



*Redleg Security*

# RIVAL HERO

JACKIE WALKER

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# DEDICATION

*For all the naughty girls who'd love to corrupt a good boy.  
Because what's hotter than a man who gives you a pillow to ensure you're  
comfortable before railing you on the counter, but then later pulls your hair  
and orders you to choke on his cock?  
Nothing. The answer is nothing is hotter than that.*

## CHAPTER I

**THE BITCH BETTER HAVE MY  
MONEY**



MIA

O kay, fine. I admit it. I can't help myself.  
I'm a pimp, and intel is my whore.

But the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem, right? No clue what the second step is, but that's fine, because I'm nowhere near ready to kick the habit.

After ending the call with the head of Redleg Security, I glance at my laptop, but I force my gaze back to my coffee.

*Don't do it, Mia.*

*Do not fucking do it.*

While frantically tapping my nails on my mug, I bite my lip and attempt to distract myself. I shouldn't *need* to dig up every ounce of intel about my potential new employer. I should interview for the position and learn about the Redleg employees like the average Josephine.

Three seconds later, my gaze still burns into the computer on my desk. It's freaking calling to me. I need intel like Cheech needs Chong.

*No. Stop it. Just be normal for once.*

But I'm not normal.

The CIA beat that shit out of me during training.

*Yeah, but that's why you're leaving. To live a normal life.*

I spend the next five minutes arguing with myself like a head case.

Fuck it.

I already know I'm going to do it, so why fight it? A zebra doesn't change its stripes.

Besides, with the enemies I've accumulated over the years, it'd be dangerous to walk into a potential new employer unprepared.

There. A nice, logical rationalization.

After grabbing the laptop, I return to my couch and absorb everything available about the key players at Redleg Security.

My fingers move across the laptop keys with the precision of a surgeon, and my hand directs the mouse like it's my scalpel. Data, pictures, and documents all come together to tell me a story.

*Inhale information... exhale uncertainty.*

Most of it is information I need. And I use it to help people.

Sort of.

But I'm a *people*, so it counts, right?

Before I called Big Al — Alan Lancaster — back about the job opportunity earlier, I unearthed mountains of shit on their client roster to determine the types of cases they handled. I'm not going to leave the CIA for a private security company where I'll be bored to tears. It's dangerous for hands like mine to become idle.

Redleg Security had my undivided attention from the moment I saw the *pakhan* of the Russian mafia, Nikolai Lenkov, in their files.

This security firm operates on a whole other level; no *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* there, that's for damn sure. These are men and women who use their experience in military special ops to help average citizens in danger. Is there a more noble profession? A few come to mind, but none that I'm suited for like this one.

The deeper my search went, the more I became convinced my old buddy Shepherd Collins was leading me along the right path, which makes sense because the retired Army Ranger wouldn't work somewhere they didn't utilize his specialized skills.

As a member of the Redleg intel team, I could use my talents without putting my neck on the line at every turn. While the majority of their work is protecting starlets and the wealthy, they also have dangerous and complex cases for people with nowhere else to turn. It's the perfect balance.

For an added perk, I wouldn't be in the field anymore, which provides a cushy layer of protection. Although I predominantly work from a comfortable seat behind safe walls these days, there have been plenty of times when I've risked life and limb to get the intel — a.k.a. be the hands-on pimp and get my money from my bitches.

If my job were safer, maybe I could reconnect with my family and work on rebuilding all that I destroyed so long ago. My sisters live in Orlando, so if I were based out of Clearwater, where Redleg is located, they'd be close enough to develop an actual relationship.

With emotions and everything.

A grin tugs at my mouth at just the possibility of visiting my sisters and their kids.

Baking a homemade five-layer tie-dye cake for one of my nieces' birthday parties. Going to their cheer competitions and holding a sign with their names painted on it. Taking them prom dress shopping or to get their

hair done for the big night. And even being there to take pictures and embarrass them in front of their dates.

My heart beats faster, and my smile widens just imagining the possibility of seeing them in the flesh instead of through security feeds and social media.

I wonder what those kids are *really* like. Could I become the cool aunt? Would they even *want* to get to know me?

And more importantly, would my sisters give me another chance?

