



DE LUCA CRIME FAMILY BOOK FIVE

# INFLAMMED

*Touch*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

E.C. LAND

*Inflamed Touch*

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BOOK FIVE

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# *Contents*

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also By E.C. Land](#)

[Social Media](#)

## Inflamed Touch

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblances to persons, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

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# *Trigger Warning*

## Trigger Warning

This content is intended for mature audiences only. It contains material that may be viewed as offensive to some readers, including graphic language, dangerous and sexual situations, murder, rape, and extreme violence.

Proceed with caution. This book does entail several scenes that may very well be a trigger to some.

Also, tissues are a must with other scenes.

Not for the faint at heart.

If you don't like violence and cannot handle certain subjects, then this is not a book you'll want to read.



# *Chapter One*

DIEGO

*Well, fuck.*

I close my eyes and release a heavy breath. Talk about an unexpected intrusion of the past.

The voice on my phone is one I can't ever forget.

A voice I never wanted to hear again.

In any fucking lifetime.

Yet it's haunted me for all this time.

So, what do I do? I hit replay on the message.

Again. And again. And again.

"Please, Diego, I ... I wouldn't call if I had someone else to turn to, but I don't." A swallow. I can hear it. The absolute fucking effort it's taking her to call. "I-I'm okay, but ... please call—I need you."

And it ends.

I can see her, hand on her phone, fingertips white with little moons of red at the top from gripping so hard. Nadia would have been tucked up in the corner of her couch, legs curled up tight to her chest, her free arm securing them there, making this call.

She was probably also watching out for anyone around her so no one could see who she called.

Chip meet fucking shoulder.

Opening my eyes, I lean back against the wall and end the voicemail playback, tucking the phone away. I should've erased the message and said forget about it, but I can't.

Shit.

Nadia Reed, the prettiest girl I ever had the misfortune to lay my eyes on. I don't know what the fuck the call's about, and I have no intention of finding out.

Enders Ridge, hometown, misery mill, and reminder of all the shit in my life, has always been a hotbed of small minds and big prejudice, of dickwads running the place into the ground for oil or whatever the fuck they want there.

Gussy the place up, bring in a tourist dollar for I don't fucking know what and let the rest run to ruin. That's Enders Ridge.

Yeah, I maybe exaggerating, but most people don't see the underbelly of small-town America like I've seen.

Nadia probably broke a fucking nail.

The thought stabs guilt into me because unless she was body snatched or something, she's not the type to break nails. Or have long ones. Then again, it's been a while—

“Yo, Diego.” Nicolo pokes his head around the corner of the building. “We gotta roll.”

“It's him?”

Nicolo grins. “He sure as shit is in the wrong place at the right time. Let's go find out.”

Yeah, definitely not interested in old flames and betrayals, or the bullshit smalltown crap of Enders Ridge. Why the fuck would I help?

I got better things to do.

\* \* \*

Tizio has some aggressions to work off, something about an old friend involved in a major beef with the law. So, we let him take on the guy first.

I'd almost feel sorry for the guy—almost—except I know what this fucker has done, apart from the shit he stole from us.

Theo's coming in, third to the big boss, Leo. But he's not going to be here for about twenty minutes. Fatherhood and balancing family, along with being one of the nastiest, coldest

killers around, means time is precious to him. He'd rather be home with his family than out here handling the dirty work.

That's how much the De Lucas want their hands on this piece of shit who thought stealing from one of the most powerful mafia families in Dallas was a smart move. We don't tolerate stealing, or profiting off our goods when it's not your fucking place to do so. And selling to kids? That's a death sentence.

But the fact that this guy who goes by the alluring name Weasel has a thing for young girls, willing or otherwise. He was bragging down at the local bar on the border of neutral and Lowlander territories about a girl he sampled. A girl he claimed had gone on to bigger things. A girl who sounded like Lissa Beaumont, who went missing last week, well ...

We want a word, as De Luca enforcers, with this weasel named Weasel, all about that.

One of our informers came to tell us, not realizing the info she was handing over. She thought it was the drugs, as someone had been stupid enough to take, and this guy bragged about it, along with the girl.

Combine that with all the recent issues we thought we'd put to bed, and our desire to keep shit nice and clean for the bosses, we brought the guy in early. Thought we'd get the fucking party started early.

Theo's going to want to discuss the drugs.

Tizio, once he gets his workout in, is going to want to discuss the girl and the big ol' truck of laundered money that went missing around the same time.

He hits the guy again, harder than he needs to, shifting from roughing up to intent to kill.

That money that went missing isn't De Lucas, so by rights, it is not our business. Neither is the girl. Technically. But there are girls missing, from all over the larger area inside and outside Dallas. People go missing all the time, it's just she went when the shipment did.

A shipment under the watchful eyes of a small crew who work magic on the border, mainly for El Cabeza, and they've been known to throw in with some of the outliers affiliated with the Lowlanders.

The problem is, El Cabeza operates mostly in Mexico, and the Lowlanders, headed by the Irish and, in particular, O'Grady, an enigmatic player. I fucking say problem because the Lowlanders aren't a family. There's a loyalty not to cross the core run by O'Grady, but they're secretive, and they use and take in anyone who can do things for them, make money.

We need to make sure things don't fuck with De Luca.

It's good right now, we've what passes as peace in the mafia.

And I'd like it to stay that way. I'd also like my long-ago ex not to have called me and set up residence in my fucking head, but ... yeah.

The man cries out as a thumping sound and crack meet my ears.

"Tizio." The warning in Nicolo's voice is low but there.

I exchange looks with him as he flexes his fingers, ready to step in. His face tells me everything. We're tight-knit, can read each other, and Nicolo thinks Tizio is overstepping for reasons that don't belong here.

The guy screams as Tizio ignores Nicolo and lands an uppercut to the guy's chin, snapping his head back into the brick wall where he's chained.

"Doing that again," Tizio snarls, "and don't think anyone will rescue you. This place is soundproof, so ..."

Another punch. And another.

I sigh. This isn't my favorite part of the fucking job, unless they really deserve it. It's not usually Tizio's, either. It's what makes us so good at our job. We're not fucking sadistic. We do the job, and will fucking wipe the floor with the remains, but it's not for fun.

We have some of those guys.

Lower on the food chain. Usually in the arena of real dirty work when a touch of Armageddon is needed.

“Don’t kill him, Nicolo’s right. Frozen’s gonna want to talk. I say talk, but ya know.”

The guy’s one good eye bugs, he squeals, and that’s when Nicolo shifts into place.

“You okay?”

“Fucking tea party time here, Diego.”

I take that pile of surly as a mind your business.

Nicolo has ways of getting these bastards to talk. We’re big guys, and no one ever expects the finer points on finesse and degrees of pain we can mete out. Right up until we fucking do.

The scream is unholy, thin, high-pitched, and I don’t want to be this asshole’s balls right now.

“Should we share?”

Tizio cuts me a look. “No. Not until we know what the fuck’s going on. You wanna start a war?”

“The De Lucas know about the girl.” I pause. “Aware. But she could be a runaway or taken.”

We listen to the blubbering voice. “I just ... I’m sorry, I didn’t know the drugs were De Luca’s.”

“Fuckin’ fool,” I say so the guy can hear. “How dumb do you need to be?”

I peel from the wall and saunter closer, picking up an ice pick from the table as I pass. The terrified moron’s eye locks on it as I bring it down in my other hand on repeat.

“This is the biggest fuckin’ family in town, and you don’t mess with them. Just spoke to my colleague, he’s thinking of letting you go. If ...” I ignore the hot needles of Tizio’s stare. “If you tell me what happened to the girl.”

“I don’t know. I just got paid by some guy to invite her out, and ... she never showed up. Look, I didn’t touch her. I

swear.”

“Who?” I ask this quietly. “You didn’t just take a job without a name.”

I step back, and Tizio comes up. The three of us crowd the fucker. “Who?”

“I don’t know.” Weazel moans. “I swear. Went by the name Landers? Don’t know the outfit, just assumed they were with Lowlanders.”

“He still fuckin’ breathing,” Theo says behind us.

We step back, and I swear, Weazel loses control of all functions as the infamous Frozen steps in.

“Yeah,” Tizio says. “Just.”

“We can finish him when you talk, or—”

“Stealing? Selling to kids? I got a kid. Another on the way.” The ice in his voice is enough to even make me uneasy. “I’m going to enjoy dealing with this.”

He looks at the guy and then his equipment.

“Let’s get started ...”

In the basement’s locker room, I lean against the wall as Nicolo looks at his phone. Probably at a picture of his fiancée, Avah.

Privately, me and Tizio have been betting on whether or not she’ll be knocked up and when. Nicolo, for all his violence and fire, is actually a pretty fucking decent and old-fashioned guy. He’s marrying his girl ... fuck, was ready to give everything up for her ... so yeah, they’re gonna have a family, and soon.

“Landers? Anyone heard of an outfit like that?”

Tizio rubs the back of his neck. “We will sooner rather than later. I’ll get digging.”

“This shit is wrong. There’s something, ya’ know. I thought most of it was dealt with when we fixed everything with Avah, but ...” Nico sighs.

I nod. “I hear you. Feels like it’s deeper.” But how fucking deep and when do we bring De Luca in? Like properly?

“We can’t.” It’s like Tizio can read my fucking thoughts. “It’s on your face, bro. Leo and Scarlett wield a lot of power, so if we’re wrong, best case, we make things difficult, at worst, we start a war. Christian will go to battle because of everything that happened to Mia, and Theo ... he’s got Blake and his little family. We do this ourselves, but ...”

“Could be nothing.” I shrug not sure if I believe it. “But worth poking into.”

“Poking into what?” Theo comes out, wiping blood from his hands on a rag.

The three of us look at each other.

Theo sighs. “Guys, c’mon.”

“Nothing, Boss.” Tizio, head of the enforcers, says with the kind of smooth touch most would declare case fucking closed.

The De Luca family aren’t most.

Theo’s shaved off his beard, but the curated stubble says it’s coming back. I’ve heard rumor his beard makes him scarier. I disagree, he just is scary, no matter what.

We’re all deadly. The three of us, Christian, Theo, and, of course, the head honcho himself, Leo. I’m fucking deadly, like I say, but I wouldn’t get in a fight with any of those three.

If anything hits anything with what we’re messing with behind their backs, poking into things, following leads—we just might face the brunt of their ire. Even if we’re doing it for them.

Still ... Theo’s instincts have kicked in. “Is there a fuckin’ difference between me not needing to know and simply not wanting but probably should?”

“Hoping it’s the first.” I run a hand over my close-shaved beard and ignore the bite of anger in Tizio’s look.



He's just generally pissed since his friend got caught up in something. It's a don't ask until you're told situation.

Theo takes us all in, then nods, settling on Nicolo. "Got anything to do with your pretty birdy?"

"Deniable plausibility," Nicolo says. "Boss."

Theo sighs. "My fuckin' Snowflake, love of my life who's about to fuckin' give birth to my second kid, is a scary creature made of hormone. She's worried about her new friend, one Avah, so I said I'd checkup since I needed to work."

I pull on the chain around my neck, a habit when I'm uneasy, and that unease has squat to do with his words.

Everything to do with a dark-haired beauty I barely remember.

Shit.

"See, this is the thing." Theo drops his voice like the dead have ears. "I didn't need to be here. You three can do this shit in your sleep. You're family. Maybe not De Luca by name or blood, but you three are De Lucas all the same. We know it. You know it deep down. Heart and soul. So, why the fuck am I here?"

Tizio has already discreetly called our cleaning crew to take care of the aftermath. So, we wait, and I kinda get the feeling under the low-level ire, Theo's glad to be away from hormones for a moment.

He protects Blake with his life.

A man would have to have a death wish to think of harming her.

Same with Mia. Same with Scarlett. Same with Avah.

Those who've made that mistake.

Never lived to tell any fucking tale.

But family warms something in me, whether I want it warmed or not. This is, for me, a good place to belong. With these people.

And I don't want anything warmed because something at the very back of me, right at my subconscious, it fucking isn't okay with the missing girls. Or the crews that keep popping up.

Still, we don't need to work with certain factions.

For us, we have options, some more convoluted than others, but options are options.

It's just ... if the wrong skirmish starts and we had the wrong fucking end, skirmishes can lead to war real fast, and De Luca painted the villain of the piece.

We don't want that.

None of us do.

"Selling drugs to kids," Tizio says. "A De Luca always has words."

"You called me."

"Protocol—"

"Would be Christian." He shrugs and tosses the rag in the trash. "I'm thinking me because Leo ends up not asking questions, adding shit together and making moves. Christian's a fuckin' hot-edged, chaos theory in action. Hey, he's my cousin's husband and close friend. He's gonna just make moves and spill blood, Maybe ask questions when he's done. Me? I got the little fuckin' family at home, and I'm a cold bastard."

Oh, I read him, loud and beyond clear. He wants to line everything up and protect what's his.

"Theo." I rub the back of my buzz cut. The velvet brush that usually calms me, doesn't. Fuck, I'm more on edge than a newbie. Fucking exes. Fucking phones. "Certain things are going on, we think. Weasel may have to do with that, and he may not."

"Why the fuck—"

"Because he had nothing to give us."

He knows why I'm talking over Tizio and even Nicolo. The newest member. Sure, I've fucking been here years, but newest in the higher-ups is newest, even if that's a long ass time. And newest gets a little leeway with the deniable plausibility.

"Leo said O'Grady's been around a lot, in and out. More than usual."

"Lowlanders were mentioned but just a crew who's done some work for them. We haven't heard of them. That's it."

Nicolo takes a chair and sits. "We did O'Grady a solid. What did you hear?"

Theo shrugs again. "Just something at an event that he's around more than usual. Leo paid attention as did I. We like to keep an eye on players, just like you."

"In and out of town and more time here?" Tizio asks.

I frown. "Maybe there's something going on in the ranks."

"Our thoughts too." Theo nods. "But they're fuckin' closed as a clam on a winter's day. But he was seen at a small town near Corpus Christi. Dude's got fingers everywhere, but it seems there's been gangs causing undue problems." He grins. "You didn't hear this from me. But if there's anything that could threaten us, I want to know. Nicolo, tell Avah to come by."

He heads for the door as something in me turns hard and cold and starts to sink, dragging a sea of unsettled waters with it.

"Which town?" I ask.

Theo scratched his chin. "Ender's Ridge."

Fuck.

I look at the others. "I'm gonna need some time off."

# *Chapter Two*

NADIA

“What’s the fuckin’ problem?”

I grip the phone, finger pressing hard into it as I press myself into the wall at home. I don’t know why it’s a habit I have when it’s someone who can floor me on the other end.

Who am I kidding?

Diego.

When it’s Diego.

The man I haven’t seen for ten years. The man who smashed my heart, betrayed me, and oh, shit. I didn’t expect him to call me back. I hoped.

I definitely didn’t figure his first words to be those.

A tremble starts from my toes, spreads through me, and I can barely breathe.

All this, and it’s six a.m. on a Monday morning.

“Diego?”

“I’m not the tooth fairy.” The gruff roll of his voice that pushes against me hasn’t lost power. And I half laugh.

“You’re too big.”

“What’s this help you need, Nadia?” That gruffness gets thicker as he again gets right to it.

I swallow hard, my stomach twisting, my throat burning, and my tongue suddenly too big for my mouth. Time ticks and I can’t speak.

“For fuck’s sake.”

And he’s gone.

I sink down to the floor and bury my head in my arms. I’m tough, I’m strong, I’m a previously engaged twenty-fucking-eight-year-old woman. One call from a long-ago boyfriend and I’m fourteen. I’m lost, I’m pathetic.

One call and I can't even tell him why I called in the first place.

Of course, him hanging up is beyond rude and juvenile, but ...

I take a breath and push up, ignoring the shake to my legs.

What did I expect when I got his number—no small feat in itself—rainbows? The world to be all happy and populated with unicorns?

I'm just shocked he called back.

But relying on men isn't my thing. I just ... it's all ... Jay didn't come home again last night. He's young, sixteen, and in with a bad crowd. He doesn't listen to me anymore.

What would Diego have done? Turn up to a town he couldn't wait to burn in the dust behind him ten years ago, wave some macho wand and make it all better?

That's not life. It's not how it works. Not for me.

On my own. How it should be.

I hurry out the door to start the day.

\* \* \*

I've been in the principal's office for twenty minutes. Grant Peabody isn't exactly known for his progressive ideas or winning ways. But I smooth down my skirt, smile, and wait for his answer.

"No."

The effort it takes not to scream or leap over his desk and try and strangle some sense into his small brain deserves accolades. "I'm not asking the school for a dime. I'll pay for the classes, the supplies."

"Do you have a problem with my answer being no, Miss Reed?" He folds his arms over his small paunch. "Because I'm not sure how else to say it. You're a teacher here, with classes

of her own. Setting up extra-curricular ones like this one is ridiculous.”

“Schools do it all the time.”

“Yes.” He eyes me like he’s eyeing a spot of ketchup from lunch that mysteriously appeared on his shirt and won’t go away. “But bigger schools with more staff. Better schools with a real budget.” He holds his arms up indicating the school his office sits within. “This isn’t one of them.”

“I’ll pay, and I don’t have anything else.”

“Since you and Riff went south, you mean,” he states and goes on to add, “Besides, you’ve got enough on your plate at home.”

White hot fury sears my veins. My nephew’s none of his business. Just like Ralph Martin, my ex-fiancé, an ex-college football star and break up isn’t. I swear those in this town are still taking the split harder than either party involved. But fury doesn’t win. I’m not about to let it. So, I push it back in order to cool down with deep breaths.

“I can pay, and these kids need more than the class can give them.”

“I don’t want riffraff hanging around the school, Miss Reed.”

“You mean students?” I narrow my eyes at him as I clamp my hands in an effort not to make a move I’ll regret. When he doesn’t answer, I draw in a breath. “And if I can get their grades up?”

“No. You start that then everyone will want a program. We can’t. I know you’ve been doing a few things and that stops. No more staying after the bell to help those kids. I feel for them, I do, but we’re not their parents. Consider this your first and final warning. Dismissed.”

\* \* \*

“Fucker.” I pull out my phone and call Jay, but there’s no answer and this time it rings but goes to voicemail. I shoot a text, too, which is his preferred mode of communication—it also annoys the hell out of me, I hate texting, and tuck my phone away.

Honestly, I wish my brother and his wife weren’t off gallivanting as usual. Then again, why not when they’ve got full time care in the form of me at home?

Stomping down the school steps I cut across the lawn to the parking lot and wave at Josie, who’s leaning against my car. The art teacher is new enough to be considered totally new. She’d been hired directly after graduating with an art degree. Honestly, she probably could have gone to work anywhere, but came here instead. She’s that good. I’ve seen her portfolio. “How did it go with Peabody?”

“He somehow managed to live. Even though he didn’t deserve at least a light maiming.”

She sighs and adjusts her bright, sunshine yellow oversized leather tote with bright primary flowers sewn on. She’s red-headed, shorter than me by several inches, and full of energy. She’s also become a friend who I’ve told about my plans I wanted to put in place for students at the school who need help. “Turned it down? Motherducker.”

“Ducker or not, he is the big boss and it’s dead in the water according to him.”

Josie takes my extra bag full of homework to be marked and plonks it down so I can find my keys. “And according to you?”

“Dead my ass. I’m doing it.”

“I’m still helping.”

“Josie, he gave me a first and final warning, and he’s looking to cull the ranks. I’m not putting your job on the line.”

“C’mon, Nadia, we’re already understaffed and—”

“He’ll can us both and make everyone work more. Or just make bigger classes.”



“Shizz.”

“Yup.” Diego pops into my head just as I find my keys.  
“Shizz is right. Come on, I’ll give you a lift.”

\* \* \*

I crick my neck about four hours later, my stomach rumbling and in need of something harder than water.

Homework’s done, budgeting is done, and I think I have a plan. Early mornings. I’ll chat to the students tomorrow. Early mornings away from school grounds. It’s dodgy, shaded gray but I don’t know what else to do to make it work.

And nothing from Jay.

I get up and haunt the door of his room at the back of the house. It’s a mess in the way that teens seem to corner the market on, but whenever I try and pick up, he gets furious. Claims I’m invading his space.

He’s changed. Lately, it’s gotten worse. So much worse. Goddamn my fucking brother and his wife. I love my nephew, but I blame them for the way he’s acting. I mean I get his acting out. I do. But my brother is going about this in all the wrong ways. He wanted to build a name away from our dad’s, and he gets to go all over the place on business trips and his wife, Regina, is on one of her endless health getaways, which is her right. But what about their child?

I take a breath because in the state I’m in, I’m liable to blow some kind of gasket. That or have an aneurysm.

Closing my eyes, heart hurting, I lean my forehead against the doorframe. There are still whiffs of the cheap knock off cologne Jay took to wearing that I breathe in. They’re a reminder of other days, sweeter, more innocent.

Right before he started hanging out with the wrong kids, and getting messed up in things he shouldn’t.

Missing school.

Getting ink.

Staying out all night.

And—

I take a breath again, deeper.

The gun.

Even now the weight of it is sitting in my hand, like some kind of dark spectral. As if finding the baggie of white powder and the pills weren't enough. The drug argument didn't even come close to the ferocity of the gun one.

It's just ... he thinks he's so adult. And I know what it's like. Not only do I teach kids, but I was one, so the rush into adulthood and the absolute arrogance is there inside me. I remember all my mistakes, every moment.

And Diego—

“He's not coming, not calling back. Probably dialed by mistake, Nadie,” I mutter, and I go to my room and pull on a dress and some flats. I run a brush through my long black hair in the mirror, retie it, and stare at myself as I scrutinize everything I see in my reflection. I look too pale, my mouth's too big like my eyes, everything's a little too pointed like my bones are too big for my skin. But I'm not putting on make-up and I can't gain weight overnight, so ...

I get my phone and bag and shove some cotton shopping totes in the bag with my wallet. Then I head out. It's a nice night, so I decide to walk. The house is too big, really, for one, and the yard costs to keep it from turning wild, but I grew up here, and there are good memories with the bad. Besides, it's all we had in the end so now I'm like some kind of caretaker of something I'm not even sure I want.

“Nadia.”

The voice makes me clench my teeth and arrange my features in a smile. I turn. “Hi, Riff, how are you?”

My hot ex, because he's that, even with his bod that's slipped into dad over athlete, waves and walks up wearing the ever-crisp jeans, a cowboy shirt, and boots. His look is suits

and Ts and the latest, priciest kicks, but I don't ask about the ensemble because it's not my business.

“Better now these eyes are on you.”

Once the flirt worked. Once. Now it's cringe and it isn't his fault. He was never my choice, not really. He fit, that's all.

He's not Diego, but no one is, and that's a good thing. He never fit either.

Thoughts start to swarm, but I squash them all.

“Nice to see you, but I need to get some dinner from the \_\_\_”

“Nadia.” He catches my hand and tugs me closer, gently pushing me in the direction of the bar he likes, Rocko's Clam Hut, though I don't think the place even knows what a clam is, which is probably for the best. “Come on, we might not be getting married, but we're friends, and friends don't let friends eat frozen dinners. I'll buy you a burger.”

I swallow my sigh. I know when to pick my battles and right not having a burger with my ex isn't one of them. “Sure, lead the way.”

\* \* \*

Riff is telling me about his latest venture, and I pick out every third word as it's a raucous night in here with some game on. I know he means well, but I wonder if he's harboring a hope of a second chance.

Thing is, I know, in my heart of hearts that it's me and not him. Women still swoon over Riff. He comes from money, played college sports, and came home still loved by everyone. He'd make a good father and husband, I hear in whispers loud enough for me to hear. No one approved of the breakup, not that I care. It was my choice.

I don't know what I wanted. But Riff isn't it. Diego, now, he was always trouble and a man I always loved, ever since I can remember.

My savior, hero, protector, friend and one day it happened. Boyfriend and finally lover, and I think he ruined me.

Then he'd betrayed me, broke my heart, and taught me love is for fools. My love, anyway.

The bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks didn't want the one person who'd always been in his corner, always believed in him, and he repaid me by betrayal.

Now he's in Dallas and probably a criminal. There's a small part of me, the stupid part, that thinks if he told me he loved me, I wouldn't care.

I'm an idiot, a fool. I went through hell to get his number, and after that brief call he never called back.

"Hey, Nadia," Riff says, butting me gently with his shoulder. "Another man might take your disappearing there as a diss."

"I'm sorry, I'm just ..."

"Yeah." He nods. "Jay. I know."

I take in a shaky breath. "I should go." I start to dig in my bag.

"On me." He smiles like old times, and it makes something shift with unease in me.

Getting up, I lean down and kiss his smooth cheek. "You're a good guy, Riff, glad we're friends."

I don't give him time to insist on walking me home, I just head out the door and leave.

\* \* \*

My phone rings way too early two mornings later when I'm getting ready to leave the house. Whoever it is doesn't speak.

"Jay?"

No answer, just heavy breathing like whoever it is has a cold. Even so, a small thread of ice laces through my veins as

heat pricks my skin.

“Jay?” Nothing, just the breathing. “Who is this?”

They hang up, and I check my phone, but it’s a private number.

“You don’t have time for this.”

I don’t, I’ve got an illicit class to run. And I shove it from my mind.

The day passes in a whirl of non-stop work, and though I’m late, barely, I think this will work. The kids like the idea of different venues for the classes.

A lot of it is babysitting, and I’m thinking if this goes well, I can get them to do jobs around my place in the afternoons, so they have somewhere to come, something to do, and their parents or whoever’s looking after them, don’t have to worry about sitters for the younger ones.

It’s high school, but I have a trickle-over from grades five and six from the elementary.

Jay came home at some point because there are dirty clothes on the floor. I washed and left them on the bed with some apples, bananas, and oranges, plus some quality protein bars for when he comes by again.

All the books say he’ll come back, but it still breaks me.

Maybe that’s why I devote so much time and energy to my special classes. This morning, I’ve got assignments for them. Small and hopefully fun but designed to help with math and spelling.

When the phone rings, I answer as I rush out the door. It’s Jay’s phone. “Jay—”

“Listen up, bitch. Leave Jay alone. Or we’ll teach you the meaning of obedience.” The voice on the other end threatens and hangs up before I can say another word. Not that I could.

I’m so shocked I almost drop the phone. I’m shaking hard. That wasn’t a kid. That was a man and I almost call Diego again, but he hasn’t called again and—grown woman, right?

I jump in my car and take off, only to be met with an empty, closed restaurant a friend said I can use a couple times a month, well ...

Everything turns to lead.

It's the little, round form of Peabody.

"Miss Reed. I warned you."

"It's my dime," I say after a nanosecond of toying with denial. "And not on school property."

"My students. You're on unpaid suspension as of now."

I stare at him, everything sinking. "But... you can't."

"Oh, I can. This program of yours has really brought out the sludge of this town. Gangs and bad eggs everywhere."

The gang thing again. Riffraff. The unwanted. It's the excuse the board has used against a proper program, what Peabody uses against me doing that on my dime, and now ... now this.

"If you suspend me, what's to stop me?"

"You're chummy with that art teacher? The newbie? She could be next. Seen you two talking and she's the bleeding-heart, hippie, liberal type, isn't she?"

I glare. "Threats?"

"No. I'm protecting the school. The community. You operate something without licenses, it comes back on us. Worse, it draws more of them out of the woodwork. So, no. If you want to keep your job, then disband this."

After he leaves, I sit at a table in the front café section and put my head into my shaking hands.

Of course, that narrowminded pea brain would be like that. He knows about the issues with Jay. He probably thinks I'll turn the school into a gang house, the ass.

Finally, I get up, head out, and stop abruptly. There on the pavement, surly as all get out, artfully ripped shirt on and leather vest, oversize jeans hanging low, is Jay Reed.

If he had a cigarette it would hang from his lips.

“Jay.”

“Quit bugging me. You’re ruining my reputation.”

“You’re sixteen,” I say as evenly as I can. “You don’t have a reputation.”

“Leave me alone!” He clears his voice. “Anyway, I’m moving in with friends.” He kicks at a duffel bag and spits.

“You need to stay with me as per your parents’ wishes. You’re only sixteen.”

“So?”

“It’s the law.”

“Fuck the law,” he says, then he turns and grabs the bag.

My eyes zero in on what looks like cling film poking from his shirt sleeve.

“Jay ...” I whisper, my heart squeezing.

“Leave me alone.” He doesn’t look at me as he stalks off down the main street.

Oh, God. He got a tattoo. I know what the film is for. He just got a tattoo. He’s too young, it’s illegal, and I can’t do a thing.

Could my day get any worse?

I walk home because I need the air, and when I get there, I falter to a stop.

Yes, yes, my day could get worse.

There’s a man leaning against the wall next to my door. Hard eyes on me in his handsome face.

He’s big, dangerous, tattooed with short hair, riding gear, and a close-cropped beard. My eyes are everywhere, drinking him in like it’s a frenzy.

He doesn’t look pleased to be here.

I breathe one word. “Diego.”

# *Chapter Three*



DIEGO

My sweet Nadie.

The thought's there, wrong, and feeling somehow right, before I can stop it. I get it, sense memory.

There's an ocean of water under our bridge.

"Nadia, long time."

She's prettier than I remember, and here I thought it'd be the other way around. But my memory's wrong. It forgot little details, like the way she holds herself like she's scared and pretending to be fierce when her back's against the wall.

That little scrawny kid with the big green eyes who looked up at me with an expression of such in your face attitude that screamed, 'yeah, what are you gonna do about it?'

The fierce intelligence that says she's a girl going places.

It's all there. As always. Layers formed on that bare-faced little kid who wore her emotions so blindingly bright you could feel them. They settled, smoothed down beneath the layers of life that built her into a young woman, but I see it.

All below the surface, all there for anyone paying tight attention.

Then there's the rest of her.

The mouth so full and lush that as she grew formed into something of interest, something a man wanted to kiss. I didn't think it was quite so soft and inviting until I noticed when she looked at me with love at sixteen, and I ended up ... ended up wanting what I couldn't have. And it's still the softest, most inviting mouth I've ever fucking seen.

The long, straight hair and the palest honey of her skin.

It's all there. Attitude, looks, everything.

It's a fucking punch to the chest.

She's too skinny. Nadia's a woman made for a little curve to her, and being too skinny is a sign of stress.

So's a call out of the blue.

She also didn't go anywhere like I feared, and it breaks the ghost of my heart.

Fuck.

All this, the reaction?

Just the jolt of memory meeting reality, that's all.

"Diego," she says again and there's nothing warm, not a drop of welcome in the flat, cold tone. "Why are you here?"

"Because, Longstocking, you fuckin' called, so I came." I deliberately drop the old nickname.

She doesn't even flinch.

"You hung up on me."

"You said diddly-fucking-squat."

"I don't need you anymore. Go away."

Sighing, I straighten. "Yeah, you not fuckin' answering pissed me off, but it wasn't unexpected."

"I'm not in the mood for this."

My heart clenches. She sounds beyond tired, slightly diminished, and that's not right for Nadia.

I don't want to tell her one reason I called was to ask if she was married, had kids. It's a stupid thing because I don't care and can't do anything about it.

Except I'd have heard.

But I didn't drag my feet after I asked for time off. I had shit to do before I could go. An enforcer doesn't waltz off. "I got here as soon as I could." I shrug. "Work."

Nadia takes a step and shakes her head, mouth twisting in one corner. "I'm sorry. It's been a hell of a week, and an even worse day. I—"

Coming to the edges of the steps I hold out my hand. “You okay? This got anything to do with your call?”

“Yes and no. I ... shit, we can’t talk out here on Delvine Street. People talk.”

“Now, there’s a fuckin’ shocker.” I’m sure more than one person has seen me back in town and the tongues are already wagging about me being back. That and the fact I’ve been waiting at Nadia’s door for her.

A small laugh slips free. She doesn’t take my hand as she takes the last step and crosses the porch to the door, but she opens the door for me. Yeah, feeling all sorts of foolish, I follow her in.

\* \* \*

The place is more modern than I remember. A simple big sofa in the living room, a coffee table, and armchairs. There’s a big TV on one wall with a pile of games and a PlayStation controller on top of them. But there’s a wall devoted to books and a pile of what look like essays on the coffee table.

“The owner of the PS5 the reason you called?”

Heat flares dark and becoming in her cheeks as she glances away and nods.

“And?”

Now Nadia glares. “Give me a minute. You turned up out of the blue, Diego.”

“You fuckin’ called me. You went to a lot of fuckin’ trouble to get my number.”

She knows exactly what I’m saying. There’s only one person we both know who has it and to go there, she had to be desperate.

“I came a long way, Longstocking, I’m tired. I’d like to get this shit done.”

“If that’s your attitude, maybe you should go.”

I approach her slowly, deliberately, dropping my bag on the sofa as I do. I only stop when I'm right up in her personal space, taking the particular warmth she gives off down into me, breathing in her air, and the soft neroli and bergamot of her that I'd forgotten until then.

Even at eighteen Nadia wasn't a perfume wearer, soaps and shampoos, that's all, and the scent tells me she hasn't changed that in ten years.

The air vibrates between us. It hums in my bones, a frequency I crave.

I push that away. She's an absolutely gorgeous woman. One I've got a history with. That's it. Nothing more.

I slip a stray hair behind her ear, the zing in my fingers from brushing her skin shoots through me to my junk. "Not going anywhere until you talk, Nadia."

"Calling was a mistake ..." She stops. "Uncharitable, sorry, I just ..."

"Didn't expect me to fuckin' show?"

Nadia tilts her chin, and my stomach contracts as our gazes meet. "Something like that."

"The past is just that, past. Gone. This is now and you wanted help. I don't think it was my knitting skills you were after."

She smiles, and it's so fuckin' bright it almost blindsides me. "You knit?"

"No." I frown, step back, needing the space. "I was making a point."

Nadia's silent for a long moment, then she sighs. "It's about my nephew."

"Little Jay?"

I almost slap myself up the side of my head as the PS5 piece falls into place. Jay. One of the reasons I knew she'd never leave this fucking hellhole.

"You remember?"

“Of course, I remember.”

I remember everything. Like her crushing my heart, like me needing to walk to save her even though she probably didn't deserve it.

Sure, I lied to do it. But she knew me. She should have seen it for what it all fucking was. For her, I lied and took heat to save her asshole father, lied to her so she wouldn't look at Daddy differently ...

But I also sent her a note explaining things were complicated, but I didn't do it. A note she ignored.

Worse fucking thing? I shouldn't have needed a note or anything. She should have stood up for me, knowing me. But she didn't.

This was all a long time ago, ten fucking years, and it's hard to hate someone sweet like Nadia.

She was young, and I was wild. I had shares in every fucking self-preservation mechanism there ever was.

I go to my bag and open it, rummaging through.

There's forgiveness and *forgiveness*, and I'm not there for that bigger, older one, but I can do the adult one, privately, and forgive us both for being young. And move on.

I'm not staying. She's not leaving.

It's history. The future. The truth.

And I'm getting tangled on the path.

I'm here for two reasons. One, help Nadia, and two, find out if the reaches of El Cabeza are here, along with Lowlanders or Lowlander affiliates on the down low, like I suspect.

“Tequila and lime?” I ask.

For the first time since I've seen her, real happiness crosses her face. “You remembered. No one ever does.”

“They give you margaritas?”

“When I go out,” she says absently, looking about her, gaze falling on the essays. Then to me. “Teaching takes up a lot of time. Well, it did.” She frowns.

“Did?”

“Kitchen’s still in the same place.”

I go through, and that hasn’t changed much. The fridge is new, and that’s about it. I pull down glasses, grab some ice and the citrus squeezer. I make the drinks, they’re very much what it says on the damn tin. Tequila, lime juice. There’s a touch of salt flakes and brown sugar too.

