safe, I promise.”

AS I LET us into my warehouse, I could see how tired Mila was.

“The masquerade is going to be so amazing.” There was excitement in her voice, under her tiredness. “Clarissa coaxed Chef so sweetly. The food is going to be the best.”

I pressed a hand to her back and led her up the stairs. “She told me you’ve taken over the decorating.”

“It won’t be a hard job. Ember is already gorgeous.”

I couldn’t stop myself from stroking my hand down her hair. “I know Saturday night will be wonderful.”

She turned at the top of the stairs. “I looked up the charity it’s raising money for. Northstar.”

I slid my hands into my pockets.

“You started it,” she said.

“Yes.” I stalked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. I held it up and she nodded. I handed one to her, and then opened mine and took a long sip. She sat on a stool at the island.

She fiddled with the bottle. “Was foster care terrible?”

I set the bottle down. “Not always. There are lots of good caring people out there who just want to take care of kids in need. At first, it was better than where I’d been.”

“With your father.” Mila’s face sharpened. “Where your mother left you.”

I got the impression that if my mother was here, Mila would go after her. I hid a smile. Hell, it was the first time I’d thought of my parents and wanted to smile.

“Tell me he paid for hitting you?”

“He went to jail.” I pressed a hand over hers on the granite. “And foster care gave me a bed, food, and a roof over my head.” I paused. “But I was angry. I was angry all the time.”

“I know that feeling.”

I tangled my fingers with hers. “I got moved around a lot. No one wants an angry boy close to babies and toddlers. It was hard to start somewhere new, over and over again.”

“But you found your brothers.”

“Yeah.”

“And now you help other foster kids.”

“Northstar helps them when they exit the system. They’re often alone, with no family, without much to their name, and no support.” I’d never forget how it was when my brothers and I had been on our own.

Mila's grip tightened. "It's amazing what you're doing. You're amazing. You didn't just survive, you thrived."

Our gazes met. As I contemplated circling the island and pulling her into my arms, she yawned.

She pressed a hand over her mouth. "Sorry."

Her eyelids were drooping, and I could see the exhaustion was hitting her hard. She'd been on the run for months, afraid, not sleeping properly. Now her brain knew she was safe, and it was playing catch-up on sleep.

"Come on." I moved toward her and tugged her to her feet. She was quiet as I led her down to the bedrooms. I stopped in front of the guest room just down the hall from my bedroom. "Time to get some sleep."

She yawned again and nodded.

I cupped her jaw. "Remember, you're safe here."

Her gaze ran over my face. "I know."

"Tomorrow, we're going to see Reath."

Now she stiffened. "He has information on Chuck?"

I nodded.

Emotions flitted across her face.

"Hey." I gripped her arms. "It's going to be fine."

She blew out a breath. "I hope so."

"You're not alone anymore, Mila."

She leaned into me, and I wrapped my arms around her, resting my chin on top of her head.

We stayed like that a while, when I looked down, I saw her eyes were closed. She was practically asleep on her feet.

"Bed."

Her eyes blinked open. "Okay." The word was slurred.

I gently urged her into the guest room. "Your stuff is all in here. Take a shower, get to sleep."

I'd much prefer she was sleeping in my bed. But just having her here was a good start. I gently slid a hand into her hair. I loved the soft look on her face, all her guards were down. I pressed a tender kiss to her lips.

It was far less than I wanted, but for right now, she needed sleep.

“Good night, Mila.”

“Night, Dante.”

In my bedroom, I stripped off my clothes and headed for the shower. Afterward, I pulled on some black pajama pants.

I'd just sat on my bed when I heard a noise. I stood, frowning at the door. I knew there was no one inside my place because my alarm hadn't gone off. No one could get through one of Reath's systems.

I heard the noise again. A whimper.

Racing across the room, I wrenched the door open. It took me three seconds to reach Mila's bedroom. I saw that the bedside lamp was on, but she was asleep in the center of the bed.

In the middle of a nightmare.

She thrashed in the sheets and my chest tightened. I hated that she couldn't sleep without the light on, and that she'd been left with dreams that made her afraid.

I reached the bed and touched her arm.

“No!” she cried.

“Mila, it's me. Dante.”

She stilled, but I realized that she was still asleep. I sat beside her.

“You're safe,” I murmured. “No one can hurt you.”

“Dante.” Her voice was just a sleepy murmur, her eyelids still closed. “Safe.”

My heart felt like a fist in my chest. “Yes, you're safe.” I stroked her hair. “I'm here. Sleep now.”

Slowly, she relaxed, curling toward me. Her breathing evened out.

I settled back against the headboard, still stroking her hair. I'd sit there for hours, keeping her nightmares away, if I needed to.

“I'll find whoever hurt you. I promise they'll pay.”

DANTE

Sitting out on my rooftop terrace, I sipped my first coffee, watching the afternoon sun wash over the city.

Mila was still inside, asleep. I hadn't wanted to wake her. Sipping again, I stared out at the buildings of New Orleans. After I'd left her room, I hadn't slept much.

Kept wishing I'd had her in my bed.

I'd get her there. My fingers tightened on the mug. First, get her safe, give her what she needed.

And show her that what she needed included me.

I heard the sliding door whisper open and turned my head. "Hi."

Barefoot, Mila headed my way. Her hair was damp and pulled back in a ponytail. She wasn't in her uniform this afternoon, instead she wore black capri pants and a green, wrap-around shirt. It showed a hint of cleavage, and I dragged in a steadyng breath.

"Sorry for crashing on you last night." She sat beside me on my outdoor couch.

"No apologies required. You needed the sleep."

She didn't mention the nightmare and as I'd guessed, she didn't remember.

"This spot is awesome." She leaned back and took in the view. "It must be great to grill and hang out here." She eyed my large, shiny grill.

“It is. We’ll do that one day.”

She nodded and fiddled with the cushion beside her. “So, Reath has information on Chuck?”

“Yes. We’re due at his office shortly.” I reached out and took her hand. “It’s going to be all right, Mila.”

She gave one brisk nod. “I want to believe that.”

I squeezed her fingers. “I’ll get you there. Now, there are bagels inside, and the coffee is brewed. Have something to eat and we’ll head to Reath’s.”

“Yes, boss.”

My fingers tightened. “You shouldn’t say it like that. It gives me ideas.”

She stilled.

“Go, before we test out this couch for more than just enjoying the view.”

She shot to her feet. With one long glance, she headed inside.

About twenty minutes later, we headed out my front door. Reath had a nearby warehouse that housed Phoenix Security Services. I scanned the street, noting two of Reath’s men keeping watch.

We passed some art galleries, and reached his building. It had large glass windows on the ground floor, with Phoenix Security Services etched on them, and a small stylized logo of a rising phoenix. It was the same design as Reath’s tattoo. The glass doors whispered open, and we stepped into the lobby. A young man sat behind the reception desk.

He nodded. “Hi, Mr. Fury. He’s expecting you; head right up.”

“Thanks, Warwick.”

I ushered Mila up the stairs. The lobby looked like any plush reception of a business, with white walls, a polished-concrete floor, and one original brick wall. But I knew there

were multiple hidden cameras, and that Warwick no doubt had a handgun in easy reach.

At the top of the stairs, the level opened up.

“Oh, this place is gorgeous.” Mila looked around, taking in the wooden support posts and original beams overhead. The floor here was a smooth, gray concrete, and there were several glassed-in rooms—a boardroom, and some offices.

Just the glossy front of PSS.

“This way.” I led her down a hall. The door at the end opened and Reath appeared.

He waved at us, and held the door open. I doubted Mila could tell it was made of reinforced metal, and had a lock on it that required retinal scan. When she stepped inside, she gasped.

The darkened room was dominated by the screens on the wall, casting a blue light across the space. There were several long, curved desks. A man and a woman sat nearby, monitoring security feeds.

“Let’s go to my office,” Reath said.

He led us into another room. I liked to call it Reath’s bat cave.

The walls were dark gray, except for one that held a huge screen. It currently displayed a world map, with several glowing dots in various locations. I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know what the dots represented.

The cabinetry in the office was black, and Reath’s desk was a slab of wood. A large, curved computer screen dominated it.

Reath waved to the gray armchairs in front of his desk. He leaned back against the desk.

Mila and I sat. She fidgeted nervously, and pulled in a breath. “So you found something? I’ve been researching Chuck since I ran. I couldn’t tie him to any gangs or drug dealers.” Frustration crossed her face. “I couldn’t identify the men who killed my parents, either.”

My heart stopped. She'd been digging around some very dangerous people. *Fuck.*

Reath crossed his arms. "Charles 'Chuck' Edwards III, and his company, Edwards Industries, are broke."

Mila sucked in a breath.

"Chuck made some bad business decisions over the last few years, while still living large."

She twisted her hands together in her lap. "His family's always been wealthy and influential in Baton Rouge."

"Well, Chuck isn't quite the businessman his father and grandfather were. And he's still ensured that he and his family had all the luxuries they're used to." Reath uncrossed his arms. "His son recently joined the family business, and has been trying to help."

Mila nodded. "Charlie. I didn't know him well, but he seemed nice, enthusiastic."

"There's no indication the son knows what's going on. Chuck's hidden it well, but he's been running drugs into Baton Rouge for someone. Because he's got a good reputation, they can dodge detection. No one is going to check Edwards Industries' trucks and warehouses for drugs."

"God." Mila pressed a hand to her chest.

"Who?" I demanded. "Who's he in bed with?"

"Don't know." Frustration crossed Reath's face. "Has to be one of the cartels. They've been covering their tracks well. I have my guys digging. From what financial records we've looked at, Chuckie is doing a little money laundering, as well. We just need to track it back to the source, then we'll know who, in addition to Chuck, is after Mila. Clearly, they want to protect this lucrative deal they have going on."

Shaking her head, Mila gripped the armrests of her chair. "I still can't believe Chuck is involved in this. He's nice, jovial, wants to run for governor."

"Pumping money into his run for governor was the thing that tipped his finances over the edge," Reath said. "Since

then, it's been his cut of the drug money that's kept his business afloat.”

Mila shot to her feet. “That *asshole*. This is all because of money!”

“And power,” Reath added. “He can’t stand the idea of losing his social standing.”

She shook her head, fists clenched. “If he was here, I’d punch him.” Then her shoulders sagged. “My parents are dead, for this?”

I rose and wrapped my arms around her. She clung to me, pressing her face against my shirt. Damn, that felt good. I liked being her shelter. Pressing a palm to the back of her head, I held her close.

“We’ll keep working to dig up who the hell Edwards is working with,” Reath said.

“For now, we ensure Mila has protection.”

My brother nodded.

“Thanks, Reath.” I smoothed a hand down Mila’s back. “Come on, Clarissa will be waiting for you.”

Mila lifted her head. Her eyes were dry, but I saw the grief and devastation there.

I pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “We’re finishing early tonight.”

She frowned. “What? I can’t. Dante, the masquerade is tomorrow night. There are—”

“You and Clarissa have things well in hand for the masquerade. You need a break, Mila.”

“But—”

I pressed a finger to her lips. “No arguments. I’m the boss.”

The spark returned to her eyes. “You just love giving orders.”

I tried to hide my smile. “Yes.”

She shook her head, and I was glad to see some of her sadness fade.

“We’ll finish early,” I told her. “I have a little surprise for you.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Why do I get the feeling I should be worried?”

“Trust me.”

Gray eyes met mine. “I think I do.”

Damn. I hugged her to my chest. I felt like I’d won a damn prize.

MILA

The sound of the printer filled the office.

“Mila, you can’t be printing more checklists.”

I glanced at Clarissa. She looked tired, and she’d kicked her shoes off an hour ago.

“I don’t want to forget anything for the masquerade tomorrow.” I pulled my piles of checklists together. Hmm, I needed a clipboard.

Clarissa touched my arm. “It’s going to be perfect, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to us.”

She smiled at me.

There was a rap of knuckles on the door. I turned, saw Dante, and my heart skipped a beat. He looked so dark and gorgeous.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

He smiled. “No.”

I blew out a breath.

“A date.” Clarissa clapped her hands together. “Go, get her out of here before she prints another checklist.”

Dante took my hand. “See you tomorrow, Clarissa.”

“Have fun!”

“Am I dressed okay?” I thought my capri pants and wrap top were pretty versatile, but if we went anywhere too fancy, I might need to change.

“You look beautiful.”

My belly fluttered.

He pulled me through Ember, calling out goodbyes to everyone. Venus waved. I saw all the staff watching us.

We went out the front door, and Reggie just waved, since he was busy with the long line of people waiting to get into the club.

“Where are we going, Mr. Fury?”

He started down the sidewalk, keeping me tucked against his side. “Not far.”

He stopped in front of the sleek gray entrance to Wildfire. It was all concrete, with a large, modern wood door. A small sign beside the door glowed in gold, saying *Wildfire* in a swirly font.

“I’m taking you out for a late dinner.”

At one of the best restaurants in New Orleans. My heart skipped a beat. My hand tucked into his, I followed him inside.

“Welcome, Mr. Fury.” The elegant server nodded. She wore a sleek, gray fitted dress and looked ready to walk the catwalk. “Your table’s ready, as requested.”

Dante held my hand as we walked inside.

I had to remind myself that this was just for show. To sell our fake relationship.

The large space had a high ceiling and moody gray walls. I gasped. There was a tree in the center of the restaurant. The branches rose up, spreading out and covering the ceiling. Glowing blossoms twinkled, reminiscent of the ceiling in Ember. The flowers here glowed a dark pink.

“These flowers are all lights,” Dante said. “We can change the color with the flick of a switch.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Elegant wood tables contrasted against the dark concrete floor. They were all topped with crisp, white tablecloths.

There was an empty table in the center of the room. He held out a chair for me, touching me as I sat. I sensed people watching.

He sat across from me, and I couldn’t quite believe that I had this man in my corner. Dante was going out of his way to help me. The dim light of the restaurant cast shadows across his strong face. That lock of hair fell over his forehead, and this time, I didn’t stop myself reaching out. I brushed it back.

His dark gaze met mine.

“That lock of hair has driven me crazy since I first met you.”

“I should get a cut, but I’ve never liked going to the barber.”

A male server appeared, dressed in gray pants and tunic-style gray shirt. “Can I get you some drinks?”

“You order for me,” I told Dante.

He inclined his head. “A bottle of the Marcassin chardonnay. And we’ll share the carpaccio to start.”

“Yes, sir.”

I leaned forward. “So why don’t you like the barber?”

His shoulders tensed.

I realized that I’d stepped on something sensitive. “I’m sorry.” I reached a hand across the table. “I didn’t mean—”

He took my hand. “The second foster home I went into was a strict one. The guy there was a dick. The first day I was there, he forced me to get my head shaved.”

I gasped.

“He didn’t want trash bringing any vermin into his home.”

I couldn’t control my surge of anger. My fingers tightened on his.

Dante stroked my palm. “It wasn’t a bad place. The food was good.”

Once again, I was grateful I had my parents growing up. “How did you end up in foster care? Did someone report your father?”

“No. The teachers at school ignored my bruises, although to be fair, I was good at hiding them. He got worse after my mother left. One time, he went too far and beat me so badly, he had to take me to the emergency room. The doctors reported it. And that was it. I ended up in the system.”

I felt tears welling for the little boy he’d been. It was so hard to imagine that he’d ever been young and helpless. “Your father’s still in prison?” I hoped he was.

“He died there.” There was no expression to his words. “In a prison fight.”

“I’m sorry there are people like him. Sometimes I wonder why such horrid people end up with kids, when other loving couples are childless.”

He arched a brow.

“My parents—” I absorbed the pain and loss that hit me, but this time I focused on the good memories. “They were awesome. Wonderful parents. After they had me, they suffered several miscarriages. Eventually, they decided not to try for more kids.” I smiled. “I didn’t mind being an only child. My dad spoiled me. My mom and I shared shoes. We both loved designer shoes and dreamed of owning a pair of Louboutins one day.”

“I’m sorry they were taken from you, Mila.”

“I’m sorry you never had parents like them.”

“I have my brothers.”

And I was really glad he had them.

Our appetizer arrived, and the meat melted in my mouth. Dante ordered our main courses, and I drank a glass of the most delicious white wine. I ate perfectly pan-seared Red

Snapper with crabmeat. I'd never tasted anything so good. Dante had lamb with wild mushrooms.

A man in a suit stopped by our table. "Dante. Good to see you."

"Andrew." Dante shook the man's hand.

I sat back, watching him talk. He was so at ease, oozing an innate confidence.

"And who is this lovely lady?" the man asked.

I glanced up and saw him smiling at me.

"Andrew, this is my girlfriend, Mila."

The word gave me a little thrill, even if it wasn't the truth.

"Girlfriend?" Andrew sounded surprised. "A pleasure, Mila. I'll leave you to your meal."

"Maybe I should get a sign," I said. "Property of Dante Fury."

His lips quirked. "That's not a bad idea."

I smiled back, but my stomach tightened. *Not real. Not real. Not real.* I couldn't let myself forget that.

Because if I let myself get too attached to this man, I'd fall for him.

And when he walked away, he'd shatter my heart. I already knew it couldn't handle any more blows.