Could they forgive me?

The fantasy unfolds in front of me — a life where I don't have to be alone and always looking over my shoulder. The joy a life like that would provide is worth the risk of their rejection.

If I venture down this path, I'll need a new identity free of the dangerous ties to my current life. Perhaps I'll keep my first name, but the middle and last must go. The CIA will help me with some of that when I leave, creating records for a life that doesn't exist. Birth certificates, school report cards, hospital records, and employment applications — all fake, of course.

It'll be frustrating to keep the new details straight and figure out which parts I can tell my sisters. But after lying for a living for more than a decade, it's second nature. Even if it sickens me.

On the bright side, I can get rid of all my old disguises and just be me. *How liberating that would be.*

Shep probably wouldn't recognize me if I waltzed into Redleg with brown eyes instead of my natural green and wearing a short-cropped blond wig. Or if I had painted alabaster skin devoid of my natural freckles. While working on the task force with Shep a few years ago, I only disguised myself when I went into the field. He knows my authentic appearance as a certified ginger. There was no need to hide from him. He's one of the good ones.

Nine hours later, I've uncovered a treasure trove of intel, satisfying my inner pimp, who now rests casually on my shoulder, smoking a blunt. Metaphorically speaking, of course. *Don't do drugs, kids.*

As for what I've found... quite a bit.

*Rubs palms together with glee.*

The head of Redleg, Alan Lancaster, has many secrets, but nothing that raises a red flag. And he seems unaware of his biggest secret. It's not my place to reveal it to him... not yet. Maybe one day that tidbit will help me out of a jam. I'm depositing this little morsel in my back pocket for a rainy day.

Tomer Stillman is the most boring person I've ever investigated.

*Suspiciously* so. Can someone be *that* bland? He makes the color beige seem exciting. His favorite flavor is probably flour, and I bet he thinks ketchup is spicy. It makes me wonder if he's better at hiding his true self than I am. I'd need to watch him closely, but since we'd be working side by side, monitoring his activities would be easy. No *identified* threat.

I bet Leo Mason has interesting stories to tell. His sister's past alone is intriguing. His dad is a shitbag I'd like to remove from the planet in the most painful way imaginable. Leo gives me giant teddy bear vibes. His wife probably wouldn't harm a spider. Nothing to worry about with those two.

Kristen Dayton, one of three female guards at Redleg, has a sad past but seems to be improving from her recent on-the-job attack. Her hospital records alone were tough to read. She's got to be battling emotional scars. At least she's started getting therapy, according to her insurance claims. My heart goes out to her. If Shepherd trusts her, then I can too.

Speaking of therapy, I tried it once. I found the therapist far too nosy with all her probing questions. Left immediately.

Perry Sawyer's another one who's oblivious to his true past. I wonder why he's never dug deeper. He could find oodles with minimal effort. I guess some people like to live in blissful ignorance. He's no threat, though. I'll keep what I've learned about him in my pocket along with Alan's secret. If he's happy with his life, then why rock the boat?

I examine the others I'd be working closest to — Keelan Henderson, Margaret "Peggy" Lawler, Aaron Robles, Trevor "Junior" Donoghue, and Dante "Jonesy" Jones. All of them clean and seemingly uncompromised.

I tick them all off, then move quickly through their part-timers and the teams that handle the lower-risk cases. Very little stands out, especially considering the large size of the company.

When I'm done, only one person poses a threat.

Turns out, I'm not the *only* person Big Al is considering adding to his intel team, and Klein has the advantage over me, given he's already implanted himself in the role.

But he isn't physically dangerous — no more than the rest. He's my competition.

A rival in the making.

Klein's made no attempt to hide his desire to officially join the intel team, and it seems I'm the only one standing in his way since Big Al has ruled out all the other candidates for the position.

I wonder why Klein craves the job so desperately. Nothing in his past spells out where this desire comes from, and he seems quite eager. Highly motivated. But why? People rarely push hard for things without a driving force. He doesn't even have a background in intel unless it's hidden like most of mine will be.

This is a tricky one, but I like the challenge. And the potential he brings flares up my competitive nature.

Decision made — I need to find out more in order to eliminate the threat.