“Here.” She takes it with a murmur of thanks. I stand, drink I don’t want in my hand, feet planted apart as I study her like I’m looking for clues. “Did?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Nadia’s gaze slides to her drink. “Something I need to sort.” She straightens her shoulders and glances up. “Jay’s the important thing. I don’t know what to do. And I feel like such a pathetic loser saying that.”

I suck in a breath.

What I want to say is you’re not that. At all.

“Lemme guess, your selfish ass of a brother dumped him on you again and he’s acting out?” I studied her again. “Fell in with the wrong crowd?”

Bingo.

Nadia’s face twists like she’s going to cry, but she doesn’t. “There’re gangs—”

“There have always been gangs.”

“Don’t look at me like I’m some self-appointed princess and you’re a peasant, Fernandez. That’s your fairy tale, not mine.”

“Nadia—”

“I know. I’m not saying I just discovered gangs. What I’m trying to say is there are more of them, and at sixteen, Jay thinks he’s all grown up.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Runs in the family, does it?”

“Why are you ...” Nadia takes a deep swallow of her drink. “I don’t deserve your anger or whatever this is. If you came for revenge or for free entertainment, get back on your ... your ... hog and go.”

Fuck me, this time. I bite down on the laugh, Pippy Longstocking on the sofa stirs in me. I don’t think I’ve ever referred to my motorcycle as a hog.

“I’m not about to do that. You said you needed help, I heard it, so I came.”

She frowns. “Can you sit? You’re so ... big.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ.” But I do as she asks.

“I just ... I’m sorry, there’s no one else to help. My brother’s pretty useless when it comes to Jay. And Dad ...” She swallows. “He was a good man, the best, I know he had troubles, but I could count on him, and now, he’s gone ... all I could think of was you.”

Nadia’s overwhelmed which is rare for her or it was ten years ago. But I don’t need to digress. What I need is to see if her issue’s connected with the Dallas issue? Problem? Situation? I’m not sure what to fucking call it because I don’t know if it’s even anything at all.

Except there’s no real thing as coincidence in my world.

All I could think of was you ... fuck. She didn’t mean it like that, and the reverence for her piece of shit father is so earnest and wrong it could break hearts.

I rub a hand over my chin. “Tell me about the gangs.”

“They come in waves, always have. One group moves on, grows up or dissipates, others come in, looking for a new place, fresh blood. But some of the new ones are troublesome.”

I lean forward in the armchair, not trusting myself to sit next to her. Although what the fuck am I going to do, ravish her? “Troublesome, how?”

She licks her lips, catching a crystal of salt with her tongue. “Remember how the gangs tended to be roughhousing idiots, a stabbing, maybe? Drinking? Vandalizing? It’s changed. And this new one ...”

Nadia takes another swallow of her drink. “I found a baggie full of coke, some pills that could’ve been, I don’t fucking know, Diego. MDMA? Oxy? A-and a gun.”

“Fuck. Where is he? Point me to him.”

I’m on my feet and so is she. A cold, biting fear gnaws at me. A gun is not what I want to hear. Or the drugs.

“I don’t know. I called after the fight over the gun, when he took off and didn’t come home. Calling my brother never helps.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t,” I say bitterly. “And his wife is still about personal improvement?”

She snorts a laugh. “You remember?”

“Of course, I do, Nadia.”

“I ...” Setting her drink down, she smooths her fingers over her trousers. “I got a call, a threat to leave him alone. Chances are he put someone up to it. I love him, I do, but he’s being a little shit with his rebellion kick, and the gang he’s with ...”

Nadia shakes her head.

Another time, another world, and I’d be there, easing her into my arms. Holding her until she gives in to the trembles, until they pass, and she just sets her head against me.

Another world, another time, and my lips would brush her temple, and she’d seek out my mouth.

But this is here and now, and the chasm made from hurt, mistakes, secrets, and years past lie between us.

Man, breaking heads, bringing down threats and protecting De Luca family members with my life is way less complicated and dangerous than this. Standing in Nadia’s living room.



“They’re the problem one, Diego,” she whispers, hugging herself. “The crew he’s with. I run—ran a program to help kids who had bad home lives, or needed someone one-on-one, and some said this crew’s really bad. They’re collecting new members. Lots of the older kids were approached when they got to town.”

My senses start to leap into life. “What kind of problems?”

“Guns, drugs, fights, moving illegal goods.” She ticks them off with her fingers. “Ties to darker forces—don’t know what because that part’s verbatim—but one kid said they’re in with some of the bigger drug runners from Mexico.”

Now, that’s really not what I want to fucking hear, either. Shit.

Nadia watches closely, but I keep my expressions locked down, like I’m on a De Luca job.

“Not a lot to go on.”

“It’s not like I got handed the damn cheat sheet,” she says. “I can make thing up and throw them at you.”

“Regretting the call?”

“Regretting everything.” She drops her head in her hands for a moment, then looks up. “I just keeping thinking if I’d been a better aunt, better everything, then maybe it would be different.”

“Or maybe the same. His parents are perpetually fuckin’ MIA. Combine that shit with wanting to be an adult. You could have a room of awards for your skills in providing for him, loving him, but it probably wouldn’t have made a difference.”

“Yeah? You turned out all right.”

I collect her glass and take it with mine to the kitchen. Her presence is such that I feel it right there.

Setting them on the sink I turn and run into her. Everything explodes into life because I’m not ready for her. She knocks the wind from me and makes my stomach contract.

“Longstocking,” I say at her ear, hovering close enough I can almost taste her, “you’re gonna get into fuckin’ trouble sneaking up on a man ...”

Her gaze locks on my mouth, and her pulse in her throat visibly flutters.

“I ... I just remembered. A girl from here went missing a week ago. She went to visit her mom in Corpus Christi. She had a boyfriend. Rumor is they took off, but her mom’s adamant they didn’t. He was talking about a hiking trek, and according to the mom, already left. They’re trying to get hold of him.”

A missing girl.

I really don’t believe in fucking coincidences. “Do you know the crew Jay’s with?”

Nadia Reed nods.

“Lander’s Men.”

# *Chapter Four*

NADIA

Diego, big, broad, handsome Diego. The man who I used to be able to read, has a new kind of barrier, one I can't slide under, one I can't read.

It's either that, or I've forgotten how. Ten years is a long time.

But though his face stays neutral, the soft *fuck* shakes me.

“What do you mean, fuck?”

He turns, leans back against the counter and just looks at me, clear, steady, and empty of emotion.

Too empty.

Like it's there but hidden.

“Nothing.”

“Don't. Diego, please.” I cross and stop just shy of him. “It's something I know it.”

“Gang shit's one thing, gangs who play with cartels, smugglers, and other organized crime are something different.”

A dark heaviness hits me. “Organized crime? Here?”

“C'mon, Nadie”—the nickname makes me shiver—“don't be naive. It's everywhere, and small towns are great places to hide activity.”

I stare at him. “Sounds like it's something you know about.”

“You really want me to answer that?”

Yes. The answer is a resounding yes because right now, it's a distraction. “No.”

He shrugs, and I step closer. “What are you doing, Nadie?”

“Getting another drink because it's one of those nights.”

Diego runs a hand over his short black hair with the widow's peak. His eyes, a dark brown that border on midnight, slide over me. Though it's not a slow undressing, there's heat, and my skin tingles where his gaze touches.

And me? Lord, help me, I can't keep my eyes off how his muscles bunch in his arm under the leather jacket. The way the T-shirt clings to the broad and delineated chest with the edges of ink poking above the neckline.

"I'll get you one." He half turns and makes one, then hands me one and all the while, two things beat in the room.

The first comes from my words, Lander's Men.

The second? The thing that's turned my mouth dry ever since I was twelve. Back then I loved the giant bad boy who protected me. It was an innocent love, childish, and it wasn't until I was fourteen it started to bloom in my veins, morphing into something else, and at sixteen ...

I shut the words down.

His gaze is back on me and my mouth's dry. My heart beats an erratic, fast-tempo song in my veins, and my skin pricks and sings everywhere his eyes touch.

The attraction.

It's still there.

Strong.

Alive.

Hot and filled with the kind of things I need to stay far away from.

I take a large swallow and the tequila burns a path, slaking my throat, loosening the edges of me. Drinking is dumb, as I don't do it that much, but I need the false bolster it gives.

"What," I start, "do you know about the gang, Lander's Men?"

Diego takes my drink and puts his mouth to where mine was. It's very deliberate, hotter than any move like that has a right to be, and he holds my gaze as he takes a swallow.

He rubs a finger through the condensation. My gaze catches the heavy silver rings on his thumb and three fingers of his left hand as he does that.

Jewelry on men doesn't do it for me, and though he never wore any, he is now, the rings and the glint of a chain around his neck. But there's something about it, the rings that are unexpectedly erotic, not elegant, they're too masculine for that. There's beauty, though, and they suit him.

My heart throbs down tight.

How many women has he touched with those rings? Or are they from a lover?

I snatch back the drink, fire cascading as our fingers graze, and I take another swallow.

“Well?”

Diego smiles. The slow, winning smile is still in working order and it still goes for the kill. “Well, what?”

“Lander's Men.”

“I'll look into it.”

“Some things never change,” I say, coming at him to poke him with the glass. Some of the tequila sloshes out and lands on him.

His hand closes gently around my wrist, steadying my arm. Everywhere throbs and burns from his touch. I want to sink into it. I want to throw off the years and go back to when it was me and Diego against the world. When he could undo me with a kiss.

“Be very fuckin' careful, Nadia, or a man might think you're aiming for him to strip off his shirt.”

“In your dreams.”

He comes in close and that leather and spiced honey of him that I never could get enough of when I would smell and lick his skin, wear his shirt or jacket, fold about my senses.

“Way too many to count.”

The glass slips, and he grabs it with his other hand.

He downs the contents and puts the glass down behind him. He lets go of my wrist to slide that hand down my spine to the top of my ass and ease me in close to him, and I can barely breathe. He takes my chin and urges it up, so our mouths are almost touching.

The heated breath that bathes and licks my lips is like the kiss of a ghost.

I know I should pull away. I know what he's doing.

But I can't.

The hitch in my chest catches at things long forgotten.

He's using the power of the past, the unsaid, and the residue to try and make me bend to his will.

Once it worked. I was naive. An eighteen-year-old girl who thought the sun shined from him until he destroyed that completely. Once, it would have worked, I was easily swayed because of love.

But now I see it for what it is, a distraction. A very potent, bespoke form.

Distract the girl with touches, kisses, and sweet words, and she's lost.

Even now, with no kisses or sweetness, the touch is potent enough all on its own.

Except ... except now I see what I never could before.

Diego Fernandez is as affected by me, whether he wants that or not.

Crazy fucking chemistry. Attraction. While that's all it is, it's also a doozy. But, yeah, I can get to him too.

I'm not a sex pot. I'm not gifted in the art of seduction, but there's something that clicks, and as I step into his hold, brush against him, I feel him.

The stirrings of a hard-on. And as the iron forms, I'm saturated with shimmering need. The blood pools between my

legs and sets off a dull ache.

“Nadia.”

I ignore the warning as I slip in a little closer, this time pressing against him and rubbing on his erection.

Diego doesn't push me, instead, he yanks me up against him and his mouth slides close to my skin as he moves it up along the line of my jaw to my ear. “This what you fuckin' want? A bit of fun with the bad boy?”

“I had my fun, remember?” I curl my fingers at the nape of his neck, hair too short to grab there. “And you're using the past to distract me.”

“Or maybe I want to just fuck you, for old-time's sake.”

The mock in his tone rubs me the wrong way, and I should pull free, but I don't. Instead, I spread my other palm flat on his chest, soaking in the illicit thrill of touching that hard, hot flesh once again.

It's a crude thing to say. Not the words, the meaning. He's never, even when he'd been so mad at me, he broke things, spoke to me like that.

And I don't think he's changed that much, not the core of him.

I've never mistaken Diego's treatment of me to mean he's not dangerous. He always has been there inside. But now? He knows who he is and what he can do, and I think he could be more dangerous than ever.

I also think he's a good man.

No matter what he did in the past.

“That's not you.”

“How the fuck do you know, Nadia?” But he gently pushes me away and picks up the bottle, taking a swig. He puts it down and, back to me, gripping the edge of the counter he sighs. “There's a lot of time between us. We don't know shit about each other. Not anymore.”

“Except ...” I bite my lip.



“Yeah, but that’s just residue attraction and nothing more. And this thing? I’ll look into it, as I said.”

I nod and smooth my hair like we got down and dirty. “I’m not good at that.” Heat burns as I realize how that sounded. “Waiting around like a weakling, I mean. There was a thing, women’s lib.”

“Fuck that shit.” Now he turns and his eyes are dark, wildfire. “Have you handled a gun?”

“I can shoot.” I’ve been to the shooting range to learn when I thought maybe I should have one at home, but the idea turned my stomach so much, I stopped going. But I don’t say that to him.

“Know how to use a knife? Beat the shit out of someone? Fight off a man my size who wants to fuckin’ hurt you bad? When was the last time you stepped into a gang situation?”

My eyes blur and I squeeze them. I’m not a crier. “What does that matter?”

“When I say I’ll take care of this, it’s not about dissing women’s liberation or equality or anything like that. It’s about what you can and can’t do. You can’t do this. You freaked out over the kid having a gun and that tells me a lot.”

“That I’m a good guardian that is horrified when a teenager has a gun?” I ask.

“You’re that, yeah. But it tells me you aren’t used to guns. It tells me you don’t have a safe for a firearm, and it tells me you freaked instead of getting angry about illegal weapons and the like. And that’s fuckin’ good. I’m glad you don’t think that way.”

“And you do?”

Diego glances at me and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, Longstocking, I fuckin’ do. But ...” He reaches behind him and pulls out a gun, then slides it back to the small of his back. “I know guns.”

I take an involuntary step back and it’s not lost on him.

The smile this time is touched with cynicism. “I came to help, so that’s what I’m gonna do. No need at an awkward attempt at seduction, I’ll sort it out and get Jay back home. Catch you later.”

Diego doesn’t give me a chance to answer, he just walks past me and leaves. The sound of the front door closing the only thing, apart from the tequila, to remind me he was here at all.

\* \* \*

I can’t sleep. In the end, I go and find some milk and cookies. Such a cliché kid that I smile.

Curling on the sofa, I turn on the TV to some terrible show full of too-bright and happy people, dunk a cookie into the milk, and munch it.

Not being able to sleep is not a shock. I’m freaking stressed. The whole thing with Jay, my job, the extra classes I wanted ... and now Diego.

He’s different and the same. I get it, we all grow and change, but the fundamental core is the same. The way he left, the way he wouldn’t tell me much, it all creeps into my bones and whispers things in the dark.

Like I know he thinks there’s big trouble.

He’s always been the guy to shoulder it all, protect those he thinks needs it like me. What once comforted now annoys.

I’m not a kid, no longer eighteen.

Some things never change.

The second cookie crumbles in my hand, and I dust it off onto the plate, willing myself to relax. I guess I’m angry.

After all these years, the anger’s still there, low-key bubbling.

The man’s unquestionably hotter. Hotter and way more handsome than he’d been at twenty-two. Like he’s grown into

the man he's always meant to be.

What I don't get is—sure, he's gorgeous—how he still affects me? Still sets off sparks.

How can I be feeling those tingling bursts of excitement and awareness when I'm so mad and hurt?

It's not that I'm dragging a deep well around with me, but it's there. Just like those sparks have always been there. As a kid, when I worshipped him, when I got older, and we were together—

But yes, the hurt is still there, small and still breathing because he never came for me.

All I got was a note saying he didn't care about me and an admission that certain activities of his could have gotten my father in trouble.

Because I don't want to think about why Diego is troubled by the group my nephew's with, I focus on things that no longer matter like the past and that thing that never felt right.

My father claimed he tried to help Diego and Diego turned on him. But thing was, maybe still is, Diego's not the kind to ask for help.

And in all those years, betrayal is something he'd never done.

Except, of course, with me.

“The past's the past,” I mutter, finishing the milk. “And if he's got another agenda ...”

Well, let him.

He came to help, and in that, I can trust him, beyond, if there's any kind of beyond, I don't know.

With a sigh, I reach for the remote control and freeze as something scrapes at the front door.

Heart beating too fast, I stay where I am and pick at the remnants of the cookie I stress murdered.

“Hey.”

Swallowing, I don't move my gaze from the screen as my nephew's voice warms me. "Hey."

He dithers to the door of the living room, and I try and tamp down my shock and excitement he's here. Taking a deep breath, I look up at him and he scowls. "What?"

I barely control the flinch.

"Do you want something to eat or drink?"

"Booze."

"Not for you, Jay." I smooth fingers down over my PJs. "You're too young."

"And there you go, judging me."

This time, I can't control the frown. Teen growing pains and testing of boundaries aside, this doesn't sound like him at all.

"You're sixteen. And—"

"Fuck you." A light comes to his eyes, like he's a little unsure he's gone too far. "Anyway, I'm gonna stay tonight and go again tomorrow. When I move out."

Breath hisses out of me. "I wish you wouldn't, Jay."

Maybe I should call Diego and have him—what? Come over and scare him off? Jay's clearly in a mood. I push down on the rug with my bare feet, but don't rise. Someone turning up'll get him all fired up. Better to leave it until the morning.

Jay paces like something's bugging him. "You know you can talk to me, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't wanna." His lip curls in a sneer.

Any other situation I'd ground him, take away privileges. But this isn't normal, and too much pushing will send him running. If he's here, there's trouble or he's rethinking the move, so I stand, finally.

"That's fair. Have a good night," I say. Then I turn the TV off and head to my room.

\* \* \*

Something possesses me to text. I don't really know why, only that I do it.

**Me:** Heads up, Jay came home.

**Me:** He's fine. Says he'll be gone tomorrow.

**Me:** We can talk then.

Diego texts back. Within seconds, and yeah, a small thrill dances in my blood.

**Diego:** I can be there in ten.

**Me:** Morning's fine. Only if you want.

I can almost see his eye roll.

**Diego:** Don't fucking play games w/ me, N. You texted, you want me there.

**Diego:** I can come tonight, tho. Unless you got someone in your bed.

Asshole.

**Me:** Worried I do or don't?

**Diego:** Playing w/ fire, N.

Me: That's me always ready to get burned. But I don't need you to come over. I'm a big girl. I learned how to not need a man in my bed.

I can't believe I actually said that.

Taking a shaking breath, I know he's right, it's exactly what I was doing. And so was he. Shit. Shit. Shit. What the hell am I doing?

Nothing answers me in the dark quiet of my room, so I do the sensible thing.

I close my eyes and wish for sleep. My phone alerts me to another message, I peek at it only to ignore it. I can't take that

chance of Diego saying he's actually coming over rather than offering. Being around him is hard enough as it is.

\* \* \*

Mornings are usually chaos, but I'm not working, so when Jay slouches into the kitchen, he stops, glares, and sniffs. "Keeping an eye on me?"

"No, I—" Telling him about the crap going down in my professional life isn't on any list of agendas. "Had the day off."

"Whatever." He snatches up my bag and opens it.

"What are you doing?"

"I need money. You have it. That's the way it works."

I swallow and hold out my hand. "I'm not an ATM or a banking app."

Jay doesn't give me the bag. "I need the fucking money."

"Too bad. We've been over this." Sticking to my guns when I want nothing more than to do anything to keep him there, I keep my hand outstretched. "You have an allowance. What happened to your job?"

"Stop being a bitch." But fear flashes in his hazel eyes, along with guilt and anger.

Behind me, I feel him, like breath blown slow on my nape. Diego comes up, reaching around to take my bag. "That's no fuckin' way to talk to your aunt."

"You called the pigs?" Jay asks.

Diego laughs. "Do I look like the cops? Apologize."

"No."

Jay turns, runs out the back door, and only Diego's hand on my arm stops me from running.

"Diego, I had that under control."

“Sure thing.” He nods at the back door. “Want me to go after him?”

“No.” I take my bag and hug it like armor. “How did you get in?”

He smiles softly and touches my cheek. My legs start to buckle at the sheer sweet tenderness of the moment. “You think a lock’s gonna ever keep me from you?”

“Diego...”

He drops his hand and steps back. “You needed me. It didn’t go as I hoped, but ... I’ll catch up with him. I wanna really look into this crew he’s with. I’ll see you later.”

I stare after him as he goes, not sure exactly what the touch was, if anything at all. How he can turn everything upside down is still a mystery, and one I’ll never understand.

I shake my head and make coffee. I need to get things done today and try to find a way to help the kids still.

Something tells me the day’s not going to be good.

\* \* \*

When Riff calls to ask me to a friendly dinner, I assume it’s because the news of my suspension has spread fast, but he doesn’t even bring it up. Honestly, I only go because I need a distraction. Everything is brick walls and barbed wire fences in terms of trying to set up some kind of before and after school outreach.

Peabody has long-reaching fingers tied to the mayor’s. They want to end all the troubles and sweep all the unpleasant things like kids who need help under the carpet.

It’s an election year, and I think Peabody’s making a play for some kind of promotion beyond mere principal.

The dinner’s at a nice, out-of-the-way Italian place in town, and it doesn’t take long to realize Riff’s looking to rekindle our romance.

“I just think,” he says, “we’ve been hasty ending things, and I’m here for you.”

I blink, trying to wrap my head around it. “We work better as friends.”

“Nadia.” He reaches for my hand, and I snatch it away, going for my phone.

“I have to call Jay. And I need to be up early.”

Not able to think of anything else, I pull out cash and put it on the table before running for freedom.

He isn’t a bad guy. He’s just one I don’t want.

On the pavement, I stop under a streetlamp as my phone pings. Another, no name or number, but this time it’s a message.

**Unknown:** Meet me around the corner from the house.

My heart thumps. Jay?

I don’t know, but I’m going. I should probably text or call Diego, let him know what’s going on and where I’m heading. I don’t have a death wish. Letting Diego know is the right thing even though I know when it comes down to it, he’ll try to push me out of it. Like years ago, when he cut me out, left town, broke my heart—I can’t finish that thought. I can’t allow myself to continue to think of him.

“Hey, Nadia,” Riff says, regaining my attention with a touch. “I know it’s a lot to spring on you, but ... we should work on this. We were great and could still be great. I get it, cold feet and all, and it’s a lot to marry me and my reputation, but that’s all it is, an old reputation.”

Football star. Golden boy. Great family. Good marriage material.

All the reasons I dragged my feet in the first place. I let him wear me down, convinced myself it was love at one point, but it’s not. He’s never going to be what I want, and settling isn’t what either of us deserves.



I'm too nice to be cold, but I try to let him down. "I'm not the right person for you."

"Nadia, you don't mean that." He pulls me into his arms and slides his hand down to grab at my ass. Something I never liked, and he leans in. "We were good. Could be better."

He lurches in, mouth open, and aims for mine.

I almost squeal as I try to pull free.

"Hands off my fuckin' woman," a familiar voice says behind me, cutting the moment dead.

# *Chapter Five*

DIEGO

It takes all I have not to mess up the soft edges of the pretty boy's face.

“Beat it,” the asshole says, “we're in the middle of something.”

The thing is, Nadie was very much not wanting to be any part of that something, middle or otherwise.

I stride over and grab the dude with his hands on Nadia by the collar. The guy's almost as tall as me and built like a quarterback. He swings at me, and I block it, twisting his arm behind his back, making him cry like a baby.

Leaning close, I give his arm an extra special twist I picked up as a De Luca enforcer, and I grin, enjoying the inflicting of that pain. “Wanna tell me why you think it's fuckin' okay to manhandle an unwilling woman? And then tell me why I shouldn't make ground beef out of your face?”

“Diego, no.”

Nadia's quiet plea freezes me.

Two nanoseconds. That's all it fucking takes. Two nanoseconds are too long to put it together.

This isn't some slobbering fool hitting on Nadie against her will, like this town grows creepers who lurk on every corner, no.

She knows him.

Fuck.

Now, I see it, I sense the history. It's like real fresh. Like maybe not even history.

Disgusted with myself, I release him, shoving him harder than I should, and I stalk off, pulling my phone from my pocket.

“You keep calling me, Tizio,” I mutter as I’ve missed about eight calls so far, “and people are gonna start to talk.”

“Real funny, big guy. Got anything?”

I sigh. Apart from the case of blue balls last night that not even a good old-fashioned tug and pull fully relieved, I don’t fucking know. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Tizio, cool those sharp jets of yours. It’s been a day.”

“You got your hands full there, Diego. Things are the usual here, but Leo and Christian have been asking pointed questions that skirt everything and say way too much.”

“It’s not lying.” But it’s close enough.

“And your mission?”

“No fucking idea. Something’s rotten though like Weazel hinted at.” I pause. “Apparently, a girl from here went missing on her way to Corpus Christi.”

He starts swearing, and in the background, Nicolo joins the choir with questions.

“She fit the profile?” Tizio finally asks.

I slide a hand in my front pocket. “We have a profile now?”

“Young, pretty?” he says.

“And easy to put down as a runaway?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“So ...” Tizio pauses. “How’s the girl trouble?”

“Troublesome.” The word’s out before I can stop it. “Asshole.”

“You owe me fifty big ones, Nicolo.” Tizio laughs, He sounds like himself, unless you listen, and then a man can pick up that hum of strain.

“It’s the past, man.” I rub a hand over the back of my neck. “I’m here to check out the possible connection to home.”

Tizio snorts out a laugh before hanging up, and I kick at the ground because it’s that or break something into tiny pieces.

I get the stress he’s got going on. Keeping shit from the De Lucas they might not need to know but would get themselves in deep because lines have been crossed in areas they don’t tolerate is hard.

I’m also here for a girl, one I never told them about, and they guessed it, anyway. I also can’t believe I lost it back there with her doughboy whatever the fuck he is.

Shit, the thing is, she still affects me, maybe more than she did before. Because now she’s a woman with experience and a life and all these facets I never thought about. She’s a woman, not a girl, and that makes her even more fascinating.

My step falters.

If things were different, if the past had played differently and I were another man, would I go for a second chance with Nadia?

If one was there, on offer?

Fucking hell, is that why I came back?

“Real smart there, asshole,” I mutter. “Working this out now.”

But regardless of my job, who I am, and who I seem to be to others, I want forever. I want to come home to a woman, mine, and love her, make her happy.

Nadia betrayed me, and I did that to her. I guess because I had to walk to give her all the chances, and that included keeping her family together, but—

The point is, I might want a forever, the way she does. That sizzle that thickened in the air when we looked at each other last night, when I touched her cheek this morning, that’s real. Regardless if there’s another man, I’d win hands down in the desire competition.

But her forever dreams aren't ones I can give her.

It's everything. My history, how I'm built, our past ... and what I do now. There's so much against me giving her her dreams even if I wanted that.

Anyway, I just got into town, not to win a girl, but to help with two problems. Hers and the one we might have in Dallas.

If there's one, I need to see how far it goes, how deep. That's it. Nothing more.

Even if I've never been able to forget her.

"But, man, she's got a fuckin' dude. He's a complete douche, but not my place to get in the middle." At least I'm trying really hard to make sure it's not.

Since she does, despite the passion still swirling, I might have to forget her when this is done. Not that I don't think I can break them up. Clearly, I can, I'm not falsely modest or unrealistic about these things.

It is what it is, and I know when a woman wants me.

Nadia wants me.

But say I get her, then what? A roll in the fuckin' hay? Her moving to Dallas? I almost laugh at that, just like I do at the thought of me coming back to this poisonous town.

She can't trust me, not really, since she chose to believe Daddy over me. Chose to believe I was capable of all that crap.

Nadia still thinks the sun shines from him. She doesn't need to have said much for me not to notice. I think the word is idolize. So, how do I set it straight and not destroy the memory of a dead man? Take something precious from her?

If she didn't know or want to know the truth then, why would she now?

I look up, and there's the restaurant again, the one I tracked her to.

Christ, like some lovesick asshole, I did a loop of the block.

Nadia and doughboy are still there, talking. I hang back, wondering how to get to my motorcycle without passing them when she shakes her head and pulls away from him. He takes off, and she narrows her eyes, having spotted me.

“Just going to my bike. Loverboy’s all yours.”

She grabs my arm and I shake it off.

“Don’t you walk from me, Diego Fernandez. You did that once, so don’t do it again.”

I round on her. “Bringing up the past isn’t about to help a thing.” With an exaggerated bow, I point at my bike. “If you don’t mind, I’ve got things to do. After all, you summoned me to do your bidding.”

“Wearing a chip on your shoulder way back when would have been understandable, but now?” Her eyes narrow. “You’re a grown-ass man. Act like one.”

“Don’t fucking lecture me. I’m here as a favor.”

A few people move about us, out for dinner or a stroll, or I don’t know fucking what. I ignore them, and of course, Nadia moves closer because she cares what they think.

“Maybe.” She drops her voice. “But you’re also here with an agenda of your own. And why are you running now? Embarrassed you went caveman on an innocent man?”

I stick my face close to hers because I’m dangerously close to feeling that. Embarrassed. And that’s not something that happens often. I almost say he didn’t look that innocent to me, but I don’t. “Didn’t realize you were with Loverboy.”

“Sure.” She nods, crosses her arms and her glare is a thing that could light the night sky. “Loverboy”

But she doesn’t deny it.

“I’m out of here.” I take a step until she slaps me with her voice.

“Your woman?”

I freeze because no one talks to me with that tone. Not anyone. And if they tried, it would be once. But Nadia ... she

has a way of being hard as nails, sharp as a knife, and delicate as spun sugar. Kitten soft.

Fuck me. I need to get laid.

“I thought,” I push between gritted teeth, “he was harassing you.”

“No.”

I raise a brow. “No?”

“No.” Nadia lifts her chin. “It’s been how long? You left town and—”

“I wonder why.” I pitch my voice just right, laced with enough sarcasm she flinches.

She wants to smack me. Her hand jerks, but she keeps it there. I’m not real proud of the moment at all.

Instead, she juts out her chin and swishes her long ponytail over her shoulder. “Because you were a dirtbag that tricked me?”

“Oh, you’d like to think so, wouldn’t you? Paint yourself the innocent in this?”

“Aren’t I? You told me you would be there for me, always, and then you...” She stops. “Showed your true colors.”

“And you showed yours, way too happy to believe everything anyone had to say about me.”

I want to kiss her. I want to show doughboy how to take control. I want to feel the soft heat of her mouth under mine and see if her kisses are just as good as I remember. She wants me to.

The night air’s thick with longing.

Turning on my heel I go in the opposite direction, just enough to put space between us. Enough so I can get my equilibrium back, something Nadia’s always been good at destroying. Ever since she turned sixteen, I realized I wasn’t looking at a scrawny kid but someone who looked like a woman.



This is like old fucking times, when we'd fight, and it would lead to hot sex. Toward the end, it was all we'd do. Argue, that is minus the sex.

I shove a hand over my hair and swear.

“On a grand fuckin’ scale of proud moments, this ...” I wave a hand in the air, “is not there. At all. Fuck.”

“I don’t want to fight.”

Turning back to her, I half smile. “Yeah, you fuckin’ do.”

“Okay.” She practically hisses the word at me. “I do. There’s so much that we should clear.”

“Or leave alone.”

“You’ll go back to Dallas, won’t you and your life, and never think about me again.”

“Nadie, I—”

She sighs. “Don’t. Don’t finish that. You came to do me a favor, maybe work an angle of your own. I don’t know, I’m trying not to care because you’ll do what you can to help Jay. And maybe you’re right. Maybe we should just leave it all alone.”

“Yeah, okay.” Fucked if it is or not. But fighting’s only going to lead to trouble. It might be delicious, but trouble is trouble, and I’m looking down the barrel of a whole lot of it already. I don’t need more.

Nadia takes in a shaking breath. “We’re not together, me and loverboy.”

“I’m calling him douche from now on, and it’s not my business, is it?”

A small party of people walk past, eyeing us with naked curiosity, and I don’t feel like being more fodder for gossip than I am.

“Guess not.”

“Hey, Longstocking?”

A little smile cracks. “Yes?”

“That bar still there? The one on the edge of downtown we used to go to?” The kind of dive where it didn’t matter if the guy from the wrong side of town went there with the pretty rich girl.

Talk about fucking cliché.

She doesn’t answer, but then she nods, and the smile cracks wider, softer. “It’s under new management, but it’s there. Why?”

Going there now, after the fight, with her is stupid. Of course, I don’t have to go with Nadie, but if I’m going, so’s she.

That place, our old haunt, perversely suits my mood. Besides, if there’s any real underground action happening, that’s the kind of place where deals are made and players go to relax.

It might have new management, but I’m willing to bet it’s still the same beneath whatever veneer’s been glossed over it. Places like that always stay true to their souls.

I hold out my hand. “Coming?”

Nadia gazes at my hand like it holds out a gift, but she puts hers in mine. I pull her to the bike, fitting her with my helmet.

It’s oddly intimate, a touch romantic if you believe in that shit, which, with her, I just might, and we get on the bike.

Riding there with her pressed against my back, arms around my waist, melts the years. My bike back then was a beat-up piece of crap, but with Nadie riding behind me, nothing could ever touch us, and that’s what it feels like in that moment.

I try to hold onto the slender edge of anger. Try and fail.

And that’s a fuckin’ problem.

Because apart from my reasons for being here—beyond helping her, one thing’s obvious.

The awareness and the passion are still there.

I still want her, and I don't know what the fuck to do about that.

Not at all.

# *Chapter Six*

NADIA

I never want this ride to end.

It thrills me down to my core, opens doors I thought nailed shut, and makes me feel things I'd forgotten, and the things I haven't—they're in full flight.

This isn't just that I'm pressed up against his hard muscled body, the heat of him sliding down into me, and it isn't how his body is part of the machine. Or the way everything in me thrums down to the core on the back of his bike, wind against me.

The years disappear.

This moment is something that's burned into me. And it still excites me.

I'm in trouble. I know that.

I don't care.

I don't care that he's not staying that it's all sexual energy and unrequited passion that flows around us. Right now, it doesn't matter that nothing's changed or solved from the past. I just care about this.

It's been a long time since I've taken something joyful for myself, a moment from time. Taken something simple and complex like this and flown with it.

There'll be guilt. There's always guilt. Like I'm not really thinking of Jay, that I'm letting him down somehow.

So, I close my eyes and sink into my own head while holding a man I want and know so well. It doesn't matter how true it is, it just feels good.

He slows and pulls into the lot. I get off the bike with shaking legs, smoothing my clothes, and running fingers through my hair. He takes our helmets and locks them away in the saddlebags.

I take a step to the bar, but Diego stops me.

“Longstocking?”

My hand flutters over my hair, but he smiles.

“You look fuckin’ perfect as always.”

I’m far from perfect but I don’t argue with him as he once again holds out his hand. I’m aware this isn’t to make any kind of declaration to me. He’s always held my hand and opened doors for me.

But this is a statement to every man in there to keep their hands to themselves and their eyes above the neckline.

I shouldn’t like it, but I do. There’s something sweet in it. Not the staking a claim he-man style, but it’s how he protects, even if I don’t need it.

We cross the lot, gravel crunching under shoe and boot, and the way he rubs his calloused thumb against my fingers sends shivers of heat cascading through me.

I always like holding his hand, but this feels a little different like the playing field is more even. The gentle touches hold all kinds of promises and desires I can read now.

It might just be sex, but ooh boy, can I read it.

Diego opens the door for me, and we step in. Everyone goes a little quiet as they take us in. The six-foot-five man who’s built out of pure muscle and looks like he knows his way around guns knives, fists, and the darker parts of life, and the schoolteacher.