DANTE

“D ante, where are we going now?”

I led Mila out of Wildfire. A black BMW 8 series was waiting out front for us. I opened the back door of the car for her. “I have one last surprise.”

Her lips tilted and she shook her head, but slid into the car. I followed her in.

“Evening, Mack.” The man was Kav’s driver.

“Mr. Fury.” The car slid smoothly away from the curb.

“Tell me where we’re going,” she said.

I shook my head.

We drove into the French Quarter. Friday night, as always, was busy.

“Is it safe for us to go out?” She fidgeted on the seat.

“Yes. I promise.” I didn’t tell her that two of Reath’s guys were shadowing us. “I’d never put you in danger, Mila.”

She leaned forward, and my gaze snagged on her cleavage. I released a short breath.

“I know that,” she murmured.

My need for her was building. I wanted her naked, under me, screaming my name. But as I saw her look out the window, smiling and relaxed, I locked it down.

For now.

“You can let us out here, Mack.” Mack pulled the car over.
“I’ll call you when we’re ready to head home.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I helped Mila out of the car. As we headed toward Bourbon Street, loud music pumped through the air. There were people wandering in all directions—tourists, pickpockets, revelers. When we turned onto Bourbon Street, I saw her taking in the neon signs glowing under the iconic balconies.

“I’ve only been to Bourbon Street once,” she said.

“Once is usually enough.”

She laughed. “Spoken like a true local.”

I slid an arm around her, keeping her close. We walked past the busy restaurants and packed bars. A man played a saxophone on one corner, a small crowd cheering him on. I turned down the next street and led her toward a well-known location.

When she saw the brightly colored bar with green shutters, she straightened. “We’re going to Pat O’Brien’s?”

“Yes.”

“Home of the hurricane.”

“I figured a budding cocktail maker should visit where the hurricane was reportedly invented.”

I ignored the line waiting to get in and headed straight for the door. Mila shot me a confused look.

The bouncer turned, saw me, then smiled. “Fury. What the hell brings you down here on a Friday night?”

“I have a beautiful woman who wants a hurricane.”

The man shot Mila a curious look. “Then you’re in the right place. Go on in.”

The main bar was busy, and I led Mila through to the courtyard. The famous flaming fountain burbled in the center. I found us an empty table in a shadowed corner.

“It’s said Pat O’Brien invented the hurricane during World War II,” I told her. “Back then, it was hard to import whiskey and Scotch, so the salesmen forced bar owners to buy cases of the much-more-plentiful rum in order to be able to get any whiskey. Pat needed to find a use for all the rum he had.”

“And the hurricane cocktail was born,” she said. “Rum, lemon juice, and passionfruit syrup.”

I signaled to one of the busy servers as she darted past and ordered a hurricane. Then, I pulled Mila’s chair closer to mine.

“Thanks,” she said.

“For what?”

“For a night out. Which I haven’t had in a long time.” She leaned in and kissed my cheek. “For everything.”

Under the table, I gripped her thigh. I saw her chest hitch. Then I leaned forward and kissed her.

As it always seemed with Mila, heat shot through me. My desire went from zero to through the roof in a second. One taste of her, and every dirty fantasy I’d ever had filled my head. Going on instinct, I pulled her into my lap.

“Dante—”

“It’s dark, and it’s New Orleans. No one cares.” I gripped her jaw, my other hand stroking her thigh.

Her gray eyes glittered and she rocked against me. My cock was rock hard in an instant.

“Feel that? Feel what you do to me?”

“*Dante.*” She pressed her mouth to the side of my neck.

Fuck.

“One hurricane.” The server broke the spell, setting a tall glass down on the table.

Pulling in a deep breath, I dug up some control, and stroked Mila’s cheek. “Drink. We have more cocktails to try after this one.” I handed some cash over to the server.

“More cocktails?” Mila sipped her drink and smiled.

“Yes. I’m giving you a private cocktail tour of the French Quarter.”

After we left Pat O’Brien’s, we strolled back down Bourbon Street. It was loud and garish, but it had a certain vibrant charm.

“The French Quarter is fun,” she said, “but I like the Warehouse District better.”

“Me too.”

As I looked around, I saw one of Reath’s men walking nearby. He didn’t appear to be paying us any attention, but when he caught my eye, he gave me a quick nod.

I led Mila off Bourbon Street, and turned onto Royal Street. When she looked up at the historic white building where we were headed, she giggled.

“Oh my God. If Clarissa knew we were about to set foot in the Hotel Monteleone, she’d be mad.”

“Then it’ll be our little secret.”

When I took her into the Carousel Bar, she laughed, glancing all around with interest. The circular bar was decorated like a carousel, and spun slowly. A jazz singer sang in the corner.

“Home of the Vieux Carré.” I helped Mila onto a stool at the bar.

“I know Vieux Carré is French for old quarter. Rye whiskey, cognac, sweet vermouth, Bénédictine, and Peychaud’s bitters.”

I leaned in behind her and waved at the bartender. I ordered a Vieux Carré. “A bartender here at the Carousel Bar called Walter Bergeron invented the cocktail in the 1930s. It’s considered the signature cocktail of the French Quarter.”

She tipped her head back and smiled. I let my fingers drift over her cheek, and down her neck. She shivered.

I loved touching her. Pleasuring her. Her drink arrived and she took a sip.

“Yum.”

It was easy to tell she liked it better than the hurricane. My girl liked her whiskey. I let my hand drift down her side, and she pushed into my caress. I slid my hand up, and cupped her breast.

She looked around, but no one was looking our way.

“You’re a big tease,” she said breathlessly.

I leaned in and nipped her ear. “Finish your drink. “

“Then we’ll go home?” There was eagerness and desire in her eyes.

My cock throbbed. *Home*. Did she realize she was calling my place home? “Soon.”

I kept caressing her, and saw that her nipples were hard little nubs under her shirt. When she finished her drink and slid off the stool, she was a little unsteady.

From her cocktails, and my touch.

We rejoined the crush of partygoers on Bourbon Street.

“One more stop.”

“Dante—”

“Trust me.”

She nodded.

Hands entwined, I took her to the edge of the French Quarter, and crossed Canal Street. We walked up the red-carpeted steps into the Roosevelt Hotel.

The place oozed old-world history and charm. The Sazerac Bar was no different. It was small, with an Art Deco flair that included a long wooden bar, and plush banquettes. It felt like stepping back in time.

We found a free table and I pulled Mila down beside me on the comfy seat.

“This has a totally different vibe to the French Quarter.” She looked over at the famous Paul Ninas mural on the wall. “It feels...rich.”

“The Sazerac Bar celebrates what some call America’s first cocktail, and the official cocktail of New Orleans.”

“The Sazerac. Cognac or rye whiskey, absinthe or Herbsaint, Peychaud’s Bitters, and sugar.

A white-coated server appeared. “What can I get you?”

“Two Sazeracs, please.”

The man smiled at me. “Coming right up, Mr. Fury.”

Mila gave me a look. “Of course, he knows you.”

“Lots of people know me.” I pulled her closer. “And tomorrow, they’ll all be talking about me being out with a beautiful woman.”

Her smile slipped. “Right. This is all for show.”

Oh no, I wasn’t letting her think that. I pulled her onto my lap, and she gasped. It was fast becoming my favorite place for her.

I gripped her chin. “Tonight is about you.” Under the table, I slid a hand up her thigh, stroking.

Her lips parted.

“It doesn’t feel fake or pretend when I touch you.”

“The lines are getting very blurred, Dante.”

Not blurred enough. I moved my hand right between her thighs and stroked up the seam of her trousers. She gasped, shifting against me.

It wasn’t enough. I found the waistband of her trousers, and flicked them open. Her breath hitched. I slid a hand into her panties.

Her breathing quickened.

“So wet, Mila.” I ran my fingers through her wet folds.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, her face was flushed.

She was so hot. Hot and sweet.

I brushed her clit with my thumb, and she jerked, rubbing that sweet ass on my cock. I slid two fingers inside her.

She whimpered. The sweetest sound.

“Ride my fingers, baby.”

Her hips moved.

“Feel good?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

Suddenly, the server appeared. “Two Sazeracs.” He set the two glasses down in front of us.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

Mila tensed, but I kept my fingers where they were, and pulled my wallet out with my other hand.

“Here you go. Keep the change.”

The young man smiled and hurried off.

“*Dante*,” Mila said.

I brought my thumb, slick with her juices, back to her clit. “You come for me, first, then you can have your Sazerac.”

I worked her faster now. She rocked against my hand, her eyes wide and a little glazed.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I murmured.

With the next circle of my thumb, I felt her body clamp down on my fingers. I pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her as she came.

I’d never wanted anyone as badly as I did right then. I’d sell everything I owned, including my soul, to have her.

She slumped against me, and I pulled my hand free. “Have your drink, baby, and then we’ll go home.”

Nodding, she reached for the glass and sipped.

I lifted my hand, and licked my fingers. Her eyes flared.

We both quickly drank our cocktails, and I sent a message to Mack to pick us up.

In the car back to my warehouse, I was careful not to touch Mila. If I did, I’d fuck her in the backseat with Mack listening.

I felt her trembling, heard her fast breathing. After what felt like fucking forever, we pulled up in front of the warehouse.

“Thanks, Mack.” I shoved the door open and yanked Mila out.

As the car pulled away, I pushed her against the brick wall beside my front door. In a flash, I had her pinned against me, my mouth on hers. As I kissed her hungrily, her hands slid into my hair, tugging hard.

I had to have her.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I ignored it. “Baby, I need inside you.”

She pressed into me. “Yes.”

I moved toward the door when my phone vibrated again.

“Fuck.” I yanked it out and looked at the text. Then I cursed.

“Dante?” She pressed a warm hand to the side of my neck.

“There’s a small fire in the kitchen at Smokehouse. No one’s hurt, but—”

“You have to go.”

“Yeah.” I blew out a breath. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Sometimes it sucks being the boss.”

“It does.” I rubbed my lips across hers. “Go to bed, all right. You need the sleep.”

She smiled, went up on her toes, and bit my bottom lip. “Thanks for the best night of my life, Dante.”

I stood there and watched her go inside. I’d bought her three cocktails in the French Quarter, and she thought that was the best night of her life?

I shoved my hands in my pockets, swearing to myself that I’d make it even better for her.

No matter what it took.

I swiveled and strode across the parking lot toward Smokehouse. The days of Mila Clarke being afraid, eating shit, and having nightmares, were over.

MILA

“Okay, I want the fresh flowers over there, and check the decorations and lighting again.”

“Sure thing, Mila.”

As the workers hurried off, I checked my clipboard. I was slowly working through the list for the masquerade. I wanted everything to be perfect tonight.

I paused. Clarissa and I had been going a hundred miles an hour today, getting everything ready for the masquerade.

After my magical evening with Dante, I’d gone to bed alone. I bit my lip. I’d tossed and turned, twisted myself up in the sheets, my body thrumming with desire. This morning, we’d barely seen each other as Clarissa had arrived and dragged me off to Ember.

There had been no news on Chuck. And no one had been into the club asking about me.

Closing my eyes, I fought back a shiver. Dante was taking care of me, looking out for me, ensuring my safety. It would be so easy to get used to that.

And if I didn’t get him naked soon, I was going to lose my mind.

I pictured him naked, lying in his big bed. I knew he had a big bed because I’d peeked into his gorgeous, masculine bedroom. I didn’t know if he slept naked, but in my hot, sweaty fantasies, he did.

I blew out a breath. The memory of the way he'd made me come at the Sazerac Bar shivered through me.

When I heard the click of heels, I spun. Clarissa hurried toward me. She looked a little harried, but was bouncing with excitement.

"Chef's hard at work in the kitchen, and yelling at everyone."

I smiled. "I think the more a chef yells, the better the food. It's a rule."

"Well, it smells good in there." She pressed a hand to her still-flat belly. "I'm hungry *all* the time." She huffed out a long breath. "The auction items are all set up." She waved a hand toward the other side of Ember, to the VIP area that had been set aside for the silent auction.

"Great job. Everything is coming together. Decorations are almost finished." I wondered where Dante was. I couldn't wait to see him in a tuxedo. My hands tightened on the clipboard.

This thing isn't real, Mila. You can't get used to having him.

Except it didn't feel fake.

Right now, Dante was one of the most real things in my life.

"Earth to Mila?"

I blinked. "Sorry, Clarissa. My mind is going in a hundred different directions."

Clarissa squeezed my arm. "Understandable. Tonight is going to be *amazing*. I couldn't have done it without you."

It felt nice hearing that. "You would have rocked it."

"But with a lot more stress, and a lot less awesomeness. I'm going to check on the drinks situation. I want to make sure we have everything for the signature cocktails you put together. They're going to blow everyone's minds." She pulled a face. "Except mine, since I can't drink them."

"Actually, I asked Eli to do a special mocktail for you."

She beamed at me. “Really? I love you!”

“I’ll do a final run-through.” I checked my clipboard again. “I’m almost through everything.” Then I wanted to check everything again. Twice.

Clarissa leaned over my clipboard. “Does it say get your hair and makeup done on here? And wear a fabulous dress?”

“Ha. Don’t worry, I’ll squeeze in some time to look presentable.”

My friend gasped. “This is your masquerade, Mila. And you have to look amazing, not presentable. With your body, you’ll look like a million bucks.”

“I have a little black dress that will do the job.” It was from a thrift shop, but it had a classic cut that suited my curves.

Clarissa shook her head. “Nope. You have to be fabulous. Have you seen Dante in a tux?”

My belly knotted. “No.” But I was very good at imagining what that man looked like in various states of dress.

“Plus, if it’s like other years, all of New Orleans’ single ladies will be panting after him.” She rolled her eyes.

“What?” More knots.

“You have to stake your claim, girl.”

I swallowed. “I don’t have another dress.”

“Which is fine, because the boss gave me his credit card and strict orders to get you one! That man just loves spoiling you. I bought you the *perfect* dress. And shoes, which he specially requested. And the hairstylist is coming to Dante’s warehouse in...” She looked at her watch. “Twenty minutes.”

My stomach did a crazy dance. “Clarissa—”

“Dante said, and I quote, ‘Don’t argue, Mila.’”

I rolled my eyes. “That sounds like him.”

Clarissa snatched the clipboard from my hands. “Everything is going to be perfect. This is going to go off

without a hitch. Now, go and beautify. I'll tick all these little boxes of yours, then head off to get ready, too.”

“But I—”

“Go.” She made a shooing motion. “CJ, the hairstylist, will be here soon.”

In a bit of a daze, I left Ember. I saw one of Reath's guards in the parking lot, and waved. I felt him watching me as I crossed to Dante's warehouse. I put a hand on the lock and waited for it to beep. He'd inputted my fingerprints, so I had access to his place.

Inside, I hustled upstairs. I needed to shower. Then hopefully I could hurry the hairstylist along and get back over to Ember to finish the prep.

I entered the guest bedroom and jerked to a halt.

There was a dress lying on the bed. A long column of black. I let out a breath. Okay, okay, it didn't look too fancy.

On the floor beside it was a pair of beautiful, strappy shoes with long, dangerous heels. They were sexy shoes, with glittery crystals across the ankle strap. I gasped. They had red soles! They were Louboutins.

I bit my lip. “Damn you, Dante. You're going to break my heart.”

There was a face mask resting on the bed as well, and I picked it up. It was gorgeous. Black, with a fancy lace and some glittery crystals on one side.

Then I took a closer look at the dress.

Oh God. It was sheer. It was made of a sheer black lace, and there are a few darker patches in places that would cover most of my bits and pieces, but there was a whole lot of thin, delicate, spiderlike lace.

I was going to kill Clarissa.

I heard a buzzer. *Crap.* The hairstylist was here.

Racing back down the stairs, I hurried to the front door. When I opened, it, I saw a security guard standing there with a

small, petite woman. She was wearing a tight tank, and cutoffs. One arm and shoulder were covered in a sleeve of colorful tattoos. She had a nose ring, and her short hair was the palest blonde and cut in choppy waves that reached her jaw.

“I’m CJ.” Her gaze went to my hair. “I’m here to fix whatever you did to your hair.”

The guard nodded and stepped back.

“Hi, I’m Mila. Come in.”

CJ hefted a huge box. “Lucky we have a few hours. Why on earth would you punish your hair with that ugly black color that doesn’t suit you?”

I closed the door behind her. “I was on the run.”

“Bad ex?”

“Bad boss.”

CJ nodded with understanding, and I led her to the elevator.

“There’s nothing worse than a bad boss.” She cocked her head. “Things okay now?”

“I’m getting there. I have a better boss now, and uh, I’m sort of living with him.”

“Girl, Dante Fury isn’t better, he’s the pinnacle.”

I smiled. “He is.” I grabbed a hank of my hair. “We have a big masquerade charity thing tonight. I want to wow him. Can you fix this?”

A smile curled CJ’s lips. “Mila, I love a challenge.”

I STOOD in front of the mirror, a little in awe.

Reaching up, I touched my hair. CJ was a miracle worker. She’d dyed my hair light brown, then put in some blonde streaks. It almost matched my natural blonde-brown color, that I hadn’t seen for months.