Information on a screen only reveals so much. I'll have to meet him in person to uncover the rest of his story.

He's attractive. Fit. Young. Single. Probably ruled by his balls.

With a glance at my bust, a plan swiftly takes shape.

Two days later, I hop a flight from Virginia to Tampa, preparing to obtain the missing pieces of intel before making a final decision about working at Redleg Security. Might as well access the rest of their network while I'm there to see how secure Tomer keeps his shop. Given how easily I found their case files on my first pass, there are multiple vulnerabilities — not many, but enough. A deeper probe will only prepare me for my future role. Maybe I'll find something about the company that I missed today. I should be prepared. After all, if you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail.

Another logical rationalization for my deviant behavior. Perfect.

Ugh. I hate myself sometimes. Why am I this way?

*Oh yeah. I remember.*

Because a long time ago I learned that you can't trust anyone.

And that's a mistake I'll never make again.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE PIE AND THE PARROT

KLEIN

“Cream, of course. Don’t be silly.”

Honestly, is there even a choice? In the battle for pie domination, cream pies reign supreme.

Standing beside the kitchen chair where I’m seated, Ma beams at me from ear to ear. Bending down, she kisses my forehead and squeezes my shoulder. “Coconut? Chocolate? Banana?”

I scan the counter. “I don’t see any bananas, and you already taught me how to make coconut.” I shrug. “I guess that leaves chocolate.”

Her smile grows impossibly larger, making my chest feel fuller. “I’ll never say no to a chocolate cream pie.” She tips her head toward the kitchen sink. “Let’s get started. You don’t have much time before you have to leave me.” Her lip rolls into a pout.

There it is. The guilt trip I was waiting for.

I deserve it. Especially since I haven’t spent much quality time with her over the last two weeks. It’s been so hectic at Redleg I haven’t had time for more than a quick daily check-in to deliver food, see how she’s feeling, and ensure she’s taking her medications.

And these days, I worry about her being alone that much.

Her guilt is nothing compared to my own. Thank goodness she lives next to her best friend. I don’t know what I’d do without Gloria’s help these last few months.

Stifling a groan and trying to quash my inner turmoil, I wash my hands and join her at the kitchen island. “Okay, what comes first?”

In lieu of answering, she sways to the beat of the Rat Pack’s version of “The Birth of the Blues.” She gazes up at me with a twinkle in her eyes and her hands extended. Flashing me that knowing grin, she implores me to dance with her.

From as far back as I can remember, we’ve danced in the kitchen to this kind of music.

Taking her hands, I give her a quick twirl around the linoleum floor, and she hums along to the tune. Occasionally, I’ll sing along with Sammy. By the time it gets to Frank’s verse, we’re laughing together.

Once I release my hold on her, she catches her breath and finally gets us



back on track. “I’ll get the butter and a pie plate. You get the food processor, a small saucepan, and the Oreos from the... from the... uh...” She trails off, unable to finish the sentence as her face waxes with confusion.

My throat gets thick, but I finish the sentence for her. “Oreos are in the pantry, right?”

Nodding, she blinks a few times and repeats what I said, voice monotone and laced with discontent. “Oreos are in the pantry.”

Trying to return her to the moment, I ask, “What are the Oreos for? Is that going to be mixed into the filling?”

A smile tugs at her lips as she seems to snap out of her haze. “The crust. Oreo crust is your father’s favorite.” Giggling, she turns to the fridge.

My heart constricts, sending a dull ache through my chest.

Dad’s been dead for two years, and sometimes, Ma forgets he’s gone. And right now, that wasn’t a wistful *I miss him* type of look. It’s a look that says *he’ll be home soon*.

Expelling a weighted sigh, I collect the items and return to the kitchen island. She melts the butter on the stove while I grind up the Oreos. After she shows me how to make a cookie crust, using a buttered spoon to pat it down along the pie plate, she sets it in the fridge, and we start on the filling.

While I’m whisking the tempered egg yolks, she asks, “How’s that young lady you’re dating? What’s her name again? Jessica? Jenna?”

My grip on the whisk tightens. “It’s Jenna, and we broke up, Ma.”

A year ago.