I can almost believe all the sweetness and touches mean more than a job and sex, and he’s here for me.

But Diego isn’t. He’s just here on his own business and to help me. Nothing more.

If there’s some sex involved, then maybe ...

But what he might want and what he decides to go for are two different things.

Diego leans in. “Tequila?”

“Sure.”

We head to the bar where he patiently talks the bartender through my order and then he turns and hands it to me, lifting a beer to his mouth.

“Beer?”

He shrugs. “Got precious cargo, and it’s a little bit of a drive back to your place. Plus ...” Diego doesn’t look around, but I get the feeling he’s soaking the place in and that he took stock of who was here and where. “Got some magic to work.”

For a moment, my heart leaps, but then it settles. It’s not me. He brought me here for a reason, so I finish my drink, set down the glass along with his beer, and slide my hands up the front of his T-shirt.

“Dance?”

“With you, Nadie? Always.”

When he says things like that, I can’t breathe properly, and my pulse beats hard against my veins.

He slips his arms loose around my waist. I wind mine about his neck, and I lay my head against his chest to listen to the thump of his heart. From here, women cast me looks of envy because I’m dancing with a hot man, one who holds me with the ease and familiarity of a lover.

It doesn’t matter that we’re not, because I take secret joy from their looks and the feeling, old and worn in and comforting, that he’s mine.

Reality crushes it down, because he’s not mine, not anymore, no matter how much we might want each other. Want and getting really are two different things.

Plus, he’s not here to rekindle anything. Besides, how would it work, even if he was? He’s not staying.

Diego isn’t here to fix anything or talk through the past. I’m not even sure I want that. It’s just ... time and common sense have a habit of falling away whenever he’s near.

Shit. I’m mooning over him and not thinking about my nephew. I’m the worst. I suck in air, and he strokes his hand over my hair like he knows where my thoughts went.

“Diego?”

“Yeah, Longstocking?”

I smile, and really, I should hate that nickname. “Why are we here?”

“To talk.” He sighs softly. “Tell me about the new gangs, changes with the old.”

Diego’s voice is a low caress, and his fingers slip over my hair and along my spine like he’s trying to make me purr.

He’s almost succeeding.

“Hate to break it to you, Fernandez, but I’m not exactly known to be on best terms ... or any ... with gangs.”

“Apart from Jay.”

My breath stutters. “Apart from him. I know the new ones are pretty much put in with the old ones in people’s eyes. It’s just there’s been more violence.”

“Linked to this Lander’s Men.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t need to say it. Jay’s mixed in with them. Back in our day, the gang kids would get mixed up with were bad enough, but it wasn’t a lot of grown men. The one on the phone who threatened me sounded like a real man, not a kid in his early twenties. Then again, I’m not sure how much that matters.

Things change, gangs with them.

“Shit.”

“I don’t like that tone.” He eases me back to look down at me. “What is it?”

“Someone texted to meet me near the house—

“When I take you home, I’ll check it out. Inside too.”

“It might have been Jay.”

“You said someone, so not his number. Sorry, Nadie, that kid didn’t have his shit together enough to use another phone.



He'd tell you. Fuck, he's got keys. And he might be practicing his teenage asshole moves, but he cares. He wouldn't put you in danger, so it wasn't him."

I sigh. "It could have been one of the kids I've been trying to help with the after and before school programs the principal shut down."

"You know, those kids will probably know what's happening with the gangs. Some of them."

"I'm not putting anyone in danger."

He doesn't respond, and though he's looking down at me, his gaze slips to the side. "There's a bit of a change in here. Not much, but I can see it. A lot more hardened types. And they're not wearing gang colors or markings."

"How do you know that?"

His gaze shifts back to me. "I've got experience with these things."

"Is that a warning, Diego?"

"Not particularly. I'll tell you things when you need to know them. Just an observation. So, this girl who went missing? Did it stir up any talk about others?"

I frown, drop my head to his chest to breathe in the leather and spiced honey, like it's a secret elixir that gives me strength. Maybe it does. I always felt stronger closer to him, like together we could do anything.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Listen out, okay? But don't go fuckin' asking shit." He pauses. "How long since Lander's Men have been here?"

I look up. "No idea. I'm sorry, to me, a gang's a gang. A pain and troublesome but also not life-threatening to the average Joe. A few months ago, I guess. When Jay started acting up."

He's searching for something with his questions but he's not spilling any tea as my kids say, and he won't unless he chooses to.

That's one thing that's changed, the still center of him, the control. He's a man who is deliberate and closed mouthed until it suits him not to be.

Except when he went for Riff. Except when we argued. That was naked, raw, and thrilling in ways it shouldn't be.

“Diego, will you let me know what's going on?”

“Later.” I can't tell if he means it or it's a way to shut me up or a bit of both. “C'mon, another drink.”

He orders and leads me to a quiet corner where we lean against the wall. He smiles and my heart spins.

For a second, when Diego leans in, I think he's going to talk more about everything, and I'm already a mess inside. But he surprises me.

“Who's the douche?”

I laugh and sip my drink, aware he knows how to tie me in knots, aware he knows how to play me. But this ... I think this is something he can't help but ask.

Out there, when we danced, the touches were orchestrated, designed to lay claim, to throw me off in case I knew something I didn't think I knew.

Right now, I could pay him back. I could toy with him, play with him. But I'm not a player, I suck at those kind of games, too awkward. I've had sex outside Diego and Riff, a handful of guys, but not that many. Enough to know I'm not the kind of woman who can wrap any man around her finger even if I wanted to.

I don't want to.

Maybe ... maybe just this man.

“Ex-fiancé. It didn't work out.”

“Good.”

The harsh bite of his words makes me laugh. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“That you’re way too good for a doughy douche like him. I hope he cried when you dumped his ass.”

A warmth spreads through me. “Maybe he dumped me.”

“I don’t think so. And he wants you back.”

“He just thinks he does because I ended it.”

“I’ll break his face for you.”

“He didn’t cheat, it just didn’t work.”

Because Riff isn’t Diego. It burns, that knowledge, something I never admitted before he walked back into town.

I called Diego and went through hoops to get his number. I could have asked Riff.

“Yeah, well, you’ll choose better next time, Nadie.”

And with that he kills the tiny dreams of us being an us dead. He destroys the hope that what’s between us isn’t just old lust and latent heat remaining from times gone by and it means he’s into me now.

He isn’t.

And that, I tell myself, is a good thing.

I barely survived a broken heart last time.

This time, I don’t know if I’ll survive.

# *Chapter Seven*

DIEGO

RoadSide is now run by O'Grady, the head of the Lowlanders who keep to themselves back in Dallas.

They're territorial, and they're a loose knit group, especially all the smaller players. The ones at the top and at the bottom are two different beasts. I want to find out how connected they are.

I do find it interesting that I learned today O'Grady bought RoadSide. It isn't Lowlander. It's not even advertised or known who owns it.

The number of palms I greased, promises I made and one or two threats handed out got me that information.

That some Irish guy by the name of O'Grady bought it.

And I'm very much interested as to why.

According to a guy I dealt with today, a greedy little bastard who'd sell his first born half price, who's done some odd jobs in Dallas and surrounding areas for the Lowlanders, said fucking O'Grady's in town.

He's not here tonight, and I don't hear any Irish accents behind the bar. In fact, I'm sure most of them worked here ten years ago.

Maybe he's just expanding legit territories. Maybe he's got some other business going, or it's a meeting of both, but again, no such thing as circumstance.

Some guy started up a conversation with Nadia, and while I kind of want to rearrange his features a little, it's not my place, and he's being respectful. He's not hitting on her. They're talking about school, his kid, and the program she started, and I tune out.

It gives me fucking time to think.

O'Grady likes bars. He operates from one when he's in Dallas, but he has them, as far as I know, all over. Like an

investment. So, as I say, no idea if he's expanding or it's something else, but for a man who stays in the shadows and operates out of Ireland, he's sure as fuck in this part of the world being hands-on. More than usually reaches my ears.

One of our jobs as enforcers is to do that. Listen and keep note of unusual rhythms in our world. And that's what I'm doing and this one's taken an unusual tempo on.

The other thing we keep an eye on is criminal types. Those for hire. Not gang members, but the hardened type who can slip in and out of the worlds. That is unless you know what you're looking for.

I do.

Unless this is like some kind of stop-over spot or there's a fucking weird ass convention in town, there are more than is usual for even this town.

The beauty here is no land is carved by organized crime so a De Luca can go anywhere. I intend to use the fuck out of that and find out all I can.

If her nephew, who's a punk but just a kid, is involved with a hardened gang, I need to get him out before it's too late. And if that gang's involved with the missing girls, then the trouble's really deep.

Hell, I can even talk to O'Grady if I happen to run into him. This isn't Dallas. I've got freedom here.

But I do need to be careful. I don't want to stir a hornet's nest unnecessarily and bring heat down on the De Lucas. That kind of heat can flare to a war. It could, especially if what Nicolo found when saving Avah is connected to something way deeper, it just might.

Nadia's still chatting to the guy, and he doesn't strike me as the kind to make a move, wedding ring or no, so I excuse myself to get some more drinks.

At the bar, I listen to the conversations around me. Most are boring as fuck. Hook ups, tits, the brag about last night's hot babe one night stand, the usual shit for places like this. It really hasn't changed.

The two criminal types smoothly switch what they're talking about to real estate of all things. They must think I'm a cop or what I am, potential trouble of the dark side of the law. But even without then giving anything away, which could be about a job they're doing, they've just told me they're professionals. Only professionals guard themselves so well and easily.

I take a sip of my beer, turning to see Nadia. She's chatting to someone else, and I don't like the look of him. I'm about to go when two guys come up to order.

"I'm just saying," says one. "It was better before they came here. Businesses were safe, and at least if kids got caught up in shit it wasn't hard drugs and stuff."

"Dude, you live in the clouds if you don't think kids are on anything and everything."

"The good kids, bro, the good ones."

Ahead, Nadia moves back, and the guy moves forward so I cut my eavesdropping short and go over.

"Problem?" I hand the tequila to her, this one with half the booze, soda water, and lime. What can I say? The girl's a lightweight.

The guy takes one look at me as I hook an arm around her shoulders and shakes his head. "Nope, not at all."

He turns and runs.

And Nadia gives me a stern look. "You're a bad man." Then she grins.

It's a punch, hard, to the guts.

Fuck, I've missed her.

\* \* \*

Outside the bar, she traces the handlebars of my bike with a finger, and I fight the urge to release her hair.

I never understood it, why she mostly wears her hair pulled back. Sure, there are definite pluses to it for a guy. It shows the angles of her face, the high cheekbones, and it's practical but oh yeah, give me it loose so I can thread my fingers through it, so I can—

“Are there any gang bars in town?”

It takes her a little while to answer, and I can't shake the feeling I've somehow disappointed her. “Gang bars? Is that why we came?”

“I want to say yes, so much less complicated that way. But I came because I wanted to check it out for where it is, and because I fuckin' wanted to.” I thread my fingers through the soft, heavy silk of her hair. “Memories are a bitch.”

“I'm kind of insulted by that.”

“You shouldn't be.” I sigh and let go of her hair.

She shifts a little closer to me, her hand resting on the saddle, and tilts her chin up to me. “So, we're leaving because I'm way too alluring to stay in there with?”

I almost laugh at her flirt game, not because it's pathetic, but because the sweetness has no place with a man like me.

It turns me on when I've no right to be. When I'll be leaving. I put a hand on the saddle near hers and the other on a handle grip. Boxing her in.

“You'll get burned, playing with fire. I left because there were too many locals. I'm still not overly fond of them.”

Nadie nods. “But now, you want to take me to gang bars.”

“No. I asked if there were any where gangs were known to use as their local. And I meant I'd be going alone if I check them out.”

“No new bars recently. This is a biggish deal because someone from out of town bought it ...” she trails off. “But you knew that part.”

Fuck, Nadia's always been too smart for her own good.



“I know of him. Operates out of Dallas. Irish. You know him?”

“Nope. And I have no idea where the gangs hang out. Jay’s too young to go ...”

Nadia grows quiet as she studies my face.

“C’mon. You’re not that naive.”

She jerks back, hitting the bike, but I don’t move from where I am, where I’ve trapped her.

“I’m not. I’m sure he’s been drinking, but I don’t know of anything.”

“Then areas where either gangs are known to have places, or areas, pockets of town miraculously crime free.”

She sucks in a breath. “I don’t know. If you go on that, where I am is a hotbed of gang activity.”

“I don’t mean the affluent areas. The town’s grown over the years, but some things stay the same.”

“I’m not rich. The house is all I have. Jay’s home is the hills.”

Jesus, the gated community where the new rich are, complete with guards in gold carts. The American wet dream. Or was. But it suits this place because those people own businesses, work in town, and send their kids here to school.

I see why Nadia’s ass of a brother doesn’t leave his kid there alone and instead with her. I see more clearly than her why he dumps the kid instead of taking him, and it’s not about education or stability. He just doesn’t give a fuck.

“Anything stopping Jay from staying there and having his friends there too?”

“The guards and the entire community. They’d know in a second.”

“Rent-a-cops who don’t have guns are useless.”

“They gossip and big-note themselves. Once, Regina, Seth’s wife, forgot her pass and ID and went in to get it. They

refused. They knew her, and they waved as she left. But my brother had to come home from work and get her back in. Good thing he was in town.” She presses her lips together and slides her fingers down along the outside of my jacket. “So, Jay’s not there.”

“Cold?” I’m about to take off my jacket for her when she flinches, snatching her hand away. I sigh. “C’mon, I’ll get you home.”

\* \* \*

The ride is heaven and hell. Heaven, because Nadia’s close and has her arms wrapped around me, head against me, and it wipes out the years. Hell, because this is, if I’m going to remain any kind of decent man, all there can be.

So, I’m both glad and disappointed when we get to her place.

“I can take it from here.”

I get off the bike after she does. “Fuck that. Someone was wanting you to meet them.”

“That was ages ago. I hardly think they’re still here.”

She’s really not of my world. If someone wanted to get to her badly enough, they’re not giving up. So, I glance about—a curtain in the house to the right twitches.

Straightening, I hand her the helmet. “Wait here.”

Before she can say a word, I stride off to check the perimeter and down the side of the house. I’m not carrying my gun, walking into a bar like RoadSide, even without the change in ownership, with anything more than a knife is like a red flag.

And if I can almost always pick when someone’s packing, sure as hell, it goes the other way.

Besides, I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.

In the narrow area between the fence and the house I find a man's print in the dirt and the butt of an old cigarette.

It could be something, it could just be from her nephew. Nadia said near, which could mean around the corner on the street, but that's a little different. It's residential for a few blocks on either side, so standing out in the open is harder to do in a nice area. Someone's going to call the cops.

I also don't want to take off and leave her.

Returning to her side I motion to her door. "I'll see you in."

"It's not a fucking date, Diego," she mutters.

I smile. "Yeah, but I'm an old-fashioned guy."

"No, you're not."

God save me from this woman. "I want to make sure there's no one nasty lurking inside, okay? Now, get on up there and unlock the fuckin' door." I lean in close. "Your neighbors are already highly entertained."

"Busybodies." She huffs. "Come on, protector man, take a look."

She leads me up the steps and to the front door.

When we step inside, it's clear no one's here. Places always seem to have an energy when just vacated, or maybe I'm attuned to searching out all dangers, no matter how microscopic. I have precious cargo to protect in the form of the De Luca kids and women. I secure places for the guys when we're moving in on something.

That's when they play by the rules. They're as fearless as me, Tizio, and Nicolo.

I sweep her house, anyway, checking the back door, windows, bathrooms, and closets. Anywhere securing the place as I make sure no nasties lurk.

"Am I free of vermin?"

"Yeah." I glance around the living room, like I'm checking it again, but really, I'm just hungry for a taste of her life,

anyway I can get it. “Human-kind free. Don’t know about the other sort.”

“Diego, I ...” She takes a breath, her tits rising and falling, and I try not to watch them. Try and fail. “Thank you.”

Stepping closer to her, I cup her face in my hands and lift it to me. “For what”

“Coming when I called.” Her breath fans over my mouth, a phantom kiss. I lean a little into it because I want nothing more than to brush my lips against hers and taste her with my tongue.

I’m slightly humbled as a meaning to her words I missed before come home.

She didn’t need to call me.

There’s the ex-fiancé, a thing I don’t have a right to be jealous over, but I am someone she’s on good enough terms with he thought he could have another play for her. She could have called her brother. I know she’s a woman who’ll have friends, the lonely, skinny little girl lost to time. But she picked me.

Sure, she might have thought having a big ass guy on her side might help, but dough boy douche is big.

I shut down those thoughts and let her go. If I don’t, I’m gonna kiss her and that’s going to lead to complicated places. “You’re safe enough but call if there’s an issue.”

With that, I get the fuck out of Dodge and on my bike, heading to the first dive bar to check it out.

Call me a fucking coward and I won’t disagree, because I’m not strong enough to resist those big eyes and the want in them. But I also don’t want to do something we’ll regret.

As I walk in the bar, it feels a hell of a lot like running away.

# *Chapter Eight*

NADIA

What was that?

What the living hell was that?

It's rhetorical because I know. How could I not? My blood pressure's heading on an upward trajectory, and my pulse is hammering.

Diego Fernandez almost kissed me.

He wanted to kiss me.

For a mad moment I was beautiful, desirable, the most wanted in the world. Shit. I sit down, my legs almost giving way. I forgot how he could do that to me. How could I forget that?

"Self-preservation," I whisper, bringing my hand to my mouth like he did kiss me, like I was ravished and part of me wishes I had been.

A huge part.

I close my eyes. The way he looked at me, touched me ...

I could lie to myself, tell myself it's just my want playing tricks, but I don't lie to myself, or at least, I try not to. Even with all this tension between us, the throb inside me that aches for him, I know it would be easier, safer if it were all one-sided.

Just to taste him again, feel his hands on my naked flesh would fuel fantasies for years and—

Oh hell. How did I just go from a kiss to sex?

"Because you want it."

No matter how much it could complicate things, upset the world I've carefully built, more than the troubles with Jay. I'm not even sure I can play the ego role that having him kiss me would have stroked it. Because I think—know—I'd be putty in his hands.

I don't think I'd have been able to turn him down. Not even the kiss.

But it really is moot.

Diego didn't kiss me.

He left.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my pocket and smile. I press answer. "Hey, Josie, how are you?"

"Better now I've finally gotten a chance to call. I'm so angry at ducking Peabody I could spit! It's not that late. I can bring over ..." A rustling and banging hijacks the phone. "Rum. I have rum. Aged."

"You found a dusty bottle in your cupboard, didn't you?"

She laughs. "It was a going away present last school I was at. Anyway, we can crack this bad boy and plot Peabody's demise."

"I'd love to but I'm tired."

"Depression," she says wisely. "Fight it with rum. Though, tomorrow night also works if you aren't up to it tonight? Oh, did that guy find you?"

Josie in full-on mode is a force of nature. It makes her popular at school and kids quickly learn beneath all that's a sharp mind that doesn't put up with the wrong sort of nonsense. "What guy?"

"Big and burly. He was asking about you the other day."

Diego. Had to have been Diego when he got to town. Maybe he did his homework on me too. He discovered I'm a teacher and figured a school would be the best place to find me.

"Uh, yeah."

"Good. Didn't give your address, though. Just said he'd be able to find out and about. Just said you were on sabbatical."

"Thanks."

"Hey," Josie's voice softens, "what about the program?"

“I don’t know. I should just drop it, but I don’t think I can. The kids need something and just because Peabody thinks it makes the school look bad is his own problem, not mine.”

“He’s a shizzhead. But what about your job?”

That’s an angle I need to work on. If I lose the teaching job, I don’t have much, and savings go quickly when they’re all you live on. “If he fires me, I’ll go work for Riff, or someone. Riff wanted me to run his office.”

“Maybe it won’t come to that. Use the time to build it up, make Peabody see.”

Josie has an eternal font of positivity. But maybe she’s got a point.

“And I’m going to help.”

“We can’t both be on suspension, Josie,” I say.

“Let him try.” But I hear it in her voice. We both know he will, and it’s something she can’t afford to do, put her job on the line.

Besides, his ham-fisted threat still sits in my head.

“Josie, this isn’t worth your job. And he’ll try.”

She sighs. “Shizz. I know. But we’ll come up with something, I know we will.”

“I’ve got nothing but time. Raincheck on the rum.”

“Gotcha, Nadia. See you.”

\* \* \*

The phone stays silent the rest of the night. I figure tomorrow I’ll reach out to Diego in the daylight where almost kisses and hot looks don’t exist.

At least that’s what I tell myself. I know they do especially when it comes to Diego.

“Stop thinking about him,” I mutter, as I get ready for bed, before changing into PJs and braiding my hair.



I slide into bed and reach to turn out the light, not in the mood for reading, when my phone buzzes.

Heart beating fast, I snatch up my phone. Jay's name's on the screen. "Jay?"

"Nadia, I-I-I'm sorry."

I grip the phone tight. He sounds miserable and scared, like he's trying not to cry. He also sounds for all the world like a little kid.

"Where are you?"

He rattles off an address. It's on the edge of town where warehouses and factories live, and there are the kind of places I've never been to. I suspect, the sort of places that would give an underage kid ink without bothering to check for ID.

It's a five-minute drive, and I'm already up, throwing on sneakers and grabbing my coat.

"What happened?"

There's what sounds like a scuffle. My heart jumps up, forming a lump in my throat, hot and bitter, and my stomach churns.

"Means the little bastard fucked up, bitch."

The phone goes dead.

Fuck. Fuck. I race to the study and throw open the bottom draw. Pulling out the gun I took from him, checking it for a clip and making sure the safety's on, I throw it in my bag and run out the door.

Once in the car, I hook my phone up to the car. "Call Diego."

The phone starts to ring, and I take a corner a little too fast, fighting like hell not to burn rubber to get there.

He doesn't pick up and frustration threatens to swamp me.

Diego doesn't have a message for voicemail. The moment it beeps, I say, "It's me. Jay's in trouble. I'm heading there to get him out." I repeat the address and end the call.

Maybe he's drunk. Or he left. It doesn't matter. The only reason I called is I'm not stupid. If he's around I need him in my corner. If he isn't ...

I'll make do.

I pull up outside a strip club and for a moment I stare at it, realizing I'm some kind of sheltered idiot. I had no idea there was one in town, but it makes sense.

"A little something for everyone." I swallow down the hysteria and grab the gun.

What the hell am I doing? I'm not a movie star. I can't go in there brandishing a gun.

Not without knowing the situation. So, I shove it in my glove box and my bag under my seat. Nabbing the phone, I lock the car, straighten my coat, and try for all the world not to look like someone's crazed mom in her coat and cloud PJs.

The music hits my ears before I even reach the place. Red neon flashes the name of a beer, and green the name of the bar Dive.

Someone thought hard about that.

There's something else too. A symbol in orange neon down the bottom. I don't know the gang tags and who they belong to, but I'm betting this place belongs to one I have seen around town. To me it looks like an angry quarter moon.

The guy on a stool outside smokes a cigarette and blows smoke at me. He's got on ripped jeans that look too big, a black shirt, and around his arm is an orange band.

"Hey, Mami, you here to get lit?"

"Yes."

"Free to go in. Bold choice in outfit, Mami." He grins, flashing a gold tooth.

He's got to be thirty if he's a day. He stamps my hand, I go in, and it's dark, loud, and smoky. This isn't like any bar I've seen. It's like someone turned their basement into one and invited their toughest friends.

Except these aren't kids, and not one looks like the other younger gang members I've seen Jay with. This, to me, is a different league altogether.

And then I see him.

Black eye.

Swollen lip.

Blood on his white T-shirt with a zombie on it that he loves, and my heart breaks, but I can't fall apart. If I do, we're both in trouble.

"Jay?"

"Nadia—"

"Shut it, kid," a man says, punching Jay in the back of his head as he comes up to me. "Your brat started a fight. Not good form, you know. And he owes me fuckin' money, which means you owe me fuckin' money, and that bill gets higher by the minute, you feel me?"

"You are?"

"None of your fuckin' business, bitch. Yo, Tito, get her a drink."

"I don't want—"

"You'll have one." His head swings to me, the close shave on his head and face doing nothing for him. From what I can see, he's covered in tats that climb up his throat and down over his hands. "Play nice, Mami."

"Jay, go wait outside, please, I'll deal with this."

"Naw, don't think so. We're getting to know each other, aren't we?"

This time he lands a punch to Jay's stomach.

"You see, bitch, he comes here on another gang's turf. That's a death sentence."

He's sixteen," I snap as a woman dressed in the shortest cut-offs and tightest shirt I've ever seen sashays over in heels, handing me a drink.

Because this man's watching, I take the world's smallest swallow.

“Good bitch. Now I don't care he's sixteen. He's old enough to fight, to steal—”

“I didn't!”

“Talk over me, he's old enough to fuckin' die.” He grins again.

“No one's killing anyone. There's an easy way out of this. I can pay you and we walk out, pretending this didn't happen.”

It's pure attitude and fake confidence. I'm not sure he's buying it, but he doesn't say anything, so I glance at Jay.

“Get your things,” I say. “We're going.”

“Now why would I do that? Let you go?”

“There's no reason to keep us here. How much and I'll pay.”

“One hundred grand.”

The blood drains, and my head spins a little. I don't have that kind of money.

“So, we'll go and get it.”

“You haven't got it.” The man spits. “It's all over your face. Besides, why would I let a fuckin' tasty thing like you go?”

“The goodness of your heart?”

He looks at the others, and they all laugh. While I try and keep it together.

The man approaches, hooks a finger in my PJ top, and pulls it open, taking a good look. “Nice set of tits on you. Drink your drink. You're gonna be our entertainment, and your nephew's gonna learn a few fuckin' things. So, drink, it'll be more pleasant that way.”

Everything in me is shock-cold and numb.

He's put something in my drink. And they're ... they're ...

I glance at Jay and then I throw the drink in the man's face.

“Run!” I grab Jay and make a run for it.

The music stops. Someone grabs me, and I fall. I'm pulled up by my hair and a gun is shoved in my face.

# *Chapter Nine*

DIEGO

“I wouldn’t,” I say to the skinny, balding guy who’s holding the gun. “Not if you want to fuckin’ live.”

My voice is cool, almost bored, and my weapon in easy reach, but I need to get a lay of the land here first. The ass at the door wasn’t going to let me in, but a conversation with his teeth and my fist changed his mind.

At least, I think it changed his mind. He wasn’t exactly speaking when I came in or conscious.

There are one too many people in here, and two of those are the ones I need to get the fuck out of here.

Jay’s being held in place by a woman whose clothes are about five sizes too small, and the one I’ve pegged as the ringleader, standing behind Nadia, is I think, the one who’ll be the most trouble. I can take him but there are five other guys who are ready to step in and defend.

Then, of course, there’s baldy with the gun in Nadia’s face.

He’s going to die for that fucking move.

She’s shaking and trying not to, and I’m betting her biggest fear is for her little shithead of a nephew.

Who is just a fucking kid. Too skinny, closer to a boy than a man still. But fuck me, he sure knows how to cause trouble.

Gun guy isn’t too versed in guns. It’s in how he’s standing, holding it, the whiteness setting in around his fingers from the too-tight grip.

Of course, that means fuck all if he pulls the trigger, but ...

I swing my gaze to the ringleader, who’s spitting mad and dripping wet.

He’s not going to order her death.

She’s pretty.

Men like him can always use pretty girls.

And I do mean use.

Yeah, I'm going to enjoy ending the fucker.

So, I play a card I shouldn't.

“This is how it's gonna go down. She's walking the kid out of here, and I'm gonna follow and forget you exist. This way, I don't tell De Luca about you.”

Only one other person makes a sound as the ringleader jerks. Two real criminals in here. And ones who, I'm betting, have drifted about enough to have crossed paths with the De Luca family.

No doubt they saw an opportunity here, or they are hiding in plain sight while they do other things. Either, or maybe both. It doesn't fucking matter.

I know who to concentrate on.

“How you know De Luca, big guy?”

“Work for Leo.”

The guy motions, and the skinny man with the gun drops it. But he doesn't say they can go.

Nadia's gaze goes to her nephew, running over him, checking he's in one piece, and then she looks at me. Those big greens kill.

“Take him out to your car.” I switch my gaze back to the main guy as I say this.

The guy shakes his head. “I don't think so.”

“Yeah, actually, I know so, but tell you what—you get me instead. A De Luca enforcer.”

All cards in the fucking ring.

“She's gonna fetch me a good price after we have some fun. Maybe knock a few bucks off the kiddo's debt.” The guy grins, pulls a knife, and clean his nails.

I'm not ready to play a game of show and tell or whose is fucking bigger. Not yet.



“Let my aunt go!” Jay says, his voice wobbling all over the place. “And I didn’t start a fight. Or steal. I was sent here on a mission to get a package, and ...and ...”

I turn and stare down the kid. Last thing I need is him crying. Let him see who the scariest motherfucker in the place is. Shit, Nadie’s holding it together better than him.

But he is just a fucking kid. I need to remember that.

“See? Misunderstanding,” I say. “And he’s under De Luca protection. She’s taking him to the car, and we talk.”

This isn’t the kid’s gang. But it is a bunch of grown ass men playing games no kid should be part of.

“And if I don’t?” the guy asks.

I grin. “If you don’t, you’re gonna have trouble. Big trouble.”

This is where it’s tricky. I can’t mention De Luca again, I don’t know his connections or what I might be stirring. But I want her out of here, because one of these adults beat up a kid. One pulled a gun on Nadie and shoved it in her face. And this one? He threatened to rape and sell her.

Not a bit of that flies.

If push comes to shove, Nico, Tizio, and the De Lucas will back me.

Let’s hope I’m not about to land everyone in the fucking fire.

“Okay, let’s talk,” the guy says.

Nadia’s eyes go wide as her nephew’s shoved at her. “Diego—”

“Go, Nadia. Now.”

For a second, I don’t think she’s going to obey, but then she turns and leaves.

I’m impressed with her, how she held her cool. Less impressed with her not wanting to leave like she could protect me. Okay, that’s sweet, but I can’t be worrying about her.

“She calls the cops, I’m fucking shooting you.”

“Well,” I say, calculating how many bullets and shots I’d need to bring them down. “Do that and you’re bringing even more fuckin’ pain down on yourself.”

My issue isn’t the hardened professionals, like him—even if he’s putting up a good show. It’s the ones like the guy with the gun.

I don’t like wild cards.

The guy looks past me, making my heart sink. I don’t need to turn to know fuckface here changed his mind about letting her go.

“I like her titties, ya know, so I might keep her.” The guy offers me a shit eating grin.

My hands curl into fists. “I don’t think that’s going to happen. I make guys like you wish they were dead before disappearing them forever. You tried to extort money from a kid. Not sure what crew you run with that. That shit doesn’t fly, especially when there are no turf wars going on in Enders Ridge. You broke rules and this place? It doesn’t look like you run a big outfit. Who are you with, Landers Men?”

The guy just looks at me. Not a reaction or an attempt to hide one. I’m aware they’re shifting behind me, the girls with Nadia and Jay, the other two moving in. But no one seems to have a gun other than the asswipe who pulled one on Nadie.

Doesn’t mean they don’t have one.

Mine’s in the back of my jeans, small of my back. Wasn’t expecting to be carrying with any intent to use tonight, just had it in case.

I’ve got my jacket on, but still ... not the ideal spot.

Behind me, the kid moans, and I know who he’s shifted too. That damn group, the ones that are nothing but a pain in my ass—Enders. Because he’s starting to put together, I’m definitely a bad guy, way worse than any he messes with, at least in his head.

If they're sending him on jobs like whatever this is, then he's in deep, and fast.

I don't even know what's going on yet, except something isn't right.

These guys don't fit at all.

"Just an average Joe trying to make a living," the guy says.

"Tell your men," I say, "they take one more step closer and they're going to be dealing with broken limbs at the very least. So, let's play fair, everyone in front of me, and we talk it out."

With Nadie and Jay in here, I can't use my gun. Can't fucking risk one of them doing something stupid like taking a shot and hitting the wrong person.

So, I slowly reach behind me, holding my other hand up. "I'm gonna level the playing field. Taking my gun out and putting it on the table, okay?"

The gun guy swings wild to me. "For fuck's sake. Quit that or you're liable to shoot yourself in the eye."

I empty the clip and pocket it, then set the gun down.

Big as I am, mean and dirty fighter as I am, this puts me at a disadvantage. But I already know the ones to go for to win. And yeah, I'm more than aware I'm putting my wellbeing on the line.

I just fucking hope Nadie will take the first opportunity and get the fuck out. She's not stupid, so ...

"That didn't answer my question." I let my body relax, readying for anything.

He slicks back his wet hair, and as he steps up, I can smell whiskey. "Not with them. Bigger fish."

"Got a face full of booze did you, or do you have a fuckin' drinking problem?" I nod at him.

"Mamacita here didn't like her drink. Did you, bitch?" He grins.

Nadia growls behind me. "Go to hell."

“That one, she needs a lesson or three.” He grabs his junk. “I’d be happy to do it.”

It takes everything I have not to take him down yet.

I take in the tattoo on his arm as he does this. It’s familiar, and as I play over everyone in here, they all have gang-style ink, but they’re not all the same.

Oh, lots have the same as the tag they actually spent money on and getting it done in neon, but there are other symbols on a few of them. Which is unusual. This is a bar, but it’s what I wanted to find. Gang run, gang owned and, by the looks of it, also their club house.

“Who are you working for?” I ask.

The guy sneers. “Myself.”

“Bullshit.” I move a hand in the air. “This isn’t your club. You’re working for someone. Who?”

I’m not expecting him to tell me, but I need to think, and keep things as safe as I can for Nadia and her nephew.

Just one little thing, a slip, something to tie whatever is going on here back to home. O’Grady, girls missing, bigger and darker gang influences ... it’s not good, and it doesn’t add up to much.

Yet.

A lot of strings, and I don’t know where they’re going. I pull the wrong one and all kind of bad shit might happen.

“See, you mentioned using Nadia here, passing her on. Sounds a lot like trafficking to me. And using kids for drugs. It’s not just the De Lucas who look unkindly on that shit. So, if you’re working for yourself, then you’re a fucking moron.”

“And you’re a De Luca out of his pond.”

I grin. “I’m an enforcer. Top enforcer. Considered family. You know exactly what that means. Anything happens to me or mine like these two and you’ll bring half the outfits down on you.”

“Not—”

“Jurisdiction? Enforcer. More leeway. So, want to talk?” I cock my head. He’s going to try and take me down soon. He’s getting twitchy, the guys around him twitchier. It’s like a meth convention without the meth.

“Not really. I’d rather see you bleed. I’m looking at prospects, me. Climbing the social ladder. Working with the real players. Not here, across the border, you know.” He offers another smile.

Yeah, like Cabeza. And one of the twitchers has Cabeza style ink. I say style, because it’s not legit. Most don’t have one, and when they do it’s small and discreet.

Twitcher Cabeza takes a swing and I shift, grabbing his arm and twisting it high behind his back, breaking one of his fingers as I do. He squeals.

Now I smile. “Not smart. Want to know what I think? I think our little punk here walked into something he shouldn’t have, and you beat him and tried to extort money.” I look at the leader. “C’mon, he’s fuckin’ sixteen. He hasn’t got that kind of money.”

He narrows his eyes and points his knife at me. “I’m gonna have fun beating the shit out of you.”

“From over there?” I twist the guys arm a little more. I could dislocate his shoulder, but I don’t. Not yet. I’m at a disadvantage with him, but he’s also perfect for throwing at a few of them, so I keep hold.

“Fuck you,” he says, puffing up.