It was *me* looking back at me in the mirror.

I hadn't realized how much the ugly black had weighed on me. It hadn't suited me at all, and had been a symbol of everything I was going through.

CJ had pulled my hair back in a loose ponytail. It had a side part and a few wisps around my face. She'd also helped me with my makeup. Natural, but with dark, sexy eyes. She'd said natural would be better, since my dress would be doing the talking and I'd be wearing a mask.

I settled the mask over my face. It screamed sex and mystery.

But it was the dress that took my breath away.

It was a perfect fit. The delicate black lace gave the illusion that I was naked underneath. The dress had a simple V-neck, and patches of dark lace in strategic areas. It had no back. I swallowed, looking over my shoulder. I couldn't wear a bra. And the tiny thong I wore barely rated as panties. I skimmed my hands over my curves. The dress hugged them, then had a mermaid-style flare at the bottom.

I'd never owned anything so gorgeous.

"God, I'd do you." CJ appeared and fiddled with my hair. "Your hair looks amazing. It's so thick and gorgeous."

"Thanks to you."

"I did work some damn good magic." CJ crossed her arms. "And the dress is hot."

I smiled and pictured Dante seeing me in it. Heat coiled inside me.

CJ cocked a pierced brow. "I'm guessing you're imagining your guy right now."

I laughed. "How can you tell?"

She wagged a finger. "It's written all over your face. He's going to lose his mind. Now—" she snapped her box closed "—this fairy godmother is out of here."

"Thanks, CJ."

She smiled. “It was my pleasure to save your hair. Next time you reach for the home dye, don’t.”

“Got it.”

“Have fun tonight.” She winked. “And drive your man wild.”

I smoothed my hands down the dress again.

Yes, I wanted to drive Dante Fury wild. Make him feel a fraction of what I felt inside me every time I saw him.

My brain begged me to remember that the man wasn’t really mine, but my body wasn’t listening.

DANTE

I wasn't sure how I felt about getting kicked out of my own home and being forced to get ready with my brother.

With a flourish, I tied my bowtie, then fiddled with it until I was happy with it. Clarissa had told me that she'd bullied Mila over to my warehouse to get ready several hours ago.

How long did it take a woman to get ready?

Of course, imagining Mila naked, or wearing some sexy lingerie had my cock twitching. I swallowed a curse and blew out a breath. Having her in my place, touching her, kissing her...

My iron-clad control was gone. I needed her. I had to have her soon.

I'd looked in on Ember earlier. The place looked great. I knew it would be our most successful fundraiser, yet.

I grabbed my tuxedo jacket and shrugged it on. I didn't mind wearing a tux. It reminded me of how far I'd come.

“Fuck me.” Colt appeared, fighting with his bowtie. “I hate these things.”

Colt preferred jeans and a Henley. “Here.” I tied it for him.

He shifted from one foot to the other.

“Hold still, or I’ll get it crooked.”

He made a disgruntled sound. “I’m drinking all your Macallan tonight in payment for wearing this penguin suit.”

“There.” It was still a bit off-kilter, but it would do. “Quit complaining.” We headed out to the living room of the main house.

“So, you finally going to claim your woman tonight?” Colt asked.

I grunted.

“You two are doing such a good job of pretending, but you’re not fooling anyone but yourselves.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Really?”

“I’m biding my time.”

“Ah.” Colt nodded. “Sneaky.”

“Mila needed time to trust me. And time to relax. She’s been running on nerves and fear for a long time. I’d be an asshole to take advantage of that.”

“You’re often an asshole.”

I glared at my brother. “You want me to punch you?”

He tugged on his bowtie, completely wrecking it. “Well, I’m already choking to death, so what’s a punch or two?”

There was some kids’ cartoon show on the TV in the living area. Daisy bounced off the couch and her eyes widened.

“You guys look so pretty.”

“Men are handsome, short stuff, not pretty.” Colt nabbed his daughter for a hug. “You’re pretty. Now, be good for Lola tonight.”

“Lola’s not here,” Daisy said.

Colt froze. “What?”

“She had a girls’ night planned with some of her friends,” I said.

Colt frowned. “But—”

“Well, don’t you two look mighty fine?”

Macy Underwood strode in. She was a tiny, bubbly blonde who currently had her wavy, blonde hair up in pigtails. She was holding two Popsicles in her hands. She looked like she was in high school. But her tiny cut-off shorts, cowboy boots, and fitted, button-down shirt that showed off her breasts said quite clearly that she wasn't a child.

Colt scowled at her. "What are you doing here? What's with your hair?" He stared at her pigtails.

"Daisy did my hair." She handed the little girl a Popsicle. "I'm babysitting tonight."

"Macy, I'm not a baby," Daisy complained.

"I know, sweetie. I'm fabulous-little-girl-sitting."

Daisy beamed at her.

"Where are your clothes?" Colt asked.

Macy shot him a withering look. "I'm not in the office, big guy. And as I've told you before, you have no say in what I wear."

I watched several interesting things cross my brother's face, before he buried them under his usual scowl.

Macy took a step forward. "Your bowtie is crooked."

"Dante did it."

"It's crooked because you fucked it up," I said.

"Uncle Dante, that's a dollar for the swear jar," Daisy announced.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. Run me a tab."

"Here." Macy went up on her toes and redid Colt's bowtie. She looked extra tiny beside my tall brother, but not intimidated one bit.

He leaned down, and I saw him sniffing her hair.

I fought a smile. Colt had been giving me shit about Mila, but I think he had his own thing brewing with his pretty, bouncy office manager.

“There.” Macy stepped back. “You’ll do. Go raise lots of money for charity. Daisy and I have tacos to eat, and a Disney movie to watch.”

“*Frozen!*” Daisy cried.

As Macy headed to the couch, I watched Colt’s gaze linger on her bare legs.

When he glanced at me, I cocked a questioning brow.

His scowl deepened. “Come on, I need a Scotch.”

“Bye, Daddy.”

He gave Daisy a kiss. Macy got a scowl, and behind Daisy’s back, the blonde shot him the finger. I barely controlled my laugh.

As we headed out, Colt stalked ahead. “Not one word.”

“Fine. But there will be words later.”

“Fuck.”

When we entered Ember, it was like a fairytale. Tiny gold lights glittered, dripping down the walls like gems. There were fresh flowers everywhere, done in black, gold, and cream.

“Damn, your girl did good,” Colt said.

“Yeah, she did.”

The guests were starting to arrive. Servers were handing out drinks, and a band was playing by the dance floor.

“Try not to scowl too much at whichever lady wins your dance,” I told him.

Colt grunted. “Auctioned off like a slab of meat.”

“Think of the kids you’re helping.”

My brother’s face softened. Helping kids just out of foster care, many of whom had no one, meant something to him. To all of us.

“There you are.” Beauden appeared, drink in hand. His tux did little to soften him. He still looked like a brawler.

Kav was with him, looking like he'd been born wearing a tuxedo. His bowtie definitely wasn't crooked. And Reath wasn't far behind. Reath had the ability to wear anything and look comfortable anywhere.

"Here." Kav handed me a glass of Scotch. "Well done. The place looks amazing."

"Thanks. But Mila and Clarissa deserve the praise." I looked at Reath. "Any updates?"

My brother shook his head. "Edwards is on a leave of absence. He's meant to be out at his country home, but I had some guys go past. He's not there."

I felt a prickle on the back of my neck. I didn't like that.

"Don't worry," Reath assured me. "I've increased security, and no one is dumb enough to target a public event like this."

"Still no idea who he's working with?"

Reath shook his head.

I nodded, searching for Mila. I still didn't like it. I knew that desperate people tended to do desperate things.

The crowd parted, and suddenly I saw a woman. First, I noticed the gorgeous fall of blonde-brown hair. Damn, whoever she was, she had a head of hair on her. Then my gaze drifted up her black dress, a sexy dress that lovingly hugged mouth-watering curves. Curves I knew. Curves I dreamed about.

Mila. I barely controlled my jolt.

I couldn't breathe. She looked...like every dark fantasy I'd ever had. Every part of me clenched tight.

Finally. Finally, I knew what her real hair looked like.

Her gaze met mine.

"He is so fucked."

I ignored Beau's gravelly voice.

"Yep," Colt agreed.

"I don't think he cares," Kav added.

“Drink up and let’s enjoy the show.” Reath sounded amused.

“Shut up, assholes.” I saw people looking at her. *Men* looking at her.

No one was going to fucking touch her. She was *mine*. I shoved my drink at Reath, and strode toward her.

MILA

Ember looked amazing.

I smiled as I walked through the club. I was so proud of what we'd done here. This definitely called for a drink. Catching sight of a server, I waved. As she neared, I recognized her, despite her black-and-gold mask.

"Hey, Jessica. Everything running smoothly with the drinks?"

Jessica did a double-take. "Mila? Oh my God, you look incredible. Like a dark princess."

Heat flushed my cheeks, and I traced the lacy *V* of my neckline. "Thank you."

"You're on fire." Her gaze ran down my dress. "That dress is everything. And behind the scenes, everything is running smoothly. You and Riss organized it so well."

I smiled.

She handed me a flute of champagne. Someone called out for champagne. With a wink, Jessica whirled away.

Turning my head, I watched lots of guests arriving. The place would be packed soon. I sipped the champagne, enjoying the sweet fizz.

This felt good. I felt like me.

Then I saw them.

The Fury brothers.

Holy hotness. My belly fluttered. Did they have any idea how gorgeous they all were?

They all looked so different, but it was clear they were linked. They all had the same air of confidence and power.

Kavner exuded class and authority. He needed a crown, I decided. He looked like a crown prince or a young king surveying his new kingdom. Beauden was the opposite. His tattoos were hidden by his tuxedo, but it did nothing to soften his rugged appearance. He'd be the head of the king's guard, ready to go into battle.

Reath looked like a young James Bond, scanning the room for trouble. I figured I would keep going with my analogy—he'd be the king's spymaster. Colt looked fine, even with the fierce scowl. It was clear he was desperate to yank his bowtie off. Hmm, he'd be the king's scout. Travelling far and wide to serve his kingdom.

And then there was Dante.

He was darkly handsome, with that rough edge that said he could handle anything.

And make a woman's deepest, wickedest dreams come true.

He'd be his king's right hand, wheeling and dealing, troubleshooting and making problems go away. There was probably a name for it, but I didn't know it.

I looked away, trying to calm my racing heart. Heat was building in my body just looking at him.

When I glanced back, my gaze collided with his.

Everything inside me quivered.

He was heading my way. *Oh, boy.* I almost stumbled. Heat surged through me.

His dark gaze moved over me, and it felt like he'd touched me.

His half mask was pure black, with no embellishment. My gaze traced the strong, beard-covered line of his jaw. All I

could do was watch him come toward me. With a shaky hand, I set my flute down on a nearby table.

Dante reached me. “Mila.”

“God, you look good in a tux.” I pressed my hands to his snowy white shirt.

His hands moved to my hips. “You’re stunning.”

He leaned in and his scent enveloped me. Mmm, if only I could bottle it.

“I’ll need to fight every man here,” he murmured. “They’re all looking at you, wanting you naked.”

I felt heat in my cheeks. “Hardly.”

“Oh, they are. I am.” He pulled me closer and kissed me.

As soon as the taste of him hit me, I was lost. I pressed into his body, opening for him. He deepened the kiss until I felt it everywhere.

When he stepped back, I was in a daze.

“Fuck.” He gripped my jaw.

I surreptitiously glanced around. “People are staring.

“I know.”

Oh, right. That was the point. All pretend.

“Fury.” The deep voice made me startle. “The club looks amazing.”

Dante slid an arm around me. A man in a dark suit, several years older than Dante, approached. He had that rich look of someone used to money.

“Paul. Thank you. Good of you to attend.”

“It’s an excellent cause.” Paul turned to face me. “And who is this beautiful woman?”

“My girlfriend, Mila. Mila, this is Paul Durant, a businessman here in New Orleans.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” I shook the man’s hand.

“Mila helped put the event together,” Dante said.

“Really?” Paul nodded. “You have the touch. Excellent work. I’ve been to far too many things like this, and most of them are bland and boring, with bad food.”

“We have a very good team here at Ember,” Mila said. “And the chef from Wildfire did the food, so I promise you, it’s more than good.”

“Excellent.” Paul smiled.

“Mila, would you like a drink?” Dante pushed my hair to the side and pressed a kiss to my bare shoulder.

I fought back a hot shiver, trying not to melt. “Champagne, please.”

Soon, I had another flute of champagne in my hand. Dante introduced me around as he worked the crowd. People gravitated toward him.

“Mila!”

Clarissa appeared. She wore an emerald-green dress, with a flowing skirt and strapless neckline. Her black mask was coated in black and green sequins.

“You look beautiful, Riss”

She swung her skirt from side to side. “And you look incredible. I hate you. You look like you should be in a movie playing the sexy temptress. I wish I could get away with wearing that dress. I knew it would be perfect for you.”

“I would have liked to blend in a little more.”

“No.” Clarissa shook her head. “You’re done blending.” She turned. “Dante, I’m stealing your girl for a minute.” Clarissa threaded an arm through mine. “We’re going to check on the silent auction.”

He touched my cheek. “Just bring her back to me.”

“You got it, boss.” Clarissa pointed us in the direction of the VIP area. “The way he watches you...” She gave an exaggerated shiver. “It nearly gives me an orgasm.”

“Clarissa.”

“Mila, you need to stake your claim. Half the single women in here want your man.”

What? I looked around.

“And the other half want one of his brothers. The Fury brothers are hot commodities.”

I did see several women watching Dante. I couldn’t make out much under all the masks, but I could imagine the hungry looks.

I straightened. “Well, they can’t have him.”

My friend smiled. “Good. Let’s check the auction.”

As we perused all the items, I noted that there were already lots of bids. Some were large enough to make my eyes boggle. This event would raise a lot of money.

Nearby, a trio of women were giggling, and sipping cocktails as they were writing their bids down.

“They’re bidding on the dances,” Clarissa whispered.

One woman finished writing her bid with a flourish. “If only we could win more than a dance.”

“I’d empty my savings account for that,” another said.

The women laughed.

As Clarissa and I moved closer, I saw lots and lots of bids for the dances. Jeez, some were in the thousands of dollars. Dante had a long list of bids.

Dammit. And I had an empty bank account.

“You *have* to bid,” Clarissa said.

“I can’t afford to.”

She rolled her eyes. “Dante can.”

“Clarissa—”

A tall woman sauntered up to the table. She was wearing a beautiful designer dress in a deep shade of purple. She had a

slim body, and dark, silky hair done in artful waves. Her mask was topped with black feathers.

She gave me a long look. “I heard you’re fucking Dante.”

Clarissa gasped, her eyes going as large as dinner plates.

I straightened. “Yes, I’m Mila. His girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” The woman smiled, and it wasn’t nice. “Dante Fury doesn’t have girlfriends. He fucks.” Her smile curled. “And I know just how good he is at it.”

My stomach curdled. She was an ex. A beautiful, glamorous ex.

Clarissa thrust one hand on her hip. “Well, I guess Dante hadn’t met the right woman before now. One he wanted to keep.”

The woman’s blue eyes flashed. She took a pen, then wrote a large bid on Dante’s sheet. With a sharp look, she walked away.

“Wow, what a bitch,” Clarissa said.

“She’s beautiful.”

Clarissa snorted. “I disagree. She’s jealous. Now you *have* to beat her bid.” Clarissa studied the page. “Ugh, three thousand dollars.”

My mouth went dry. “I don’t have that kind of money.”

“You *cannot* let her dance with Dante.”

I ignored my churning stomach. “Come on. Let’s get you a mocktail.”

As we got drinks at the bar, I tried to shake off my disquiet. Okay, my raging jealousy. I didn’t want that woman dancing with Dante.

A woman who’d touched him, seen him naked, had him inside her.

Ugh. My stomach tightened into a mass of knots.

When I spotted the brunette staring at me again, my emotions churned. She shot me a smug smile.

Screw it. I strode back toward the silent auction.

“Mila?” Clarissa called out after me.

I kept going. I was *not* letting that woman dance with my man.

DANTE

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Clarissa’s voice echoed across Ember.

I spotted her standing by the dance floor with a microphone in hand.

“It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for, the auction of the dances with the Fury brothers!”

There was loud applause and whistles.

“Fuck,” Colt muttered beside me.

“It’s for charity,” Kav said.

“Okay, okay,” Clarissa said. “Now, unfortunately you don’t get to keep them.”

There were good-natured boos and shouts.

“Ladies, don’t forget, it’s just *one* dance. First up, is bounty-hunter extraordinaire, Colton Fury.”

My brother gave a long-suffering sigh.

“And the winner is...Mrs. Julia Platt. This is a gift from her wonderful husband.”

An older lady in an elegant gray dress walked out of the crowd, blushing. Her husband was smiling at her.

Colt dimmed his scowl and gallantly took the woman’s hand.

“Next up—” Clarissa drawled “—sexy billionaire Kavner Fury.”

There was wild whistling and clapping. I saw women jostling each other, their gazes on my brother.

“The winner is Miss Kristy Benson.”