But I’m not telling her that, because the last time I corrected her about a timeline, she ran out of the room in tears.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” She pauses chopping, her knife hovering over the stick of butter she’s slicing into small squares. “Are you okay? I know how sensitive you can be.”

Her eyebrows pinch, and her mouth turns down, revealing a genuinely compassionate expression. She’s so good-hearted. Kindness and love personified. The best person I know, and she raised me to be like her.

Of all the people in the world, why is this happening to her?

Unlike when I first broke up with Jenna, I can answer honestly this time. “I’m fine with it, Ma. It was for the best.”

“Good, but don’t be surprised if you go through waves of sadness. Breakups are never easy. You don’t need to act tough with me. I’m here if you ever need to talk.” With her free hand, she cups my cheek, and a lump

forms in my throat. “Like your father, you’ve always loved with your whole heart. It’s a beautiful gift. But it can also lead to heartbreak when that love isn’t returned. If you don’t feel like discussing it with your mother, then your father has a good listening ear too.”

Instead of reminding her that Dad is gone, I simply nod and return to the eggs. As I obliterate the yolks, it reminds me of the turmoil I feel every time her mind slips like this.

I don’t want to lose her — physically or mentally. I’m not sure what would be worse. Losing her body and soul the way we lost Dad or having her here but without anything inside to remind me of the woman I’ve looked up to all my life. The one who taught me how to see the world for its potential instead of the devastation and pain. The woman who gave me her eyes, her heart, her time, and all her love.

On second thought, I know which is worse.

And I’m powerless to stop it from happening. Instead, I’m forced to bear witness to her steady disappearance.

Blinking, I clear my mind and return to today’s lesson. I want to soak up everything she has left to teach me before it’s too late.

After the pie filling is made and poured into the crust, we put it in the fridge to set overnight. She shows me how to make a double boiler to melt the Ghirardelli chocolate baking chips, and we pour that onto a cookie sheet and place it in the fridge to harden.

“Ma, why don’t you sit and relax? I’ll clean the kitchen.”

She rubs her hands along the front of her apron and nods. “I suppose I could use a rest. Are you coming over tomorrow to make the whipped cream and shave the chocolate so we can finish the pie?”

I come over every day, even if it’s just for a minute. The fact that she had to ask is further proof of her current mental state, and it makes my gut feel like I’ve been kicked.

“Of course. How else could I taste it to see how we did?”

“That’s right. You *are* my quality control tester, aren’t you?”

How she can remember so many small things and not the big ones baffles me.

About an hour later, I kiss her goodbye and head home to get ready. I’m meeting my coworkers for a celebratory happy hour.

Once I drive away, relentless worries pelt me. One after another. A nonstop assault on my mind and heart.

Is she going to be okay on her own? What if she wanders off? She hasn't done that yet, but I've heard horror stories. Is she drinking enough water? Should I insist on moving in with her to keep a closer eye on her? Does she need a full-time caregiver? If she does, can we afford it? Probably not, and insurance doesn't cover enough. My sister has already looked into it.

And how the hell am I supposed to juggle my own life with all the care she'll soon need?

By the time I've pulled into my driveway, one worry screams at me louder than the rest.

*How long until she doesn't remember me?*



RAISING MY BEER, I shout above the din of the Sassy Parrot, "Cheers, boys!"

Tomer, Jonesy, and Henderson clink bottles with me and then chug.

Jonesy sets his bottle down first and sighs. "So glad this fucking week is over."

"No shit," Tomer mutters, tension radiating off him. Poor guy has had it rough lately. "I told Boss I'm taking tomorrow off. I don't care if a bomb goes off in the middle of Clearwater and we're the only people who can save the town. I'm sleeping all damn day."

We decided we were due for a happy hour to celebrate the successful close of a challenging case facing off with the Russian freaking mafia to save one of our own. It took a few weeks for our schedules to sync up, but most of the team made it out for a drink tonight.

I'm surprised Henderson's still here since he has a wife and baby waiting for him at home. Lionheart, Sawyer, and Shep were here earlier, but they soon disappeared to rush home to the women they love. Domesticated saps.

If you were wondering, yes, that was said with the utmost jealousy.