But he makes no move toward me. Neither does his buddy, the other one I picked as a professional. Two of the gang members take a step, but they’re uncertain, which normally would be bad news for them.

Here’s what I’m thinking. With such a mixed group, these are wannabes, the guys who didn’t make it or are with small crews with no power, like, I suspect, the ones that own this place. They fucking stamp people. The guy at the door had a stamp and inkpad. No self-respecting gang does that shit.

Doesn't make them less dangerous, just helps me sort them into groups. I'm seeing a dirty little group playing at been tough with gold tooth here as an outsider ringleader, looking to use what he can. Just like I first thought. In plain sight or looking to move up.

Fucking wannabes. Try hards. The type Lowlanders might use if they fit the bill for dirty work that's untraceable. Like maybe trafficking?

It's people like this that play where other gangs and outfits don't.

Now I've got a place for them, I see it. Smell it. I've known people like this guy and his little group. Used them for information when I've needed to.

They don't have loyalties or follow rules because if they did, they wouldn't be threatening me after I set my gun down.

So, I hit them where it hurts.

Pride.

"Y'know, I think we got off on the wrong foot here," I say. "You wanted my girl and kid and that doesn't fly with me. You get it. She's not for sale. But maybe I'll loan her to you down the track, before we leave town."

The other professional comes over and covers his mouth to whisper something to the ringleader. There's a tattoo on his hand. I know it.

Fuck.

86s.

This is a real gang, one that's got power, one that would throw in and use people like this, one who'd use a group like Landers as a steppingstone to get newbies like Jay.

They've been here and in other towns and small cities in this part for decades.

"Time to go, sweetheart," I say.

The girls come over, forgetting their job, to get a better seat. And I use the guy I've got hold of and throw him at the

two criminals.

The door slams and all hell breaks loose. I duck and spin, using my legs to bring down the guy with the gun. I grab that and crack him over the head, knocking him out.

With the gun as a weapon, I slam it into the next one, who comes fists swinging from my left.

Gold tooth pulls his own gun and I point the one I grabbed at him. It's a standoff. "You let my prize go."

"She let herself go." I keep the gun steady. There are a couple more, but they don't rush me. Pulling back with the girls like they're ready to bail. The other criminal puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles.

Fuck. Men come rushing in from the back, and three come at me, a fourth hitting me hard on the head. I take a punch to the guts before I can slam two heads together.

Using all my force, I slam one into the wall with a vicious uppercut. Then I leap at gold tooth, knocking his gun from him, and I lay into him before a chair comes down on me.

I almost black out and slump to the ground, losing precious seconds.

Four of them grab me as the ringleader spits blood and fumbles for his gun. "I'm gonna kill you."

These fucks left town mostly around when I left. For better pastures. But now the 86s are back, it seems.

"Like to see you get away with that. I know who you fuckin' run with. I know who half of you are. Fuckin' 86sers. No-good assholes who roll in the dirt and mud and rough up girls to feel manly. You also sell drugsto kids. Because that kid I'm with? He's a fuckin' minor."

The guy laughs, and it tells me all I need to know.

The others might be 86s, but he's got ties to Cabeza. I get ready to throw the fuckers off me and teach them a lesson when a gun cocks behind me, and everyone turns.

Including me.

Nadia.



# *Chapter Ten*

NADIA

I hold the gun as steady as I can, which is pretty damn steady if you ask me. All the lessons come back, how to hold it and how to stand. Where to fucking point.

So, what if I look like some crazed woman in cloud pajamas? I've got a scared kid hiding in the back seat of my car and a damn man who thought I'd just up and leave.

I'm so mad I could shoot him.

He's an idiot.

A beautiful, hot idiot that I'm going to save.

Everyone, including Diego, looks at me like I'm an alien. I cock the gun.

"You're letting my man go now, or I'll shoot ..." I swing the gun to the one with the gold tooth. "This one first."

He holds out his hands. "Mamacita ..."

"Fuck you." I look around to make sure no one's moving, and when I see Diego's no longer looking at me but at everyone else, I focus in on gold tooth. "You threatened to rape me and do God only knows what. You tried to drug my drink. Not cool as the kids say."

"Elroy," he says. "When—"

"Elroy, this mamacita knows how to use a fucking gun and doesn't take kindly to the threat of rape. So, make one move, and I'll shoot him in the balls." I lower the gun. "We're getting out of here. Diego ..."

He might be strong and know how to fight but there are about eight in here, and gold tooth has a knife. One has a wrench, and another's holding a broken part of a chair. And Elroy ... oh, I want to shoot him, because he's got a piece of pipe in his hand.

Not even a badass like Diego can take on all these guys with weapons. It seems the first round didn't go so well

because most of them are bleeding or have black eyes or swollen lips, so they were ... what? Going to beat the shit out of him with weapons? This is the life my nephew chose.

I carefully push the hysteria down and find whatever it is that passes as Zen.

“Diego? Get up now.”

“Fuck.” He gets up, faster and more smoothly than I would have thought, and he takes his gun and puts the clip in place. He points his gun at the one other guy.

“We’re going and if you have anything to do with my nephew he’s out of the gang.”

“Mamacita,” gold tooth says, “He’s not with us. Came here with a delivery. Yo, tell your bitch that ain’t how gangs work.”

“You’re braver than I thought,” Diego says, taking my arm and pulling me back as he heads to the exit, not turning his back on them. “Calling a pissed off lady names.”

“I’ll fuckin’ destroy you and the bitch,” the guy says. “De Luca or not, you don’t know who you’re messing with.”

Diego opens the door. “Why don’t you fuckin’ enlighten me.” He shoves me through it.

“Trouble, that’s who. And I know where they live, and what crew the kid messes with. Trouble’s coming. For you.”

The door slams. “Get in your car and go straight home. I’ll meet you there.”

\* \* \*

Diego’s there on the pavement already as we pull in. The whole drive, Jay sat hunched in, silent.

“You’re a goddamned fuckin’ fool,” he mutters before motioning us to the door.

Once there, he takes my keys and unlocks it before doing a sweep.

“I can take care of myself, Diego.”

“Who’s Diego? And—” Jay shuts up as I whirl to glare at him.

“Kitchen. Now. Milk, herbal tea, or water.”

He shoots Diego a long look and then back at me. “Cookie?”

Jesus, how they bounce back. I’m about to say no but I can see the guilt and fear in him and maybe his bounce is more for show than real. “Sure.”

When he’s gone, Diego takes my arm, that warm hand spreading heat I desperately need through me.

“What the fuck, Nadia? That was stupid.”

“At least I’m not going around town asking about you.”

He frowns, and I want to touch the scrape on his cheekbone. “Asking ... what do you mean?”

I shrug and pull free so I can think. He short circuits good sense when he touches me, and I think I need all I can get, because I’m starting to shake. I sink on the arm of the sofa. “At the school? You were there. My friend, Josie, said—”

“Wasn’t me, Longstocking. I didn’t need to go searching. I knew where you were.”

“She said a big guy. Had to be you.” I frown.

He looks less than pleased. “Not me. You need to be fuckin’ careful, Nadia. And after tonight ...”

I stand up. “I’m not going to be intimidated in my own hometown.”

“Nadia, those were—”

“I don’t care. I’m going and getting a tequila, and then I’m taking care of your face. And we’ll talk.”

He sighs, irritation lighting up his features. “I’ll have a strong one and send Jay in. I think we need to talk.”

I nod and go to the kitchen. Jay’s sitting at the table, slumped with his head in his hands. “Jay?”

He rolls his eyes up to me. “Are you gonna send me to juvie?”

“I don’t even know how to do that.” I sigh and cross my arms. “My friend wants to talk to you.”

“What?” His eyes bug. “He’s huge, and he wasn’t even scared of those guys. And I didn’t do anything.”

“Maybe not tonight, but you want to end up like them? Living like that? Doesn’t look like a good life to me.”

“No. But ...” Then he straightens his shoulders and puts his tough guy face on. “You’re not the boss of me.”

“Go. Now.”

He gets up, the chair scraping the floor, and I lean over the counter, crossing my arms, laying my head there as I breathe long, slow, and deep. The tears prickle behind my eyelids, and my throat burns.

Instead of crying, I open the tequila, pour some in a glass and toss it back, trying not to shudder at the burn that hits the back of my throat making me want to cough.

It’s better than whatever that guy tried to slip me. Thank goodness the sip I took was so tiny it did nothing.

What if Diego hadn’t been there, or I’d downed it? What if

---

I make myself stop. I don’t have space for a game of what if. It leads nowhere good. Instead, I set about making the drinks. I’m about to head to the living room when Jay appears.

“I’m really sorry, Nadia. I know I hurt you.” That was definitely Diego making him do it, but he did it, and I’ll take the win. Then his eyes fall on the drinks. “Can I—”

“You’re sixteen, no you can’t.” I take a breath. “You’re staying here, tonight, right?”

He has the grace to turn brick red. “Can I move back in?”

“Yes. But my rules, okay?” He nods. “Go to bed.”

He takes off. I know it feels like everything magically sorted itself out, but I know it's just the aftermath of the evening, and there's a bumpy road ahead.

"Hey." I hand Diego his drink and take a sip of mine. "I need to find the first aid kit."

"Not a new thing for me." He cheers the air with his drink. "I think Jay will be okay. Explained a few fuckin' home truths to him about that life and he started looking a little green."

I cross my legs on the sofa next to him. So many questions push at me, but I'm not sure where to start, like who are the De Lucas? What's an enforcer actually mean? He can fight and he's seasoned. He's got a gun. Worse, he was confident enough to lay it down.

What world is he in now?

I don't think it's above board but it's not that gang shit, either. And he's come to help me. I'm not going to judge.

"Diego, I—"

"Remember when you used to follow me around? Your parents were going through that awful divorce, and kids were mean, and you seemed to think the sun shined from me?"

"You protected me. You looked at me like a friend, like someone you liked, and it ..."

Made me fall in love with him when I had no idea what that really was. "It made me safe and happy."

"Because kids what? Thought I was cool?"

I let the note of bitterness in his voice slide. "I thought you were the coolest thing. Had nothing to do with other kids. You scared Cameron Ross into being nice to me and he was always mean. You listened to me and laughed at my dumb ass jokes. I thought you were the coolest."

He groans, and whatever bullshit he was going to say goes by the wayside.

Diego thinks other kids thought he was cool because he could fight. He got into trouble with the law, and his dad let him do what he wanted.

They thought Diego was into drugs and banged all the hot girls.

He was sixteen then, so he probably did. I never asked years later when we started seeing each other because I was the girl he wanted, not for one night but, it seemed, forever.

What they never knew was Diego never touched drugs, didn't drink much then either. He learned to fight because he said, it was the only way to get people to leave him alone when he was fourteen, before he started to grow and fill out. He learned to scrap.

Diego grew up poor. His mom took off when he was ten. His father, the town drunk, Xavier never cared what Diego did.

He got into trouble because sometimes he wanted to eat and there wasn't anything, and sometimes because he was just angry at everything.

But not me, never me. And that meant something too.

"I was a little kid, but I always thought we saw the other person entirely."

He rolls his eyes. "No, you didn't." But the color on his cheeks that flares beneath his beard and scrapes gives him away. "You liked to annoy the shit out of me, and I felt bad, so I protected you. Then you grew up into a pretty thing."

"Ass." I kick him with my foot, and he sets down his glass and grabs my foot, rubbing it gently. "You liked me."

"You were all right. For a skinny kid." But he smiles and my heart skips and dances. I could live on one of his smiles. "Nadie, I'm very different from that sixteen-year-old kid. Different from the twenty-year-old who felt like a sick perv developing a crush on you when you were sixteen or seventeen. You just grew up overnight."

I stare at him. I'd tried to kiss him once around then, and he'd turned me down. I ... "Diego."

"Not proud of it. I tried to forget you. Dated around but it was you and when you were eighteen and kissed me, I lost my

fucking head.”

The first boy I had sex with, the boy I fell in love with all over again, if you could call it again, when you were already so lost ...

“I was twenty-two, and you were this sweet, spiky eighteen-year-old, and I’m not ashamed to say I fell in love with you, Nadie. I got to call you mine for a whole year.”

“And then—”

“What’s done is done,” he says.

“It’s not done. Is it?” I gaze at him, taking a swallow of my drink. “After everything with Dad, and—”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“And what about what I want?”

“Nadia. My point is I’m not him. I grew up. Got into trouble and got the shit beaten out of me ...” He smiles when he says this. “And found my new family. But it’s not ... not your life. It shouldn’t be. It’s violent and dangerous, and I do things.”

I should be furiously angry at him. Not for the fact he won’t discuss why he crushed me and betrayed my father. Why he left. There’s anger in his voice when he deflects from that. I don’t even care about what he’s saying about his life now.

I know him.

Who he is.

The man he is.

That doesn’t change.

Not with Diego.

I loved him then, even after he hurt me, and I think I might still love him now. Not that it means anything. Loving Diego doesn’t mean I’ve got a chance, because this man who’s in control of himself, so sure, has more armor than the angry boy I fell for.



“You’re a decent man, Diego.”

He gives me a look that’s pure irritation. “I work for the fuckin’ mafia.”

“Really?” I pull my foot free and set my glass down. I go to the bathroom and come back with the first aid kit. “As an enforcer. Which is ... what?”

“I protect, I break heads, bones, sometimes kill. I make sure no one touches Blake, Mia, or Scarlett. Or Blake’s kids. They’re De Luca women. Avah too. And by women, I mean they’re with members of the family.”

“You love them.”

“Yeah. Guess I do. But I’m not decent.”

I just nod, letting the information sit as I open the box and start to clean him up.

He swats at my hand, wincing.

“Big baby.”

“I don’t need that shit, Nadie.”

“You do, and sit still.” He sighs heavily. “Want to know what I think?”

“Do I get a fuckin’ choice?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

“Maybe,” I say, aware of just how close I am to him, “you do things people call bad or illegal, but I know you and you always do the right thing.”

“Always?”

“Mostly. You’re not a saint.”

“Uh huh,” he says softly, letting me turn his face to get to one of the cuts. When he turns back, we’re closer still, and my heartbeat speeds up.

“Yes,” I whisper, “and I know if you work for the mafia, then your De Lucas are better than those people tonight.”

“You’re saying they’re like pious fuckin’ nuns?”

“Yes.”

“It’s an image.”

Our gazes catch, and my blood pressure soars. My body throbs. No one moves.

I take a breath.

I might never get the chance to do this again. So, I close the gap and kiss him.

For a second, he doesn’t move, then he groans and takes hold of my face and kisses me deeply. He tastes dark, like the good sin, and coming home. I remember our kisses, but this ... this is better. I kiss him back, falling into the heat and wild passion that swirls up.

And then Diego does the unforgivable.

He ends the kiss and pushes me away.

# *Chapter Eleven*

DIEGO

I tell myself I ran the fuck out the door like she'd unleashed very hungry hell hounds on me because I need to move things along fast.

On the ride back to the hotel shame eats at me, which isn't exactly pleasant. I should be there, watching her.

Once at the hotel, I strip off the jacket and call Tizio who answers pretty much immediately. "When and where?"

I half smile. "So, I don't need to check how things are going?"

"We had a skirmish. But we handled it, nothing big. You weren't missed. So, I say again, where and fucking when."

Leaning against the wall of the hotel room, I close my eyes. "Enders Ridge, and as soon as possible."

"We'll leave now, got an address?"

I give him Nadia's.

"There's a kid, Jay, sixteen. And a woman, Nadia. If you can just watch the place for trouble, I'd appreciate it?"

Suddenly Nicolo speaks. Bastards have it on speaker. "You can't because why? Too scared? She's not what you remembered?"

"None of your fuckin' business. I have things to do. Just ... come and watch. I think you might need to take the kid. Gang trouble."

"Just that?" Tizio asks.

"I don't know. I'm beginning to think not." I outline everything.

"Fuck," Tizio says. "We'll be there soon."

When we disconnect, I run my hand over my face, not caring about the scrapes and bruises. Fuck, I should've called them back this morning to get them here, but it's not exactly

like the De Lucas can do without their three top enforcers for days on end. Not that I'd have them here that long.

It's the principle of it all.

The job isn't punch out at five. It's a twenty-four-hour thing, and we're always ready for action at a moment's notice.

They said soon, the assholes. It's going to take about eight hours. They need to get ready, and I mean weapons in case they're needed ... we don't go on road trips without them. And they're going to need to clear it with one of the De Lucas.

That doesn't even include the five-hour drive.

I'm gonna need to get my ass back to Nadia's.

She's not safe on her own, and ... sweet and hot and inviting as that kiss was, I can keep it in my fucking pants.

Right?

I have some bourbon, and while it's not really my drink of choice, none of them are. I drink, even been known to get drunk, but after how my father drove Mom out and systematically ruined his life and mine with liquor, it's not really on the top of my grocery list.

Sure, I bought tequila for Nadia, and if I had a favorite, it'd be that, but ...

Right now, I want to lose myself in the bottom of the bottle in my bag.

I won't, I almost never do.

Pocketing my phone, I grab my jacket when someone knocks on the door.

I grab my gun and open it.

"Nadia? Why are you here and how the hell did you find me?"

Her hair's still in the braid. It's now messy, and she changed into pajamas with lambs on them. This time she's donned a heavy pair of boots that make her look for all the world like the world's most adorable punk.

She's gorgeous.

But those green eyes aren't soft. They're hard, glittering, and fighting mad.

"You've been a lot of things to me over the years, Diego," she says, poking me in the chest. "But I never thought you'd be a coward. And of course, I found you. Enders Hotel? Room twelve? You used to always come here, and this is the room tucked furthest away."

"And you left Jay?"

She pushes up against me, and pulls the door shut then springs away like I'm diseased. That or she's really fucking mad. My money's on the latter.

"No, I didn't leave him. Not alone." Nadia crosses her arms, still steaming mad. "Your big friends turned up, Nicolo and Tizio. Says they've been on the road for a while. Hadn't heard from you? I said hopefully you were in a ditch somewhere ... not dead but painfully maimed. And they're watching the house and Jay."

Of course, they were in town when I called.

"So, they're there, and I'm here because you kissed me and ran off. You're a coward, Diego. An honest to God coward."

I rub the back of my neck. "There's that."

Thing is she's right, in all of it. Resisting her is a futile, uphill battle of the kind I can't win.

"This can never work, Longstocking."

"I know."

"We're too different."

She presses her lips together then blows out a breath. "No. You're too much of a stubborn coward."

I stare at her, all that fire and spark and life. The way her cheeks are pink, and her long, dark hair is askew, and she didn't notice or care. The change in her pajamas the only sign those fucks got to her.

She's a hell of a woman, and she's laying into me like I'm a kid.

There are grown men who wouldn't dare.

I want her.

It's as simple and devastating as that.

I want her.

Does it even matter this might not work, that the lies and betrayals of the past are still there, unchecked? Because I think if there's even a slight chance, I'll go for it. Fuck. I'll go for it even if there isn't. Even if it's just another taste, a few stolen hours with her.

“And I don't think I can deal with a coward right now.”

“Nadia.”

“For years I wanted you to come back. It didn't matter that all this pain existed, it didn't matter you took off and abandoned me after ripping my life apart. I wanted you. Now here you are, and you're a coward.”

She spins to leave, and I grab her arm, pulling her back around.

“You never could pause long enough to listen to the subtext, could you?” I ask.

“What subtext?”

“This.”

I thread my hand in her braid and haul her up against me, kissing her hard, deep, and thorough. Everything bursts into raging life, and I back her into the door of the room, hands everywhere. One of my thighs between hers, pushing up against the heat of her pussy, and I move my leg, hard and rough enough and at the right repetitive pace to make her grind down on me. To make her moan into my mouth as she rocks, rubbing that sweet cunt on me.

I'm fucking hard, and one of her hands slides up under my shirt as she kisses me with the ferocity of a wild animal.

I'm there for it. I'm a whirlwind of need, heat, and passion. I need to taste every inch of her, kiss, bite, and suck on her pulse points. I want to worship her tits and eat the fuck out of her pussy.

I break the kiss and drop my mouth on her throat, suckling and kissing at her artery. Sliding a hand under her ass, I pick her up, and she wraps around me. Her little startled moan of appreciation is pure award-winning music as she feels the length and girth of my hard on.

“If you stop, I'll kill you.”

I laugh, biting down on her neck as I carry her to the bed and tossing her down on it. I pull off her shoes then mine. “It's why I find you hot. Your innate fuckin' pacifism.”

“I find you hot when you talk less and strip more.”

Parting her legs, I crawl up between them, ripping off my shirt and tossing it. Then I come down over her, the tremors slipping through her pure eroticism. Pure heat.

Slowly, I kiss my way down her throat, slipping the buttons open on her pajama top. “You should wear silk and lace.”

“Then I'd never get anything done.” Nadia's mouth finds mine as she undoes my jeans, dipping her hand in them to close about my swollen cock.

Holy fuck. I hiss out air as her palm is soft against me. Her thumb teasing the head, and I fucking swear this woman who could always work evil magic on me has grown even more dangerous because now she has confidence. Skills.

Our mouths keep coming together in sipping, teasing kisses, in hot, deep, ungodly kisses that hold an erotic worship at their centers.

I need to taste her everywhere. Stripping her naked, I shuck my jeans and boxer briefs. Her gaze is locked on my cock before moving up over my body, taking in the scars and the ink. She licks her lips like I'm the finest fucking meal she's ever seen.



“Right back at you, Longstocking,” I mutter under my breath.

She’s absolutely gorgeous. Too skinny but nothing a good meal or three won’t fix. The jut of her hipbones is too harsh, but they draw my gaze to her pretty pussy, swollen and ready for me. Her clit showing, moisture clinging to her thighs. I run my finger along them, just shy of the prize, spreading her wetness a little farther down her upper inner thighs.

I push her legs apart so I can kneel between them, taking in the perfect handfuls of her tits with their dark nipples.

“Fuckin’ hell, Nadie. You’re better than I remember.”

“You’re not bad yourself,” she says. Once, she’d have blushed like crazy. Everything still crazy new for her, and she’d have tried to hide from my gaze.

Now, she lets me look, and her nipples bead tight like it turns her on.

She’s not eighteen anymore with that untouched body. That was hot, no getting past that. Young, virginal, and unsure.

This is hotter.

Nadia’s shy of thirty, a woman who’s comfortable in herself, a woman who’s lived. Don’t get me wrong, I want to fucking end every man who’s touched her, but fuck is she the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

Hotter than that girl.

I come down and kiss her. My mouth slipping over hers reverently, light and feathery, just the tease of tongue. I continue down, her little moans of protest music to my ears, and I suckle on one nipple and then the other.

Down and down, I move, until I can smell her, the arousal. That Nadia scent that’s a heady mix of sweet and dirty, pure sexual need.

I move my fingers up, touching her. She arches, hissing, legs trembling, and her stomach at my forehead flutters. Sliding two fingers in her I revel in that sharp familiarity that’s

also new all over again. She's fucking tight, she's wet. The heat of her is like the best kind of come on.

Thrusting into her, I close my lips over her clit. I want to take my time, exploring, relearning, making her reach for heaven in a slow hot song. But right now, I need it fast and dirty, and the way she moves says the same.

Her hips start to move as I suck and slip my tongue against her clit. She pants as she breathes with her voice and sighs. I keep thrusting into her, making her lift her hips to meet me.

When she's close, I up the pressure on her clit and curl my fingers in her until she wails out my name, coming.

Her contractions come down on my fingers and her clit flutters. Pulling out my hand, I take my cock and push into her as she still comes.

Fuck, she's tight. Like a size too small glove and it's perfect. I find her mouth as I plow into her, rolling us so she's on top, so she has control.

"Oh, God ..." She starts to lift and come down on me in a rocking motion, and it's glorious.

I grit my teeth because she can make me come with no effort at all, and what she's doing is the kind of torture I live for.

It's a hard battle not to blow my load when every part of me is switched all the way on. Pleasure is flowing and all of it going right to my sensitive cock.

My balls start to tighten as she slips into a hard rocking on me. I flip us again so I'm on top, and I push her legs wide and up so her feet are on my shoulders. I can reach so fucking deep into her it's like I'm seeing stars.

She rolls her hips up, offering more and more. I look into her eyes as I slam hard into her, so hard the bed bangs against the wall.

I want to speak, but every part is tuned into her. I'm trying to hold on, but we're both losing control, and she starts to come around me, crying out my name.

Oh, fuck, she can milk a cock with her pussy. She spasms around me and she moans, wrapping about me and sinking her teeth into my shoulder.

It's my undoing, that bite. The floodgates burst open, and I fuck her with abandon, my orgasm so close. Wild heat shoots up my spine and my balls contract. I'm catapulted into another realm, and I come.

If this was it, one last time, then it was more than fucking worth it.

# *Chapter Twelve*

NADIA

The bed is saggy, the linens are on the thin side, and the room just smells old.

But the body I'm wrapped around, the body with one big, strong, muscled leg thrown over mine, is warm and smells faintly of leather and spiced honey, so I breathe him in.

"Morning." Diego's voice is as familiar as my favorite coat I've had in the back of the closet far too long and thick with too little sleep.

He's already hard, his cock pushing against my hip as I rub myself on him.

I'm not sure this is going to go anywhere or if there are repeats in our future once we leave this bed, so I'll take all I can.

"Christ, you're fuckin' temptation itself." One large hand palms my breast, kneading softly a moment before coming in to tease and tug on my nipple, each pull a mainline to my clit which throbs.

I ache. In unexpected places, the places I once knew but forgot about. As his hand leaves my breast to travel south to delve between my thighs, every atom of my awareness follows too. Focusing on the exploring fingers that tease my entrance, up along my outer and inner lips and to my clit, only to repeat over and over again.

Man has picked up some real skills over the years, and I shudder as he keeps refusing to enter me.

I'm both hating those women and begrudging in my thanks. He was always good in bed and had skills far beyond my non-existent ones, but now?

I gasp vocally, unable to keep the reverse cry in, as he finally pushes into me.

He sets a lazy rhythm against my clit with his thumb and the pump of his finger inside.

Now he has skills I'm ready to get down and worship a God over.

Diego's playing me, and I'm singing. His leg's moved between mine, trapping me, keeping me open, and everything is made of nerve endings that spark.

His mouth traces up my shoulder, my throat, to my ear, where he sucks on my lobe sending a new series of livewires into life inside. I'm lost, being pulled apart, and I'm climbing toward that sweet release. He pushes me up, and I flower open, wave after wave of heat and pleasure filling me. He doesn't stop, his wicked laugh in my ear as I try and pull away.

"It's too much."

"Gotta fuckin' pay up, Nadie."

Now he ups the tempo, pushing in a second finger, strumming my clit harder, and everything wants to curl up and hide. It's too much, and I'm too exposed, I'm ... oh, God. A switch is flipped, and I gasp.

Suddenly, I no longer want to escape, I want more, I need it. I push against him, hips moving, trying to tilt to get that perfect beat, and I grab at him.

But the bastard doesn't slow or speed up. He doesn't change the pressure. Diego doesn't fucking move. He's playing. Torturing and ... shit. If I get out, I'm killing ... I ... I can't think straight. The pleasure is a thrum so deep and loud in me, and it starts to throb. It's big, a tingle that spreads everywhere, and from nowhere at all, another crest rushes at me. This is higher than Everest, more thrilling, and worth the climb. It takes me over, rolling through me, through my bones and veins and flesh. The deep ecstasy is so big, so there, it's almost frightening.

It takes me from my toes and shoots everywhere. "Oh, God. Diego!"

I shake and shudder with the force of the orgasm. My mind shuts down to lower-level functions and I sink into the sheer sweetness of it.

When I come back to me, he kisses me softly, and gets up. “I’m grabbing a shower, you can get one here or at home.”

“But—”

He doesn’t wait for me to finish my sentence, or even really begin it. Instead, he’s gone from the room, a naked God with a hard-on. It should be ridiculous, seeing him like that. But it’s not.

It’s stone-cold mouthwatering. He’s the hottest thing I’ve seen. The network of tattoos that cover his chest, arms, and back. The ones down one leg. The scars, old and new. A map to a life I know nothing about except the little he’s told me.

I know he won’t give up his life or anything for me, not even if I asked, which I wouldn’t.

It breaks my heart. Not that he wouldn’t give up anything, but the why. He wouldn’t because he doesn’t want me enough. He doesn’t want to try and work things out or ask me to come with him.

I push a hand over my hair. I don’t want him to leave his life. But I can’t leave. Not years ago, not now. I’ve got Jay. I always had Jay. I could see it in my brother and his wife, the kind of parents they would be. I couldn’t stand the thought of this young kid being shunted around, left in hotel rooms, or to a rotation of nannies.

Worse, to my father, who I loved almost more than anything. Diego, notwithstanding, but he was also a weak man who relied on cut corners and dodgy deals until he roped Diego in, and Diego got my father in trouble.

Something I still have problems with, no matter the note Diego sent me.

The fortune—what was left was saved, and I told my father to do what he wanted but to give me the inheritance promised now. Sign it over in my name.

He did because it wasn’t much.

I took that and set up a long-term account for Jay, one his parents don’t know about, one they can’t touch. I don’t think

they would. They're selfish not poor or greedy, but Jay has a future now. Well, he will as long as I keep him alive long enough to reach that point.

But I don't mean enough to have Diego willing to make a grand gesture.

"You're so fucked up, Nadia." I am. I'm aware how wrong this thought process is.

So, I get up, go to the bathroom, open the door to the shower, and step inside.

"Longstocking."

"Shut the fuck up, Diego. I want this."

I go down on my knees, take his cock, and kiss and suck it all over, laving the underside of the head with my tongue. He hisses, "Fuck."

Diego's hands tangle in my wet hair. I suck him into my mouth, using my fingers to play with and tease his balls as I go deep. My mouth stretching to fit him in until he's at the back of my throat.

I work him, bobbing up and down. Sliding my tongue over the head as I almost pull off, and then down again. Over and over, until he groans and starts to swear.

I like this, him filling me. When his hands tighten and he pulls me against him to fuck my mouth deep, I revel in the feeling, in the need to pull away and the urge to take him as deep as I can.

"Fuck, I'm gonna fuckin' come."

And he does. His cock twitches as he holds me against him, his cum hitting the back of my throat as I swallow it down. When he's done, he lets me go, and I slide off him, hair free from the braid, freed sometime last night by him.

But this is Diego, and he doesn't leave me on my knees. He lifts me against him, and the hard, fast, erratic beat of his heart fills me with something like pride because I did that to him.



“Jesus fuckin’ hell, Nadie. I want names. Who taught you that?”

Then he laughs, smoothing my wet hair and tilting my face to his.

“Actually, nix that. I don’t want to know. and I don’t know if I should thank or kill the bastard. Bastards?”

I laugh and bury my face in his chest. “I could say the same.”

“I haven’t picked up any skills from men, Nadie.”

Playfully, I punch his arm, and he takes my hand, threading our fingers. “Nadia ...” He kisses me then, a long, slow, deep exploration, like he’s got all the time in the world and I’m something to be savored.

Then he finally lifts his head. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

\* \* \*

My kitchen is filled with big, burly men. Two of them in suits, and all I can think about is how good Diego must look in one.

None of these men, not the two in suits. Not Diego in jeans and a black shirt, the necklace he wears hidden, the tattoos on his arms on display, look harmless.

In the middle of it all, eating pop tarts that one of these guys must’ve bought—I don’t have such crap in my house, at the most a healthy oat-based cereal—is Jay, staring up at them, unsure if he should be scared or in awe.

Maybe, I think, a bit of both.

The conversation seems to be benevolent. A catch-up on goings on here and in Dallas, but I’m picking up on another, darker thread beneath it all.

Then he glances at me, and I take a breath. “Jay, go clean up and get ready.”

“I’m not going back to fucking school, it’s dumb. Like you!” He grins at the guys.

Not one of them returns it.

Diego comes up to him and stares down. He doesn’t lift a finger, but the look of disdain is worse than a beating from the way Jay recoils.

“I’m gonna give you a fuckin’ pass because you had the shit beaten out of you. Normally, I’d point out the humiliation, but they were grown men, so I’m just gonna say that lifestyle with no discipline is chaos, for idiots, and I thought beneath you. However, you’re a kid, so you don’t get to swear like that in front of Nadia. I do because I’m a fuckin’ adult.”

“Not fair.”

“Life isn’t.” Then he pins Jay in place with that ice of a look. “We all learn that, you’re learning the hard way. What you don’t ever do is diss your aunt or swear in such a way that you’re thumbing your nose at her authority here. In this house, in her care, she’s the queen fuckin’ bee. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Go.”

Jay’s up so fast the chair falls and is caught by a speedy Nicolo. Christ, I thought Diego was one of a kind, but they seem to breed them in Dallas. Big, tall, and ridiculously good-looking.

“Sorry.” Jay dips his head, shoulders hunching. “Sorry for that, Aunt Nadia.”

And then he scurries out.

My mouth drops. “Who was that?”

“He’s got a silver tongue, Diego.” Tizio winks.

“Like a fucking bar of silver.”

“Shut it, Nicolo,” Diego mutters.

The humor dissipates with the sun coming in through the window, and I’m aware of the looks at me with my damp hair

and Diego all shower fresh too. But the other two men don't comment on it.

“Nadia, we gotta do something here, and we don't think Jay's going to be safe in town.”

I stare at Diego.

“Yeah, we'd like to take him back to Dallas and look after him until this is done.”

“But—”

“Nadie.” Diego's dark eyes turn darker, but there's a softness there, one I don't like because it's like goodbye. “Just until this is sorted. The gang you pulled a gun on aren't nice, and from what Tizio tells me, their ties are worse. You can't stay here alone.”

I look at them all. “I'm meant to go where?”

“Get dressed,” he says softly, “go pack. We'll discuss it when you return.”

I take a breath, wanting to talk back, but I don't think they're going to take that well. Normally, I'd say screw it, but this is Jay's life, and I need to stay calm.

Maybe it's easier without him, and maybe Diego will come here, or we'll go to the crappy hotel.

It's not until I've showered and am halfway through packing that I realize what he means.

The bastard's planning on sending me away too.

\* \* \*

“Not on your life, Diego.” I burst into the kitchen, killing their conversation. “I'm not being shunted out of town. I have a life, I—”

“Don't say job, Nadie. You're suspended.”

“I need to keep my mouth shut.” Tizio deftly steps out of my way, a coffee in a reusable cup halfway to his mouth. I

stomp past him and up to Diego. “I’m working on not only fixing that, but I can’t abandon my kids that need me. I’m planning on starting up again in a few days.”

I flick my gaze at the other two like they challenged me, and Nicolo takes a bite of the bright pink pop tart, grimacing at the taste. Or at me. Or both.

Then, I settled back on my target.

I’m fudging a little. I haven’t set anything up, but Diego doesn’t know that. While I’m behind sending Jay away for a few days or however long it takes, I’ve never backed down from a fight. I know when I need to give up, but back down like a coward? No.

It’s there, burning between us. That divide of past and now, of different needs, of things still unexplored from that past.

“Nadia.”

I ignore the warning. “No, Diego. My life.”

“Fuck ...”

“I’ll get Jay.” Tizio tips an imaginary hat to me and heads off to his room.

Nicolo smiles and puts his hand on my shoulder. “He’ll be fine. We need to check out some things, and he’s a local. We’ll watch him.”

Then he heads out.

Soon, it’s just me and Diego, and I’m so mad I could breathe fire and burn everything down.

I flounce past him, hating myself for putting on a pretty dress that’s short enough, swingy enough that it works low-key, sexy magic.

Dragging open the fridge, I pull out bacon, egg, feta, spinach, and a red pepper. Then I stomp to the cupboard for spices, and bend for a cast iron frying pan.