Clarissa kept calling out the winners, and slowly my brothers were all paired up with dance partners.

“And finally, the man who put tonight together to help foster kids here in New Orleans. And the man who brought in the biggest price tag this evening, Dante Fury.”

I glanced around. I didn’t want to dance with anyone but Mila. There was no sign of her anywhere, but several women were eyeing me. I knew the look. They saw the expensive suit, the club, the money, the influence. Never the man.

“Okay, now let’s find out which lucky lady paid ten thousand dollars to dance with Dante...”

There were gasps, and I raised my eyebrows.

“Well, it’s his girlfriend, of course. Come claim your man, Mila!”

I turned and the crowd parted. I saw her walking toward me. My gut tightened. I could tell she wasn’t loving the attention, and I didn’t want men looking at her in that damn dress, either.

The mask made her even more alluring, emphasizing the lines of her face. A song started, and I closed the last few feet between us and pulled her into my arms.

“It seems I’m all yours.”

“I’m so sorry, Dante, but I can’t afford the bid.”

I ran my nose along hers and molded her body to mine. “I don’t care. I can pay. As long as I get to hold you like this, I’m happy.” We moved around the dance floor, and I was barely aware of my brothers and their partners.

I could only see Mila.

Her lips parted and she pressed closer. Every slide of her body I felt in my cock. My blood was running hot.

Suddenly, there was clapping. I blinked and realized the song had ended.

Mila's eyelids fluttered, still caught in the spell between us. I didn't want to let her go. I *needed* her.

I slid a hand up to the back of her neck, and felt the pulse pounding in her throat. Her cheeks were flushed.

I pressed my mouth to her ear. "Go to my office. Wait for me."

She pulled in a breath, and I watched her breasts rise and fall.

"Now."

She lifted her chin and nodded.

"And Mila?"

She raised a brow.

"No panties."

Her lips parted, then she whirled and hurried away.

Tonight, I was finally claiming my woman.

I glanced around Ember, ignoring people trying to capture my attention. Then I stalked toward the employee entrance to the back of the club.

Every thought I had was on Mila. My skin itched. If I didn't get my hands on her soon...

I punched in the code, then took the stairs to my office two at a time.

MILA

I couldn't stop trembling.

Walking into Dante's office, anticipation made me jittery. His office smelled like his sandalwood cologne, and I pressed my thighs together.

I knew he was coming.

Coming for me.

Soon, he'd have his hands on me, his mouth on me.

Reaching under my dress, I caught the side of my thong and slid it down. Excitement, desire, need, they all whirled together inside me.

Heart pounding, I dropped the scrap of lace in the center of his desk. Then I walked toward the one-way window. Down in the club, I saw all the beautiful partygoers. They were laughing, drinking, having fun.

They had no idea of the ugly side of life outside of their glittering world.

No idea that life could change in an instant.

And now, I knew as soon as Dante got here, my life would change again. I felt it brewing. I bit my lip, my skin warm and flushed. I'd never imagined that one man could make me want this much.

The door clicked open, and I turned.

Dante stalked in like some dark king on a conquest. My pulse skipped.

His gaze ran over me.

Oh, God.

Then he saw my panties on his desk, and he snatched them up. “Good, my sexy, beautiful girl.” He stuffed them in his pocket.

Trembling, I waited.

“Turn around.”

Unsteadily, I followed his order. The window was right there, inches away, but I didn’t look down at the party.

I watched the reflection of Dante in the glass. He shed his jacket and tossed it on his desk. Then he walked toward me, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt. He still wore the mask, making him look mysterious.

My thudding heartbeat echoed in my head. He rolled up his sleeves.

“My beautiful Mila.” His hands came around my waist. I felt him hit against the bare skin of my back. He reached up and slid the straps of my dress down, baring my breasts.

As he cupped them, I moaned. He played with my nipples, which were already hard points.

“I need you, Dante.” It was a confession I hadn’t meant to make.

“You have no idea how much I need you.” His mouth hit the side of my neck and I arched into him. “How I’ve fucking imagined having you. Touching you. Sliding my cock deep inside you.”

A moan escaped me.

“Put your hands on the glass.”

My breath hitched. I pressed my palms to the window, the glass cool beneath my skin. I knew the people below couldn’t see us, but it felt like they could. It only amplified my excitement.

“All night I’ve watched you.” He bit the side of my neck. “Wanted you.” His hands moved down, and he bunched the fabric of my dress, drawing it up.

Then his hand was stroking between my thighs. I cried out and fell forward, my breasts touching the glass. My nipples were so hard they hurt.

He wasn’t gentle. His fingers stroked through my folds.

“Oh, God.”

“Already wet for me.”

“I’ve been wet for you all night.” Hell, for weeks.

He stroked, then plunged two fingers inside me. I let out a husky cry.

“*Dante*—” His thumb brushed my clit and I moaned.

“They can’t have you.” His breath was hot on my ear. “They can look, but they can’t touch.”

“The women out there want you, too.” He kept pumping his fingers inside me and my voice cracked.

“Jealous, baby?” He pressed in and nipped my ear.

“Yes.” I could feel the hard steel of his body against me.

“Don’t be. All I see is you. Since you came here, all I’ve seen is you.” He ground against me, and his rock-hard erection pressed against my ass. I didn’t care that my dress was pulled up and bunched around my waist. All I could do was feel the desire pounding through me.

All centered on this man.

“*Dante, please.*”

“Keep your hands on the glass, baby.”

I heard a zipper, and felt his hand as he freed his cock. He rubbed it between the cheeks of my ass, and I made a needy noise and pushed back against him.

“Wait, my greedy girl.” There was the crinkle of foil. “I want you screaming my name. They can’t see or hear us, but they’ll know exactly who you belong to once I’m done.” The

head of his cock brushed my folds, and I sank my teeth into my bottom lip.

Then he surged forward, burying himself inside me with a single thrust.

He filled me completely. I cried out, my fingers pressing hard against the glass. Finally, I had him inside me. Blindly, I watched his reflection as he powered inside me. That darkly handsome face was twisted with need.

For me.

“Fuck, Mila. So damn tight.”

He showed no mercy as he drove powerfully inside me. He snaked an arm around my waist, holding me in place for his thrusts.

I loved it. Every second.

I tilted my hips, his cock hitting places I never knew existed. My desperate cries echoed around us. I felt my orgasm building—big and fast.

“Dante,” I panted.

He thrust hard and a sharp cry escaped me.

“Come, Mila. Come for me.”

On the next plunge of his big cock, I came, screaming as pleasure detonated inside me. I was sure everyone in the club could hear me, but I didn’t care.

I kept coming and coming, moaning Dante’s name.

Then in the reflection, I watched his orgasm take him.

His head snapped back, neck straining. He thrust deep inside me and groaned.

Beautiful. God, he was beautiful.

Then there was just the sound of our harsh breathing. His arm was holding me upright, our clothes were in disarray, and I didn’t care one little bit.

When he pulled out, I bit my lip to stifle a moan. Then he lifted me up and carried me to the couch.

“Don’t move.” After setting me down, he strode to his bathroom.

Wow. I floated on the euphoria of the best orgasm of my life. I felt so, so good.

He came back, shirt re-tucked and his sleeves back in place. His mask was still on, as was mine.

His dark gaze ran over me. “So gorgeous.”

I smiled. Right now, I felt gorgeous.

He knelt and wiped a cloth between my legs. I tried not to blush. He got rid of the cloth and helped me stand.

“I wish we could stay here, but we need to get back,” he said.

I nodded. He righted my dress and smoothed it down. He pulled the bodice up, then pressed a kiss to my collarbone. I shivered.

“Mila.” With that low murmur, he ran a thumb across my cheekbone.

The look in his eyes made my heart stutter. “That wasn’t pretend. We left pretend in the dust a long time ago.”

“How’s my hair?”

His lips curled. “It’s fine.”

I pulled a face and touched it. It didn’t seem too bad. “Do I look like I just got fucked?”

Now his lips twitched. “Maybe.”

I slapped his chest.

He grabbed my wrist. “I don’t care. I want people to know you’re mine.”

“It was supposed to be pretend, Dante.” My words were a whisper.

“Does it feel like pretend?”

I shook my head, but a trickle of fear wormed its way inside me. I knew that bad things happened. I knew that good

could be ripped away when you least expected it.

His hand took mine and squeezed. “We’ll sort it out, Mila. Right now, we need to get back to the party.”

A part of me wished we could stay up here, just the two of us, curled up, together. But I nodded and lifted my chin.

AS WE RE-ENTERED EMBER, the noise hit me—the music, the din of chatter, the laughter.

My belly was still hot, and other parts of me still very sensitive.

“There you two are!” Clarissa appeared. “Dante, the mayor is looking for you.”

He sighed. “I’ll find her.”

“Shoo.” Clarissa hooked her arm through mine. “Mila and I need to check a few things.”

Dante shot me a long, possessive look, then strode away. Clarissa towed me deeper into the party.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Everything is perfect. Everyone is talking about how great tonight is.”

I smiled at her. “We make a good team.”

“We sure do. I’m officially making you my best friend.”

My insides warmed. I’d left all my friends behind when I ran. And Laura’s betrayal had left me so wary.

Someone bumped into me. I turned. “Oh, I’m sorry—”

My throat closed. The man in the tuxedo staring at me was my old boss.

“Chuck,” I whispered.

At a glance, he looked like he belonged. He had that older, distinguished look, but as I took him in, I noted his salt-and-

pepper hair was mussed and he was sweating.

“Mila, you’ve caused me so many problems.” He ran a shaky hand across his mouth.

“Me?” Anger charged through me. “You tried to have me killed! You murdered my parents.”

Beside me, Clarissa gasped, her hand tightening on my arm.

“It wasn’t me.” His face twisted. “It was the person I’m—”

“The drug dealer you’re working with,” I said furiously.

He blanched. “I’m sorry, Mila. I really am. But there’s no other choice.”

“There is always a choice, Chuck. You just made the selfish one.” I looked around, trying to spot Dante or security. I spotted a black-suited guard and waved at him.

“You leave her alone,” Clarissa snapped. “I’m getting Dante.”

“Don’t move.” Chuck’s voice rose.

That’s when he opened his jacket to show the gun in his hand. He kept his body angled to hide it from the nearby guests.

I froze. *Oh, God.* This couldn’t be happening. I shifted to move in front of Clarissa.

Guests started to notice what was happening. I heard raised voices.

“Drop the weapon!” One of the security guards stepped into view.

Panicked, Chuck turned and fired.

The guard went down. Screams broke out. Horror rocketed through me.

“Oh, my God!” Clarissa yelled. “He’s got a gun!”

I didn’t think. I just charged forward and rammed my shoulder into Chuck. He grunted, his gun hitting the floor.

“Help!” Clarissa screamed. “Help us.”

I heard shouts, but time felt like it was moving in fast forward. Chuck’s eyes were wide, panicked. He staggered, then lunged and grabbed Clarissa. He shoved her.

I watched her fall heavily to the floor.

No! Thoughts of her baby echoed in my head.

This was my fault. He was here because of me, and now Chuck had shot a man, and Clarissa and her baby were in danger.

I flattened my hand, hearing Shay’s voice in my head. I hammered the heel of my palm into Chuck’s throat. He gagged, and I followed through with an elbow strike to his face. He made a strangled sound, and threw his arms out. One of hands hit my face, right where I’d been hit before.

Ow. I stumbled back.

Chuck advanced. “You have to die. There’s no other choice. They’ll kill me otherwise.”

I sensed people rushing our way, but I stayed focused on Chuck.

From the floor, Clarissa grabbed the man’s leg. “Leave her alone.”

He turned and kicked her. She fell back, curling into a ball.

Rage overflowed inside me. “Don’t hurt her!” I whirled and grabbed a stool from the table nearby. I spun, swinging it through the air.

It cracked into Chuck’s head.

“You asshole!” I hit him again and he went down to his knees. “I won’t let you hurt her.” I swung again.

He swayed. Bodies rushed in from all sides.

“Contain him!” Dante’s roar.

Dante, Reath, and Colt rushed in, several security guards with them. Chest heaving, I saw Beauden and Kavner were crouched by the guard who’d been shot. As Dante and his

other brothers converged on Chuck, I stumbled over and dropped to my knees beside Clarissa.

“Clarissa.” She was trying to sit up. “Are you okay?”

“I-I think so.” Tears ran down her face.

My chest was so tight I could barely breathe. I looked up. Dante’s face was a mask of fury. All I could do was hug Clarissa tight.

DANTE

I stalked through a now-empty Ember, my blood still boiling.

The guests had been cleared out, and the police had Chuck fucking Edwards in custody.

The bastard had almost killed Mila.

As I reached the front door, I saw Reath. “Mila?”

“She’s fine. She’s out front with Clarissa. Refused to leave Riss until she got checked by the EMT.”

I couldn’t seem to get air into my lungs. “Your man?”

Reath’s face darkened. “Luke’s fine. He was wearing a vest. He’ll have a hell of a bruise.”

“And Clarissa? She’s pregnant.”

My brother muttered a curse. “She looked fine, but she took a fall, and that asshole kicked her.”

I strode out the front door of Ember, and saw a crowd had gathered. There was an ambulance there, and a police car. The lights cast red and blue over the scene.

Mila sat at the back of the ambulance, an arm around a crying, ranting Clarissa. Her husband stood beside her, holding her hand. An EMT was checking Clarissa out.

As I approached, people got out of my way. I figured my face said I’d reached my limit. Mila lifted her head, and her gaze met mine.

My heart lurched. Her eyes were disturbingly empty.

“You both okay?” I reached for Mila’s hand. She didn’t pull away, but she didn’t hold on either.

“I’m fine,” Clarissa announced. “You’d better get that motherfucker locked away for a really long time.”

“Riss, baby,” her husband murmured. “You need to calm down.”

“A guard was shot,” Mila said, woodenly. “Chuck *kicked* Clarissa. She needs to get checked because...”

“He knows I’m pregnant.” Clarissa pressed a hand to her flat stomach. “And my baby is fine. That guy kicked my arm. Asshole.” She threw a glare past me.

I turned my head. Two officers were leading a cuffed Edwards toward a patrol car. When he met my gaze, he stiffened and looked away.

I focused my attention on Mila.

“I’m all right.” Her tone was emotionless. Shock, maybe?

I pulled her into my arms. Her skin was cold. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Clarissa got hurt, and that guard got shot because of me.”

“The guard was wearing a vest. He’s fine.”

I felt her shudder. “What’s his name?”

“Luke.”

She nodded.

The EMT stepped forward. “We want to take Mrs. Landry in to do an ultrasound, since she’s pregnant.”

Mila’s face crumpled. “Clarissa, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s *not* your fault.” Clarissa squeezed her hand, then met my gaze. “Take care of her.”

“I will.” I turned Mila back toward Ember. “Let’s get you safe.” And warm.

“I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“I know. This isn’t on you. It’s on Edwards, and whoever he’s working with.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

We stepped into the entry of Ember. Warmth filled my gut. I liked that she was worried about me, but I also didn’t want her upset. “I won’t. I’m hard to hurt.”

That’s when I noticed the swelling on her face. Where she’d already been hurt. “He hit you?”

My tone made her blink. “It’s nothing. Luke was shot. Clarissa got kicked.”

I gently touched the corner of her eye. “Let’s get some ice on it.”

She nodded, but there was something working behind her eyes. Something I didn’t like.

MILA

I was sitting in the center of the bed in Dante's guest room, staring out the window at the lights of New Orleans.

He'd watched me like a hawk after we'd gotten back to his place. Made me a hot chocolate, tried to distract me with a movie. Clarissa had messaged me to say she and the baby were fine. The guard, Luke, was doing okay, as well.

I told Dante I needed some time alone. He hadn't liked it, but his phone had been ringing constantly, and he had things to deal with. From all the trouble I'd brought his way.

I curled my body over my legs. This was my fault.

This time, everyone was okay. But what about next time?

This was why I couldn't get close to people. Couldn't put them at risk.

Fucking Chuck. I slapped my hand against the comforter, and rose.

He might be behind bars, but whoever he was working with wasn't. They didn't know that I hadn't seen them.

Because of Chuck and his partner, my parents were dead. They'd ruined my life. I wouldn't let them hurt Clarissa, or any of the others at Ember.

Or Dante.

I went to my bag and got dressed. I pulled on black jeans, and a black T-shirt.

I only had one choice.

I had to run.

Pausing, I closed my eyes. The pain growing inside me felt like rapidly growing acid, eating at my insides.

As quickly as I could, I stuffed a few things into my backpack. Essentials, my stash of money. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

I had to get far away. California, maybe? Montana?

I had no other choice. I had to leave Louisiana behind.

Dante's face filled my head and pain coiled in my chest. I rubbed my fist against it, trying to take some calming breaths.

I couldn't keep him anyway, despite our fierce attraction. A man like Dante could have anyone. One day, he'd move on and break my heart.

But my heart and body kept wanting to relive those hot, frenzied moments in his office. The powerful slide of his body into mine, being connected to him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I opened the bedroom door quietly. It was after 3:30 in the morning. He should be asleep by now.