When Jenna and I broke up, I went through a bit of a depression. It wasn't losing her that got me down so much as the promise of what we could have been together. I was mourning the loss of a future. A family. Something I've wanted for as long as I can remember, but even more so now that Ma's health is declining. Family is everything to me. And for a time, I thought Jenna could have been the one to give me that.

Forcing a cleansing exhale, I brush off the grim thoughts and try to stay in

the moment.

Gripping Tomer's shoulder, I shake him lightly. "In bed all day, huh? Keep that crap up, and we'll have to change your door sign to *Stanimal the Party Animal*."

He rolls his eyes at my shitty joke, hiding a partial grin behind the rim of his bottle. The drinks must be kicking in, since he didn't instantly growl at the mention of his cursed door sign.

Sawyer, one of our coworkers, has been trolling him with a *Chuck Nofunfuck* door sign for over two years after a mouthy client forgot Tomer's real name and bestowed that nickname on him.

Understandably, the poor guy hates it. And that just makes everyone tease him more. It's Redleg tradition.

But I should cut him some slack. He's suffered enough — especially lately. He's one more bad day away from snapping and walking off the job.

Tomer and I have been through the muck these last few weeks. It started with a shitload of fallout work from the Franco case. Then we've had to trudge through tons of extra work that Big Al promised CPD we'd handle as part of our new partnership.

Unlike him, though, I'm amped.

That's because there's a silver lining to being this busy. The more often Boss assigns me to assist Tomer, the closer I get to becoming a permanent part of the intel team instead of being backup like I've been for a couple of months. It's only a matter of time until the job is mine.

We make a good team. He's got the technical shit down pat, and I know the ins and outs of all the toys we use. Plus, he's quiet most of the time and doesn't complain when I blare my music in the office. My parents taught me to love all the classics — Sir Tom Jones, Barry Manilow, Bobby Darin, Sammy Davis Jr., and Sinatra.

For as long as I can remember, I've considered myself the unofficial sixth member of the Rat Pack.

Thinking of my parents' influence on my love of the greats makes me uneasy, so I pull out my phone and open the tracking app. A few weeks ago, when Ma's mental decline seemed to accelerate at a faster pace, I gave her a tracker so I could monitor her location and vital signs when I'm not with her. She thinks it's a beautiful bracelet from her loving son. It is, but it's also a tool to ease my worried mind.

She's at home, and her vitals are normal, so I put the phone away and

enjoy the night.

Once I've finished my beer, I grab the empties from the table. "This round is on me. How about shots?"

Jonesy grins. "1800 with a lime."

Henderson puts his palm out, facing me. "Nothing else for me, thanks. Liv's almost here."

I lean forward to make sure I heard him correctly. "You're making your wife pick you up when she's been home with the baby all night? I don't claim to know how marriage works, but that seems like a surefire way to get banished to the couch."

Jonesy chimes in, turning it into some type of *Family Feud* reveal. With his palm splayed wide over the table, he says, "For the question of *Dumb Ways to Die*, show me *Make the Mother of my Newborn be my Uber Driver*. Survey says."

Tomer and I make a loud dinging sound. Everyone busts out in laughter.

After he's done laughing, Henderson offers his defense. "She offered because the baby is teething, and a car ride always settles her down. And it's safer than getting behind the wheel after hanging out with you drunkards all evening. She'd rather I be alive."

"You've got a good one, man. Hold on to her," Jonesy tells him, a hint of unease passing over his face. But it fades before I can ask what he's getting at.

Backing away from the table, I catch Henderson's gaze. "If you have a designated driver, you can definitely have a shot before you go."

I dash off to the bar before he can object.

And that's when the night gets... *interesting*.

## CHAPTER 3

**TARGET ACQUIRED**

MIA

Target acquired at the Sassy Parrot. Cute name for a dive bar on the beach.

Interestingly, the Redleg guys frequent this place despite Samantha Mason's abduction from the rear alley earlier this year.

"Four shots of 1800," Klein tells the bartender.

With the girls on my chest presented like an offering, I slide beside him at the bar, easing onto the closest stool. I toss my long red hair over my shoulder, hoping my perfume wafts in his direction.