His hand comes down, and he eases it free. “Just in case.”

“I should hit you with it. Why are they taking Jay?”

He sighs, sets the pan down, and leans against the table. “Because I need to know who he’s running with, and the kind of places he’d know. He’s safe—”

“I know he’s safe with your enforcer friends.”

“Hopefully, you all can leave by tonight at the latest.”

“Did you hear me say I’m not going?” I pick up a nice, sharp chef’s knife that’s on the magnetic knife strip. “I’m staying here.”

I grab a chopping board, onion, and garlic clove and set up a *mise en place*.

“He told me they won’t let him go even if he wanted to.”

My heart squeezes at that. “So, what are we going to do?”

“You? Fuckin’ nothing. Us? Something.”

I don’t look at him as I take a breath. “Like what, Diego?”

“Like something to get him free. And he might be exaggerating.”

I turn then. “But you don’t think so?”

“I hope so.”

“Diego.”

He rubs his eyes. “Fuck, Nadie, I don’t know what to tell you. This is the help I can give right now, and it’s a learn-as-you-go kinda thing. There’s a chance it’s tangled with shit in Dallas, but I don’t know.”

“So, he wouldn’t be safe there?”

“He’ll be a fuck ton safer under De Luca’s watch than here. There’s an entire army who’ll watch out for him.”

“Army?”

“Told you my life isn’t what you want.”

“Did you? Or is this your way of pushing me away?”

Calming down is easier said than done, but I tell myself that anyway. I try not to melt at how he was with Jay earlier.

How he'll go that mile to protect him makes me see what he could be like as a father, and would we have—

I shut that down.

Jay's hero-worshipping the three guys. I saw that over contraband breakfast.

Yeah, all three probably are monsters and would be a better father than my brother. And Diego? The best of all.

Shit, I have to stop this.

"You pushed me away, Diego, when I loved you so much. You betrayed me."

He laughs. "Of course, I fuckin' did." But his eyes glitter with anger.

I'm suddenly angry too. Because he did. "I know. You broke my heart."

"Betrayed your father, led him astray."

There's sarcasm there now too.

I shove him. "I don't care what you got up with or did to survive. My father was a grown man, but you—you hurt me more than anyone, ever."

"You don't know shit, Nadia."

"Then explain."

"The past can rot where it lies," he says, hauling me against him. "And it's interfering. This town's got something wrong happening. More than how I felt about it when I was young. Drugs? The missing girls? And is anyone doing anything?"

"Riff." I twist the knife or try to. "The douche? He and some others have been talking about how to clean up this mess, so there's that."

"And how are they doing that?"

"Highland dancers? I don't know."

Diego releases me. "Lowlanders?"

“I was half listening when I had a drink with them a few nights ago. He was chatting to some drunk idiot, and they mentioned that name.” I shrug. “Just came to me.”

“What else has he said?”

“Nothing? They want to clean up, but they need to do it the right way. Not everyone hates this place like you.”

“I never hated everything.”

Me. He didn’t hate me, and I want to cry.

“Longstocking, I don’t have the big picture yet, but I will. My friends will help. Hey, don’t cry.”

I slap at him as he reaches for me. “I’m not. I’m mad.”

“I’m not too happy, either.”

The air in the kitchen changes, and he drops his gaze to the hem of my skirt.

My heart lurches because there’s a good way to avert a fight. I take the dress and edge it up, just high enough that I’m borderline about to show him everything, and that’s where I stop. “What are you going to do about it?”

“This.”

His mouth crashes down on mine in a punishing kiss that feeds the need in me. Diego breaks it, spins me, and pushes me face-first onto the table.

“I think I’m gonna fuck you now because you’ve been testing my patience.”

A thrill runs, dark and hot, through me. This is something we dabbled in but never plunged into the really rough stuff, and as my blood pressure spikes, I wiggle my ass at him. I want this. Need it.

“That’s if you can get it up.”

The laugh is full-on carnal, and he comes over me, the hiss of his zipper music. “I can more than get it up. Can you take a man is the real question.”

“Do it.”

He pulls my panties aside, they rip a little, and I don't care. He drags the head of his cock through my wetness, and then plunges in, balls deep.

“Oh, God.”

“Take it, Nadie. Take it all.”

Then he hammers into me, banging me against the table like a man on a mission. It's all the way every time, and it feels so fucking good. My body hums, aches, and begs for more.

Fast, hard, dirty, and he comes, not even stopping to urge me on. I don't need him to because I come, too, and it's violent and wild, and I want it all over again. He bucks on me, cock twitching as I clamp down on him over and over, and when he's done, he lays there a moment before turning me to kiss me.

He then picks me up in his arms and holds me.

Like it or not, a few tears break free.

I slip my fingers into the chain. I want to ask, but I'm afraid because it has to mean something to him. He isn't a jewelry or chain guy.

But it's not my place, and all I do is pull free and straighten up as he tucks himself away.

“Nadie?”

I put on a smile over the dull pain that starts and say, “Breakfast?”



# *Chapter Thirteen*

DIEGO

Nadie can cook. It's an omelet, frittata style. It speaks to something in my Latin blood that she put the right spices in and some chili to lift it.

I eat, and she sets the rest to the side in the fridge, ready to go when the guys come back.

She's off in a spare room she calls her office doing ... I don't know what she's doing. Keeping away from me, I suspect.

I shouldn't have fucked her. Not again. Every time makes it harder, but that use of the anger, indulging in a rough dirty fuck with her. Her blooming with it, wanting it, well ... that opens realms of possibilities I don't need. Realms I desire.

I like it hard and dirty. I like it rough. I like it soft and sweet too. But there's something in taking someone like that and having them sing when you do. It's ownership, and there's only ever been one woman I want to own like that, one woman who I want to own me, and that's Nadia.

Fuck me, I want her ass.

No, what I want is trouble I don't need.

Because I'm a fucking moron.

I start looking over my notes on my phone, and I really hate the picture emerging. If we can't get to the bottom of things here and in Dallas, squash it, then there might be war. Big shit, and if there's big shit, it's something the De Lucas won't let happen on or near their turf.

Hopefully, it won't get there.

I know the kid isn't exaggerating about his crew. Even if they're mild, things are done a certain way. But he hasn't been initiated fully yet, so we'll play by the rules as much as we can and negotiate. After all, staying friendly with even small groups has advantages.

We might not ever need to use those advantages, but they're good to have stockpiled anyway.

The front door bangs open, and Tizio, Nicolo, and Jay come in. The kid's got a swagger that's a suspicious mix of Nicolo and Tizio. He keeps looking at them before he yells 'hi' out to his aunt. Then he disappears into his room.

Tizio's eyeing the pan I've left on the stove after drying it and the plates in the drainer.

With a sigh, I open the fridge and set out the egg mixture and some butter for the pan. "If I feed you, will you both shut up?"

"Nope," says Tizio.

Nicolo shakes his head. "You're fucking crazy, man."

"We were nice to you about Avah, and this isn't that."

"So, the hot teacher's up for grabs? Good to know." Tizio grins.

I narrow my eyes. "Only if I'm dead and then not for you."

"Territorial, Nicolo."

"Very, Tizio." Nicolo sniffs the air. "What's that? Is that romance I smell in here?"

"It's eggs, you fuckin' idiot."

I turn on the stove, the oven, and heat the pan.

They continue ribbing me as I cook the eggs the way Nadia did, and then I transfer them from the pan to the oven to continue cooking through. I fry up some bacon, and when it's done, I dump it on plates and then shove one at each of them. "Can you shut up now?"

Tizio starts tucking in. "You're the one with a secret hot number hiding away."

"I plead the fifth on account I'm in love with the world's most beautiful girl, so ..." He takes a forkful. "Damn, she can make a mean breakfast."

I steal some bacon and roll my eyes. “I did fuckin’ just cook that.”

“Yeah, but ...” Tizio spreads a hand in the air to take in his plate, “you’re just the line cook, and she’s the chef. Where is she? Chase her away?”

I pull out a chair and collapse in it. “I don’t know, man. That would be for the best, but ... shit ...” I look at them. “How’d it go?”

“Nothing that revelatory.” Tizio takes some bacon. “The kid’s fucking right, though. You gotta don your work suit while we get him out. Might take a bit. A few visits. Get the best deal for all.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “Make sure there’s nothing to bite our asses and keep them on side.”

“That about covers it. You’re right, too, bro. It’s best we get him away from here.”

“He has to come back to Nadia. He’s got fuckin’ parents.”

“Shit parents,” Nicolol says with a shrug, but his tone’s hard. “You didn’t convince her?”

I look at them. “I’ve known Nadie since she was a stick of a twelve-year-old. You don’t make her do anything.”

“Drastic measures?”

I glare at Tizio. “The only ones this time would be drugging her, knocking her out, and kidnapping her. So, no.”

“Real history, then,” Tizio mutters.

“Yeah.” It hurts to say it. “Ever since she was sixteen, I’ve had a thing for her. From eighteen to nineteen, she was mine, but life doesn’t work out. Her ... shit, her family sucks, man. When we were together, I knew she wouldn’t leave her dad, and she certainly wouldn’t leave her little nephew.”

“The parents?”

I shrug and drop my voice. “More interested in themselves and their lives. And why not? They had Nadie. Thing is, she wouldn’t go, I had to. This place was killing me.”

Nicolo points at me. “You were a punk when we met you, man.”

“Things ... things got bad, and I got in trouble.” Took on trouble, but I don’t know if she’s listening, and none of us in this room believe in self-pity. Pick up, improve, and keep growing. Own your part in any shit that goes down. It keeps us honest. Sharp.

“There was a threat made against her, and, fuck, I don’t know, we were fighting a lot. We were young. She was too young, way too young for any of my shit.”

“So, you broke it off.” Tizio wipes his plate with a scrap of bacon.

I breathe in, then out. “I stomped on her heart and left. I was twenty- three going exactly nowhere, and she should have known me better than to buy into shit.”

“After you stomped her heart.” Nicolo raises his brows. I think of smashing his face, but Avah won’t like it, and I like Avah.

“She didn’t defend, do anything, so I left.”

“So ...” Tizio takes me in, face blank. “Wanna explain what it was she didn’t defend?”

He’s not going to let it go until I tell him.

I get up and pace, settling against the kitchen counter. “Her dad, apple of her fuckin’ eye, got into real shit, and I helped him out, took the heat. I had a reputation and had been picked up by the cops here and there, but I didn’t have a record. And this wouldn’t send either of us to jail, but to a man like him, it’d destroy him, his standing, his business, his standing to his daughter.

“So, I agreed if he’d be a man and tell her. I was leaving, and all I wanted was for him to give her a letter, not where I said I was to blame, or whatever the fuck it was.” I remember the words on both letters like they’re burned into my brain, but they let it slide. “Another one. And she never came to see me.”

As I say it, my mind plays over the past couple of days. How she's been, how she looks at me like she never stopped loving me. How she told me I hurt her ... fuck, what if—

“Or maybe her dad never gave her that second one.” Tizio puts his plate on Nicolo's empty one.

Nicolo collects the cutlery and the plates and heads to the sink. He starts washing them. “That's the thing about weak people. They're weak, they take the easy way out. So, y'know, Diego, ever fucking think of talking to her?”

“Fuck you guys.”

Because even if Nadia actually thinks I lured her father into crime, she hasn't judged me, and—

I rub my eyes. “We don't have time for this. The sooner we sort this shit out, the sooner I'm back in Dallas.”

“Good talk,” mutters Nicolo. “But you really need to look in your mirror, y'know?”

“Maybe you should tell her.” Tizio joins us and grabs the tea towel.

“Maybe you should mind your own business.”

“As soon as we deal with this shit for the kid, we'll head back to Dallas. The kid can stay with me and Avah,” says Nicolo. “I'm sure the ladies will enjoy scaring him straight.”

“Don't worry, we're on a trip for Leo, and that part's done. No one knows anything, and Mia and Scarlett kinda started all this.”

“Leo—”

“Can't stay mad at his sister or his wife. And if he finds out about all this, it'll be because he needs to know. Nothing else.”

“Now go get changed, we got things to do.”

They've hung my suit in the bathroom, and I change quickly. I'm straightening my tie when I run into Nadia. “Oh, my. Wow. You look ... I mean ...”

Something heats inside me. I spin her into the wall, run a hand up along her thigh to stroke over her pussy, and I kiss her long and slow. I'm starting to get hard, so I make myself stop, one of the toughest things ever, and I whisper, "Gotta fuckin' go."

I just walk out.

Her 'asshole' is the sweetest contraband ever.

"We ready?" I say to the other two.

They nod and it's not until a pink faced Nadia locks the door behind us and we get in the SUV that Tizio smacks the back of my head.

"Wipe that look off your fucking face, man. We got a job to do."

\* \* \*

"So." I look at the assortment of kids and younger men. They were the Nekromancers, and I really don't want to know what pimply-faced virgin came up with that, but now they've been absorbed by Landers Men. "Are we square?"

The leader, a lanky kid who can't be more than twenty-two, looks at me, Tizio, and Nicolo nervously. He's trying to hide it with posturing, and we let him have it. But there's an understanding that passes between us.

He knows we know he's about to shit his oversize jeans that show half his ass.

"Gotta take this to the big man."

I look at Tizio. "Big man?"

"Thought this one was the big man." Tizio jerks his head in the kid's direction.

"Nah, look at him. He's fuckin' just middle management." Nicolo grins.

"Aw, shit," I say, "Nice knowing you."

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not gonna last long. Not if you can’t make decisions, show ‘em who’s in charge,” Tizio adds. “Maybe we take our offer off the table. I mean, the kid’s not even initiated yet, so he can walk. Maybe we do that, beat you, and take it the big ... what the fuck did he say, Nicolo?”

“Man.”

“Yeah,” Tizio says, “man.”

“Maybe we just beat the shit out of them, move some go-getters in. The real bad ones we know,” I suggest.

They’ll get the money, a generous amount, and know they’ll be protected if they come into any De Luca territory—as long as they don’t set up shop and break De Luca law. But sometimes, stringing along gets results.

If they’re absorbed with Landers Men, then they aren’t the big problem.

Someone gasps, and I zero in. The kid’s about Jay’s age. I nod at him. “You look smart. Why’s everyone so fuckin’ scared of the big daddy gang?”

There’s an exchange of looks. But he holds his head. “Someone’s paying gang members to do real dirty shit. Paid Ronald to go deliver stuff to the 86s last night. We ... we kicked him out.”

“Drugs?”

No one says a word. I’m thinking drugs. Bad ones, fentanyl, dirty heroin. There’s a lot of fucking shit out there that makes money.

“We just do weed. And some coke. Party stuff when we can get it.”

“MDMA,” mutters Nicolo.

“That’s where we draw the line.” Leader boy decides to speak up. “We aren’t scum like the 86s are now. They run in dark circles. Don’t mess with them. It’s why Ron made Jay go.”



“And Cabeza?” I ask.

Bingo.

A few veer back.

But about twenty minutes of questions gets us nothing.

“Jay walks, or we kill you all,” I say. “That fuckin’ understood?”

They all nod and fall over themselves to say yes.

On the way out, Nicolo hands over the money.

For a while, we’re silent on the way back, and I close my eyes. “Fuckin’ Cabeza again.”

“Didn’t get much,” says Nicolo.

“We got they’re a new feature in town and don’t really mess with gangs unless they want something. And they really like the O’Grady bar, RoadSide.”

“You think he’s in on this?” Tizio asks.

“No idea. Guess I need to find out if he’s still in town.”

“Careful, we’re talking Lowlanders.” Nicolo leans forward from the back as I open my eyes.

“Yeah,” I say, “and this is no man’s land.”

But I fucking hear him.

Tearful goodbyes aren’t my scene, I say bye to Jay and leave it to the guys and Nadie.

I’ve got extra ammo, an extra gun, and I’m keeping the suit, even though I change. Something tells me there’s a chance I might need it.

She’s not looking at me. “I managed to get to the church hall today to have a class. We’re going to try and work out something consistent, maybe at the church, an after-hours thing ... I don’t know. But I got that put together while you were gone.”

“Nadia.”

“So, I have to leave in an hour and ...” She presses a hand to her mouth.

“Longstocking, it’s okay.”

“Feels empty,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say as Nadia stands looking forlorn in the living room.

It’s a pretty scintillating conversation I’m pulling off here.

She turns, blinking fast, and I know she is thinking of having a little cry. That’s Nadia for you. She thinks about it. Sometimes it gets to her, but she’s not a woman given over to bouts of tears, and there’s something stoic about that.

But I don’t know what to fucking do. The kiss I stupidly laid on her hangs there like a thing that needs feeding, just like the sex. It roils and twists around us, everything we’ve done, everything we want to do. And if it came down to just sex, it would be easy.

Even a moron like me knows this is beyond complicated and more than sex.

I want her back.

The thought plays in my head.

I don’t know how to do it.

Or even if I should.

See? Fucking complicated.

“It is ...” Her hair’s still down, and she looks soft and delicious—and I need to stop this shit now. “I ... I don’t know what to tell my brother.”

I try and find something to say but everything seems incendiary, and nothing feels right.

So, I nod.

“I don’t think I should.” She looks away.

Her brother hated me, I remember that now. Accused me of using his sister, once he even tried to push me away, though it didn’t work, and I think he did that because of who I was,

where I came from. I don't mean my Brazilian and Italian-American roots, either. Me, boozed up father, missing mother, and dirt poor.

So maybe she doesn't want him to know of my involvement.

It's my out, I know it. I need to do some things, get some fucking air. Run the fuck away. The usual shit.

"Just tell them the kid is gone to some camp thing with a few friends you know." That picture cheers me up a little. "Your brother doesn't need to know I'm involved. Hell, just tell them you sent him to military school. The kid could damn well benefit from it."

She recoils a little. "Diego?"

I'm being a punk, I know it, and I can't stop. What I want is to cross to her, hold her, and tell her it's all okay.

I don't.

"Got things to do." I grab my jacket and head to the door.

"Diego—"

Whatever she was going to say was cut off by the slam of the door, and I know I just fucked everything up. Well and truly.

# *Chapter Fourteen*

NADIA

All through my little class, the talks with them about the next meeting. And setting up something permanent, I silently curse him.

All through my meeting with the pastor, who agrees to let us use the hall on a regular basis as an experiment, I'm imagining doing very violent and unholy things to Diego.

I stomp back to my car and unlock it, throwing myself in.

I should be feeling sad Jay's on his way to Dallas and relieved he's safe. I should be happy this group thing is going well, and the church idea, which was brilliant, might just be my way around Peabody.

He can't stop the church from doing what churches do, help people. If I choose to volunteer to run those sessions with children, that's not his business, either. It's not on school grounds or in odd places that could reflect badly on him for refusing to give me space.

Here, at the church hall, I'm just me, not a teacher. I can even pitch it to him as something he came up with to help the youth, if it comes to that. He loves looking good.

So, I should be happy, a little sad, and hopeful.

Instead, I'm in shreds. That kiss when he looked panty melting hot in that expensive suit seemed almost like a taste of a new beginning.

I didn't expect a kiss and hot sex to magically fix things, but he just acted like a child and took off.

I put my hand on the ignition key when a tap on the window almost makes me scream.

Josie's smiling face is there. "Get out! We need to talk."

I do. "You just missed the class, and you shouldn't be here."

“I have to be. I want to help and, look, other kids have turned up. I talked to Pastor McGregor, and he’s happy to extend the times.”

My head spins. I wanted to do more but didn’t expect such a big and long turn out. I thought we’d build up to this, but there are about fifteen kids ranging in age there in the hall.

“Seems like a lot of parents make them go home and work first, so some miss classes others just have nothing to do. Shizz, girl, I don’t know, we just go with it. And I’m here to help.”

“I ...”

“Word gets about. Kids have these things, phones? And they’re ducking good at texting fast.” She laughs and hoists her bright bag up. “I have a lot of ideas but if we do this, get together a few times a week, we can maybe get others involved, do it each night after school. I’ve got art supplies and books, so maybe we can just read, talk books, draw and paint, and if anyone needs help with homework, there you are because, girly, I’m an art teacher.”

Things go well until two boys start picking on Sadie, a pretty girl with glasses and pigtails.

“Leave her alone. I’m not above giving out lines.”

One of the boys pulls her hair. “Freak.”

“Lines, now. Josie?”

“On it,” Josie says as I take off after Sadie.

The shadows are getting long, and dusk is approaching.

The kid’s fast, and I’m puffed by the time I catch up to her.

“They do that because they like you.”

“No,” she says, voice wobbly, “they did it because I cried today. My bunny died.”

“Aww, I’m sorry. There’s nothing wrong with crying for something you love. And ...”

I trail off as a shadow falls over us and two tattooed guys step out. Not gold tooth, but one of them was at that bar. I recognize the bruises left by Diego.

“It’s the big bitch with a little bitch.”

I push Sadie behind me. “Go back to the hall,” I say to her. “And you two need to go. My friend’s still in town.”

Shit, if they make a grab I don’t know if I can get away. I ready myself to run.

A small thing with brown pigtails darts past me and Sadie kicks them both in the shins. “I’m telling Mommy on you, Adam.”

“Fuck.” Adam rubs his leg.

The other one makes a grab for the girl, but Adam flings out his arm. “Don’t touch her. She’s my little sister.”

“Go home! I’m telling Mommy and yours.”

As the other one growls, Sadie grabs my hand. “Don’t worry, Miss Nadia. I’ll protect you.”

As we walk back, I try not to shake. I think I see Diego at his motorcycle down on the other side of the street leaning on it, arms crossed. Think because there is no way I am stopping to look.

I want to get back inside and end this. Sadie’s a formidable little girl and on the surface the whole thing’s funny, but beneath? It’s scary as hell. If that guy hadn’t been her brother, then what would have happened?

This town was never this bad, and I’ve always felt safe.

That is, until now.

I keep a smile in place for the remainder of the class, and when everyone’s left, I take my time cleaning up.

“You know, we need to organize a drop-off for them.” Josie picks up a broom.

I turn. “Go home. I’ll take care of this.”

“No, I’m here to help.”

“I need to go talk with the pastor. You help next time. I’ll walk you to your car.”

She gives me a doubtful look, but she nods, and I see her off with a hug, watching until she’s gone.

Last thing I want is them coming back and grabbing Josie. She’s innocent. I don’t need to talk to the pastor, so I go back to cleaning up.

“Nadia.”

I scream a little and whirl around, dropping the cushion.

Riff’s big form takes up the door.

“What ... how?” I stare at him. “Are you following me?”

It’s a very un-Nadia thing, bordering on rude, and I bite my lip.

“I mean, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, I heard about all the troubles since your new boyfriend came into town.” He rubs a hand over his shaven chin. “I get it, you want to let loose before you come back to me.”

“I’m not.”

He ignores me. “And this shit? Not a good look for our town. We’re trying to clean up, not invite troublemakers.”

“Those troublemakers are kids. They live here.”

“They’re not worth it.”

“I think those kids are worth a hell of a lot more than you.”

Riff only smiles.

“Peabody’s on some of the committees I’m on. He’s with the golf club, and when we were playing some rounds, he told me about this. You’re getting a reputation as a troublemaker now Diego Fernandez is back in town. Could have him run out.”

I shake my head. Diego’s right, Riff’s a douche. I suddenly have the urge to shower and wash away all touches I ever had from him. He also has no idea of Diego’s connections. He’d



probably piss himself, and the thought almost makes me giggle.

“For what?”

Riff doesn't say anything. “Come on, Nadia, I'll buy you dinner, take you home, and—”

“I'm not gonna be pleased with that,” a voice says. My fingers curl. The asshole is swooping in, thinking I can't handle it. I'm pathetic, considering I like it. “I don't like to share my woman.”

I slide Diego a side-eye. He did that deliberately.

But it does the trick and Riff just stiffly says, “We'll talk later. Alone.”

“Not gonna happen,” Diego calls out at his retreating back.

I glare at him. “Where's your bike?”

“Parked it around the corner. And yes, I am keeping an eye on you. So, get in your car, and I'll make sure you get home.”

I jump in my car, locking my doors. Diego nods and walks off. Seeing me home, like he's going to check I go in alone and then leave. It's pretty fucking telling, what it is.

Heart heavy, I drive home.

\* \* \*

Diego follows right until I'm about to turn onto my street, then he guns it and takes off.

I hate him in that moment.

Like a full-on melt down frustration of hate, born from love. Because I do, I still love him, and I hate him for that.

It's childish. It gets me nowhere, and I can't help it.

When I pull up, his bike is there, and Diego leans against my door.

Fury flashes bright, and I stalk up to him, shovign him hard. “I hate you, Diego.”

“You probably fuckin’ should but I think the problem here is you don’t. And I don’t hate you either. It’s a heck of a problem. Wanting each other still. We’ve fucked and all that’s done is turn the flames up high.” He pauses. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“I’m sorry, by the way.” He catches my hands and puts them on his chest, over his heart. “I was a total ass earlier.”

“Damn you, Diego. Why can’t this be simple?”

“Because it isn’t. We want different things.”

I shake my head and shove him again. “You. You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

“But it doesn’t work that way. You want to be here, in town, with your memories and do things for kids and what kind of selfish fucker would I be if I said I was worth more?”

“You make me love you more, you know.”

“I love you, too, Longstocking.”

His words send shockwaves through me, but there’s a desolate note. “This isn’t about love. I hate this place, and I have a life outside of here. So, we don’t mesh.”

“Fucker.”

“Nadie.”

He grabs me and turns me, pressing me into my door. He kisses me hard, long, and deep, sending all my senses spinning and tumbling.

I cling to him, kissing him back, opening to him, pressing against him. He tastes like my dreams, like Diego and despair. And I’ll take all the heat he can give me.

The kiss makes my toes curl as his tongue plays over mine, drawing deeper parts of me up to the surface so all I know is him and me. How this is bigger than us, how it’s doomed before anything can happen.

He's right, I need to do this and can't ever ask him to stay. If I didn't have Jay, I could maybe set something up that's got momentum and go to him, but Jay will be back, and this kiss ... it's all sorts of goodbyes and needs.

He lifts his head, and he looks me in the eyes. "If none of that existed, what would you want, Nadie?"

I don't even have to think.

"You."

# *Chapter Fifteen*

DIEGO

Someone clears their throat, and I pull away and turn, keeping Nadia behind me. I'm pretty sure she can feel my gun, she's that close. But this fucking town.

"Sorry to interrupt," the man says with the slightest of Irish accents, "but someone wants to see you."

Judging from the accent, it's O'Grady who's interested in my company. I guess we made enough of a splash, and he's still in town.

I nod and turn to Nadia. "Go inside and lock the door. I'll be back."

"Hell no. I'm coming with you."

"Nadia."

"No, I'm coming, and you can't stop me."

I most definitely can but I don't think O'Grady's going to kill me, and she's safer with me than here alone so I nod. I look at the guy. "Lead the way. We'll follow on my bike."

\* \* \*

O'Grady sits at the RoadSide bar, a whiskey next to him, silver rings on his hands, and his too-long hair finger swept and threaded with a little gray. He looks totally at ease, and I can see how dangerous he is.

He holds himself the way Leo does, like do anything to get his way and not lose a moment's sleep. And from the way he runs his territory in Dallas ... yeah, as dangerous as Leo.

"Another De Luca enforcer, you boys sure do get around, don't you?"

"Could say the same," I say, nodding at him.

His gaze drifts to Nadia, and he cracks a smile. “So, you’re the teacher causing all the waves in this little town.”

“You got a beef with her, you fuckin’ deal with me.”

He picks up his phone and sends a text, then leans back. “Not at all. Waves are good and not my business. And trouble? I’m Irish, I fucking love trouble. I just bought a bar, see. And quite the little hotbed of information it is too. Heard all about your pretty little troublemaker.”

“Who,” Nadia says, “has a name.”

“I know. Nadia? I’m O’Grady.”

I’m trying to work out his angle, but I can’t make it fit. I suspect that’s just the way he likes it.

“So, Diego, is it? Down to fucking business. I’m here checking out my new acquisition before flying to Ireland and what do you know? Another De Luca enforcer is on my territory.”

“It’s a bar. This isn’t Lowlanders.”

He straightens up and the sharp teeth snap as a veneer of his charm disappears. “No, but it’s mine, and this place is what I fucking say it is. Talk.”

I need truth, but not that we’re digging. “Nadia’s nephew got in with a gang. We got him out and now some of the other gangs I had to have ... words with over them using a sixteen-year-old kid have an issue with Nadia, so I’m here until that’s sorted.” I pause. “Though she did tell me something interesting.”

He raises a brow.

“I think Nicolo told you about the missing girls?”

“It happens.”

Even giving nothing away, not one iota of emotion.

“Seems the same thing happened recently around here. Exact same thing. Like there’s someone trafficking.” I take a step forward, aware I was allowed to enter with my gun, which means this is unofficial.

Or he wants me to think that.

There are four men packing in here. None of them have a hand near their piece, and none of them seem overly on alert. Fucking seems. That is such a killer word. Sometimes literally.

O'Grady's gun is on the bar, but it's not that close, and he hasn't made a move for it or made a point of it being there. It just is. He picks up his whiskey and knocks it back.

"Fucking hate long flights. Tedious things."

"Heard anything about the girls?"

"You asking if I'm into trafficking, or are you trying to see what I know?" He taps the empty glass, and the bartender comes up and refills it. "No and no."

Of course, he could be lying.

"So, you summoned me because?" I ask actually curious.

"To see what you're doing in town. But maybe it's good you're here to protect your girl. Be careful, this town isn't all it seems."

His phone pings, and he goes back to texting.

The discussion is clearly over. We're led outside, and there are people there, no doubt wanting to set up for the night because I recognize one of the bartenders from back in the day.

Nadia doesn't say anything until we get to her place.

The moment we step inside, she rounds on me. "Who the hell was that?"

"O'Grady."

"I got that," she snaps.

I sigh. "He heads a very loose crime family? Group? I don't know the term for what he is. The Lowlanders. They keep to themselves and are very territorial."

She nods. "Diego, what did he mean? About the town?"

"Longstocking, I got no fucking idea." I pause, frowning. "You've never met him before?"

She shoves her hands on her hips. “Did it sound like we’d met?”

I could tell her how people do all sorts of shit to make it sound or not sound like something, but I don’t because she’s not that person.

“Besides, I think I’d have told you if I’d met the new owner of RoadSide, especially if he was that good-looking.”

Her words pull a smile from me. “Trying to rile me?”

“Is it working?”

“Maybe.”

She comes up, and I wrap my arms around her. Nadia rests her head on my chest. “Diego, all of this ... it’s just not right.”

“Yeah, fuckin’ tell me about it. There’s a slew of new people coming through, settling in beneath the surface and ... what? Your boyfriend was worried about a bunch of kids? The principal? There are some bad people hanging about. Dangerous ones like O’Grady.”

She bites the corner of her mouth as she looks up at me. “Do you think he’s going to cause trouble?”

“Nadie, I’m dangerous too. But I don’t know. It depends if he’s here only to open a bar or not.” I smooth back her hair. “I’m just curious as to the why of it all. Perhaps not him, but all the unsavories, the big gun gang members. The worst that was here is the 86s and even they seem harder than before, made harder by other influences. We saw it.”

Nadia shudders. “And Jay got mixed up in it all.”

“A smaller gang,” I say, “one that’s not as bad.

“He was threatened, Diego, they beat him, someone gave him a gun.”

“And I’m betting the gun, all the bad shit came from the unsavories. I’m not saying his gang’s sweet, they’re a fuckin’ gang, but I’m saying there are worse ones. We got him out.”

“How?”



“We just did, Longstocking.” I ease her from my arms because I’m just riffing, trying to read into this, see what truths there are.

Like is this some kind of off the beaten path post where trade and contraband come through. It’s close enough to the bigger places and just far enough from the border to be both convenient and not on any radars.

It makes sense. I text the thoughts to Tizio and Nicolo, aware Nadia’s watching. I also ask about Jay.

Nicolo gets back to me.

**Nicolo:** Putting that on the board, def. Kid’s good, of course, we left earlier.

**Me:** O’Grady bought a bar.

They know this, but I can’t help bringing it up again. When it comes to O’Grady, I get a bad taste in my mouth.

**Nicolo:** Yeah, we knew this, D. We’ll look into where he goes and the criminal activities there.

**Me:** Let’s hope we can catch him before shit really goes down and someone gets dead.

It’s about as much as I can hope for. But I still think my theory makes sense. It’s the who behind it if I’m right that I’m interested in.

I give Nadia a glance. She’s sitting on the sofa now, waiting, and watching me. No one can do that watch and wait and make you want to give up all your secrets like Nadia.

The thing is, Nicolo doesn’t have to say it, Tizio neither. This girl thing, if it’s a thing and not just a bunch of kids taking off because they can or after a fight with their parents or any number of reasons, isn’t our job.

It’s taking on a lot of trouble if it’s really something that’s not connected to the trouble I can practically taste that’s heading to Dallas.

But there’s this thing. And it’s big.

Nadia. Longstocking herself.

She'd want me to look into it.

It wouldn't do for Nadia to be unable to forgive me. I shouldn't even care. I keep telling myself I don't. Still, I find myself doing what I can. With all the shit between the two of us, I want to see what I can find out. What I can do. The thought of seeing a hint of disappointment that gets to me.

"Jay's fine."

"He hasn't been gone that long, so I hope so." Nadia gives a slight smile that barely lights her big green eyes. She rubs a finger below her bottom lip. "What's the next move?"

"I put you on a plane to Dallas."

"Not happening."

I sigh. "I'm sure there are Lowlanders here like I said, but they're not a cohesive group so turn a rock and you'll probably fuckin' find someone who's hooked up with them. But thing is, the lowlifes here seem to have more to do with El Cabeza, a Mexican cartel, than O'Grady's outfit."

"What if they're together?"

"I don't think O'Grady shares, but you don't know, and he'd work with them in the right circumstances."

She breathes out. "You're saying this isn't really about Jay being in a gang, it's about the safety of the town."

"Always knew you were smart. And O'Grady's warning was pointed."

"I know you're not telling me something."

Shit. Fuck. "In Dallas, when Nicolo met Avah, his fiancée, he found himself caught up with smuggling, trafficking, and embezzling. It's complicated, but the gist is we think someone's out to make a lot of trouble, and some of that involves Lowlander turf. So, to tell our bosses about the girls, cartel possible involvement, and what they might be into ... it could start a war, so we need to know what's going on."

She nods. "And you take responsibility, like always."

"It's my job."

“It’s you.”

I go to her, on my haunches, and take her hands. “It’s why you need to get out of here, leave me to it. I might uncover something dangerous, and it could blow up in my fuckin’ face. I want you safe.

“Not on your life,” she says. “We’re in this together, Diego.”

“Nadie, you’re in danger.”

“And you’re not?” she asks.

“I want you safe.”

“It seems I’m safer with you than I am alone.”

I stand and shake my head. “No way, you won’t be alone, you’ll be with Jay under full De Luca protection.”

She stands too. “Not on your life, Diego. I’m staying.”

“Fine.” I raise my hands like I’m giving up. “You stay.”

As soon as I can, I’m getting her the fuck out of Dodge.

Tonight.

# *Chapter Sixteen*

NADIA

I know he's going to try and get me out of here. Whether he likes it or not, I'm staying.

When he suggests we go for a drive, I deliberately leave my bag. We end up arguing as he starts trying to book me on the next flight out of Corpus Christi.

In the end, Diego backs down. I don't know whether he gets it he's not winning in this, or he couldn't get a flight until midday tomorrow, and I don't care.

I'm hungry.