Stepping into the hall, I stared at the closed door at the end. His bedroom. I pressed a hand to my belly. It was too easy to imagine him spread out on his sheets. All that tan skin, that big, muscular body.

More than anything I wanted to go in there and curl into his strength. *God*. I squeezed my eyes closed for a moment, and then walked down the hall, careful to move quietly.

My plan was simple. Sneak out and disappear. Get out of New Orleans.

I reached the stairs and headed down to the garage. It was dark, so I stuck close to the wall and made my way to the external door. I pressed my hand to the security panel. It beeped, and the red lights turned green.

I stilled, with my hand on the door handle. I was doing the right thing. I didn't want to leave, but I had to take my troubles

away. I had to keep my friends safe.

Goodbye, Dante.

Pushing down the pain, I opened the door. Humidity hit me. I hitched my backpack up on my shoulder, and scanned my surroundings, then I stepped outside.

Suddenly, an arm clamped around my middle, and I was yanked back inside.

My pulse skyrocketed.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

Dante.

I let out a breath. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“You should be scared,” he growled.

He slammed the door closed, then reset the alarm. The way he stabbed at the buttons told me he was pissed.

“Dante, listen—”

He whirled me around. One look at his face, and my belly locked.

Yep, pissed.

“You were just going to run. Disappear.”

“Yes.” There was no point in trying to lie.

His face twisted. “I’d have no idea where you were. Those assholes would still be out there, hunting you.”

“If no one knows where I am, then no one I care about gets hurt!”

He nodded. “Luke and Clarissa getting hurt triggered this.”

“Yes, damn you.” I shoved his chest. “It’s my fault.”

He caught my wrists. “It’s *not* your fault. It’s the bad guy’s fault. It’s Chuck Edwards’ fault.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand you trying to sneak out and leave me. Not. Happening.”

“You aren’t in charge of me.” Wow. I’d regressed to high school.

He growled, pinning me to the wall. His face leaned close to mine. “You were going to *leave* me.”

His tone made me freeze. I stared at him in the darkness.

“You were leaving me, without looking back.”

“No.” The word was a whisper, my throat tight. “I didn’t want to leave. I was doing it for you. To keep you safe.”

He ran his lips over my jaw. “You can’t leave me.”

My heart broke at the plea in his voice. From this strong, amazing man. “Dante.” I shoved until he released my hands, then I wrapped my arms around him.

He pulled in a shuddering breath.

The next second, he tossed me over his shoulder.

“Dante!”

He stalked to the stairs. He carried me like I weighed nothing.

“Put me down.”

“No.”

Argh. I’d never had a thing for bossy men before. He stalked right past my room, and my heart jumped into my throat and did a wild dance. He entered his bedroom.

I lifted my head. In one look, I took in the brick crisscrossed with black metal beams. The bed was huge, with a gray headboard and a black cover.

He set me down on my feet, and my gaze locked on his chest. He was shirtless, and only wearing a pair of loose, black trousers. All those muscles, with a light dusting of dark hair. My belly clenched. He had a six pack that I desperately wanted to trace my fingers over.

I made a sound. It was husky, needy.

His face was stark in the low light, a dark look in his eyes. He speared his hands into my hair.

“You are *not* running. I’m not letting you. You’re *not* leaving me.” He rubbed his lips over mine.

I shivered. His words were fierce, possessive.

He nibbled my lips, and my heart started a crazy rhythm. I felt the dark, predatory intensity coming off him.

“I’m going to have to show you that you belong to me, Mila. Fuck you hard, for as long as it takes for you to never question it again.”

My hands curled. His words sent a rush of dampness between my thighs, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

I had nowhere left to go.

And not a single part of me wanted to run.

DANTE

Watching Mila stare at me with such need on her face was fucking intoxicating.

Her hands were balled into fists. Like she was holding herself back. I knew she'd been locked up and alone for too long.

I reached out and stroked her neck. I saw her eyelids flutter. "You're going to let go for me."

"I haven't, I don't..." Her voice was shaky. "It's too much."

"Mila, do you want me?"

She glanced away. "You know I do."

I brought her face back to mine. "Are you wet for me?"

She sucked in a breath. I saw her nipples tighten under her T-shirt.

"For now, it's just you and me. No one and nothing else. Let it go and trust me."

"It's not easy letting go of my control."

"You can. Just like you did in my office. You're safe here with me." I gripped the hem of her T-shirt and lifted it off her. She wore a simple black bra beneath. I quickly divested her of it. Her chest was rising and falling quickly.

"Gorgeous." I cupped one breast.

"I can't seem to say no to you."

“Because you don’t want to.” I played with her nipple, savoring her small moan.

I unzipped her jeans next. I took my time, pushing the denim and her panties down her legs and off her, even though need pounded through me. It was a dark, possessive beat in my blood. I stroked a hand over her shoulder, and down her arm, then across her stomach. “Beautiful.”

“Dante.”

I nudged her back a step and she sat on the black cover of my bed.

I knelt and nudged her legs apart. Taking my time, I stroked between her thighs, through her brown curls. She was soft, slick, and so wet.

“*Oh.*” She fell back on her elbows.

“I knew you’d be wet for me, baby.”

I moved closer, and nipped her thigh. She squirmed and I drew in the sweet scent of her arousal.

Then I pressed my mouth to her pussy.

She cried out. As I licked her, her body bucked. I used my tongue, lapping at her folds, then teased her. I let my teeth scrape over her clit.

“You’re...too good at this,” she said breathlessly.

“Just feel. Let me make you come.”

She made an inarticulate sound. She grabbed my head, her hands tugging on my hair. I savored the taste of her, sliding my hands up her body and gripping her rib cage. I kept working her with my mouth.

“I dreamed of you,” I muttered against her. “Imagined all the fucking ways I’d touch you. Kiss you. Make you come.”

Her hips bucked. As I used my mouth and tongue on every sensitive nerve, she wrapped her legs around my head.

My cock was so hard it hurt. I kept licking her.

“In my office, we had to rush. I couldn’t take my time, do everything I wanted.”

“I want... I need to come with you inside me,” she panted.

My cock throbbed. Both it and I liked that idea. “Not yet. First, you come on my mouth, next on my cock, and then there’s more we’ll do. I’m not stopping until you’re so exhausted you sleep without having one single nightmare.” I bit her inner thigh, and she cried out. “Until you know you belong to me.”

I wanted to mark this woman. I raked my teeth over her sensitive skin, then sucked on her swollen clit.

“Dante...*Dante*...” She tensed.

Her orgasm hit, and her naked body convulsed.

I savored every second. She’d let go for me twice tonight. I rubbed my cheek against her thigh, and knew my beard would leave a mark. Then I lapped at her, holding her as aftershocks shivered through her.

“Oh, my God,” she breathed.

I straightened. “I’m not done yet.”

She sat up, and all I saw on her face was desire. “Good.” Her fingers tunneled into my hair, her mouth pressing to mine.

I growled into her mouth, crushing my lips against hers. Standing, I shoved my pajama pants down.

Her eyes widened, her face eye-level with my swollen cock. “Dante.”

I wrapped my hands around her waist, and moved her to the center of the bed. Then I knelt on it. “What, baby?” I leaned over and kissed her shoulder.

“I want you so much it scares me.” Her gaze locked on mine. “I want you so much, I feel like I’m going to fly apart.”

I covered her body with mine, pinning her beneath me. “You’ve got me, Mila.”

She ran her hands up my sides, then slipped them between us. Her fingers circled my cock and stroked. “I wanted to touch you before, in your office.”

Fuck. I flexed into her hand. If I wasn’t careful, I’d come on her stomach before I even got inside her.

“I’m clean, Mila.” My gut clenched. “Never fucked a woman without a condom.”

I wanted to slide into her bare, with nothing between us.

“I haven’t been with anyone for a really long time.” She licked her lips. “And I get a contraceptive shot. If you want—”

I nudged her hand away, fisted my cock, and slid it through her wet folds. She moaned.

“I want.” I wanted so fucking much.

Then I fit the head of my cock right where we both wanted it.

“Yes,” she breathed.

I buried myself to the hilt inside her.

MILA

O h. *God.*

I was pinned under Dante's big, hard body. And stretched around his big, hard cock.

But this time, I could touch him, watch him as he moved inside me. Rearing up, I bit his chest, letting my teeth scrape his skin.

With a growl, he started to move, plunging deep and hard.

Crying out, I wrapped my legs around him, feeling the flex of his ass as he rammed inside me.

“You are *not* leaving me.”

I could barely make out his gritted words.

“I won’t let you.”

“*Dante.*” I raked my nails down his back.

I felt the pressure growing inside me. His thrusts were hard, possessive. No one had ever fucked me like this before.

“I’m going to make you scream.”

“Cocky.”

He thrust his hips forward. “Confident.” He sealed his mouth on mine.

The taste of him flooded through me. He gripped my wrists and thrust them over my head, pinning them to the bed.

I was at his mercy.

And I loved it.

“Who do you belong to, Mila?”

I tried to talk, but with each thrust, he was hitting some spot inside me. The pleasure was scalding hot. I was pretty sure I’d be burned to ash after this.

“Who, Mila? Say my name.”

“Just don’t stop,” I moaned.

He let out a short, male growl. “*Say it.*”

“Dante.” And I met his gaze. His face was harsh, need stamped all over it. “Dante. I love you inside me.”

He pumped into me, and I tilted my hips, taking him deeper. The pressure inside me was growing and growing.

“Mila. Fuck.”

“Come.” I moaned. “I want to feel you come inside me.”

“Not yet. You again.”

Every part of me was on fire. The way he filled me, the steady rhythm of his thrusts. I felt consumed, possessed.

Then everything exploded. For that glorious second, nothing else existed, just Dante and me.

Shuddering, I felt the pulses of my climax rock through me. I screamed, the pleasure so intense that I couldn’t breathe.

“Again.” His face was hard, sexy angles, his eyes impossibly dark.

When he pulled out of me, I couldn’t stop my cry of protest.

He flipped me over and I gasped. My hands twisted in the covers.

“You’re going to come on my cock again.” He lifted my hips, one hand shaping over my ass. I heard him groan, felt his lips on the back of my neck.

Moaning, I tilted for him.

“This ass.” His hand slipped under me. He found my clit and I bit my lip. When he stroked me, I was unashamedly wet.

He stroked two fingers inside me, and I writhed. I pushed back against the delicious stretch.

But I needed him. His cock. I needed Dante.

“You want my cock, baby?” He bit my shoulder.

I pushed back against him. “Yes.”

I felt him shift, then the thick head of his cock nudged against me. He sank a hand into my hair and thrust his cock deep inside me.

“*Dante.*”

“Take it. Take me.” He drew back, then surged back inside me. His strokes were deep, relentless.

All coherent thoughts flew out of my head. I couldn’t think, I could only feel.

I thrashed on the bed, but he kept me pinned, his cock driving inside me.

“Who’s fucking you, Mila? Who’s taking you? Who’s protecting you?”

He was owning me. Dominating me. I felt another orgasm growing. I knew this one would destroy me.

I was determined to take him with me. I pushed back against his thrusts.

“My greedy, sexy girl.” His hand was under me again, stroking my clit.

I jerked and screamed his name. Blinding pleasure rushed through me. Wave after wave. I moaned, and there was nothing but ecstasy.

“Mila. Fuck.”

I was still coming when Dante’s climax hit.

He gripped my hips with both hands, pulling me back as he slammed home one last time. I felt his hot release fill me.

Then he fell forward with a groan, catching himself on one hand.

I was wrecked. My heart was trying to burst out of my chest, and I heard a roar in my ears. Tingles ran through my entire body.

This wasn't sex, it was... I didn't have the words to describe it.

Dante's heavy breathing echoed above me. Then he pressed a kiss to the back of my neck.

"Still with me?"

I made a sound. "I'll have to get back to you."

He nuzzled my neck, then I felt a hand on my ass. He squeezed, possessive and bossy. "Tired enough to sleep?"

My pulse spiked. "Maybe."

His teeth closed lightly on the tendon in my neck, and I arched into him.

"Know who you belong to?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe isn't good enough. I think I have more work to do."

DANTE

Something tickled my chest.

I opened my eyes and saw Mila's hair spilling over my skin. She pressed a kiss to my pec.

I made a rumbling noise, sliding a hand into her hair. "Sleep all right?"

She looked up. She looked rested, her face still soft from sleep.

Damn. I wanted her to look like this every day.

"You know I did, since I was wrapped around your gorgeous body like a pretzel."

I ran a thumb over her lips. "Luckily, I like pretzels."

That got me a smile.

Shit. My gut clenched. I realized how much I wanted her to smile like that for me. Her guard down, her body relaxed.

She ran her hand over my forearm, tracing my tattoo. "This suits you."

"My brothers and I all got tattoos. Once we were out on our own. I sketched this design. Thorns and flames."

"The thorns are hardship," she said.

"Yeah. And fire to us meant freedom, strength." I cupped her breast. There were a few faint, pinkish smudges on her body. My marks. Put there by my fingers. I liked that, too.

She went back to peppering me with kisses, pressing several down my abs. Tension filled my muscles. “What’s on your mind, baby?”

“You.” She knelt between my legs. Her breasts were partly covered by her long locks, and she looked like a temptress.

“You’re so beautiful, Mila. Men would kill to see you like this.” I gripped my hardening cock and stroked. “You want this?”

She looked at my cock, her breath hitching. “Yes.”

I was leaking pre-come, my gaze on her pretty lips. “Take what you want, Mila.”

A sexy smile broke on her face. “You’ll take what I give you.”

Did she realize I was starting to want it all? Those were dangerous thoughts.

I leaned back on the pillows. “Really?”

“Yes.” She pressed her hands to my thighs and lowered her head.

Her cheek brushed my stomach and my muscles stretched tight.

“I want to shake that intimidating control of yours.”

“Then open up, sexy girl.”

With another smile, she wrapped her lips around the head of my cock.

I cursed in my head. Her mouth was hot and wet. I couldn’t stop a groan. She licked and sucked, taking me deeper.

“*Fuck.* Yes, Mila. Just like that.”

She kept working me, taking more. I’d never seen anything as sexy as Mila with her lips stretched around my cock. She gagged a little, and I stroked her cheek. But my smart, sexy Mila was no quitter.

She sucked me back in, bobbing and taking more.

I bit off a curse. I didn't want to come down her throat, but I was too damn lost in the pleasure coiling around the base of my spine.

"Mila..." It came out a gritty mutter.

Her mouth slid off my cock. She climbed up my body, her mouth colliding with mine.

Groaning, I kissed her, sliding my tongue inside her mouth. She made a sound I felt in my cock.

As she sucked on my tongue, I slid a hand to her ass and squeezed. She ground her body against my cock.

"I want inside you," I said. "Now."

She shifted her hips, her eyes shining with desire. Reaching down, she gripped my cock. Her other hand was on my shoulder.

She notched my cock at her wet pussy, her gaze on mine. Then she lowered herself, slowly, her mouth opening.

Fucking hell. My hands flexed on her ass. She was hot and tight, and felt so good. I gritted my teeth.

"So big, so thick," she moaned.

With a curse, I bucked my hips up, filling her.

She cried out, her nails biting into my shoulder.

"Mila, move." I used my hands to urge her on.

We both lost control. She rode my dick, me helping her. Our gazes stayed locked together, our bodies slapping together as it became wilder, more intense.

I kissed her, our bodies slick with sweat.

"Dante. *Please.*"

I tunneled a hand between our bodies, found her clit, and rubbed.

With a sharp cry, she tossed her head back.

"My beautiful, sexy girl."

Her body tightened on my cock, milking me. She screamed my name, still riding me as I came.

The pleasure tore through me, and with a groan, I thrust up, shooting my come deep inside her.

Mila melted against me, her head dropping to my shoulder.

“Fuck me.” I slid a hand up her back.

She laughed. “I just did.”

We both had damp skin, and my come was sliding down her thighs.

“How about a shower?” I’d wash her back, then make us some food. I felt a deep need to look after her.

“Sounds good, if you can carry me. I’m pretty sure my legs won’t hold me.”

I rose and scooped her off the bed. She let out a little squeal, sliding her arms around my neck.

“Ooh, Mr. Fury, you’re so strong and manly.”

I snorted. “I’ll show you strong and manly. In the shower.” I headed for the bathroom.

MILA

“We aren’t going to work tonight.”

Wearing only my underwear, I spun to face Dante. He stood at the vanity in the bathroom, wrapped in only a towel.

My attention wandered. The towel was white against his tanned skin. I saw several scratch and bite marks on his back, and I blushed. I’d never, ever done anything like that before.

“Mila?”

I blinked, and saw him smiling. He knew exactly what had distracted me.

“What do you mean, not working?”

“I’m keeping the club closed tonight. I think everyone deserves an extra day off after last night. We’ll have three days to rest, recuperate.”

I’d already messaged Clarissa this afternoon. She’d assured me that she was fine, and her husband was spoiling her.

Dante pulled me closer, leaning back on the vanity, his eyes hooded.

“We aren’t having more sex,” I said firmly.

He cupped my shoulder with a warm hand. Of course, goosebumps broke out over my skin, and I shivered.