Hungry to spend time with him, to get to know him. We might be going separate ways when this is done, but the hunger doesn't. It never will. When he left before I wasn't able to forget what he does to me. When it comes to Diego, I can't hoard every moment and nugget of information like some kind of crazy person.

Because I'm going to, and he's taking me with him, whether he wants to or not.

I get it, I do. Diego wants me safe. I'm being stupid, but I'm also willing to risk it to spend time with him.

His hands are loose on the wheel of my car, and he's way too big for it. "Y'know, Longstocking, pretty slick fuckin' move with the bag."

"I booked all the flights too."

He cuts his eyes to me. "When I said slick, I meant dumb."

"I know what you meant," I say, watching him in the dash light as we head through and to the other side of town.

"You think you're fuckin' smart, but you ever think about the danger you're putting yourself in?"

"And here I thought I had a big, strong man to protect me."

Diego snorts a laugh. It's easy to fall back into old banter, better now I'm older.

"I should ffeed you to the wolves."

"Are there any? Human wolves here?"

"Nadie." He turns the radio on, and I turn it off. A muscle works in his jaw. "You know what's going on. Of course, there are. I just don't know who the most dangerous ones are yet. So, I should tie you up and leave you in the trunk. Post you."

"Sail me?"

"To Dallas? That's a roundabout way. Besides, what about sharks? Pirates?" He stops. "I don't know who is doing what here. Someone's running the gangs and crews. And I'd feel better if you were safer."

It's fair, and he makes sense. "This is my town, Diego. And I'm with you. Where are we going?"

"You're gonna be the fuckin' death of me, Longstocking."

"I have faith in you," I say quietly, tracing a non-existent line down the front of my jeans I put on for the class. One that now feels a million miles ago. "How long were you outside the church?"

"From the moment you pulled up. What was up with you, the mini-you, and the gang guys? If they'd touched you or the kid, I'd have killed them."

I take a shaky breath, squeezing my toes in my kicks. Thrilled isn't really something that should be running through me at that, but it does. "I don't think Sadie, the little girl, would have liked that." I meet his gaze as he lifts it from the road for a second. "One of them was her brother."

"You can't fix the world," he says, clearly putting two and two together about me needing to be here.

"Neither can you."

And we're stalemate again.

He pulls up to a place called The Clam Shack a few miles out of town, bordering the next. I don't know it, but it's not

until we enter the place I get why.

Girls writhe and dance on poles. A few shake all their moneymakers in lap dances, and topless servers sling drinks.

The men are heavily tattooed, muscled, and wear denim and leather. Most are in dire need of a good shave. The vibe is sleaze on steroids with a side serve of seedy.

Diego saunters in like he owns the place and is ready to get some action other than me. But I don't think he's looking at the girls. He's scoping the lay of the land, cataloging and filing.

I follow him like a lame baby duck to the bar. Sure, there are some women in here who aren't working, but they're dressed to impress with too-tight jeans and tops either plastered on, undone down to the navel, or a combination.

At the bar, he leans against it, slaps down two twenties, and orders two bourbons on the rocks.

"I don't like bourbon."

He leans in close and coils a hand in my hair, handing me one. "I'm driving, and bad bourbon's better than bad tequila. Drink."

To whoever's looking, it seems like we're about to make out, but he's also making it clear who's in charge and who I belong to.

Diego keeps hold of my hair as I take a swallow of the bourbon, hiding my grimace. "Finish it."

"You don't need to get me drunk," I whisper, his hand gliding down the front of my shirt. "I'm gonna let you have your way with me."

"Fuckin' flirt. What's wrong with you?"

A million things, I figure.

He leans right in. "Doing that shit in this place? A cheap bourbon and you'll spread your legs, Longstocking? But I can deal. Lower my standards for you. Drink."

I do and set it down. I go to touch his face, and he turns it into my hand, lips brushing my palm before pulling away.

Someone bumps into him, and he turns, seemingly having words with the guy.

He's got his drink, so I'm guessing someone's come up to him to either call him out or talk. Nerves start to bite at me. No ... he's got my drink. He switched them.

"Buy you a drink, little lady?" a short, balding man asks.

He's not looking at my face. No, his eyes are firmly on my breasts. "No thanks."

"You want one." He grabs my wrist just as Diego slings an arm around me, a hand coming to cup a breast.

"No," Diego says, "she doesn't. She's got a thing about her fuckin' drinks being spiked by members of your lot, 86sers."

Heat streaks through me as I press back into the hard form of Diego. I glance down, and no wonder his hand feels hot. It's on the lacy cup of my bra because he unbuttoned my shirt to where the two cups meet.

Diego draws me around so his back's to the guy. Whoever he was talking to has gone, and he tips my chin to face him. "Don't worry, for a cheap little thing, ready to jump my fuckin' bones for a glass of cheap bourbon, I noticed you wore a lacy but not at all see-through bra."

"You really are the worst."

He brushes his mouth over mine, and I don't know if it's for show or he means it, and I don't care. "I know. And yet I don't have to get you drunk to sample that fine pussy."

"You've already done that."

"I have, and I'm willing to come back for more." He doesn't smile, but there's a fire that lights his eyes. Oh, Christ, he's gorgeous. My legs shake a little. "You're a fuckin' dangerous distraction."

"Diego—"



“Listen, that guy I was talking to’s done work for an affiliate of the De Luca family. It says two things. He gave me some places and names, but he also doesn’t know anything. He’s here on the way to a job near Austin, and word’s spread about me. So, lean the fuck back, enjoy the girls so I can watch the room.”

“Do this often, do you?”

“The fuckin’ answer, Nadie, is on occasion, probably more than you’d like, and always for work. And you’re making it that much harder.”

“I’m—” I stop.

I’m not sorry. I like doing this with him, if like is the correct word. The new take on our old push and pull exhilarates. It’s a game of trust, and it layers over the feelings of the past. The fact I’m not ready to face what our declaration of love for each other means beyond the whole doomed aspect.

Because even in this, the tease and banter are something forged by people on the same wavelength, who know each other even if there’s still so much to uncover.

That connection that lives and breathes is deep, strong, and delicate.

I don’t know how to explain it, except that it’s so easy to sink into it all with him.

Maybe without different responsibilities in the real world, now I’m older we work even more than before.

Like we’re meant to be.

Diego’s hand slips to my waist, pulling me back against him, and it’s not until I wiggle against him does his cock start to stir. I look from the stage to him and he’s staring down at me.

“The fuckin’ death, Nadie.”

\* \* \*

We stay awhile but no one else approaches apart to order a drink. When we leave, he pushes me against the car, and looks into my eyes. “Goddamn you. This is all gonna be so much harder. I wish to I could pack everyone you want to save and take you all to Dallas.”

It’s the most romantic thing anyone’s said. It’s another declaration of love.

“And I wish I could fix this place to get you back.”

My nephew doesn’t deserve abandonment. The kids, either. The latter, I know I can fashion a workaround. It might keep me longer, but for Diego, I’d do it.

But what workaround is there for Jay?

I can’t ask this man to wait four to five years for me. Not that he’s offered.

“Nadie,” he whispers, “this place would kill me. There’s too much here, soaked into the ground. I couldn’t.”

It hurts. More than I thought. “And we’ve a past with issues.”

“If it was that? I’d work it out now. Our lives go in two different directions now. But if I could, I’d ask for another start.”

“Diego ...”

“Words fuckin’ suck, and you look fuckin’ hot.”

He drops his mouth to mine, coaxing it open with tender, romantic kisses, the type I don’t expect while pinned to a car. But that’s Diego, tasting of a starless night and heat, of flowers and poetry, cheap bourbon and lust. A wild dichotomy that hasn’t stopped surprising or exciting me.

Our tongues dance, and he’s hot and wet. He’s hard against me, and I don’t want the kiss to end.

But it does. Of course, it does.

Diego steps back like nothing happened. “Come on, cheap ass woman, let’s get this show on the road.”

The rest of our trip is a Fibonacci spiral of what passes as the darker edge of Enders Ridge's criminal class.

I keep my top like I have it rather than fixing it, and just stay quiet, no matter how much I'd love to talk and ask questions.

Instead, I watch him, and as we go into another bar, this one rougher, I keep my nerves in check. I get the sense of the place that weakness can put a person in danger. Several men have eyed Diego and me. I ignore the lustful looks and stay close to Diego.

We stay for about an hour or so. I have no idea if he's learning anything. But when someone pulls a knife on him as we step out of a rough bar it scares the hell out of me.

The guy speaks rapidly in Spanish, spitting each word. I don't know what he's saying, but Diego seems to know, and it surprises me. Diego deals with the guy quickly and so proficiently. It's like he's shaking someone's hand rather than disarming by snapping an arm, punching the guy in the throat, and kicking the man's legs out so he falls to the ground.

There, he bends and frisks the guy before taking the knife, a gun, and his wallet.

I'm about to say something, but a sharp, dark look from Diego makes me shut my mouth.

The car's silent as we head to the next place. In my head runs a babble of words I could use to fill the silence, but I get the feeling he'd find it annoying.

But he's good, even I can see that. Diego can switch to Spanish easily ... I already knew he spoke Portuguese because of his father, but I never knew him to know any other foreign language. In school he'd taken sign language for his required class. I always guessed he did this because of me, I was in the same class as well. I glance at him. The way he can blend or stand out, along with how he's able to close in on the right people, impresses me.

Diego doesn't want to hear that. He just wants to end the night. He doesn't have to say it for me to know this to be true.

It's in the air around him. The tension vibrating from his direction. I suspect he's ticked off I saw him take down the man with the knife. The coldness, the brutal efficiency they're things I think he wants to protect me from, that aspect of him.

\* \* \*

“Last stop.”

I frown. “RoadSide?”

“O Grady's gone, and I want to poke around.” He shrugs and gets out of the car.

We head to the door when one of the bouncers hauls a screaming girl out. Diego pulls me to a stop as the bouncer, who's been there about a million years, who lets people in, checks IDs, and keeps an eye on what goes on outside in the lot tries to comfort her.

The one who pulled her out goes in.

“Longstocking, do me a favor? Stay out here with Fred.”

“But—”

“I want to talk to someone I got a lead on, one of the guys with gold tooth's friends. He's meant to be here, and he's got a tattoo. It's to do with the Mexican cartel.”

I frown, but this is RoadSide. “It gets rough at times,” I say, “but it's a local icon, it's safe—”

“Owned by the fuckin' head of the Lowlanders. And the less you're in the mind of the fuckin' El Cabeza cartel, the better.”

He leaves me with Fred, and he grunts acknowledgment as Diego slips inside. I lean against the wall, both annoyed and a little soft-centered over it.

“Let me go back in. I saw Manny with her. You did too.” The girl is still hysterical, but she's calmed a bit.

Fred offers her a tissue, which makes me want to raise my eyebrows, but he cuts me a severe look as the girl takes it. I

look away.

“Yo, Cindy, Manny runs with some bad peeps now. You can’t accuse. And your sister does what she wants. I thought she left with a clean-cut kinda guy. A little drunk, but she seemed coherent.”

“Manny knows her. You know her. She never came home.”

Now I straighten. “You okay?” I ask the girl, who has to be about eighteen, if she’s a day and this place shouldn’t be serving her.

Then again, I came here underage, and they looked the other way.

“No, I want to see Manny.”

“He left, Cindy, out the back when you went in. Oscar texted me,” Fred says. “Go home. She’ll be back.”

“Cindy, I’m Nadia. Your sister didn’t come home?”

“N-no, and that was three days ago. She’s always home by now, and she doesn’t get in cars with strangers.”

Behind her, Fred rolls his eyes, checks someone’s ID, and waves them in. “I got you a cab comin’, Cindy.”

My heart is clenching. This sounds like the other girls that went missing. The ones Diego mentioned.

I try and ask her some more things, but she’s clearly distraught, so I do the next best thing.

“I teach at Enders High. Look, if you want to talk, you can have my number.” I pull out my phone. “I’m a phone call or a text away. No pressure.”

She sighs and nods. Feeling like a heel, I ask for her number and put it in, calling her phone. “There, we have each other’s now.”

When she’s gone, Fred sighs. “Gotta stop messing with shit. Though, my niece likes you, and that class thing. You were always nice when you came here with Diego. Still together?”

I make a noncommittal noise, and Diego reappears. He thanks Fred and leads me to the car. “Get the fuck in.”

As soon as we’re in, he takes off.

“Been making new friends and enemies?”

“Something like that. Dude didn’t want to talk.”

I touch his hand he’s resting on his thigh. “Did he survive?”

“Of course, he fuckin’ survived. You think you’re funny?”

Against my will, I say, “Maybe?”

“Pippy fuckin’ Longstocking, the biggest pain in the ass I ever met, who won’t leave me alone, thinks she’s fuckin’ funny.”

Then he glances at me. He’s smiling, and I grin.

I know I have to tell him about the girl, but there’s nothing to be done tonight.

“Diego?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember the family cabin? I bought it. D-do you want to go there tonight?” There are a lot of memories there. It’s where I lost my virginity to Diego. It’s where I let him go when his home life was so bad, he talked of taking off.

It only got used on holidays, so it was easy to commandeer it. We both knew where the spare keys were, and it sort of became our place.

So maybe too many memories.

“It’s a dumb idea.”

“It’s perfect, Nadie,” he says. “So, why don’t you tell me all about what that girl said as we drive.”

\* \* \*

The cabin is both home and bereft of life. Even though I came here a few weeks ago. Diego has been the only man I've ever had here.

He switches on the lamps and gets a drink from the booze cabinet. Tequila. He just takes the bottle, sits on the sofa, and eases his shoes off. I do the same and take the seat next to him.

Wordlessly, I take the bottle and a swig, ignoring the burn. I try not to look at the pile of weapons on the coffee table.

“You think she'll call?”

I shrug and take another sip before handing him the bottle. His jacket's by the door, so I'm facing him in jeans, a T-shirt, and inked muscle. It's enough to make my panties wet.

“No idea,” I say. “But I've got hers.” I pause. “So, it's like the others?”

“I don't know details, but if we're looking at human trafficking over some serial killer shit, then those details will change just enough. But sounds like I need to find Manny.”

He rubs a hand over his face and takes a long pull on the bottle.

“What does it mean?”

“Nothing good, however you look at it.” He takes another swig, sets down the tequila, pulls off his T-shirt, and settles back on the floral sofa. “Not much we can do yet.”

“I know.”

“But, Nadie, I seem to remember some cheap fuckin' woman hitting on me, making all kinds of promises. So, why don't you lose the clothes?” He slaps his thigh, eyes glittering. “Then climb up here and give me a lap dance with an ecstatic ending.”

I shake as I strip, and the hunger in his expression is a revelation. He lingers on every point of exposed flesh. Then he unzips and pulls himself out, thumb stroking over the head as he starts to tug on his cock, making it bigger and harder.

“Or just get here and give me the ride of my fuckin' life.”

“Diego, we—”

“Just this, you and me. Everything else at the door.” He reaches out with his spare hand and catches my hip, drawing me close. “You’re fucking gorgeous, Nadie, but too skinny. You’re not eating enough, are you?”

A laugh bubbles. This is so Diego, getting hot and dirty and wanking himself while suddenly worrying about my health, about me.

I climb on him, and he holds his cock for me. I lower myself onto it, and he stretches me, filling me until I’ve taken him all the way in.

“Fuck, Nadie.”

“Is that a comment or an order?”

“Both.”

I start to rock on him, kneading at his chest like a cat as I find what I want. Moving up and down on him and rocking forward, pushing my clit into him.

He puts his hands behind his head and lets me do what I want. Soon, I’ve got it, a slow roll and bounce that begins to build.

Each time I come down on him, it’s perfection. Diego inside me, touching everywhere, and my stomach ripples with pleasure as I speed it up.

Soon, he’s thrusting up. His hands grab my hips to take control, working me hard on him, and it’s one of those orgasms that sweep like a wild tidal wave. It takes me hard, and I throb and clench on him.

“Fuck, Nadie. Next time, I’m having your ass. I’m going to paint you in my cum, fuck your face. Use you every way I can think and make you beg for more. Fuck. Fuck.”

He shudders and grunts. His cock twitches, and he comes inside me. I’m still being swept into whirlpools of pleasure, crashing waves of delight that come down on each other until I come a second time, my whole being shaking with it. I yell his name, and I gush from somewhere deep inside.



It's not an orgasm. I'm still riding it, right down to my toes, to where I'm fused with him, but it's a different, deeper thing, coming home, beauty and light and Diego.

I collapse on him, and he holds me to him.

My eyes flutter shut for a few moments, and when I open them, I'm up close to the chain. There's something about the links, the delicacy.

A jolt runs through me.

Years ago, I gave him a chain. It was mine, a girl's thing, delicate links. Oh. God. My stomach twists as something like nausea almost overtakes me because it's too much. I don't know what to do with such naked emotion.

He's not only still got it, but he wears it. He's had it woven into another one by a craftsman, but he's wearing it.

I want to say something, but I can't. I just run my finger along it.

"Yeah," he says, picking up my hand and kissing my fingers. "And that watered-down bourbon I got you? Totally worth it."

I start to laugh.

# *Chapter Seventeen*

DIEGO

I wish I could stay in the cabin with her, life and the past left outside, but that's not the way things work.

We end up making it to the bedroom where I fuck her again. I shouldn't keep doing it.

I need to let go of the idea of having her back in my life. Doesn't matter that I've had her. I'm not the same man I was years ago, and I can't win her back.

We have obligations that don't mesh, and she deserves better.

But I'm selfish enough to greedily take all the time I have with her now, while I can.

I drop her and her car off and get my motorbike. I've got shit to do today.

First, I stopped on the main street to buy her coffee and croissants, and then, on the pavement, I kissed her.

She called me a peacock, and yeah, it looked like that to her. I just figured making it known she's mine is a smart move and should keep Nadie safe.

I also got to fuckin' kiss her like I've always wanted to, in front of the town so that was a bonus.

Then she did the most shocking thing. She grabbed me at the car, kissed me, and whispered, "Always wanted to do that, Fernandez."

Now, I'm halfway through a list of names I got last night. I pause by the road near the house I'm going to visit, and I call Tizio.

"How's your kid prisoner?"

"He wants to learn about becoming an enforcer."

I slap my forehead. "Don't you fuckin' dare. Won't only be my balls Nadia cuts off. Yours and Nicolo's will be on that

chopping board.”

“He’s gotta go to school. There are some good ones here, you know.”

I grip the handlebar of the bike and force the latent rage away. At Nadia’s fucking brother, at the fact, I can’t see a way to make this work. Any other town and maybe I’d think of walking from the only real family I know and set up with her. But Enders Ridge has too many ghosts, alive and dead.

“Not her kid.”

“He fucking talks about her like she’s his mom. If I had a heart,” Tizio says, “it’d break.”

“He has her, but she can’t just go off with him, y’know? Anyway, good that he’s doing well.”

“He’s not happy with the private tutor Avah, Mia, and Scarlett chose.”

“They know?” Those women are always figuring things out when they shouldn’t.

“They always know. Mia started this shit by tucking Avah into her pocket as someone who needed saving.” Tizio laughs. “Yeah, but the tutoring will do him good, keep him out of trouble and on his way to get an actual education. Any leads?”

“Why I’m calling.” I run through everything, which is nothing much. Sometimes nothing much can be telling, a lead in itself, but we’ll have to see.

“Not much,” he agrees. “Which is weird.”

“So, we’re missing something. And we’re no closer to finding answers with the links to Dallas.”

“If there are any.” Tizio sighs. “Fuck. It just gets all sorts of complicated.”

“Yeah, I’m chasing up some maybe leads, and some left-of-center shit. Because I think there’s an angle we’re missing.”

“I hope it’s just a coincidence about the girls, and some will come back. I hope like fuck that the shit in that town is shit belonging to the town and you get it solved because Leo’s

got something brewing and we might need all hands on deck sooner rather than later.”

The phone muffles, and then Nicolo gets on. “Send us names and so on. We’ll look into it here. Do it now.”

When I hang up, I do as he ordered. Not because he ordered, that fucking ticks me off, but because it’s smart to use the bigger networks, contacts, and databases we have in Dallas to do some heavy lifting.

Then, I head up to visit the first name on my list.

He answers the door with an unfriendly grunt and speaks to me in broken Portuguese. I’m hard to place, and he’s heard my American accent. A lot of people speak Spanish around here, my father’s native tongue? Not so much.

“I’m looking for whoever’s running this town,” I say in Portuguese. “Thought you could help.”

His scowl deepens. There’s an old 86s tattoo on his arm, faded, newer ink almost going over it. Almost, but not quite. It says he still finds it useful, but when he ran with them, it was a long time ago. Santiago here also used to work at RoadSide running barback and occasional security.

Until recently.

“The mayor don’t live here.”

I laugh. “Real power.”

“Like the gangs? Fuck, man.” He switches to English and steps aside. “They’re puppets who think they run the show. I see. Why you think I got fired?”

“New owner?”

He drops his voice. “Piece of shit cunt.”

“I’ve met him.” It gives nothing away and lays open for him to mold into whatever he wants it to. It’s a trick that’s stood me well for years.

“You get it.” He looks me up and down. “I remember you. Come in if you wanna talk.”

\* \* \*

By the end of the day, it's like I've learned so much it's taken me in a circle.

Right back to the beginning with nothing but questions.

I'm thinking from the bong and the heavy scent in the air, not to mention the mirror and rolled up bill that Santiago dabbled on the side. And that's why he got fired.

O'Grady, it seems, runs a tight ship, where he wants to, anyway.

Whatever he's involved with might be something important to the De Lucas, but I don't think he's got anything to do with this. Not with the gangs, and he's not pulling strings.

It's the same reason Leo doesn't mess with gangs on the whole. They're messy, into themselves, and unreliable with more than grunt work.

O'Grady's smart like Leo.

I did get one place that stands out.

It's not grimy, a bar, or any kind of hotbed of crime.

Gary's Furniture Store. There's also, after a quick Google, a car dealership belonging to Gary. As well as, of all things, a florist. I put them on my list for tomorrow, but it won't hurt taking a stroll by those places, maybe picking up some flowers for Nadie.

Shit.

I close my eyes a moment as I get ready to get back on my bike and head for town. Flowers? Dinner? Because that's where my next thought goes.

I want to check out the florist, but the idea of giving Nadia flowers grabs me.

It just leads right down to getting in deeper with her. I told her I loved her.

I do.

That's the problem, right there. I fucking love her and always have. Sliding into intimacy, arguments, sex, and banter is an old glove that's molded to me. I know every crevice and line, and yet there's always something more to find.

Beyond our worlds spinning in different directions, love isn't enough. I should have learned that first time around, and yet, here I am, wanting her back and another chance anyway.

Even though the fundamental problem's still there. I'm not talking about how she never stuck up for me, because the more I think about it, it isn't Nadie. I'm betting her fuck of a father never held up his end of the deal.

No, our problem is she'll never leave. I can't live here again. I know that. Living ghosts notwithstanding, this place is fucking poison to me. She was the only bright thing, and I don't think I can stand watching it crush her too. It will. She's too good for this piece of shit town.

I watched her with the kids when I watched over her at the church. And like her nephew, she won't leave them. I'm both proud and devastated by who and what she is. Proud because she's a hell of a woman, and I'm in awe, and the devastation? That's pure selfishness.

Fuck.

I get on my bike, ride to town, and hit the florist. The lady's helpful as I look around. I don't spend time in places like this, so I don't know how they work, but the back door is shut, and there are basic-looking bunches on display.

"Do you need one of our specials?" the middle-aged woman asks.

It's an odd turn of phrase, but maybe that's just florist speak. "Ah, looking for something for my ..." Shit. Woman isn't right. "Girlfriend."

Joan, according to her tag smiles and picks a bunch of generic flowers. I shake my head, hand resting on a book. It's big and fat, and I start to flip through it at all the bouquets and wreaths.

The photos are uninspiring, and the prices are all crazy high, so I close it again.

Joan starts to look slightly strained beneath her friendly smile, which I put down to it's closing time and I'm wasting hers.

"Gary, huh?" I inspect a bunch of roses that look a little mundane, like the ones at bodegas in cities. "Same one who owns the furniture store and dealership?"

"Sure is," she chirps. "Those are lovely. Shall I wrap them?"

I put them back. I'm about to pick up each bouquet to annoy her when I spot some flowers that are all poofy, pale pink, and girly. The kind Nadie should have.

"The peonies. Just in."

I pick them up and let her wrap them, but in brown paper and string, much to her annoyance. She wanted to wrap them in green glitter paper.

After paying, I leave and stand on the pavement. Italian? Chinese? Probably Italian, as I don't see anything else close, and—

"Fernandez."

The voice stops me, mainly because I can't quite fucking place it. I turn and come face to face with douche dough boy himself. His gaze drops to the flowers.

"See you got her favorites. I have them in stock when I can get them for Nadia." He smirks. "One of my places."

"You're Gary?"

"Part owner. And you're what? In a biker gang?"

Now, I look him up and down. "No, I break better heads than yours for a very powerful family in Dallas."

He starts laughing, then double-takes and stops. "You're a thug."



“Enforcer. Brains, skill, cool under pressure, and I can mop the floor with guys like you and not break a sweat.”

He narrows his eyes. “I used to be a star football player.”

I nod. He can try and belittle me, but I’m not having it. “College, right? And used to be are real fuckin’ important words here, aren’t they?”

“Are you threatening me?”

“You asked, I explain, no threat.”

“Do us all a favor,” he says, “and get out of town.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.” Then I slap him hard enough on the back to make him stumble. “So, Riff—stupid name, by the way—this Italian place ... any good?”

\* \* \*

My phone rings while I’m waiting for my order.

“Got your fucking text, man.” Nicolo clicks on a keyboard. “Remember the photography studio Avah worked for and how shit didn’t add up? That’s your florist. The other two seem legit, but Ralph and a buddy own them. Ralph’s the money, or represents the fucking money, and dude ...”

“What is it?”

“They hire some real bad guys.”

“Thanks, man, I’ll look into it.”

Tomorrow.

When my orders are ready, I store it all on my bike and head to Nadia’s.

\* \* \*

My senses are on high alert when I pull up to her place, and the lights on the porch blaze, along with a big white car parked

haphazardly in the drive. I snap a pic of the plates and send it to Nicolo.

Then I take the flowers and food and bound up to the door. I set them down. The door's cracked open, and there are voices spilling from inside.

Nadia and a guy. I pull my gun, check it, and move in light and fast, ignoring the hammering in my chest.

“So, you dumb cunt, do I have to make the message clear with my fists? Got no fuckin’ problem hurting a female. Keep your fuckin’ nose out of things that don’t belong to you.”

I force myself to breathe steady, and I come up to him and press the muzzle of the gun into the back of his head.

“Interesting,” I say, “because I got no problem fuckin’ shooting asshole creeps in front of her, and she can do what she wants. Do I make myself clear?”

There’s a small tattoo on the back of his neck.

El fuckin’ Cabeza.

“Tell your boss she’s under protection. You got a beef, come to me. I’m bigger than you, but she’s nowhere near your size, so play nice and live. Got me?”

“Fucker—”

“I said, you fuckin’ got me?” I cock the gun, press it in hard. The man swallows.

“Yes.”

“Good,” I say. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

And I do. I don’t dare look at Nadie because I just might lose my shit and kill the fucker.

When he’s gone, I bring in the flowers and food and set them on the table. drawing her into my arms. “Nadia, you okay? I fuckin’ should’ve been back earlier.”

“I’m fine.”

“He was in your fuckin’ home.” I’m swearing a little too much, but it’s that or lose my shit.

She rubs her face against me. “Yeah, well.”

“I’m leaving you a gun. And shoot any motherfucker who tries anything.” I kiss the top of her head. “I’d say go to the cabin, but it’s the wrong side of isolated, or my hotel room, but that’s not much for protection either. Gun, locked doors, and don’t open to anyone you don’t know.”

She pulls away and looks up at me. “Diego.”

“Fuckin’ please.”

“Manners get you everywhere. Then she spies the flowers, and her face lights up. “Peonies, my favorite.” She looks at me. “How did you know?”

I shrug. “I didn’t. They seemed you and I figured maybe it’s time I bought you flowers.”

She laughs like some guy didn’t just threaten to hurt her and rises on her toes to kiss me. “Thank you.”

“I got food too. Bucatini with fennel and olive sauce. It sounded good.”

“Divine.”

Her smile is worth a thousand words.

\* \* \*

It’s early the next morning when I kiss her awake. “Lock everything, keep the gun near, take it if you go somewhere. Promise.”

“I—”

“So fuckin’ help me God, Nadie ...”

“I promise.”

I shower, don the suit, and armor up. Checking I have my permits for concealed and open carry. It’s overkill, but we all have them. It makes life easier.

Then I’m off. I have the Gary places to check out and haunt, but first, I’m going to make a real Cabeza link.

Nicolo got back to me.

I don't care if it's Satan himself, no one sends someone to threaten my woman.

No one.

# *Chapter Eighteen*

NADIA

Diego drives me crazy, bringing flowers and ordering me about. My head's spinning, and at five, I'm dashing to the church hall for the second class with Josie.

It's like he's romancing me, pushing me away, pulling me to him, and I'd be furious if I didn't understand.

But I also try not to let the latent thought that I'm not enough to come here for and give the town another go room to breathe.

It's a selfish thought. It's just confusion and trying to work out how to keep it at a level to minimize the pain when he finally leaves.

I do manage to text and say I'll be at the church hall, but then it's so full on, with so many kids coming and going, that I can't think of anything but them.

When the last one leaves, Josie helps me pack up.

"What do you think of them using it as more of a safe place to come and go from?" I ask.

"The less it has to do with school, the better, I think. School isn't designed to help kids struggling with the outside pressures of life, at least ours. So, we offer a safe place where they can hang out, paint, read, or play. Or work on their homework." She looks at me. "I'm excited about this. And ..."

Her eyes go big, and she practically drools.

"Oh ducking shizz, that man is beautiful and he's heading here."

Heat slides through me.

It's Diego, I know it.

"Ducking hell, he's eating you up with those eyes."

I turn, and my heart flutters. "Diego."

“Longstocking.” He comes to a stop in front of me. “What? Too shy to lay some sugar on me?”

“I’m having a hot flash, and I’m only twenty-six. Do you have a brother?” Josie asks.

“No, ma’am.” He tugs my hand and pulls me to him. “If the sugar won’t come to me, I’ll drag her close and get it myself.”

Diego kisses me slow and hot, his tongue dancing with mine. I’m at meltdown point when he’s done.

When he flirts like that, I lose my mind. “Good day, Diego?”

“Something like that.” He turns to Josie as he lets me go. “You must be Josie. Diego and only child. Keep her in check.” He winks at me. “Got a few more things to do, any trouble?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. then. Keep yourselves safe.” He saunters off.

Josie fans herself with a cushion. “You dark horse, and here I thought you’d settle for Fizz.”

“Riff.” I sigh. “Not settling and not a dark horse.”

“Nadia ... c’mon, you just made out, and I was jealous of your tongue.”

I laugh, then lean against the door. “I’ve loved that man since I was twelve. Fell for him at fifteen, like I understood something of romantic love. And we got together when I was eighteen.”

I look down at my blue denim kicks.

“Here’s something I haven’t told anyone. When I was sixteen, I kissed him, and he started kissing me back, but stopped. I wasn’t old enough.”

“How old was he?”

“Twenty. But when I was eighteen, and I kissed him again. It happened. He kissed me back properly, and we became a

thing. He crushed my heart. Told me he didn't love me, and left town."

I'm leaving lots out, like Dad, but that stuff is just juicy window dressing. It's not important.

"And now ..."

"Your man is back, Nadia."

"For now," I say. "It can't be."

"I don't believe it. The way he kissed you and looked at you. Dear Lord, you can feel the heat. And it isn't just sex. It's feelings."

"He told me he loves me, but also, it can't work. Our lives go in different directions. I'm here, he's in Dallas. And then there's trust." I take a breath. "He lets me in to a point, more than most, but not all of it. He keeps the important things locked up."

"Everyone has locked parts, Nadia," she says as we continue to put things away. "I think you're scared."

"Of course, I am." I stack the chairs. "Even if everything else was aligned, I want that trust. That part of him. A-and, I want to know he won't hurt me like he did last time because he threw my love back at me."

"Did he have reasons?"

"Not that he's explained."

She sighs. "Have you asked?"

"No. Because I don't think I'll survive his flinging my love down."

Her face is a million words she's not saying. All she says is, "Love is weird, Nadia."

"You're telling me."

"Tell you what. Why don't we go get a drink and get your personal hunk to meet us? It'll be fun."

"We have different ideas of fun, Jos." I survey the room, it looks better than when we got here. Half of it, anyway. With a



sigh, I go to the right side and start putting the books in the plastic bins. Toys for the younger ones that tag along in the other. “Because it sounds like your idea of fun is interrogation.”

“It’s fun.” She raised her hands. “Okay, no interrogation.”

“I’ll text—” I stop as my phone starts to ring. “Hello?”

“Is this Miss Reed? I’ve got a problem with Andy ...”

I try to calm the over-emotional parent and promise to help find the boy. When I get off the phone, Josie leans on the broom she’s grabbed. “One of ours?”

“No, a kid from one of my classes. He’s thirteen and gets bullied.” I swallow past the tightness in my throat that hurts. “I gave his mom my number at the last parents’ evening. I don’t think she knows about the suspension. But I’m pretty sure I know where he is.”

“I’ll finish up here and meet you for that drink. Tucker’s Bar and Grill?”

“Sounds good.” I give her a hug, and then I take off.

I let Diego know where he can meet me if he wants, and then I get out of the car and cross to the old, closed-down movie theater. Pushing the graffitied boards to the side a little more, I head in.

The place has power, as they’re going to start remodeling it into a Hoyts, which is a crying shame.

He’s down the front, head bent over an iPad, the glow of the screen washing his face in shifting colors. “Hey, Andy.”

I sit two rows behind him, giving him space.

He keeps watching the anime on his device. Then he sniffs, pawing at his nose and eyes. “Dan and the others were mean. Said my mom’s a *whore*.”

Her drops his voice with the last one and I force my anger down. “Because she’s a hard-working single mom?”

I have very choice words about these sixth formers who come from the moneyed part of town. Words I have to keep

locked in. The biggest problem is this kid here's smart, and he'll go places if he works at even a quarter of what the bullies do. And probably get scholarships.

The only reason we decided not to skip him ahead a grade is it can be more isolating, and Andy doesn't need that.

"Maybe."

Which means yes, and they said worse. Jesus, even if she did use her body to make money to support her kid, I respect that more than I do the moms of the bullies whose time's spent on hair and spas, nails, and shopping sprees.

"You know what? Don't listen to them. She called me because she loves you and worries." I lean on the row in front of me. "Can I trust you?"

His eyes get big, and he nods.

"I have a safe activity place, hang out joint. It's at the church hall on Elroy Street, but lots of kids go there and you can tag with some of them after school. You can even do your homework or read. Pretty much anything. You know Xan?"

"Yep."

"He's pretty cool and he's bigger than those kids, so I'm sure he'll walk with you. His sister joined the group tonight." I make a mental note to talk to Xan. He's pretty much in charge of his little sister and I know him as a friend of Jay's, pre gang. The kid got a job, so his time is stretched, but he'll do it.

"You think?"

"Yeah, Andy, I think he will. Now, let's get you home."

\* \* \*

I'm running late to meet Diego, and I can't shake the feeling of being followed as I drive there. It's silly, and this is a busy part of town. Lots of people are heading here, a bunch of cars.

It's the end of the workday, almost the weekend and people want some fun.

Still ...

I can't shake it. As I step into the bar, it's like I'm being watched.

Diego's already there, and though he's at the bar, beer next to him, and he seems lost to texting, he looks at me the moment I come in like every instinct of his has been on alert.

Maybe he saw me before I came in. He has a way of watching people without them seeing it. But I always feel his gaze on me, like a live, tangible thing, and it doesn't feel like him.

I glance around, but no one else is looking. So maybe I'm just jumpy. I slide my gaze back to Diego.

He's drinking me in. Slow, appreciative, and inside, I throb. How he can turn me on with a look from across a crowded room is beyond me, but he does.

Diego smiles slowly as he takes me in, head to toe, and I finger the edge of my outfit. I donned a dress with leggings and Docs. The dress buttons all the way down. It's something I can do a lot with, if he's planning more after-dark missions.

My wardrobe doesn't extend to the revealing clothes of the women at the bars, but this could work.

His shoulders relax as I come over and he speaks to the bartender. There's a game on the big screen, but the sound is down and some soft decade old pop plays under the chatter and laughter.

When I reach him, a tequila with lime appears, and he slides an easy arm around me as he nuzzles my cheek.

"Tell me I don't have to break fuckin' legs, and you're just late."

I smile up at him, slipping into the fantasy this is us, our life together, instead of what it is, a temporary thing that ends when he leaves town.

A basket of sweet potato fries lands between us, dusted with chili, and I moan as I eat one.

Diego presses his mouth against my ear and murmurs, “Now, I’m fuckin’ jealous of those fries, getting you to make that sound.”

I twist my fingers around his tie near the knot. When Diego chooses to turn on the charm that seems to flow naturally in his blood, there’s nothing else like it in the world.

Of course, being Diego, he knows how to control it and never lets it out. Except maybe, for me.

Or the woman in his life, I amend. There’ve been those. People don’t live in vacuums when they’re broken up and apart. They live them, and I’m suddenly jealous of those women. Not that I’ve got a right to be.

It’s then I think back to Josie seeing the big guy and then Diego. Definitely not the same. So, who the hell was looking for me? Not someone known in town, not Diego, and not Riff, who she knows at least to say hello to.

Then again, maybe it doesn’t matter. Diego’s in a suit and he seems relaxed about his day, though he does text as we chat. I don’t think it’s a normal thing for him, so it’s got to be work. But this isn’t the place to ask.

“Nadia.”

I almost jump out of my skin and spill my drink as Riff stands there. Could he have been following me? This isn’t his place of choice.

“It’s Ralph,” Diego says.

Everything in me goes on high alert. Because though his voice is mild, the ice and steel there anything but. And Riff’s hackles rise. I don’t want a fight because Riff will lose.

“Threatening me again, Fernandez, and making moves on my fiancée?”

“I’m not your fiancée anymore. We broke up a long while ago.”

Diego touches my cheek, and I almost smack him away for his smooth caveman move. “Gotta talk about your taste in men

who aren't me." Then he flicks his eyes at Riff. "Gonna order me out of town again?"

"I want you gone. You're a troublemaker."

"How so? I don't have a record. You do, though, don't you?" Diego says.

I narrow my eyes at him. What kind of pissing contest are they involved in here? And he's been poking about my ex's past?

"Speeding, beating up a teen who didn't like how you played. Accusations of less than gentlemanly behavior at college, and my personal favorite, drugs." Diego grins.

Jesus, I want to strangle them both. Diego for being an asshole and Riff for ... well, whatever the fuck he might have done at college. I don't care about any of that, but Diego's not going to lie.

Riff turns red and shoves Diego. "All fucking lies. Get out of town and leave my businesses the fuck alone." He steps back and straightens his jacket. "Nadia, we'll talk soon."

"Douche, fuckin' douche."

"And you were what? Saintly?" I ask.

"Are you defending him?"

"No. I just ... I don't want trouble, and he's got powerful friends in town, and—"

"I'm no longer twenty-two, Nadia." He rubs a hand on the back of his neck. "Wanna get the fuck out of Dodge?"

"Yes." Then I stop and grab his phone to look at the time. "Diego? Where's Josie? She should be here by now."

\* \* \*

The lights are still on when we both reach the church hall, and her car's parked on the street still.

She often rides her bicycle or walks, but today, she drove.  
My heart thumps at the sight of the car.

“Diego?”

He locks eyes with mine. “Wait in your car.”

“No.”

“Fuckin’ stubborn pain in the ass woman. Come on.”

Together, we hurry to the hall.

At the last minute, he pushes me to the wall on the outside,  
makes me wait there, and he goes in alone.

“Nadia?” I start to shake at the eerie calm of his voice.  
“Call 911.”

I do that, and then I burst in and almost throw up.

Josie’s on the floor, face bloodied, arm at a strange angle,  
eyes closed.

“She’s alive,” he says, “but we shouldn’t move her.”

“Diego ...” He takes hold of me. “This ... why?”

“Best guess? This is a message to back the fuck off.

As the sirens grow louder, Diego leaves me sitting next to  
her as he greets the EMTs. I can only think of one thing.

This is my fault.

Entirely.

# *Chapter Nineteen*

DIEGO

“I hate hospitals.”

Nadia rests her head on my shoulder in the waiting room. I fudged it a bit and said Nadie’s her family.

“Me too.” She sighs. “I always get nervous when I step in, even if it’s for something like visiting someone who’s given birth. It’s like they’ll find out something’s wrong with me by osmosis.”

I squeeze her thigh. “And here I thought nothing bothered the indestructible Longstocking.”

“Why do you?”

“Emergency rooms and the bullshit that comes with gunshot wounds, of which I’ve had one. It’s stupid.”

She rubs her cheek on me. Above the antiseptic chill of hospital scents, I can pick up the warm bergamot of her, something that beats with life, heat, and Nadia.

I shouldn’t be here. I should be off looking into things, sniffing out the trail if there’s one, while it’s fresh. But Nadie needs me, so here I am.

Honestly, I think that’s the real reason I don’t like these places. There’s too much time wasted more or less spent waiting. There are things I can usually do that utilize my time.

But right now, that would mean me leaving Nadie, who I know is beating herself up, blaming herself. And nothing could tear me from her. Nothing.

The doctor finally comes out to let us know Josie’s fine, stable, and not in the ICU. They’re watching her for signs of a concussion, but the consensus is to go home.

I don’t give Nadia much choice but to leave and in the foyer of the hospital, we’re met by two cops.

“Diego.”



“Go sit, I’ll deal.” I straighten my tie and ease into my professional persona.

It’s either someone they’ve questioned that have sent them looking for me, because that’s what they’re doing, or one douche dough boy.

Money’s on the fucking latter cloaked in the former.

I wait.

“Diego Fernandez?”

“That’s me.” I offer an easy smile. “There a problem?”

“We’re concerned about your involvement with the known gangs, Landers Men and the 86s.”

“Involvement?” Sliding my hands in the pockets of my trousers, I give a puzzled look.

People are looking. Nadie most of all because she didn’t sit down.

Back when I was young, before I made my way to Dallas, I got the shit beaten out of me and found purpose and a family. I would’ve been embarrassed and enraged over this.

Now?

Curious.

They’re in a hospital. They know Nadia placed the 9-1-1 call, so someone knows enough to have the cops seek me here. Which begs me to ask—is Nadia being followed?

Douche is acting like a douche and apart from his overbearing ways, he gets I’m a threat to plans of him and Nadie and a sweet little forever.

But yeah, I’m fucking curious they sought me out in a hospital, and their first question is a thug-oriented one, not about her friend Josie.

Less is more here, so I don’t volunteer a thing.

“You’ve been seen with some of them, and Miss Reed’s nephew is a known gang member.”

“Jay’s sixteen.”

“We want to speak to him too. Where is he?”

I keep a pleasant expression on my face. “He’s out of town, I believe, freshly out of any gang involvement.”

“And you? What about you? Couldn’t find anything on you.”

This is definitely dough boy douche’s work. And these guys are on someone’s payroll which shows me how gang shit’s allowed to go on here, more than it should.

The town isn’t that huge, it’d be doable.

“And yet,” Officer Fucking Idiot says, thumbing through an actual notebook. Pages are blank, but that’s how he got that name. “One Switchblade Gonzales”—I’m gonna fuckin’ bet that isn’t his real name, and this isn’t legal police business, though they could make it that—“mentioned you.”

“I don’t know anyone of that name.”

“Why are you in town?”

“Family and old friends. I’m from here.” They’d know that.

“Did you—”

“Enough.” Nadia’s voice makes them jump as she comes up and slips her fingers into the belt of my trousers. “He didn’t do anything.”

“He mentioned you too.”

“Know anyone by the name of ... Switchblade Gonzales?”

She stares at me with such shock I almost laugh. “Do you mean Alfie Allen? That’s his skater name. He’s fifteen and probably saw us together. He’s in a class of mine. Now what’s this about? Why aren’t you looking for the person who broke a teacher’s arm and hurt her, instead of hassling innocent men.”

“Maybe you should finish up your business in town,” one officer says.

At almost the same time, Officer Fucking Idiot chimes in, “Don’t go anywhere. We might have more questions.”

“Go do your job,” says Nadia.

Before this can escalate into more of a three-ring circus run by fucking clowns, a nurse comes up. “Josie woke. She was asking for you.”

\* \* \*

Nadie’s quite the force of nature not to be ignored when she wants to be. We’re both in the room with her friend who looks groggy from the drugs but not concussed.

I do lean into Nadia before she rushes up to Josie and whisper, “Innocent? That’s fuckin’ pushing it.”

“Shut up, Diego.” She takes her friend’s hand, the one that doesn’t wear a cast. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry, Jos. I should —”

“You didn’t do it. Don’t be worried. Besides,” she smiles at me, “you bought me a present to look at. I know he’s yours but it’s just looking.”

Okay, heat rises from under my shirt collar to the top of my head.

“And he blushes. So hot.” Josie half laughs, and I want to smash something to regain dignity and my enforcer creds. “It’s not your fault, Nadia. Plus, I’m out tomorrow. It’s an overnighter, but ...”

“What?”

She looks at me, freckles standing out on her pretty face from being so pale. “Whoever it was had lots of tattoos.” Josie shifts her gaze from me to Nadia and back again, trying to sit up in the bed with the crisp white sheet. “The one who broke my arm, he ... he was tall, big like you. Ugly, though.”

“Josie.” Nadia squeezes her friend’s hand and swallows. “It is my fault.”

“No, no, but he’s the one who asked about you that time. It wasn’t Mr. Gorgeous here. And they mentioned you.” She looks at me. “They said they were with you and wanted to

know about the kid. That's what they called Jay, the kid. And they said you needed Nadia's routine so you could set up security. I asked them to describe you, said I know a couple of Diegos. But ... they got it wrong."

"Yeah, I'd ... well, I'd never do that shit to an innocent person. Thanks for protecting your friend. What did the others look like?"

She looks down at the sheet and swallows. "There was one more guy ... he didn't touch me, didn't speak, but he seemed in charge, and he had a full mask on."

Something cold and familiar moves through me, and I ask, "Have the cops been to see you?"

"N-no. I wouldn't tell them about the guy, though." Now she's looking right at me and understanding hits, like a bolt of lightning connecting the past to now. Not like they're linked, but the feel of it, the betrayal.

Because this fucking masked wonder sounds like someone Nadie knows. And it's also meant to.

But Nadie frowns. "Why not? You have to. Did they threaten you if you said something?"

"No," I say gently, "because it's me."

\* \* \*

Nadia is beyond furious, even after we get to her place. Thank fuck I took the bike, in the fucking suit.

Because the ride gave me room to think.

History repeating itself. I was taking the place of her father because he'd hired a big guy to do his dirty work beyond what I'd do.

I can smell a fucking set up, and this reeks.

The guy around my height, build, and a mask? Sounds like a pure fucking coward. Sounds like Nadie's fucking ex.

But if Josie even mentions that guy—who she knew wasn't me and it makes me wonder at her life before the non-sweary, hippy-like teacher—she knows enough that to do that would mean me hauled in on all kinds of charges. And not by the brainless duo, either.

People up the food chain, probably corrupt, and in the culprit's pocket.

There are De Luca lawyers who'd be handing them all their asses in shreds and smiling about it if I called. Push comes to anything, I will.

So, when I find Nadie's door locked and I have to knock, her taking her sweet damn time answering, scream just how pissed she is with me.

“What was that all about, Diego?” She opens the door, steps away and starts pacing, a burning fuse connected to a bomb that might self-detonate any second. “It's you? Come on.”

I swatch her closely as I close the door, and solely focus on her. “Not me fucking me, Nadie. Meant to be me.” I shove a hand through my hair and pull off my tie.

Nadia halts her pacing and twists on her heels to face off with me, hands planting themselves on those hips. “So, you're taking that? Or are you planning something?”

“I don't know yet.” I hedge it because there are things in my head. I need to go deeper beyond everything.

There's too much at stake. All of it seeming to be centered around this town. This area. It's not too far, but far enough from the border. It's the simple place where girls can be taken to before disappearing altogether.

What the fuck is douche doing hiring ex-criminals, hell, according to Tizio and Nicolo some are active. The kind we don't ever play with, and the only dealing is putting them back in their place far away from our jurisdiction or in the ground.

“How long's the douche been working with the mayor?”

“Ex-mayor ... I think he wants to run again ... is it important? He doesn't play sport anymore, and he turned from coaching to investing family money in local businesses.”

“Parragon of fucking virtue right there, Nadie.”

She stares at me like I slapped her, and I feel like a heel. “I didn't say that. I—”

“Shit.” I cross to her and take her face in my hands. “I'm not sure what's going on, but try and keep out of his way.”

Nadie attempts to pull away, but I don't let her go. “You said all this stuff about him and now I don't know what to think. About me, him, all of it. Is he a monster, and I didn't notice?”

“I don't think he's going around assaulting women in his spare time.” Unless, of course, he's in the trafficking and drug trade to make a little extra on the side. What a good way to control and use most of the gangs than by placing yourself above them in the criminal hierarchy.

Whether the fucker's doing that, I don't know.

I'll find out.

“Nadie ... no excuses, but the college shit wasn't just him, and his career slid because of that. Lawyers buried it.”

“He raped someone?”

“No. More like some revenge porn released that a girl took part in. That's what I got, anyway.”

“So that makes me what? Complicit?” she asks.

With him? Me? I want to ask but I leave it because I sure as shit don't have any real answers.

“You trust me?” I ask instead.

She leans into me, the fight going. “Always have.”

“No, you haven't, but that's okay.”

“And you think the worst of me, Diego. I don't know if that's okay.”

I breathe out. “Nadie ...”

“It kills.”

I try to find words, and she moves into me, rising up, and putting her lips to mine. “This doesn’t kill, and I love you and want you for as long as you’re here. Until you leave me again.”

Instead of telling her it’s more complicated than that, I kiss her, deep. She gives me back everything and more. She’s so sweet, with the right amount of spice that stirs my blood and my cock. I walk her backward, kissing, tasting, biting her throat, unbuttoning the dress until I have her in just the damn leggings and bra.

In her room, I strip her the rest of the way. I kiss my way down her body, over the soft warm silk of her skin. Her nipples made for my mouth, her sighs and moans designed to heat my blood and make my cock fucking harder.

I’m aching for her. Each taste is a tumble further into her. She tastes delightful, sweet with salt, as I lick a path between her legs, along the lips of her cunt. Wrapping my arm around her ass, I suckle on her clit until she’s moaning, and I slide my hands over her, one between her ass cheeks, the other up so I can thrust my fingers into those tight, hot depths. She almost falls.

She clutches my head as I start to massage her anus. In rhythm with everything else. Against my forehead, her stomach flutters. “Oh ... God ... Diego ... that ... oh ...”

Fucking speechless. I push my finger into her a little, cock twitching at the tightness of her ass. I’m taking it. If this is how she is with me just touching it, her ass is mine, and she’s going to give it willingly.

But not tonight.

Before I leave.

I want to own every part of her, make it all mine, make it harder for any man to even be able to hold her hand without her wishing it was me.

It’s an asshole move, I know, but fuck it. She’s so etched into me, into my bones that I don’t think I can look at another

woman without wanting it to be Nadie.

She starts to moan in earnest, and I can feel the faint throbs against my tongue as I continue my attack. Nadia moans out my name, wobbly, high-pitched, as she comes, and the faintness turns into a full-on drumbeat, inside and out. I'm so fucking hard it hurts. I pull my fingers free as she starts to tumble, and I catch her, pushing her on the bed.

I need to be in her now, so I unzip and pull out, and with her legs on my shoulders, I drive home, deep, setting her off again.

Pounding into her, the moans are pure pleasure and she's so fucking tight and rippling against me.

It's not enough. I need deeper, rougher, total ownership. So, I withdraw and flip her, pulling her up so her ass is in the air, and I can fuck her standing.

I push back into her, hard, all the fucking way.

"Diego ..."

"I need all of you, every part, inside and out. You were made for me, Nadie.

I drop my pants so I can hammer home, skin on skin. I take her hips to slam into her, making her shake and move, and she comes again, hard and fast.

I need to come, but I need to make it last. I want to eke out another orgasm from her. I want to fucking ruin her for any other man. So, I changed the tempo, coming over her, supporting her with one arm, thrusting in deep, and pulling out only a bit.

I start to tease her clit, stroking it with my other hand. This way, I'm bent over her, biting and kissing her back, nape, and shoulder, feeling the heat of her sear through my shirt, taking her intimately because I never really leave. But I'm in so deep that I hit home every fucking time, and she's moaning again.

My balls are so high and tight it's a wonder I'm not singing soprano. That tingle of electricity in my back is burning. It's a pleasure laced with need and the urge to let



loose and give over, but I want her to come on my cock again. I want her spasms to wrench that cum from me.

It's getting too fucking much.

It starts as my control slips. Her orgasm takes her over, and she clamps down on me over and over. The rush of euphoria sweeps through me to the tip of my cock, and I come in her, spurting, cock twitching until she takes the last drop and collapses. I roll us on the bed, pulling out and tucking her into me.

Then when we've lain there, tangled and trying to get our breathing back to normal, I peel off my clothes to grab a shower.

"No."

I look at her. "No, Longstocking?"

She starts to play with my cock, making it grow and stir, and I groan.

Nadia squeezes. "We don't have any kind of a future, do we?"

She's going to fucking blow me, that's in the air. I want nothing more than that mouth wrapped around my junk, letting me face fuck her.

It'll sure as shit happen if I say yes or maybe or I don't know.

But I can't, and I need to do the right thing.

So, I take her hand from me and put it on my chest.

I meet her gaze.

"No, Nadia, we don't. At all."

# *Chapter Twenty*

NADIA

After that punch in the heart, I already knew was coming, Diego takes a shower.

Pathetic as I am, I want to follow him in there, take him in my mouth.

I don't.

I can't.

Everything's a mess and I don't know what to be mad at. There are no revelations. He's not leading me on. This is what I knew from the moment he came back into my life.

One thing Diego is, is honest. At least, mostly. At least to me.

With a sigh, I head to the other bathroom for a quick shower. I put on a dress, and my fuzzy pink floppy socks Riff hated. They are ugly and ridiculous, but I call them house socks and they keep my feet happy on cooler nights.

When I'm done, I just tie my hair back and go to the kitchen.

The tequila bottle is out, and it's about two-thirds full. I make a drink light on booze, heavy on soda water and lime.

Diego always makes it perfect. Whether full strength or the light version, his is always just right. Suddenly, that annoys the hell out of me.

Just like him coming here for other reasons than helping me.

It isn't fair, but emotions don't play by fair rules.

Because I need something, and that will do. I'm wrong because he told me when he didn't have to the other reasons he's here. I'm right because why the fuck am I not enough for him?

"Pathetic," I mutter, taking a big swallow.

I almost jump when someone bangs on the front door. I know who it is. The only person who thinks he's too important for the doorbell. I stomp over and drag it open.

"I'm not in the mood, Riff."

He pushes past me after glaring at the socks and goes into the living room, looking about for something ... or make that someone.

I think of getting the gun, but I don't. Because even though I didn't invite him in, I did open the door knowing who it was. But Diego's here, and it's not like Riff's going to do anything to me.

Still, I don't feel like talking to him. I take a swallow of my drink and stand while he perches on the sofa, eyeing the seat next to him like I should sit. I don't.

"Where is he?" Riff asks.

I don't answer exactly. "You sure have a lot of interest in Diego. Do you want to date him?"

"He's a bad influence on you."

"I'm not a child, Riff. No one's an influence on me."

He sighs. "Can I have a drink?"

"Why are you here?"

He folds his hands together. "Peabody told me the trouble you're in."

"So, you've said. Sort of. And that's your problem because?"

He lets out a noisy sigh. "I've got plans for the future, Nadia, our future. And it'll be beautiful. You don't have to worry about work."

I frown. "I like my job."

"You're suspended. And you thumbing your nose at the school isn't going to improve that, just make it worse. But once we clean up the town, I get more money and power, you won't have to worry about jobs."

“As I said, Riff, I like my job. I like to work.”

“I don’t want my wife working, and when we have kids —”

“Riff, I’m not sure I want children. And as for your wife, I’m not marrying you, so it doesn’t concern me.”

He stands, glowering. “It’s that fucker, Fernandez, isn’t it? Offering you a little rough and tumble and adventure, putting ideas in your head. He’s a criminal. Do you know he works with organized crime? I don’t have proof, but I will, and—”

“Riff.” I set my glass down with a click and stalk up to him, poking him in his flabby dad bod stomach. “Diego Fernandez is not a rough and tumble adventure. He’s—”

“A piece of shit mafia gofer.”

“No, he isn’t. I’ve known him since I was twelve and Diego’s one of the best men I know. So, please go.”

“He’s poisoned your mind. Stop being a stupid bitch—”

A crack fills the air, and I stare horrified at my hand.

I just slapped him.

I don’t hit people.

I try to be nice, the voice of reason and understanding.

I just hit Riff, who’s jealous and probably hurting. My stomach clenches.

“I’m—”

“Fucking stupid slut.” He grabs me, fury blazing in his eyes as his fingers bite into me.

Riff shakes me violently, then shoves me away, bearing down on me with a raised fist.

“Think fuckin’ twice about that, asshole.”

Riff drops his fist, the hate and anger gone as he looks at Diego and then me. “Nadia, I’m sorry.”

“He’s fuckin’ not.” Diego gently eases me away and steps in between me and Riff. I’m shaking. I can’t stop shaking.

I've known Riff for five years, we dated for two were engaged for about six months, and I don't know who this man is. At all.

My eyes burn, and the last thing I'll allow myself to do is cry. I know it's shock that makes the tears want to come because even with everything Diego said about Riff, I never thought he had that kind of ugly in him. Which makes me the worst of the worst because now I can see him taking part in revenge porn bullshit.

I don't want to cry. I want to throw up.

Diego's in jeans, a black T, and all those muscles and ink are on display. He looks very dangerous. And very, very angry.

He curls his hands into fists.

"You've always been the big fuckin' man, haven't you? Thought you'd caught a prize here, and you're not wrong. She's a priceless jewel, but she's not a docile thing. She's a woman whose utter amazing qualities your tiny mind missed."

"Fuck you."

"See," Diego continues as if Riff never spoke, "I'm betting you never felt the wrath of someone bigger than you. Guess what, motherfucker? I'm bigger than you, stronger than you, and I know how to fight."

Before I can do a thing, Diego lifts a fist and swings, punching Riff hard in the face.

He takes him by the collar as Riff's trying to stem the blood from his nose and drags him to the front door. Diego switches off the porch light and proceeds to beat him up.

"Diego, enough," I whisper the words.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Riff's begging for Diego to stop, and even in the light of the moon and streetlamps, my ex looks like he got hit by a bus.

"Fine." He lets him go, and Riff crumples to the ground. He turns. "Get the fuck off Nadia's property, and don't come

back. If I ever hear of you thinking of even so much as raising your fuckin' voice to her, I'll give you a real beating."

Riff crawls down the stairs, staggering to his feet. "I'll have you behind bars, you thug."

"And I'll press charges for coming into my house and threatening me." I push past Diego, mainly to stop him from killing Riff.

Riff takes a step back. "It's not over. I know people."

"Good for you," I spit, and drag Diego into the house, locking the door.

He's immediately got me. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." I shake him off. "What did he mean?"

Diego rubs a hand over his face, goes into the kitchen, and pours a glass of water. "I don't know, Nadie. But ..." He drinks the water and lifts his shoulders. "I think he might be caught up in it all."

"Like all of it?"

"It's a smart position, aligning with bigger people who are deemed beyond reproach. He's an ex-golden boy. There's the mayor, businesses where one is definitely some kind of front."

"I don't ..."

He rubs a hand over his face. "I can't prove anything, and I don't know, but the florist makes too much money. Thugs work at the dealership, and what's up with the old-fashioned furniture store?"

"I'm not saying you're wrong." I reach out and close my fingers on the edge of the counter, a strong wave of déjà vu hitting me.

Dad's little businesses, getting tangled with some scam artists that Diego introduced him to, got him into. This came out when his little empire collapsed like a house of cards when a little old lady accused the company of bilking her out of her savings. She got it back, Dad never went to prison, and blame was placed at Diego's feet, but ... déjà vu.

And even then, I couldn't see Diego doing that.

He's never been the lying sort, the oily sort. He's charming when he wants to be, yes, but aligning with people I now know Diego would've seen as cowards, even then, is an alien concept.

He might be mafia, but ... I don't know ... he talks of these people with their strong moral code, of family, like blood family.

That's Diego. Walk on the dark side, perhaps, but walk proudly and honestly.

I remember thinking then it wasn't right, and then the note and what Dad said.

"Something wrong?" he asks.

"No," I look at him, "just thinking. Why would he risk that? By hiring them?"

"To control what real criminal activity goes on. And it takes management, leaders who aren't seen as anything other than upstanding. Then you can pull strings, orchestrate, manipulate."

Another blast of déjà vu.

"It's just a working theory," he says. Then he looks down at my feet. "Love the socks, by the way."

\* \* \*

Because he claims it's too late to do anything tonight, he insists on cooking dinner, and we end up having sex again, on the kitchen counter. My legs wrapped around his waist, panties pulled aside as I ride the hell out of his huge cock.

He doesn't mention my ass again, but all through dinner where we talk and laugh about old memories, and nothing much at all, little thrills pass through me. I've never had anal and ... I think ... I think I want to with him.

I want to believe I belong to him while I can.



Later, I ask, “Coming to bed or ...”

“I’m not’ leaving. But I do need to get some work going for tomorrow. Your computer?”

I grab the laptop and give him the password.

“I don’t know how long you were there tonight, but Riff mentioned he was going to make more money so I wouldn’t have to work. I figured it was his investments in the Gary Group. But, Diego, in the past few months, he started making more money than ever, and that’s when the troubles with Jay really started.”

“I’m looking into everything, okay?”

I nod and he takes my hand pulling me down to tumble on his lap. Diego feathers his mouth over mine. The kiss is slow and dreamy, and it makes my entire being boneless.

He slides a hand between my legs and into my panties to slowly thrust into my wetness.

I sigh and roll my hips as he kisses me again, a little harder and longer this time. It’s a tease, not designed to have me come, just to rile and stroke. It’s frustrating, soothing, and something I could get used to.

When he stops, he rests his hand on my thigh. The beat of his heart is wild as I rest my head against his chest.

“Any more of that,” he says, stroking wet streaks onto my inner thigh, “and I won’t be stopping. I gotta get on this shit because—”

“You have to go home.”

“Yeah. But not until I make this safe.” He pauses. “I’ll be up when I can.”

There are so many things I want to say, things I keep to myself, things like begging him to stay, asking for every detail of his life. Of demanding a place, a real one, like I think part of him wants too.

But instead, I get up and go to bed. I fall asleep before he comes in.

The rumpled sheets and indent on the pillow next to me are the only signs of him being in bed.

I find him in the kitchen, one of those pink Pop-Tarts sitting on the counter. There's water still clinging to his hair and upper body. He's got jeans on, slung low on his hips, his belt and T-shirt on the chair as he studies something on my computer.

The phone is next to it, and I can hear Tizio talking about dates and then substantial dollar amounts.

"Yeah, what I fuckin' thought. I just don't know how to get in there."

"Someone's buying," Tizio says. "Find out who. There'll be locals. Guarantee it."

"Yeah, okay." He takes a bite of the Pop-Tart. "Tell Nicolo his taste in breakfast shit is awful."

"Radioactive fucking Pop-Tarts." And Tizio laughs. "Those are around more now because that kid's got a taste for them."

"How *is* Jay?"

"Great. He's a good kid. Your woman's a helluva female.

"Not my anything."

Those grumbled words stab my heart even as his friend snorts laughter. "Yeah, right, like I believe you."

"Asshole, dude." Diego stabs his finger viciously on the phone to end the call, and he turns. "Assholes being assholes, you know."

I almost say I'm looking at one. "So, Jay's good?"

"You probably weren't meant to hear about these disgusting snacks."

He pulls his shirt on and turns, looping on the belt. "Stay home, don't answer the fuckin' door, and keep the gun with

you.” He sighs and comes up to me, kissing my lips. “Gotta go, Nadie. Meet back here at five.”

I nod. When he leaves, I take a breath and look at the computer. There are names and numbers, local ones, on one of his spreadsheets.

I frown. Are they ... gang members?

Then, my heart skips a beat at a number I recognize.

He said to stay in, and it’s just a phone call.

I get my phone and call. The conversation is quick and to the point.

Okay, a call and a visit. I’ll get groceries, too, to make it legit and I also need them.

When I reach my destination, I keep my bag with the gun on me, unzipped for ease of access.

I look at the faces in the room.

“Time,” I say, “for some real talk.”

And behind me, someone speaks.

“We’re listening.”

# *Chapter Twenty-One*

DIEGO

Hedging bets, I drop in to the florists and Joan is there, not sure if she should be happy I'm here.

"Thanks for the flowers, she loved them, but I need something extra special, if you know what I mean."

I don't know if this is more than a laundering thing or just a florist whose owners pocket extra money. Fucking douche isn't even listed as an owner like he is at the dealership and weird ass furniture store that seems on the up and up.

There's the mayor and someone by the name of Henders, who could be anyone, but it's a name that rings old bells.

I don't even know if I'm chasing my tail or if I'm onto something, just like I don't know if there's a code and if it's a specific one.

So, I use generic phrases like *extra special*.

"The book, sir."

I start going through it front to back and back to front, looking for a pattern. I'm usually muscle and protection, but we're enforcers because when it's needed, fucking intelligence packs a hard punch.

Some of the prices ... yeah, there's a pattern. In among the randoms are pictures of wildly differing bouquets and wreaths with the same price. There are seven different prices that run through the book, which seem to be in the wrong place—everything else goes the usual lowest to highest and makes sense, and then there are the wild jumps with matching prices that rise in fifty, seventy, and hundred-dollar increments. Those ones aren't in order, so I think it's to do with the pictures. I pick a middle price and a small bouquet.

It comes out in minutes, wrapped and with a bow.

I pay up and go.

Riding back to my hotel, I take the bouquet and aren't shocked at all by the bags of coke and the pills that come out. It's like a rave in flower form.

Three hundred in this form is highway robbery. I'm betting it's fucking cut with all kinds of shit, just like...

"Oh shit. You gotta be fucking kidding me. Hendy?"

Hendy Henders, I can't remember his real name, but he was a rich kid who partied hard back in the day, and selling drugs he bought and cut with crap was his MO. And he loved to get creative in selling it to kids at school.

Fuck ... it makes sense. Sticking to what you know.

My phone rings, and it's a call I've been waiting for. Tizio. "Flush them."

That's his advice after I tell him.

It makes sense because if someone finds me with that shit I'm done. So, I do. I wrap the flowers back up as he talks. It's not as good as it looked when I got them, but I write the card for Nadie, since flowers are flowers and she deserves them.

"Woah. Back the fuck up, Tizio." I sit on the sagging bed. "Who are The Westies when they're at home?"

"That's what they call themselves. Your Ralph and the others see themselves as powerful movers and shakers. They're guys dumb enough to jump in bed with people without checking credentials. So, it seems Ralph got himself talking to this one guy who's with those fuckers who's bad enough he made the 86s uneasy. And he got Ralph and his cronies in bed with El Cabeza, the Smith Group—"

"The Smith Group isn't here?"

"Fucking interesting, isn't it?" Tizio clicks his tongue. "El Cabeza have been seen, but neither group is active in town, so it's a dead end."

I swear.

"Did you just swear in Portuguese?"

"Yes," I mutter.

“Must be bad.”

“It’s the same shit with Avah. Bits and pieces and no solid leads to the shit starting to affect Dallas and we still don’t know about O’Grady and the Lowlanders.”

“A hurdle,” he says. “But it says it’s got far reaching fingers, whatever these idiots got involved in.”

“Who’s the puppet, and who’s the master?” I ask.

“Yeah. But the Smith Group, this ex-86ser, are bad.”

“You know this how, Tizio?”

“My friend who’s gonna go to prison for shit he didn’t do knows the guy.”

“I want to talk to that guy.”

Tizio sighs. “Well, you’re gonna need a fucking séance. Dude’s dead. Last week. Shoot out in Tijuana.”

“Fuck.”

\* \* \*

I check I have my permits, my gun, and I follow all the rules to a T. I pack the bike with the flowers and make sure all excess ammo and weapons are in a case that resides in the manager’s office. He used to work with my father, back when the bastard could hold a job, so he’ll make sure it stays there until I pick it up personally.

I go over everything. Tizio didn’t say anything with a magic solution. I didn’t expect that, but I’d have liked it, anyway.

Hearing the Smith Group again bothers me in that way bad memories and omens do.

If this was Dallas or I had Tizio and Nicolo here, or one of the top De Lucas, I’d never flush the drugs. But there’s a bad feeling in the air, heavy like doom. Okay, I probably shouldn’t have beat the douche so badly, but he did deserve it.

This Westies bullshit named group is nothing more than a bunch of overprivileged assholes playing with the law. They all seem to believe they're all bad to the fucking bone, including Ralph Riff, the doughy douche, got in bed with the wrong people.

They'll be used and then taken out.

Puppets who think they're puppet masters.

I don't fucking feel for them at all.

One thing I know they do is unforgivable in my books. In De Luca's books. They run drugs courtesy of the gangs and cartels selling and Henders elaborate ways which I wouldn't give a fuck about. Except they know it goes to kids. Pick up the right floral displays, divvy it up, and get the younger gang initiatives hooked and selling to their peers and younger.

As I said, unforgivable.

I go to call Nadie but stop myself. She doesn't need me hounding her.

Getting on my bike, I slide the phone away and put on my helmet. I still have no idea about the Lowlanders and O'Grady in this growing ring of crime. One can be involved independently of the other, if it's certain Lowlander affiliates who do what they want as long as they don't cross the Irishman.

But I head to RoadSide. O'Grady should be warned because I think with Ralph and his little group's work, and the overwhelming number of 86s members working at the dealership and the furniture store as delivery muscle, it seems like they're readying to take more territory for themselves.

If there are affiliates of O'Grady looking to make some bank on his outfit's name, then he needs to know.

He's in Ireland, but someone there will be able to reach him, and I'm thinking the new bartender and probably bar manager, the only new one I saw talking to him will be able to pass the message on.



He looks at me and swears. “Dumb fucks. I’ll pass it along. He won’t be happy.”

I know better to ask about him setting up shop here. This guy won’t tell me. He’s loyal.

“This place,” he says, “yeah, it’s small, but the 86s weren’t ever that bad. Don’t know what happened, but taking over messes shit up. Already, I’m seeing some really nasty types. I grew up a few towns away, and—” He stops, hitting the bar with the bar towel. “There are ecosystems, man. It’s that fuckin’ football has been, I know it. Came here to greet O’Grady to get him to invest. He might have muttered something about protection and buying that. He’s lucky O’Grady didn’t shoot him for annoying him.”