“Sore?”

“Yes.” I had a good reason. He hadn’t been gentle.

Every second had been perfect.

“My brothers are coming over. They’re bringing food, and we’re going to grill on my deck and relax.” He pushed my damp hair back from my face. “You’ll get to meet my niece.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Niece?” I couldn’t picture which Fury brother had a kid.

“Daisy,” he said. “Colt’s girl.”

“Colt? Is a father?” I tried to picture the grumpy bounty hunter with the little girl, but it was beyond me.

“Technically, she’s his niece. His biological sister died of a drug overdose just after Daisy was born.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Colt wasn’t about to let her go into the system. He’s a great dad.” Dante kissed my nose. “Get dressed. They’ll be here soon.”

I pulled on some navy-blue shorts and a scoop-neck red T-shirt. Then I headed to the kitchen to make a salad. As I did, I kept glancing at Dante out on the rooftop deck, lighting the grill. The sliding doors were all pushed open. He looked so domesticated. The man under the sexy nightclub owner.

Fidgeting, I finished chopping up some cucumber for the salad. I was a little nervous. Here I was with Dante after causing him so much trouble. I couldn’t imagine his brothers would be very happy about it.

I heard the thud of footsteps on the stairs and looked up.

The Fury brothers had arrived.

Reath came in first, wearing jeans and a tight black T-shirt that hugged his muscled chest. He spotted me and smiled.

Wow. The man had a killer smile.

“Hi, Mila.” He gave me a quick hug. “You look rested after all the drama.” He set some beer on the island. “I’m damn glad Edwards is locked up.”

I nodded meekly.

“Mila, I brought wine if your tastebuds need more than beer.” Kavner set a bottle of wine down on the island. As always, the man looked handsome and polished, and his smile was genuine.

“I’d love a glass of wine.”

“Excellent. Finally, someone with some taste around here.”

Beauden grunted at Kav, then touched my arm. “You did good last night, taking Edwards down. I’ll tell Shay. She’ll be proud.”

I flushed. “It felt pretty good.”

He smiled, and I realized just how attractive he was under the ruggedness. “Always feels good to kick the ass of someone who deserves it.” He patted my shoulder.

“You’re pretty.”

The little voice made me whirl. A young girl, somewhere under ten, looked up at me. She wore a jean skirt and a ruffled pink shirt, and was studying me with a frank gaze. She had her gorgeous, glossy brown hair in a crooked ponytail, and was holding Colton’s hand.

Okay, now I could picture him as a hot single dad.

I crouched. “Hello. You’re pretty too. My name’s Mila.”

“I’m Daisy.” She gave me a gap-toothed smile.

“Well, Daisy, I’m pretty smart too, and a hard worker. I mean, pretty is fine, but smart and hard-working, those are even better things.”

Daisy’s smile widened. “I’m smart and hard-working too. Mrs. Dawson, my teacher, said so. And daddy said I’m sneaky as well.”

My lips twitched. “Sneaky can be good too.” I met Colt’s gaze and he gave me a small smile.

“Hey, Dai.” Dante sauntered inside.

“Uncle Dante!” Daisy ran to him and leaped on him, certain of her welcome.

He caught her, kissing her cheek, and propping her on his hip.

I froze, staring. Dark, gorgeous Dante cradling a little girl. I couldn’t look away.

He met my gaze, and I saw something flash in his eyes.

“Mila, here you go.” Kav handed me a glass of white wine.

“Let’s get cooking, Dante, I’m starving,” Beau said. “I brought steak.” He waved at the cooler bag someone had set on the kitchen island while I’d been busy staring at Dante.

“And I brought the potato salad that Lola made,” Colt said.

“I made a walnut, goat’s cheese, and spinach salad,” Kav added.

Beau rolled his eyes. “Trust you to go fancy.”

“It’s called class, Beau. I’ll teach you.”

Soon I found myself sitting between Dante and Beauden at the outdoor table. I was sipping my wine, belly laughing, eating good food, and being highly amused by the banter. The five men couldn’t help but rib each other.

I looked at Dante, and feelings swirled inside me. They scared me. A part of me wanted to tell him what I was feeling, and another part of me wanted to protect myself. I bit my tongue. For now, we’d see how things went.

After eating, Daisy had pulled out a small tablet and was watching some music and dance videos. She’d crawled into my lap for a bit, then visited all her uncles, but it was clear she was daddy’s girl. And Colt was clearly besotted with his daughter.

“I need a refill.” I held up my empty wine glass. “Anybody need anything?”

“Beer for me, please,” Beau said. He patted his flat belly. “Shit, I can’t eat anything else, though.”

“Uncle Beau, that’s fifty cents for the swear jar,” Daisy said primly.

He reached into his pocket, then flipped two quarters at Daisy. She caught the coins with a giggle.

I walked inside. That’s when I saw my cellphone was ringing. I snatched it up and saw Eli’s name.

“Hey, Eli. Enjoying an extra day off?”

“Mila. You doing okay?”

I frowned. He sounded tense. “I’m fine. You?”

There was silence.

“Eli?”

“I have a...problem. Please don’t tell Dante. I think you can help me clear it up. Have you got a minute?”

“Sure. Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Not on the phone. I’m downstairs.”

My frown deepened. “At Dante’s?”

“Yeah. I just need a minute. Please don’t tell the boss.”

I wondered what trouble Eli was in. I glanced out on the deck. Everyone was still laughing and drinking.

Kav walked in. “You need help with the wine?”

“Kav, one of the bartenders from Ember is downstairs. He just needs to see me for a second. I’ll be right back.”

The billionaire frowned. “Don’t go far. And remember the security guards are on duty out there.”

“I know. But it’s just Eli. He’s a friend. Pour my wine, and I’ll be right back.” I jogged down the stairs and opened the front door.

Eli stood there, hands in his pockets, a worried look on his face.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I just need a few minutes, Mila. Can you come with me to my car?”

I stepped outside. I didn’t see his car in the lot. I spotted one of the security guards and nodded at him.

“It’s parked on the street,” Eli said.

“All right. But I can’t go far.”

“I know. This won’t take long.”

Sighing, I followed him down the side of Ember toward the street.

I still didn’t see Eli’s car. Just then, a black sedan pulled up in front of us and the doors opened. I felt a skitter of unease.

A short man in a suit stepped out of the back of the car. “Ms. Clifton. Finally.”

As he said my real name, icy cold washed over me.

A man got out of the front seat. I gasped, dizziness hitting me.

He was one of my attackers. I saw the snake tattoo curling on his forearm.

“No.” I shook my head and stepped back toward Eli.

“I’m sorry.” Eli’s face was pale. “So sorry.”

The man from the back of the car stepped forward. His smile held a sharp edge. “You’ve caused me a lot of problems. We’re going for a drive.”

“No!” I screamed.

I turned to run, but Snake Tattoo leaped forward and grabbed me.

“You said you just wanted to talk to her,” Eli cried.

“Idiot.” The man in the suit pulled out a handgun, aimed at Eli, and fired. As Eli fell, I screamed.

Then I was shoved inside the car.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Clifton. It will be over soon.”

The car pulled away. I couldn't believe this was happening.

I struggled, but strong hands pinned me down.

“Get the duct tape,” the man in the suit growled.

Dread filled me like concrete. *Dante*.

DANTE

L aughing at the joke Beau had just told, I set my drink down on the table. I looked toward the kitchen.

Where was Mila?

I smiled. She was out of my sight for a minute and I missed her.

Kav sauntered back.

“Where’s my woman?”

My brother smiled. “It’s fun seeing you head over heels.”

I growled at him.

“She’s just gone downstairs. One of the bartenders wanted to talk to her.”

I stilled, my instincts kicking in. The ones that had helped me dodge trouble my entire life. “Who?”

“Eli.”

Eli was a good kid. I trusted him. Still, I jerked to my feet. Something didn’t feel right. “Something’s wrong.”

Reath frowned. “The guards are downstairs, Dante.”

“And they’re looking for any strangers who might be after Mila. They aren’t looking for one of our own.”

Reath cursed and stood.

“Daddy?” Daisy picked up on the tension.

“Stay here for a second, short stuff.” Colt ruffled her hair.
“We’re just going to get Mila, then we’ll be back in a minute.”

The little girl nodded and looked back at her tablet.

My brothers were right behind me as I jogged downstairs. When I burst outside, there was no sign of Mila.

I spotted one of the security guards on the other side of the lot. “Where is she?”

The man pointed toward the street. “Talking with your bartender. Eli Jackson.”

Eli was friends with Mila. He wouldn’t hurt her.

Then I heard the gunshot.

My insides turned to ice. I broke into a sprint.

When I rushed out onto the street, it was in time to see a black sedan pulling away, going fast.

In a split second, I saw Mila’s terrified face in the back of the car.

With Carlos Salazar.

Now the ice inside me turned hot, melted by my furious rage.

I felt fury at Salazar for taking what was mine. Fury for letting my enemy get her.

I heard a groan and turned. Eli was sprawled on the pavement, clutching his arm.

Gritting my teeth, I advanced on the young man.

“Dante,” Beau said.

“You lured her out.”

Eli flinched.

Beau and Colt caught my arms.

“He’s been shot.” Reath knelt beside Eli.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.” Eli was crying. “He said he just wanted to talk to her.”

“Bullet just grazed him.” Reath sat back. “He’ll live.”

“No, he won’t,” I growled.

“That man...he threatened my sister. He had photos of her at school, at cheerleading practice—” Eli’s voice hitched. “He said he just wanted to talk to Mila. I had to protect my sister, but God, Mila.” It was the devastation on his face that made me stop my struggle to break free from my brothers.

“I’m not going to kill him.” I pulled free and turned to look at my brothers. “Is this revenge? Salazar wants to lash out at me?”

Reath made an unhappy sound. “It’s more than that.”

“Talk.”

“I haven’t got all the proof yet...but I think that Moreno Cartel are the ones who are working with Chuck Edwards.”

“What?” I pressed my hands to the back of my neck. “Fuck.”

“But Chuck’s in jail,” Colt said. “Why go after Mila now? Their drug operation is a bust.”

“I have men still watching Edward Industries,” Reath said. “A shipment of drugs just went into Baton Rouge yesterday.”

I shook my head. None of this mattered. “We have to find Mila.”

Fuck. Where would Salazar take her?

“I’ll pull up all the properties he owns,” Colt said. “He can’t be taking her too far away.”

“It’ll take too long.” He could hurt her. Or worse.

My gut knotted. I couldn’t lose her.

I looked at each one of my brothers. “I can’t let him hurt her. I can’t lose her.”

Kav gripped my shoulder. “We know, Dante. We’re with you.”

Reath pulled out his phone. “I know how to find him.”

My heart thudded against my chest. “How?”

“I have a tracker on him,” Reath said simply. “The last time he visited Ember, I put a tracker on that god-awful gold chain he always wears.”

Beau frowned. “How the hell did you get a tracker on Salazar without him realizing?”

Reath just gave us a bland look, and held up his phone. “He’s heading across Lake Pontchartrain. Let’s move.”

“Yes.” My hands balled into fists.

“We’ll take my SUV,” Reath said. “It’s stocked.”

Meaning he had a collection of weapons inside. Reath always used a variety of handguns. He said he never wanted to get too used to using one particular type of gun.

Colt pulled out his cellphone. “I’ll call Lola to get Daisy.”

My hands clenched into tight fists. “Let’s go and get my woman back.”

My brothers all nodded.

Hold on, Mila. I’m coming.

MILA

I was trying to keep it together.

My hands had been tied together in front of me with duct tape. The man in the suit sat beside me, barking into his phone in Spanish.

Swallowing, I tried to push down my fear. Keeping my hands hidden, I worked to loosen up the duct tape.

Dante would come for me.

As my heartbeat pounded in my head, I held onto that fact. But my chest was so tight. Would he find me in time?

I shouldn't have been a coward. I should've told him that I was falling for him.

Losing my parents had taught me life could be far too short.

I had to survive this and get back to him.

The man ended his call.

“You’re the man working with Chuck,” I said.

“Yes. Like I said, you’ve caused me a lot of trouble and cost me a lot of money.” He gave me a smile that sent shivers down my spine. “And then you hooked up with my nemesis. Fury. That arrogant fuck.” The man’s dark eyes glittered. “Now, I’ll be killing two birds with one stone. I can protect my Baton Rouge business, and deal Dante Fury a blow. I’ll show him that he can’t push Carlos Salazar around.”

I stayed quiet. Antagonizing him wasn't going to help. When I looked out the window, I saw that we'd reached the other side of Lake Pontchartrain.

The driver took a winding road, and eventually we turned onto a long drive. Oak trees dripping with Spanish Moss lined the road. The house came into view. Once, I imagined it had been nice, but now it was dilapidated. The paint was peeling, and the gardens were overgrown.

The car came to a stop, and that's when I saw another car was already there.

My gaze moved out to the lake. I saw a long wooden dock, with the same sense of disrepair as the house.

Salazar got out, then yanked me after him.

That's when I saw the other man waiting for us.

"Charlie!" I stared at Charlie Edwards, Chuck's son. "God, Charlie, help me."

But when he looked my way, there was no nice, friendly look. His handsome face was hard.

"Fuck, Mila. All this trouble because you're a fucking workaholic. When you overheard that meeting, my Dad lost it. You put all our deals at risk."

My heart sank. "You're in on this."

He made a scoffing sound. "It was my idea in the first place. I connected Dad with Salazar. My father can spend money just fine, but he's too fucking dumb to make it." Charlie smiled. "Now he's out of my hair for good. And once we deal with you, it's going to be all smooth sailing."

"Then hurry up and kill her," Salazar ordered. "This has gone on long enough."

Charlie grabbed my arm and yanked me forward. Salazar's men, the two who'd killed my parents, followed.

Fear mushroomed inside me, overwhelming me. I kept working the tape on my hands loose.

I'd lost everything, but I'd survived.

And I'd found Dante.

The thought of him pushed aside the chilling fear, and I could think again.

I'd met an amazing man who made me feel so much. A man who made me feel cherished, alive.

I wasn't going to lose that.

I was *not* going to let these assholes take any more from me.

And I sure as hell wasn't going to let them kill me without a fight.

As we stepped onto the dock, I saw a rope coiled on the wood, attached to a block of concrete. My belly flip-flopped.

Rage welled. I welcomed the anger that curled around me. They were planning to drown me, were they?

Charlie spun. "It's time—"

"Fuck you, Charlie." I didn't pause to think through my defense moves, I just let my instincts and training take over.

I spun, and kicked one guard hard. He fell into the water with a yelp and a splash.

Snake Tattoo was already moving. I gripped the front of his shirt, then landed my knee right between his legs.

He made a horrible sound, and I wasn't even a little bit sorry. I shoved him. He teetered on the edge of the dock, then fell into the lake.

I spun, and saw Charlie staring at me with surprised eyes.

"Did you expect me to cower and cry?" I advanced on him. "I've survived, Charlie. I've learned how. And I'm falling in love with a man I refuse to lose." I whipped my elbow up and it collided with his face.

"Ow!" He staggered back a step.

I punched him in the gut, and when he bent forward, I rammed my knee into his face. I heard the crunch of cartilage

and smiled. It felt so good. I kicked him, and he fell back off the dock, arms windmilling.

He hit the water with a wild splash.

I turned...

And froze.

Salazar was striding toward me, gun aimed right at me.

I heard the roar of an engine and the skid of tires, but I kept my gaze locked on that gun. My pulse danced crazily.

“I have to do everything myself,” Salazar spat.

He fired a shot, and I flinched. But I realized he’d fired wide, just to scare me.

I sucked in a lungful of air. He stopped in front of me, cursing under his breath.

He snatched up the rope. “Now you die.”

My anger exploded.

I smacked the gun out of his hand. He growled, and lunged for me.

Shay had warned me numerous times that in a life or death situation, to never hesitate.

I snatched the rope out of Salazar’s hands and flicked it around his neck. I yanked hard.

He choked, and his arms flailed. He wasn’t used to doing his own dirty work. He slapped at me, but I held tight. I felt him grab my shirt.

I slammed a palm up into his nose.

It made a satisfying crunch. I followed through, jamming my fingers into his eyes.

His pained yelp echoed out across the lake.

“I’m not dying for you, Salazar. Dante’s going to come for you.”

I saw fear in his eyes.

“You should be afraid.”

His hand whipped up and grabbed me around the throat. As his fingers dug in, I heard running feet and turned my head.

Dante was sprinting down the dock, his face set in hard lines.

His brothers were behind him.

Dante shouldered in front of me. He pulled me free of Salazar and pushed me back.

Strong arms closed around me.

“I’ve got you,” came the rumble of Beau’s deep voice.

Dante faced off with Salazar.

“Fuck you, Fury.” Salazar’s gaze burned with hatred. “I am Carlos Antonio Salazar. I’m—”

“You took my woman. You put your dirty hands on her. You tried to kill her.”

His tone was deep, lethal. I gripped Beau’s arms and couldn’t look away.

Dante grabbed the rope that was loose around Salazar’s neck. The man spewed words in Spanish at him, but Dante didn’t stop. He yanked the rope and tied a knot. Then he kicked the man.

My mouth opened. I watch Salazar hit the water, followed a second later by the concrete block. He disappeared under the dark lake.

Then Dante was striding toward me.

I broke free of Beau and ran to him.

“*Mila*.”

I collided with his chest. “Dante, I knew you’d come.”

“Fuck.” His hands tunneled into my hair. His face looked tortured. “You’re safe now.”

I was. Elation burst inside me. “I need to tell you something.”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. Dante, I should’ve told you before.”

“Told me what.”

I dragged in a deep breath. “That I’m falling for you.”

There was a flash in his eyes, then he was kissing me.

I kissed him back, gripping him hard. His tongue slid into my mouth, and he kissed me like all he needed was me.

My legs gave out and he caught me, pulling me into his arms.

It was the only place I wanted to be.

DANTE

After lifting Mila into my arms, I strode off the dock.

Two police cars were pulling in, but I ignored them and strode over to the dilapidated front steps of the old lake house.

I sat and settled Mila on my lap. I buried my face in her hair. My hands weren't steady as I ran them over her.

Reassuring myself that she was safe.

She was alive.

I kept repeating it to myself.

Seeing her face off with Salazar, his gun aimed at her... My entire life had flashed behind my eyes.

"I'm sorry he got you, baby."

She tilted her head and pressed a kiss to my jaw. "I wasn't afraid. I mean, I was at first. But I knew you'd come after me." She frowned. "Eli. He shot Eli."

"It was just a graze." I made a sound. "Salazar threatened Eli's sister. He told Eli that he just wanted to talk to you." I snorted.

"Eli didn't betray me."

"No."

She released a long breath. "It was Charlie, Chuck's son. It was all him, Dante."

I glanced over and saw the cops cuffing a wet Charlie Edwards, along with Salazar's thugs.

Another one had Salazar laid out on the ground, giving him CPR.

My brothers all waited nearby, hands on their hips, watching impassively.

"I couldn't believe it," Mila continued. "Charlie's always seem so nice and unassuming. When he said he was going to shove me in the water and drown me—"

My hands convulsed and I glared at Charlie Edwards.

Mila cupped my face, bringing my gaze back to her. "I'm okay, Dante. When I realized what they had planned, my anger rose up inside me. I thought of you, and I didn't want to die. I refused to lose everything that mattered to me again."

"You used your fury."

She nodded. "It powered me, fueled me. I fought."

"I know, baby."

She stroked my beard. "I meant what I said before. I'm falling in love with you. I don't expect anything from you—"

I growled. "You should. Because I'm falling in love with you too."

Her eyes widened, shining with emotion. "*Dante*." She shifted, straddling me.

I gripped her hips. "Nothing between us was ever fake, Mila. This is real."

"You make me feel alive," she whispered.

God, she slayed me. "This is how it's going to go. You're not moving out, you're living with me now. You'll work in PR and marketing with Clarissa."

"So bossy." But her smile was wide.

"We're going to fuck, I'm going to take you out on dates. You aren't going back to your old life."

“I don’t want to. There’s nothing for me there. I’m not Amelia Clifton anymore. I’m Mila.”

“Stay with me. We’ll make a new life together.” I kissed her until she was breathless.

“Okay,” she breathed.

“Some time in the future, I’ll find a ring, and you’ll marry me.”

Then she’d be mine. Forever and always.

“Yes, Dante.”

Then we were kissing again. I groaned and hauled her closer, my hands on her ass. She undulated, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“I was going to ask if she was all right, but from the looks of things, she’s just fine.”

Mila gasped at the unfamiliar voice with a touch of a Cajun accent. I looked past her to a man wearing dark jeans and a white button-down shirt. He had shaggy brown hair shot through with gold, and a badge was clipped to his belt.

Mila turned in my lap.

“Mila, this is Detective Simon Broussard. New Orleans PD.”

Broussard inclined his head. “Ms. Clifton.”

“Hi. Mila is fine.”

I put a hand over hers. “Broussard is one of the good guys.”

The detective’s lips quirked. “I’m not sure I can say the same about Fury, here.” He glanced over as an ambulance pulled up. The paramedics climbed out, heading toward the still prone Salazar.

“Salazar’s breathing, but it’s likely he suffered oxygen deprivation,” Broussard said. “Your brother said you fought with him to free Mila. He got tangled up in the rope and fell in the lake.”

“Yes.”

Mila stiffened, but nodded rapidly. “He was trying to kill me. They all were. And they murdered my parents.”

“Reath’s briefed me, Mila. It shouldn’t take too long to get it all sorted out and have your name cleared.”

I felt her shudder.

“And the DEA will be delighted to dismantle Salazar and Edwards’ little business,” Broussard added.

I nodded. “Good.”

“Mila, here’s my card.” Broussard handed it over. “Are you going back to Baton Rouge?”

I tightened my hold on her. “Hell, no.”

She stroked a hand down my arm. “No.”

Broussard smiled. “I didn’t think so.”

“I mean, I’d like to visit my parents’ graves.”

I kissed her temple. “We will. And sort out anything from your old apartment.”

There was sadness on her face, but she smiled at me.

Broussard shook his head. “The first Fury brother takes the fall.”

“Fuck off, Broussard.”

“Take care of your girl, Dante.”

“I intend to.”

We sat there and watched Charlie and Salazar’s men being loaded into police cars. My brothers were headed our way.

“It’s over,” Mila murmured.

“No, baby, it’s just beginning.”

“Ready to go home?” Reath asked.

Mila smiled. “Absolutely.”

MILA

A few weeks later

“Get there, sexy girl.”

With a moan, I gripped the kitchen island for balance as Dante powered into me from behind.

God, he felt so good. I pushed back into his thrusts.

The front of his body pushed against my back. He surrounded me. Claimed me. Protected me.

As he always did.

A hundred times a day, he touched me, kissed me, made sure I knew that I was his.

His cock slid deep, and I moaned.

“I love that sound you make,” he growled in my ear.

He was the perfect fit.

We were the perfect fit.

One of his hands shifted, stroking between my thighs as he kept up his hard thrusts. He rubbed my clit, and it was all over.

I threw my head back. “Dante!”

I felt him watching me as I came, and then, with the pleasure still coursing through me, his cock slammed deep.

Buried inside me, he groaned my name and came.

A moment later, warm lips hit the back of my neck. I was still wearing my pretty sundress. Dante had literally just

shoved it up and ripped my thong off to get to me.

It was one of my dresses from Baton Rouge. I finally had my wardrobe back. He'd taken me to Baton Rouge the week before. We'd laid flowers on my parents' graves, and I cried in his arms. And after some legal wrangling, I got my personal belongings back. We also arranged to sell both the land where my parents' house had stood, and my apartment.

"Best birthday present ever," he murmured in my ear, slowly slipping his cock out of me.

I smiled. "You said that about your birthday blow job when we woke up today."

He spun me, and kissed me deeply. It filled me with a warmth that I felt all the way through me.

"Best birthday ever," he said.

We were both finally relaxing, trusting that I was safe. He let me out on my own now, without a security guard.

Salazar had survived the lake, but he'd never be the same. He was imprisoned, along with Charlie Edwards and Salazar's men. They'd gone down for the murder of my parents.

I was safe.

And I was loved.

Hands skimmed up my legs, and under my dress. "I guess we'd better get ready for the party."

I nodded. "Everyone will be coming soon." His brothers were coming over to celebrate his birthday. Lola was making her amazing lasagna. I'd baked a cake, and decorated it in black and gold. I'd also made some cupcakes that I'd frosted in pink and purple icing. Daisy's favorite.

"You know you're hard to get gifts for," I complained. "You're the kind of man who if he wants something, he just goes after it and gets it."

His smile was slow and lazy. "I have everything I need."

But I'd wanted to get him something special. To show him I was his, that I would never leave him.

His fingers kept moving under my dress and that's when he brushed my hipbone.

He frowned. "What's this?"

I licked my lips. "Your birthday present."

A groove appeared in his brow. "Why do you have a bandage on your hip?" He shoved my dress up.

For a second, he was distracted by my bare pussy, then his gaze moved to the white bandage on my hip.

"I got it for you," I whispered.

He pulled the bandage off, and the look on his face said everything. "*Mila.*"

I'd gotten the tattoo on my hip. Beau had taken me to a place he'd recommended. The tattoo was thorny branches and flames in the shape of a heart.

"I wanted to show you how much you mean to me. I wanted to ink it on my skin for eternity."

His fingers dug into my side. His dark gaze caught mine.

"I love you, Dante Fury."

He gripped my waist and boosted me onto the island. "I love you too, Mila. So fucking much." He shoved my dress up to my waist and reached for his belt. "I have to fuck you again."

I gasped, desire ripping through me. "There's no time."

"I'll be fast." His mouth fused with mine.

DANTE

Shuffling the papers on my desk, I signed off on a new location for the second Smokehouse in the Garden District. I was looking at a third spot in Mid-City too.

Business was good.

I smiled. Life was good.

There was a knock at my office door and Mila breezed in.

“It’s busy out there tonight,” she said.

I glanced at the window. “Must be your new marketing campaign.”

She grinned.

“What brings you to my office, Ms. Clifton?”

She’d stuck with Mila, but was using her surname again.

Until I could give her mine.

“I have the new advertisements for you to approve.”

She was thriving doing the marketing with Clarissa. Clarissa would eventually take leave when the baby came. With the expansions I had planned, I needed Mila in the role.

“Oh, Eli’s back behind the bar tonight.”

I scowled at her. I’d wanted to fire Eli, but Mila had pleaded the young man’s case. When she’d heard he’d been protecting his sister, she’d forgiven him in an instant.

“He’s nervous about seeing you, so go easy on him.”

“He should be.”

“Dante.”

I sighed. “I’ll be nice to him.”

“Thank you.” She kissed my temple, then set some glossy prints down on my desk. “These are for Ember.”

The ads were all classy, and done in black and gold.

“And these have a more casual vibe for Smokehouse.”

I leaned closer. She smelled delicious. “They look great.”

“You aren’t even looking at them.”

“Because I know they’re great.” I tumbled her onto my lap. She was wearing a fitted black skirt to her knees, and the way it hugged her ass was pure poetry.

She was giving me sexy secretary vibes.

“Mr. Fury, I’m working.”

“Mmm.” I kissed her.

It got better every time I kissed her.

The guarded, wounded look had left her face. She slept soundly in my arms every night, and there were no nightmares.

And I knew in my heart that she was mine, and I was hers.

One day, she’d have my babies. She’d be my life. She was it for me.

We’d live, laugh, fuck, grow old together.

She’d never walk away from me. I wasn’t just enough for her, I was her everything. She showed me that every day.

I deepened the kiss, absorbing her moan. I let my hand drift down to cup her ass.

“I thought you didn’t fool around in your office,” she said against my lips.

“I didn’t. But a certain temptress makes me break my own rules. A lot.”

Suddenly, the door flew open. Mila gasped. Colt stalked in, looking like a thundercloud.

“You could knock.” I shot him an annoyed look.

My brother grunted and went straight to the cabinet, and poured himself a bourbon.

“You could not fuck Mila in your office,” he said.

“I’ll fuck Mila wherever I want.”

She dropped her head to my shoulder and made a sound. I was pretty sure she was trying not to laugh.

“I’ll knock next time.” Colt tossed back half of his drink.

“I’ll lock the door next time.” I paused. “Why aren’t you with Daisy?”

“Lola took her to see a movie. With princesses.”

Colt didn’t do movies. He couldn’t sit still long enough. Especially if they involved princesses.

“And Macy’s making me do paperwork.” He scowled at his bourbon.

“A necessary evil, brother.”

I saw Mila watching Colt, speculation on her face. My woman tilted her head. “So, you came over here to...hide from Macy?”

Colt stiffened. “I’m not hiding.”

“Right,” Mila said.

“She works for *me*.” He drank the last of his bourbon.

“Mmm.” Mila grinned at me. She was so damn beautiful.

Colt’s cellphone rang. He yanked it out, scowled at it, then answered.

“What?” A pause. “I’m at Ember. I needed to see Dante.” He got a belligerent look on his face. “No, I’m not doing the damn paperwork.” A longer pause. “No.” A short pause. “Fine, I’ll be there in five fucking minutes.” He shoved the

phone in the pocket of his jeans and slammed the empty glass on my desk. “I have to go.”

“Good luck with the paperwork,” I called after him.

“Fuck you.” The word drifted back as he headed down the stairs.

“What’s going on there?” Mila asked.

“My brother is a stubborn, grumpy, and in-denial idiot.”

“Sometimes you men can’t help it. I think it’s all the testosterone.”

“Is that right?” I pressed my lips to her neck, scraped my teeth over her skin.

The air shuddered out of her, and her head tipped back.

“I think you’d better lock the door, sexy girl, and I’ll show you the benefits of testosterone.”

She smiled at me. It was bright, warm, happy.

I felt it in my chest.

She did that. She warmed me up, blanketing the dark fury inside me with warmth and love.

And it lay there, deep and dormant, happy to not be needed.

Yes, life was good.

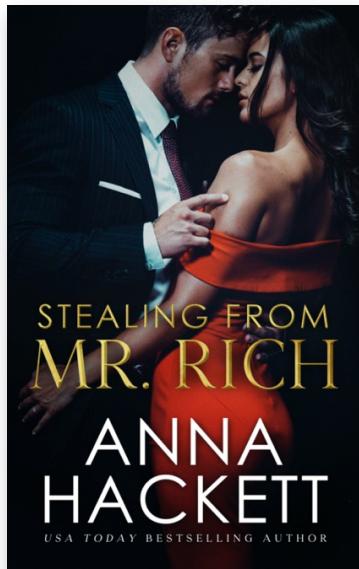
Then I locked my office door and fucked my woman on my desk.

I hope you enjoyed Dante and Mila’s story!

If you want a little more of Dante and Mila, then read the Fury Bonus Epilogue: [GET MY EPILOGUE](#)

The Fury Brothers continues with *Keep*, starring grumpy single dad bounty hunter Colton Fury and his sunshiny office assistant Macy. Coming October 2023.

For more action-packed romance, check out the first book in the **Billionaire Heists**, *Stealing from Mr. Rich* (Monroe and Zane's story). **Read on for a preview of the first chapter.**

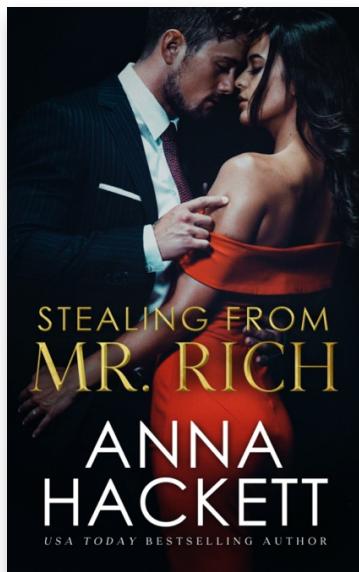


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The image shows a white box set containing three books. The spine of the books is visible, showing "BOOK 1 ANNA HACKETT", "BOOK 2 ANNA HACKETT", and "BOOK 3 ANNA HACKETT". The front cover of the third book, "Stealing from Mr. Rich", is visible, featuring a man in a white shirt and a woman in a red dress. To the right of the box set, the text "Would you like a FREE BOX SET of my books?" is displayed in a black, sans-serif font.

PREVIEW: STEALING FROM MR. RICH



Brother in Trouble

Monroe

The old-fashioned Rosengrens safe was a beauty.

I carefully turned the combination dial, then pressed closer to the safe. The metal was cool under my fingertips. The safe wasn't pretty, but stout and secure. There was something to be said for solid security.

Rosengrens had started making safes in Sweden over a hundred years ago. They were good at it. I listened to the pins, waiting for contact. Newer safes had internals made from lightweight materials to reduce sensory feedback, so I didn't get to use these skills very often.

Some people could play the piano, I could play a safe. The tiny vibration I was waiting for reached my fingertips, followed by the faintest click.

"I've gotcha, old girl." The Rosengrens had quite a few quirks, but my blood sang as I moved the dial again.

I heard a louder click and spun the handle.

The safe door swung open. Inside, I saw stacks of jewelry cases and wads of hundred-dollar bills. *Nice.*

Standing, I dusted my hands off on my jeans. "There you go, Mr. Goldstein."

"You are a doll, Monroe O'Connor. Thank you."

The older man, dressed neatly in pressed chinos and a blue shirt, grinned at me. He had coke-bottle glasses, wispy, white hair, and a wrinkled face.

I smiled at him. Mr. Goldstein was one of my favorite people. "I'll send you my bill."

His grin widened. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

I raised a brow. "You could stop forgetting your safe combination."

The wealthy old man called me every month or so to open his safe. Right now, we were standing in the home office of his expensive Park Avenue penthouse.

It was decorated in what I thought of as “rich, old man.” There were heavy drapes, gold-framed artwork, lots of dark wood—including the built-in shelves around the safe—and a huge desk.

“Then I wouldn’t get to see your pretty face,” he said.

I smiled and patted his shoulder. “I’ll see you next month, Mr. Goldstein.” The poor man was lonely. His wife had died the year before, and his only son lived in Europe.