I think I like O’Grady.

After thanking the guy, I head to town, intending to get food to make for dinner. Something sweet for Nadie since she likes dark chocolate, but never gets it for herself.

Anger bubbles in me. Gangs like the 86s are now spread and run everything, ruining this place. No one will be safe. It’s fucking enough to burn things to the ground my way just to keep Nadia safe.

“Calm down ...”

Easier said than done. But I park and take off my helmet and start to head to the grocery store when two cops appear. Guns drawn and pointed at me.

These jerks are clearly a higher pay grade than the other two.

“Diego Gael Fernandez?”

“Yes?”

“You’re under arrest.”

Fuck me, this holding cell’s small. And boring. Insanely boring. It shouldn’t be because douche is here with a cop friend, and they’ve been trying to taunt me.

The only thing I'm irritated about is the lack of one phone call. Though I haven't decided whether it's gonna be Tizio or Nadie.

Probably Tizio—or Nicolo—because he can let Nadia know, call in the lawyers, and get these asshole's asses busted.

But they're bordering on being irritated.

"Let's see," says douche, standing as far back from the cell as he can. As if I can hurt him from here. "Illegal weapons—"

"Got all the permits," I say right as the cop buddy says almost the same thing.

"Drugs," continues Riff Raff. "Probably intent to sell."

"Yeah," I mutter under my breath, "because I always come to a small town to buy overpriced subpar drugs in a convoluted way to sell them on."

"Riff." The cop shifts uneasily.

"I don't even have aspirin."

"We're searching your hotel room," Riff says.

"We? You're a cop too?" I beckon him closer. "And is there a warrant?"

"Riff, go. You, shut up."

I stop myself from saluting the cop. There's a line where insolence causes major trouble and I'm about right up against that thing. Not that I've said too much that's insolent, but these guys all seem very sensitive to me.

"And the assault." Douche points at his face.

I shrug. "I did that. But he's clearly fine, and it was after he pushed uninvited into someone's home. Threatened her, bruised her arms, and threatened to punch her. So, yeah, I stopped him."

The cop turns to Riff. "That true?"

"He's lying."

"Now, I have to check in with Nadia. You know that. Get the fuck out, Riff." The cop turns to me. "And keep quiet. I'll

let you know when the phones are running.”

The phone on the main desk rings in the middle of him saying this.

So, I sit and go over everything, hoping like hell I'll get that phone call sooner or later.

\* \* \*

I must have been in holding for five hours. It's past seven, the sun's down and no call, nothing.

But the cop comes up to me and clangs the keys over the bars. “Must be your lucky day. Someone posted bail.”

I get my things, they process me out, and there she fucking is.

My Nadie.

And she's pissed as hell.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

NADIA

“How dare you.” I give him a shove, aware of the eyes on us, one pair in particular.

Riff’s.

For a moment, he’s confused, but a flick of the area with a gaze, and he raises a brow. “You’re not the fuckin’ boss of me. I don’t remember calling you. How did you find me anyway? Following me?”

“Someone told me.”

He throws his arms up and turns. “Your ex. Let him use you as a punching bag, Nadie.”

Diego stalks off, and I follow, my heart beating fast. “You get back here. We need to talk!”

I have to almost run to keep up with his powerful strides, which makes every pulse hammer hard. Shit, I thought he got it, understood.

Fucking stupid slut. The words ring in my ears like that’s what I am. Stupid.

Amazing how all it takes is a face of violent anger spat right at you, and a girl crumbles a little, because I have to be stupid not to have seen what Diego did, that Riff’s a piece of no-good garbage.

“Hurry up, Longstocking, and work that ass in chasing me,” Diego says, his voice just reaching me. “C’mon abuse me a little more. We got an audience.”

The relief that floods my veins is so overwhelming I almost laugh. “I can’t believe you sweet-talked me when you’re nothing but a low-life.”

He stops, turns, stalks up and slides his hand about my arm. “I think we need to talk.”

“Well. I’m not going home with you, so—”

“You bailed me out, Nadie, sure you are.”

“We talk first. The bar ahead. I prefer people around.”

There’s amusement, dark and low-key, in his gaze. “Okay. But for the fuckin’ record, I am mad at you for not staying home. But now I remember you’re a cheap, sweet lay. Maybe I’ll buy you two drinks and take that ass.”

My heart spins as heat pools down in my pelvis, and my clit throbs. “Well, shit, Diego. I think we both know it doesn’t even take a drink.”

“That make me a cheap lay too?”

“The cheapest.”

He nods, not letting go as he steers us to the bar. “Let’s see just how man I’m gonna be and you can thank your lucky stars I’m not into whipping you.”

“We can work on that.”

I pull free because I have to, need to. The bantering flirt of words is a cover for a thread of desperation that runs in me, and I think, in him.

Diego’s leaving soon.

I don’t know if either of us is ready. I know I’m not.

Taking a breath and ignoring the closed sign, I step into the bar, Diego right behind me.

There are a handful of people in there, no one comfortable, not even the bartender—but her gaze hits mine and she nods. She went to school with my brother, so I know her well enough to put this together.

Diego’s arm slips about me as he pulls me up against him. “For real, Nadie. Jokes and fucking bullshit flirting aside tell me why I shouldn’t be absolutely furious at you right now.”

I twist around. “Diego, these—”

“Fuckin’ know who these people are, Nadie. You put yourself in danger. Not good. Not at all.”

“Initiative.”

“Danger. Fuckin’ gangbangers and even worse. Jesus, Longstocking, what if you’d gotten hurt? I was cooling my jets against my will in the county jail there.”

“You were at the station,” I mutter. “In holding. And these people helped. You know that?”

He tilts his head, eyes glittering. “Lemme guess. Police scanner.”

Diego doesn’t even ask. It’s a statement and it pisses me off because it’s true.

I put my hand on his chest because some of the guys in here are jumpy and Diego’s big. And he can fight. He’s connected. None of this is lost on them.

I need him calm before we start.

“Yes. I contacted Sadie’s brother. The little girl.” My hand’s pushing hard because I can feel the vibrating strength and muscles ready to spring into action. He’s not stupid, except, perhaps, where I’m concerned. “He put word out, and a number came to me.”

“Jesus, Nadia.”

“They want to talk to you.”

He shakes his head and the tension in the bar ratchets up.

“They all had their chance and didn’t.”

“People need to think, let it sit, talk to others and you’re scary when you want.”

“To you?”

His soft question throws me. Unexpected. From the heart. And I move my hand from his chest to cup his cheek, even though I know it’s probably the wrong thing to do. But Diego doesn’t stop me.

“Never.”

Diego takes the hand and squeezes. “What do they want?”

One of them, younger, only a few tattoos steps up. A few years out of high school but I think he dropped out because

keeping up with classes and raising siblings when parents aren't around is hard. Another reason I need to have that after school hangout where those that need to can leave their siblings or bring them and use it as a place to get that extra help.

“He cool?”

“Yeah, Zane, he's cool.”

Diego orders a drink, but he doesn't drink it, just putting down a ridiculous amount for it. Which from the bartender's smile is very much appreciated. “You wanna talk, talk. But if you're looking for protection or to join my family or make trouble, I'm not interested.”

“No, man, no.” The kid slaps a hand on his chest. “We don't wanna mess up the town. Keep it cool, you know? On the DL. We need to keep it evenly balanced, like we're not the UN or nothing, no issues being solved, you hear me? But we keep it even keeled.”

“And the threats against Jay Reed?”

The kid spreads his hands while a couple shuffle a little, clearly trying to look small and failing because Diego's clocked in every single face, person, and gang insignia in the place.

“Not my crew. And that's the new 86sers.”

“New?” Diego asks.

The kid shrugs. “Things at that level are fluid you know? Got a flow. The old guard's around, but the new one makes affiliations we don't like.”

“Power and real dangerous bullshit,” someone calls. “They'll take over with the rich fucks here rolling them.”

“You got us talking,” Zane says, and I swallow a smile. Diego got them talking because he scared them all. “An' Miss R too.”

“So ... talk.”



There's a moment where they all talk at once, and even though I heard the whole thing, it's almost impossible to follow, but Diego does.

I know, because he holds up his hand for quiet, runs the other over his clipped beard, and he exhales loudly. "I fuckin' get it. Someone or someones in town is out to change the status quo. How's that helping?"

A girl slips from the back of the room and edges to the front, near the bar. "Because all this shit, the drugs, as in excess isn't us, or any of the gangs. We don't sell to anyone. We help move things, some of us, from one distributor to another, but not for this town. And the mayor," her eyes slip to me, "and his buds are busy getting us to blame the other."

A guy joins her. If they have tattoos that show who they're affiliated with, I don't see them. "The new 86sers, man, they deal with people like El Cabeza on behalf of the mayor and his friends. An' we have this."

They hand the photos of Riff at the dealership, shaking hands, accepting something, putting it in his pocket. My stomach churns.

It doesn't look good, even I know that. But I used to love this guy, or care enough to think I wanted to marry him. And I find it hard—

I stop myself.

Diego's already told me the things Riff's capable of. As has Riff himself.

So, what looks like a kickback or just a payment, it's ...

I breathe out. Diego's frowning at them. "You caught douche in a deal? Nice. Here's what you do, don't deal with these people. Lay low." He pulls his wallet and takes out a card. "If girls go missing or you see activity by new people, call this number."

Zane steps up. "That is?"

"Keep out of big shit. Dangerous shit. Fuck, help protect the town, the good people, go help Miss Reed with her after

school set up. You can do a lot without spilling blood.”

“Peabody involved?” The kid looks at me.

“Hates the idea,” I say.

Zane beams. “Okay.”

I settle at the bar while Diego talks to them about cohesion and communication. Never once does he lecture them on walking on either side of the law or drugs or anything, and he draws information from them.

The bartender holds up the soda gun and I point to Coke. She then ices a glass and hits the button, filling it before sliding it over to me.

“Okay, I was doubtful when you came in, but the assholes with big money never come here, and you’re making us some money.” With that she peels away to serve one of the tattooed kids, after discreetly checking ID. Then she returns. “You’re okay.”

I smile and pick up the Coke.

The gangs all look the same to me and all seem after the same thing, a way to carve something in their lives that gives a purpose. To belong. And Diego respected that.

They’re talking about the florist and the places Riff’s got money sunk into.

And me? I want the place back to what it was, and Jay safe.

There’s something bugging me, something I can’t put my finger on. Riff’s life has been about being the big man wherever he is, but the football star aspect is so long gone that the memories are the only parts he can ride because the town likes that.

He got Diego arrested on the one legitimate part, the beating, but even that I know he’ll drop if I have to push what he did and said in my house to get it.

There was talk of drugs and illegal weapons which is ludicrous, but it all came from Riff, the arrest.

Because he was jealous.

Diego is the bigger man in every way.

I understand the jealousy.

Guess I'm having a hard time with the rest, because mastermind isn't a word I associate with Riff.

"Longstocking? Ready?"

Nodding, I rise and leave ten for the bartender and then we're out of there.

We walk for a bit, and on a quiet side street he stops. "Your boyfriend could be in a whole lotta fuckin' trouble." He hands me the photos. "What are you going to do?"

"Diego, I know what this looks like, but—"

He starts to laugh and shakes his head. "You rich folk stick together, right?"

"You think I'm rich?"

He doesn't answer.

I clutch the photos I want to throw at him tight. "I'm not rich. And I can't help my father was."

"Bringing your father into this, are you?"

I slap his chest with the photos. "You're prejudiced, Diego. A giant chip that made you do dumb things, made you run."

"You know nothing,"

"I know you act like you don't have a dad. That he's gone. I know you send him money. And—"

"Shut the fuck up, Nadie."

That hurts. Not the words, but the meaning. The door he slams between what he perceives are two different worlds.

"No." I look at him. "I won't. You're thirty-two and acting like you're sixteen. The world isn't fair. And ... you pushed me away then. You're doing it now. I know you're leaving. I know that. I'm not trying to make you stay. I know how much

you hate this place. But don't get that wrong, Diego. Because you can be a real prick sometimes.”

“Not to you, Nadia.”

“To me. Pushing me away is a prick move.” I take a breath and it catches on the bitter lump in my throat, coal-hot. “All I ever wanted was to love you. You betrayed me and I forgave you. Crumbled the moment those eyes of yours touched me.”

He laughs again. “I betrayed you? What about you with me?”

“Diego, you went off and did whatever with my father, and sent me a letter saying you're the one to blame for getting Dad in that whole scam thing.”

“And you believed it. Still do, I'm guessing. And what he told you? Did you dismiss that?”

“He gave me the note, told me I'm better off without him and—” I stop. Look him in the eye. “No. I didn't. Not really. Not when I think about it. But you betrayed me by leaving without a word.”

“Fuck, Nadia.” He moves in close, face right up to mine. “Jay was already being left for you to look after, even then. And with your dad shifting everything to me, which I let him do, because it was a better deal for him, I couldn't stay. And you would never have left.”

He's right. My eyes burn. I wouldn't have. I couldn't. Jay had been so young, Dad needed me, and I wasn't even out of my teens. “I was too young, but you never offered choices, like you staying, and you never gave me a choice.”

“Here's the fuckin' kicker, Nadie. Nothing has changed. You still won't leave. I can't stay. I hate this place, it's poison in my veins.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“No fuckin' idea. But I have to take care of some shit for these kids, call the lawyers De Luca holds on retainer. So, go home.

He stalks off.

There's no tease and sex talk now. There's nothing. It's like it's all dead in the water because ... because that's how things roll. He's off on business and I need to do the same.

Funny how Peabody united the younger ones in the group. Seems he's less popular than even I thought.

I start heading to the station.

“Nadia—”

“Save it, Riff. You're in trouble.”

He tags along with me, right up the steps to the station. “Look at me.”

“I'm looking.” I turn and take him in, the bruised face, the puppy dog that's been kicked expression. But I harden my heart. “Yes, Diego did that. But I can't help but think what you'd have done to me if he hadn't been there.”

“I was angry. I've never hit you before.”

“There's always that first time. So, you need to understand that I'm never dating you or marrying you. We're done. And I also suggest you get a lawyer. Your money-making schemes might get you in trouble.”

With that I go in and march up to the desk. The officer is a friend of Riff's, I know that, and from the flicker of his gaze past me I know Riff followed me in. I put the photos down, my hand on them.

“Riff's injured because he entered my home without an invitation, and in a rage of jealousy, called me horrible names, and grabbed my arm.” I push up the sleeve to show the dark bruises from his hand there. “And he was going to punch me until Diego grabbed him. Diego tried to see him out, but he tried to hit Diego too.”

“This true, Ralph?”

“I'm here to drop my charges against Fernandez.” The top looks at me.

But I've already twisted the truth and it's time to push further, so I move my hand. “I think you need to make sure all

charges are dropped and maybe talk to the main investors in the Gary businesses. Because it looks like illegal activities, and I just don't mean hiring criminals and hardened gang members."

"Equal opportunity."

The cop suddenly snorts. "Like Peabody's into that."

"He's not an investor," says Riff. "He plays golf with the mayor."

"Explain these. You're taking a bribe or a payment. Is it for the girls? The drugs I'm assuming are being sold out of one of the businesses?" I say in a rush.

"I ..." Riff looks at the pictures. "I'm not selling drugs. And what girls? That ... that's for the florist where we leave bills and—"

"Looks fat," I say. "Like it's full of money."

"Fine, yes, payments. They do all kinds of deals, but the Gary Group isn't illegal." Riff's eyes are huge.

"Riff," the cop says.

"I'm telling the truth. They got cheap labor, guys with muscles and some dealings aren't quite conventional, but it's about connections. What girls?"

If not him, then who?

# *Chapter Twenty-Three*

DIEGO

I'm stretched out on her porch steps when she comes up from parking her car.

Nadia's face is awash in the ghostly light of her phone, and she doesn't look overly happy, as her fingers move on the screen.

"That was Cindy, the girl from RoadSide."

"Sister turn up?"

Her gaze isn't friendly, and her voice is neutral. "No. But you came about the missing girls? Your theory of human trafficking?"

"Theory."

"Not in the mood, Diego." The slight snap makes me smile when it really shouldn't. I lean back, gaze up at her. She scowls.

"Yeah," I say. "One of many reasons I came here. The main one being Jay, Longstocking, okay?"

"If you say so." The begrudging softening curls inside me.

I nod. "I do. What did she want?"

"I asked her about ... about the principal." She straightens like all the burdens are hers. "I think he's involved. He knows the mayor, he doesn't want the gangs around, but really, he doesn't want me calling attention to the school by helping the kids who need it. A lot of them are related to or in the gangs like the ones from today."

"I gotta fuckin' ask." How big is this thing if she's on the right track. "What about Riff?"

"What about him?" She puts the phone in her pocket and takes one small step. "Am I trying to what? Help me, please."

Fuck I'm a heel. "Are you protecting him, trying to lessen the blow?"



“Not at all. I went to press charges against him, and he followed. Begged not to do that, and he dropped everything against you.”

Oh, fucking yeah, the worst heel on the planet.

Even if it's a legit question and I'd ask anyone.

But this is Nadie.

“I showed them the photos and ...” She looks away a moment, then straightens her shoulders and looks at me. “I think he put in money to make money and maybe dabble at feeling bad ass by walking the line, but criminal? Not knowingly, not to that extent. I don't think he has it in him. He rides his frayed coattails of past success, he's not a man given to initiative. He's so far from you that it's probably why I went out with him. He was safe. You're not.”

Shit. Fuck everything. “The kids and Zane don't like Peabody. It's a different thing to that hate of a mean teacher. Like they intrinsically got something.”

I think she's going to brush me off, but she doesn't. “Why?”

“Thing is, Nadie, I didn't put it together until here and now and you.” I send a quick couple of texts. The RoadSide new manager because courtesy is courtesy, and it's O'Grady property, but just in case he's in this up to his ears, I alert the bouncer too.

Then I text Tizio.

“Zane told me something interesting, I figured it was a nineteen-year-old just talking the shit because he could, but now ...”

Nadia takes one more step. “And?”

“Zane had a girlfriend who left school when he did. Her family moved, she stayed, abruptly disappeared last year. Peabody was seen by Zane talking to her before—”

“She disappeared.”

“Yeah.” My phone lights up, and I read the messages that come in. Then I look at her. “Your ex probably won’t fare well in all of this. The mayor sure as hell won’t. And Peabody, let’s hope we get him too, though it’s a long shot right now. With what we know, it’s not enough to prove anything, but it’s enough to leave those still involved running scared. O’Grady’s people are scary, as are those who work at RoadSide.”

Basically, we can’t do anything. I can’t, beyond what I have. This isn’t my jurisdiction at all and it’s up to the local elements to band together.

I reach behind me and grab the flowers, holding them to her.

“What’s with you and flowers?”

“These ... well let’s just say I found the way things are smuggled and passed along through this town. Not sure how big distribution is, but I’m betting it’s drugs, guns, and cigarettes bound for places that tax them heavily.”

“So,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper, “it’s done.”

“Yeah.” I stand, come to her and look down. “How are you feeling?”

But Nadia eases away and with the flowers in one hand, goes to unlock her door. She opens it and gestures inside. I do as asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she says. “Actually, I don’t want to talk at all.”

Neither do I. Shutting the door, I capture her mouth and coax it open, sweeping my tongue in, angling her head up with my hands.

She tastes like coming home. Tears, laughter. Hot sex and sweetness. She tastes like heaven.

I toss the flowers to the ground as she wraps about me and the kiss deepens, grows harder and more erotic. Grinding into her, I revel in the soft heat of her body, the way her hips move up to meet my clothes on moves. Even those sharper angles

are delicious, the places where, if she ate properly, she'd soften.

I'll take Nadia any way I can have her. The only reason I don't like her being too skinny is it comes from her own pain and anxiousness. Nadia never ate properly when upset.

Her fingers dig into my ass, pulling me deeper into her. I oblige, biting, kissing, licking a path down her throat. Everywhere I go it's familiar and new.

The familiar perfect because I know the buttons to push to give us both the best ride, to make her shake apart and squirt. And the new's exhilaration, the way a half breath might stutter, her pulse flicker firefly crazy under my tongue. An unexpected moan when I do something different and right.

"Bedroom?"

I just pick her up as an answer and carry her there. I'm already fucking rock hard and want this over and done because there's nothing like fucking Nadia and coming. I want it to last forever because this is probably the last time.

I want her ass, but that's not fair to her if we never do this again. She's mine. I want to mark her so no other man comes close to me in her future. But I'm not taking that and then leaving.

She's panting, and so am I, as we rip at each other's clothes. She's so wet that her panties have soaked through.

My junk's in the blue ball arena already and we just started. Fuck, how am I gonna get through this? I want to do all kinds of wild and filthy things with her, to her, and I need to worship her.

Her hand wraps around my erection, and I bite her bottom lip, running my tongue along it as she shudders and moans. I slip my fingers over her cunt, and finger her, hooking them inside her to massage her G-spot.

"Diego. In me, please."

We tumble to the bed, a tangle of limbs, teens lost in that moment where it's pure passion and no finesse.

But we know each other so well. It's sense memory and the passionate frenzy isn't teeth knocking against teeth or elbows in the wrong place. It's perfect.

I make my way down her body, suckling her breasts, biting on the soft sweet flesh and down so I can taste her, but she grabs, me and says, "No."

I want that cunt. But for Nadie and only for her will I give in. My wants are selfish, but she benefits. And she says no.

Her hand comes back to my cock, over the sensitive head and this time I let her guide me. I push in and her tightness is as always a beautiful thing.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," I say.

Nadie does and I sink all the way into her. I find her mouth again and start to sip at it, licking along her lips, over her tongue, drawing it into my mouth. I go from carnal to sweet drugging kisses as I move in her.

I roll my hips how she likes. And she raises to meet me. We go from a deep, intimate fuck to something hard and frenzied as that hardcore passion catches us again. I'm slamming into her now, her fingers digging into my ass as she rolls her hips up with each thrust, and I'm in so fucking deep I'm part of her.

She's exquisite. Pure decadence. She's life and heat, lust and love, and want and need. I don't know where one starts and the other begins. Each of her moans is mine, every shudder of her pleasure sets off a wave in me. As she starts to flutter, throb, and spasm, I ride it, even as everything in me screams for release. I ride through her orgasm until she has another and then I can't take it.

Nadia's moaning my name, words of love, and every single syllable sinks into my blood. I thrust deep and come, spurting into her. My cock twitching as the walls of her cunt clamp on me, over and over again.

"Oh, fuck. Nadie ..."

I kiss her and roll so we're still locked together but she's not taking my weight. I smooth her hair and take her lips again

and again until I close my eyes and rest my head against hers.

We stay like that, wrapped together, as though it's just us keeping the world together.

I don't know how long it is, but finally we pull apart and I know I have to go. I've got things to do, to make sure will happen, beyond the texts. Calling to arrange Jay's return, making sure all the right people are watched.

And maybe go do one thing I've put off.

Getting up, I get dressed.

"Diego."

I close my eyes, not sure what she's going to say, but trying to hold every single cadence in her voice when she says my name. I'm fucking thinking to torture myself with.

"Yeah?"

"I don't think you can take out Peabody. I don't think he can know you know."

"Not my—"

"Don't give me jurisdiction crap. If this is trafficking, then it's a big operation. It always is. It's not just one person doing it. There's going to be a network and to get to the root of it, the people behind it, you have to be careful. Take out Peabody, send him a message, then you'll alert whoever it is."

I turn, and she's dressed. I can see her nipples through the thin T-shirt. I scowl. "I'm trying real fuckin' hard not to let you go out in that."

"You're not the boss of me and where am I going?"

That's the bitter pill, isn't it? I'm not. She's not mine, I'm not hers no matter what the heart might think. "You're right, about Peabody. But you can't ... you can't take matters into your own hands."

"Are you going, Diego?" she asks after a short pause.

The bed's between us. It might as well be an ocean.

"Yeah," I say, "I think I am."

“I can’t ask you to stay.” The choked sound in her voice kills.

“You have a life, so do I.”

Her hand curl into fists. “Are you going to ask me?”

“No.”

Nadia looks at me like I hit her, and she nods. “You should go, Diego. Now. It’s better this way. Get Tizio or Nicolo to call when it’s time to get Jay.”

I’m about to say I meant no because it’s futile, I already know her answer. But I don’t. Instead, I pull on my boots and grab my jacket.

She follows me to the edge of the hall. “Diego?”

I look at her.

“Go see your father before you go.”

A bitter smile rises. “Because I owe him?”

“No. You owe yourself.”

\* \* \*

The ride out to the old place is slow, mainly because I ride well under the speed limit.

Last thing I want is to see the old man, how he’s deteriorated. I send him money, isn’t that enough? If I knew where my mom was, I’d send it to her too. But she left me behind with Dad for a reason, one I probably won’t ever know for sure. But I’ve made my peace with that.

I guess, after this, I’ll all make peace with him. As much as I fucking can, anyway.

The first thing I note is the place dilapidated, not done up, not with newer places now around it. Fuck, even the yard’s mowed. The house was fixed up and painted.

Maybe the fucker didn’t spend all the money I gave him on booze.

I sit on my motorcycle for about five minutes, trying to get up the courage to go in there and not start something.

The front door opens, and a small kid whizzes out, followed by one about ten and a pretty blonde who's older than she looks as she approaches with the kids. She's maybe mid-thirties. She stops and stares at me.

Recognition in her eyes.

But she doesn't introduce herself, simply says, "He's inside."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I get up, go to the door, and knock.

The old man opens the door. He's put on weight, gone gray, and I'm taller than him.

"Took you long enough, Diego," he says in Portuguese.

I don't smile. "Fuck you, Dad."

"You're not in prison, so there's that."

Once an asshole, always an asshole, and I really want to punch him. But the woman and the kids, their images fresh, stop me.

"You don't hit them, do you? Get drunk? Make their lives hell?"

"Oh, you saw my wife and kids." There's a look on his face I don't like, and it takes me a moment to realize what it is and why.

He loves them, and I've never seen that look sent my way.

"Your money helped me clean up. I'm sober."

"Yeah," I say, knowing I should congratulate him or something. But he didn't bother cleaning up for me. "Well."

"You helped. And Leanne."

"Are you working?" His gaze shifts.

"Here and there."

I'm not an idiot. I know he doesn't want the money to stop. I have more than enough, and what I send him ... I used to think it was the guilt trade off. But I don't think I should feel guilty for not seeing him for all these years. Not anymore.

"Don't worry, I'll keep sending you that money. Try and ask for a cent more, and you'll get cut off, though."

"Diego, I'm your father."

"Yeah," I say again. "Well."

"Family. Just because I have—"

"For years, I hated this place and myself. I spent a long time thinking I wasn't good enough because of how much you resented me. I thought I drove Mom off. Even though I knew the truth. It was you. The town's still poison to me. But now I see you're weak. Best of luck with the new family. Keep them happy. Have a good life."

And with that, I turn and walk away.

\* \* \*

In my hotel room, I stretch on the bed. I expected that confrontation to be ... I don't know, climactic? Cathartic? A lightbulb fucking moment?

Instead, it's a fizz in the dark and nothing at all.

I'm sure she's nice and my little half-brothers are fine. They seemed fine. But I have a family, a good one, and that was ...

Laying old ghosts to rest.

Saying goodbye.

And Nadia?

With a sigh, I get up, collect my shit from the office safe, and I hand over the key. Then I return and push the door I left open and get things ready to go.



Riding into the night. There are other hotels along the way, or maybe I'll just go until I get back to Dallas.

I know I can't stay. I still feel the poison of the town.

Maybe ... I put a hand on the wall near the door, maybe I should go and see Nadie.

I tried to win her in a fair way, one where she could decide on her own. Tried. Maybe not overtly, but then again, I told her I loved her. What more does she need? A fucking billboard.

But even then ...

I straighten and pull on my jacket, and then sling my pack over my shoulder.

I can't take Nadia from her home. Jay will come back to her and she's hell bent on saving the town, the kids, and someone needs to keep a fucking eye on things here. Nadie will.

Things aren't settled how I'd like it but settled enough. We'll still look into it all from Dallas, me, Tizio, and Nicolo. Nadie's gonna be watched and looked out for by a bunch of misfits. I'd laugh, but I'm pretty' sure I'm close to crying right now.

I didn't think leaving Nadia again would hurt so badly.

I'd give the world for her to say she wants to be with me. She didn't. Won't. And anyway, how can we have a future with so much tying her here? We can't, and I can't take her from her home.

Shaking my head, I step out, pulling the door shut. I take a step toward my bike. It's still in the pool of light from the outside lights of the hotel.

But my bike isn't as I left it.

Someone's on it in a leather jacket, jeans, and boots.

She's not wearing a bra, and her long hair is in a braid.

A backpack sits at her feet.

Nadia.

# *Chapter Twenty-Four*

NADIA

“Oh, this seemed cooler in my head.”

I fidget with my fingers in front of me, suddenly full of nerves and unsure of the moment. I’m having trouble breathing easily.

“What I should do is call a cab,” I say. “Go, pretend this didn’t happen. Me here. You standing like a rock staring at me.”

“Did something happen to your fuckin’ car?”

“No.” I can do this, because there’s a hint of both worry and happiness there in his face to give me the strength. Worry for me, happy to see me. “I left it for Josie, hers is a piece of crap and keeps conking out, so she prefers her bike and walking to get around. Anyway, I went to see her at the hospital ... she gets out tomorrow.”

“I see,” he says, sounding like he doesn’t see at all.

I push on, my heart tight. “One of the teachers I ran into at the hospital when visiting Josie dropped me off here. And bless his heart, he didn’t ask many questions. Personally, I think he’s got a crush on her.”

“Nadie?”

I push air out of my lungs. “This is the scariest thing I’ve done because what if you push me away? And it’s the easiest because there’s real love here.”

He dumps his pack next to mine and puts a hand on the seat next to me as he comes in close. “Love, when it comes to you, is the easiest fuckin’ thing in the world. It’s everything else that’s hard and non-compatible.”

My eyes burn. “I talked to Josie. And she’s going to take over my house, maybe turning it into somewhere they can set up a before and after school program. The logistics can be worked out. She’s going to take over running the program I

was setting up. The attack strengthened her resolve to do something good for the town.”

“This is your life,” he says, shifting back.

I nod. “It doesn’t have to be. I can work anywhere. And I spoke to my brother. Either Jay joins them or stays with me, wherever I go.”

Oh, God, what if I misread this? But I know I didn’t, just as surely as I know being right might be a hollow victory because it might not be enough.

“There are jobs in Dallas,” I say.

His brow rises as a small smile tugs the corner of his mouth. “And if I don’t want you?”

“Maybe I’ll go for that job in Dallas, anyway. Jay likes it there.”

“Yeah, he does.”

My heart swells and all I want is to pull him to me. But I can’t. I don’t. I need him to say it. Not just dance around it all but say it. Tell me he needs me as much as I need him.

“I think he needs a strong male role model.”

Diego comes close again, mouth at my ear, the heat of his breath makes my stomach clench with need and my toes curl. “I didn’t volunteer.”

“I didn’t ask you.” I turn and speak against his ear, lips really close, and the leather and spiced honey of him plays havoc with my senses. “Tizio and Nicolo seem keen, and—”

“Nadia.” He pulls back and gives me a stern look.

I return it. “Diego.”

“You haven’t thought it through.”

I give him a shove and he doesn’t move. “You don’t get to tell me what I think and don’t. I lost you once, Diego. I won’t lose you again. I’m older now. Stronger. Wiser. And I’m not letting you go. Besides, who the hell are you to give me

advice? In matters of the heart, you're more into shooting yourself and everyone in the foot."

"What the fuck, Nadie. Anything I do is for you, to protect you."

I take hold of his face. "I don't need protecting from you. I mean, you were going to sacrifice your heart for stupid reasons. Like you thought I'd be better off without you. Well, I've got news for you. I won't."

"Fuck, Nadie, what I do isn't a world for you."

"I think that's my decision."

He closes his eyes. "I've made mistakes—"

"Who hasn't? When I spoke to Jay and then Tizio, Tizio told me about this young, angry guy who came to Dallas started an ill-advised fight with two guys his size. Ended up making lifelong friends, finding a family. My decision is to spend my life with that guy. If he'll have me."

Diego shakes his head and laughs, brushing his mouth over my temple. "I was fuckin' angry. Lost the girl of my dreams to save her."

"All this and you still won't tell me Dad set you up and you saved him. I'm assuming that's what happened. And you thought you could save me, by letting me think badly of you and well of him."

He shudders and takes my face in his hands. "He was meant to tell you ..."

"He didn't, but you could have. Now."

"Not my fuckin' place, Nadie."

I slide my arms around his neck. "You should have made it your place when you came back to town. You should have come back and ..."

"Hey, Longstocking? You know I regret shit, but I couldn't."

He doesn't need to say it. Jay. He also doesn't need to say maybe my brother would have turned his selfish life around if

I'd gone. But I'd never take that risk, not with Jay.

"I wasted years. And through it all, it was always you, Nadia. You, no one ever came close, not ever." He takes my mouth in a devastating kiss. One that turns everything into liquid, and all I can do is kiss him back.

It's deep, it's long. It's goodbye to bullshit, hello to the freshest page. It's sex and love and happiness.

When the kiss ends, I say, "Wasted years is one way to look at it. Or maybe we look at it another way. We were lucky enough to find each other then, so we could recognize each other now we've grown into the selves we needed to be." I run my hand over his lean cheek. "I've loved you since I was a kid. Ten years are nothing, Diego."

"I agree, Nadie. As long as that's it. No more time apart."

"Together, Diego. Rest of our lives?"

"You bet." Then he takes a breath. "I love you, Nadie. Been in love with you so long it feels like my entire life."

I nod slowly, unable to control the smile. "Prove it."

"Fuck yeah, as long as you don't mind a thorough man, one who'll spend forever making sure proving his love is done right."

"That's a deal. And I promise to do the same. Let's get this life on the road, Diego."

He grins, kisses me again in a kiss so sweet the only thing I can see is stars. He packs the bike, and hands me a helmet.

As we ride off, I don't think I could be happier. I'm amazed at how easy something so complicated is when you love enough.

A life to prove it.

It's going to be a good life. The life that always should have been.

I wrap my arms a little tighter around his warm body and close my eyes as I press against him.

“I love you, too, Diego,” I whisper.  
Always.





Dear Readers,

I hope you are enjoying the De Luca Crime Family series! Up next is *Searing Passion* and also Tizio's book, woohoo! You can expect this story to be coming soon. I also have one more book to the series to come out and only because I couldn't resist and have to write it. Wilder will be getting a story and will be the last of the series!

Sincerely,

E.C.

# *Also By E.C. Land*

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Horse's Bride

Thorn's Revenge

Twister's Survival

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Redeemed (Devil's Riot MC Volume 2)

K-9's Fight

Revived Boxset (Devil's Riot MC Volume 3)

Red's Calm

Brass's Surrender

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Owning Victoria

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Devil's Ride (DRMC Originals Volume 1)

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Neo's Strength

Cane's Dominance

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Protecting Blaze's Mark

Devil's Reign (DRMC Originals Volume 2)

Whip's Breath

Viper's Touch

Cyprus's Truth

Devil's Regret (DRMC Originals Volume 3)

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Spiral into Chaos

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Entangled  
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Entrapped

**Night's Bliss**

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Cedric's Ecstasy  
Arwen's Rapture  
Christmas Delight

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Keeping Reaper  
Forever Tombstone's  
Hellhound's Sacrifice  
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