“Sure thing, Monroe. I’ll have some of those donuts you like.”

We headed for the front door and my chest tightened. I understood feeling lonely. “You could do with some new locks on your door. I mean, your building has top-notch security, but you can never be too careful. Pop by the shop if you want to talk locks.”

He beamed at me and held the door open. “I might do that.”

“Bye, Mr. Goldstein.”

I headed down the plush hall to the elevator. Everything in the building screamed old money. I felt like an imposter just being in the building. Like I had “daughter of a criminal” stamped on my head.

Pulling out my cell phone, I pulled up my accounting app and entered Mr. Goldstein’s callout. Next, I checked my messages.

Still nothing from Maguire.

Frowning, I bit my lip. That made it three days since I’d heard from my little brother. I shot him off a quick text.

“Text me back, Mag,” I muttered.

The elevator opened and I stepped in, trying not to worry about Maguire. He was an adult, but I’d practically raised him.

Most days it felt like I had a twenty-four-year-old kid.

The elevator slowed and stopped at another floor. An older, well-dressed couple entered. They eyed me and my well-worn jeans like I'd crawled out from under a rock.

I smiled. "Good morning."

Yeah, yeah, I'm not wearing designer duds, and my bank account doesn't have a gazillion zeros. You're so much better than me.

Ignoring them, I scrolled through Instagram. When we finally reached the lobby, the couple shot me another dubious look before they left. I strode out across the marble-lined space and rolled my eyes.

During my teens, I'd cared about what people thought. Everyone had known that my father was Terry O'Connor—expert thief, safecracker, and con man. I'd felt every repulsed look and sly smirk at high school.

Then I'd grown up, cultivated some thicker skin, and learned not to care. *Fuck 'em*. People who looked down on others for things outside their control were assholes.

I wrinkled my nose. Okay, it was easier said than done.

When I walked outside, the street was busy. I smiled, breathing in the scent of New York—car exhaust, burnt meat, and rotting trash. Besides, most people cared more about themselves. They judged you, left you bleeding, then forgot you in the blink of an eye.

I unlocked my bicycle, and pulled on my helmet, then set off down the street. I needed to get to the store. The ride wasn't long, but I spent every second worrying about Mag.

My brother had a knack for finding trouble. I sighed. After a childhood, where both our mothers had taken off, and Da was in and out of jail, Mag was entitled to being a bit messed up. The O'Connors were a long way from the Brady Bunch.

I pulled up in front of my shop in Hell's Kitchen and stopped for a second.

I grinned. *All mine.*

Okay, I didn't own the building, but I owned the store. The sign above the shop said *Lady Locksmith*. The logo was lipstick red—a woman's hand with gorgeous red nails, holding a set of keys.

After I locked up my bike, I strode inside. A chime sounded.

God, I loved the place. It was filled with glossy, warm-wood shelves lined with displays of state-of-the-art locks and safes. A key-cutting machine sat at the back.

A blonde head popped up from behind a long, shiny counter.

“You’re back,” Sabrina said.

My best friend looked like a doll—small, petite, with a head of golden curls.

We’d met doing our business degrees at college, and had become fast friends. Sabrina had always wanted to be tall and sexy, but had to settle for small and cute. She was my manager, and was getting married in a month.

“Yeah, Mr. Goldstein forgot his safe code again,” I said.

Sabrina snorted. “That old coot doesn’t forget, he just likes looking at your ass.”

“He’s harmless. He’s nice, and lonely. How’s the team doing?”

Sabrina leaned forward, pulling out her tablet. I often wondered if she slept with it. “Liz is out back unpacking stock.” Sabrina’s nose wrinkled. “McRoberts overcharged us on the Schlage locks again.”

“That prick.” He was always trying to screw me over. “I’ll call him.”

“Paola, Kat, and Isabella are all out on jobs.”

Excellent. Business was doing well. Lady Locksmith specialized in providing female locksmiths to all the single ladies of New York. They also advised on how to keep them safe—securing locks, doors, and windows.

I had a dream of one day seeing multiple Lady Locksmiths around the city. Hell, around every city. A girl could dream. Growing up, once I understood the damage my father did to other people, all I'd wanted was to be respectable. To earn my own way and add to the world, not take from it.

"Did you get that new article I sent you to post on the blog?" I asked.

Sabrina nodded. "It'll go live shortly, and then I'll post on Insta, as well."

When I had the time, I wrote articles on how women—single *and* married—should secure their homes. My latest was aimed at domestic-violence survivors, and helping them feel safe. I donated my time to Nightingale House, a local shelter that helped women leaving DV situations, and I installed locks for them, free of charge.

"We should start a podcast," Sabrina said.

I wrinkled my nose. "I don't have time to sit around recording stuff." I did my fair share of callouts for jobs, plus at night I had to stay on top of the business-side of the store.

"Fine, fine." Sabrina leaned against the counter and eyed my jeans. "Damn, I hate you for being tall, long, and gorgeous. You're going to look *way* too beautiful as my maid of honor." She waved a hand between us. "You're all tall, sleek, and dark-haired, and I'm...the opposite."

I had some distant Black Irish ancestor to thank for my pale skin and ink-black hair. Growing up, I wanted to be short, blonde, and tanned. I snorted. "Beauty comes in all different forms, Sabrina." I gripped her shoulders. "You are so damn pretty, and your fiancé happens to think you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Andrew is gaga over you."

Sabrina sighed happily. "He does and he is." A pause. "So, do you have a date for my wedding yet?" My bestie's voice turned breezy and casual.

Uh-oh. I froze. All the wedding prep had sent my normally easygoing best friend a bit crazy. And I knew very well not to trust that tone.

I edged toward my office. “Not yet.”

Sabrina’s blue eyes sparked. “It’s only *four* weeks away, Monroe. The maid of honor can’t come alone.”

“I’ll be busy helping you out—”

“Find a date, Monroe.”

“I don’t want to just pick anyone for your wedding—”

Sabrina stomped her foot. “Find someone, or I’ll find someone for you.”

I held up my hands. “Okay, okay.” I headed for my office. “I’ll—” My cell phone rang. *Yes.* “I’ve got a call. Got to go.” I dove through the office door.

“I won’t forget,” Sabrina yelled. “I’ll revoke your best-friend status, if I have to.”

I closed the door on my bridezilla bestie and looked at the phone.

Maguire. Finally.

I stabbed the call button. “Where have you been?”

“We have your brother,” a robotic voice said.

My blood ran cold. My chest felt like it had filled with concrete.

“If you want to keep him alive, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

Zane

God, this party was boring.

Zane Roth sipped his wine and glanced around the ballroom at the Mandarin Oriental. The party held the Who's Who of New York society, all dressed up in their glittering best. The ceiling shimmered with a sea of crystal lights, tall flower arrangements dominated the tables, and the wall of windows had a great view of the Manhattan skyline.

Everything was picture perfect...and boring.

If it wasn't for the charity auction, he wouldn't be dressed in his tuxedo and dodging annoying people.

"I'm so sick of these parties," he muttered.

A snort came from beside him.

One of his best friends, Maverick Rivera, sipped his wine. "You were voted New York's sexiest billionaire bachelor. You should be loving this shindig."

Mav had been one of his best friends since college. Like Zane, Maverick hadn't come from wealth. They'd both earned it the old-fashioned way. Zane loved numbers and money, and had made Wall Street his hunting ground. Mav was a geek, despite not looking like a stereotypical one. He'd grown up in a strong, Mexican-American family, and with his brown skin, broad shoulders, and the fact that he worked out a lot, no one would pick him for a tech billionaire.

But under the big body, the man was a computer geek to the bone.

"All the society mamas are giving you lots of speculative looks." Mav gave him a small grin.

"Shut it, Rivera."

"They're all dreaming of marrying their daughters off to billionaire Zane Roth, the finance King of Wall Street."

Zane glared. "You done?"

“Oh, I could go on.”

“I seem to recall another article about the billionaire bachelors. All three of us.” Zane tipped his glass at his friend. “They’ll be coming for you, next.”

Mav’s smile dissolved, and he shrugged a broad shoulder. “I’ll toss Kensington at them. He’s pretty.”

Liam Kensington was the third member of their trio. Unlike Zane and Mav, Liam had come from money, although he worked hard to avoid his bloodsucking family.

Zane saw a woman in a slinky, blue dress shoot him a welcoming smile.

He looked away.

When he’d made his first billion, he’d welcomed the attention. Especially the female attention. He’d bedded more than his fair share of gorgeous women.

Of late, nothing and no one caught his interest. Women all left him feeling numb.

Work. He thrived on that.

A part of him figured he’d never find a woman who made him feel the same way as his work.

“Speak of the devil,” Mav said.

Zane looked up to see Liam Kensington striding toward them. With the lean body of a swimmer, clad in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, he looked every inch the billionaire. His gold hair complemented a face the ladies oohed over.

People tried to get his attention, but the real estate mogul ignored everyone.

He reached Zane and Mav, grabbed Zane’s wine, and emptied it in two gulps.

“I hate this party. When can we leave?” Having spent his formative years in London, he had a posh British accent. Another thing the ladies loved. “I have a contract to work on, my fundraiser ball to plan, and things to catch up on after our trip to San Francisco.”

The three of them had just returned from a business trip to the West Coast.

“Can’t leave until the auction’s done,” Zane said.

Liam sighed. His handsome face often had him voted the best-looking billionaire bachelor.

“Buy up big,” Zane said. “Proceeds go to the Boys and Girls Clubs.”

“One of your pet charities,” Liam said.

“Yeah.” Zane’s father had left when he was seven. His mom had worked hard to support them. She was his hero. He liked to give back to charities that supported kids growing up in tough circumstances.

He’d set his mom up in a gorgeous house Upstate that she loved. And he was here for her tonight.

“Don’t bid on the Phillips-Morley necklace, though,” he added. “It’s mine.”

The necklace had a huge, rectangular sapphire pendant surrounded by diamonds. It was the real-life necklace said to have inspired the necklace in the movie, *Titanic*. It had been given to a young woman, Kate Florence Phillips, by her lover, Henry Samuel Morley. The two had run away together and booked passage on the *Titanic*.

Unfortunately for poor Kate, Henry had drowned when the ship had sunk. She’d returned to England with the necklace and a baby in her belly.

Zane’s mother had always loved the story and pored over pictures of the necklace. She’d told him the story of the lovers, over and over.

“It was a gift from a man to a woman he loved. She was a shop girl, and he owned the store, but they fell in love, even though society frowned on their love.” She sighed. “That’s true love, Zane. Devotion, loyalty, through the good times and the bad.”

Everything Carol Roth had never known.

Of course, it turned out old Henry was much older than his lover, and already married. But Zane didn't want to ruin the fairy tale for his mom.

Now, the Phillips-Morley necklace had turned up, and was being offered at auction. And Zane was going to get it for his mom. It was her birthday in a few months.

"Hey, is your fancy, new safe ready yet?" Zane asked Mav.

His friend nodded. "You're getting one of the first ones. I can have my team install it this week."

"Perfect." Mav's new Riv3000 was the latest in high-tech safes and said to be unbreakable. "I'll keep the necklace in it until my mom's birthday."

Someone called out Liam's name. With a sigh, their friend forced a smile. "Can't dodge this one. Simpson's an investor in my Brooklyn project. I'll be back."

"Need a refill?" Zane asked Mav.

"Sure."

Zane headed for the bar. He'd almost reached it when a manicured hand snagged his arm.

"Zane."

He looked down at the woman and barely swallowed his groan. "Allegra. You look lovely this evening."

She did. Allegra Montgomery's shimmery, silver dress hugged her slender figure, and her cloud of mahogany brown hair accented her beautiful face. As the only daughter of a wealthy New York family—her father was from *the* Montgomery family and her mother was a former Miss America—Allegra was well-bred and well-educated but also, as he'd discovered, spoiled and liked getting her way.

Her dark eyes bored into him. "I'm sorry things ended badly for us the other month. I was..." Her voice lowered, and she stroked his forearm. "I miss you. I was hoping we could catch up again."

Zane arched a brow. They'd dated for a few weeks, shared a few dinners, and some decent sex. But Allegra liked being the center of attention, complained that he worked too much, and had constantly hounded him to take her on vacation. Preferably on a private jet to Tahiti or the Maldives.

When she'd asked him if it would be too much for him to give her a credit card of her own, for monthly expenses, Zane had exited stage left.

"I don't think so, Allegra. We aren't...compatible."

Her full lips turned into a pout. "I thought we were *very* compatible."

He cleared his throat. "I heard you moved on. With Chip Huffington."

Allegra waved a hand. "Oh, that's nothing serious."

And Chip was only a millionaire. Allegra would see that as a step down. In fact, Zane felt like every time she looked at him, he could almost see little dollar signs in her eyes.

He dredged up a smile. "I wish you all the best, Allegra. Good evening." He sidestepped her and made a beeline for the bar.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

Wine wasn't going to cut it. It would probably be frowned on to ask for an entire bottle of Scotch. "Two glasses of Scotch, please. On the rocks. Do you have Macallan?"

"No, sorry, sir. Will Glenfiddich do?"

"Sure."

"Ladies and gentlemen," a voice said over the loudspeaker. The lights lowered. "I hope you're ready to spend big for a wonderful cause."

Carrying the drinks, Zane hurried back to Mav and Liam. He handed Mav a glass.

"Let's do this," Mav grumbled. "And next time, I'll make a generous online donation so I don't have to come to the party."

“Drinks at my place after I get the necklace,” Zane said. “I have a very good bottle of Macallan.”

Mav stilled. “How good?”

“Macallan 25. Single malt.”

“I’m there,” Liam said.

Mav lifted his chin.

Ahead, Zane watched the evening’s host lift a black cloth off a pedestal. He stared at the necklace, the sapphire glittering under the lights.

There it was.

The sapphire was a deep, rich blue. Just like all the photos his mother had shown him.

“Get that damn necklace, Roth, and let’s get out of here,” Mav said.

Zane nodded. He’d get the necklace for the one woman in his life who rarely asked for anything, then escape the rest of the bloodsuckers and hang with his friends.

Billionaire Heists

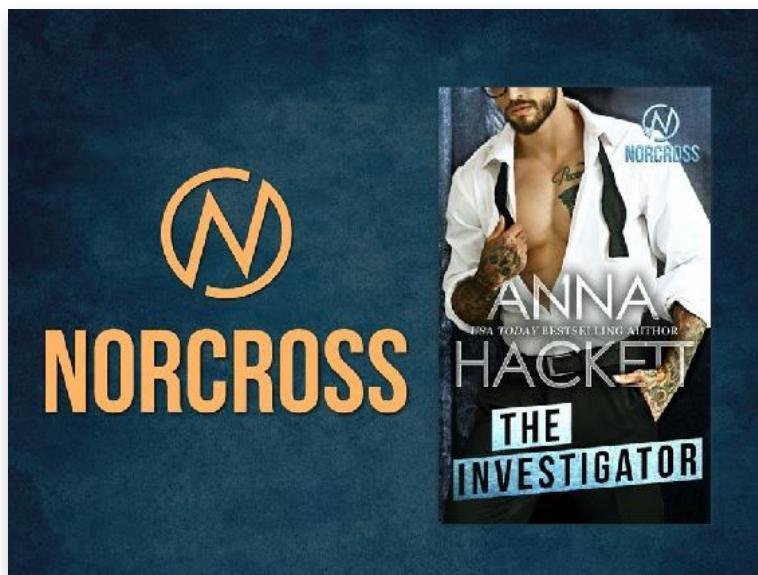
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PREVIEW: NORCROSS SECURITY

Want more action-packed romance? Then check out the men of **Norcross Security**.



The only man who can keep her safe is her boss' gorgeous brother.

Museum curator Haven McKinney has sworn off men. All of them. Totally. She's recently escaped a bad ex and started a new life for herself in San Francisco. She *loves* her job at the Hutton Museum, likes her new boss, and has made best friends with his feisty sister. Haven's also desperately trying *not* to notice their brother: hotshot investigator Rhys Norcross. And she's *really* trying not to notice his muscular body, sexy tattoos, and charming smile.

Nope, Rhys is off limits. But then Haven finds herself in the middle of a deadly situation...

Investigator Rhys Norcross is good at finding his targets. After leaving an elite Ghost Ops military team, the former Delta Force soldier thrives on his job at his brother's security firm, Norcross Security. He's had his eye on smart, sexy Haven for a while, but the pretty curator with her eyes full of secrets is proving far harder to chase down than he anticipated.

Luckily, Rhys never, ever gives up.

When thieves target the museum and steal a multi-million-dollar painting in a daring theft, Haven finds herself in trouble, and dangers from her past rising. Rhys vows to do whatever it takes to keep her safe, and Haven finds herself risking the one thing she was trying so hard to protect—her heart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a USA Today bestselling romance author who's passionate about ***fast-paced, emotion-filled*** contemporary romantic suspense and science fiction romance. I love writing about people overcoming unbeatable odds and achieving seemingly impossible goals. I like to believe it's possible for all of us to do the same.

I live in Australia with my own personal hero and two very busy, always-on-the-move sons.

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