While he waits for his shots, I tuck my arms close to my sides, accentuating my breasts. My eyes catch on his corded forearms, and my pulse picks up.

He glances over, eyes bulging from his handsome face at the sight of my cleavage.

Already off to a good start. This might be easier than I thought.

Gulping audibly, he forces his gaze straight ahead. I can't suppress a soft chuckle.

Twisting at my waist, I swivel the bar stool to face him. "It's okay to look, stud, but you can't touch."

When we face each other, his breath hitches. And I'd be lying if I said mine didn't too.

He's *far* more attractive in person than on a screen. Dark brown hair that's long enough on top to run your fingers through and nicely trimmed on the sides. A dusting of stubble gives him a touch of rugged appeal. But those hazel eyes are full of innocence and virtue.

And what is that scent he's wearing? *Eau de fuck me?*

It's a mixture of sweet and spicy. It makes my mouth and core moisten.

This man is *freaking delicious*.

A sense of confidence sweeps over him as he stiffens his spine and narrows his eyes at me. I bat my lashes demurely, playing up the flirting game.

He swipes his tongue across his lower lip. "Was that a challenge? It sounded like it might be."

I try to hold it in, but a genuine laugh escapes me, big and loud. I quickly



tamp it down and coyly retort, “You wish.”

“Or maybe *you* wish,” he tosses playfully.

At least my overzealous laugh didn’t turn him off. That was a close one.

Now that I’ve captured his attention, phase one is complete. Time to make him wait.

Shaking my head, I twirl the stool toward the bar and blow him off.

The bartender pushes the four shots toward him. “On your tab?”

“Yeah, and we’ll take three more beers when you have a minute.”

He picks up the shots and turns to rejoin his friends at their table — Jonesy the SEAL, Henderson the doting father, and Tomer the bland.

In the mirror behind the bar, I notice Henderson creeping toward the door with his shoulders and hands raised in a faux apologetic gesture. Likely heading home to his wife and baby.

Klein’s posture droops, and he sets two of the shots on the bar, sliding one of them in my direction.

“Consider this an apology for looking a bit too long.” He flashes me a wink. “Or maybe a thank you.”

How to play this?

I could toss it in his face, but that’s too aggressive and sends the wrong message.

Accept it with a blushing thank you? Nah. Too boring.

Let’s go with option three. Get him hard so he flaps those full lips and reveals all his secrets.

I spear him with a sultry glare and drag my harlot red fingernails in a circle along the rim of the glass. Reaching forward, I wrap my hand delicately around his corded forearm and yank him toward me.

My pulse spikes at the feel of his skin on mine and how his deliciously sexy scent permeates the air around us.

Flirting with this man is *no* hardship.

I’ve dealt with my share of attractive marks before, but this one might take the proverbial cake. Speaking of which, it would be heavenly to lick icing off his entire body.

*Mmm. I love cake.*

Bringing his wrist to my mouth, I swirl my tongue over his pulse point. Precisely as I feared, he tastes better than he smells.

With a heated gaze, I grab the saltshaker from the top of the bar, pour a few crystals on his damp flesh, and lick the salt, letting my tongue linger.

After dropping his hand, I grab the lime wedge from the top of the shot glass and place the rind into his mouth. He bites down to hold it, but his eyes widen in shock.

He seems so innocent.

The beginning twinge of guilt takes a seat in my throat, but I banish it because pimps don't feel. And this pimp is going to get what she needs.

After throwing back the shot, I lift from the bar stool and grab his shirt collar, pulling him closer to me. Like I've done with other marks at least two dozen times before, I bring his face down to mine and clamp my teeth onto the juicy lime. He doesn't release it, though. So I end up sucking the sour juices while my lips graze his.

My pussy clenches involuntarily at our proximity.

Oh shit. It's been a long time since a man caused that kind of reaction.

*Bad pussy. That's a very bad kitty.*

He finally relents, letting the lime transfer to my mouth.

Settling onto the stool, I pucker around the wedge and suck deeper, letting the liquid chase away the harsh sting of the tequila.

My gaze burns into his as I remove the lime and draw my tongue over my lips. Slowly and seductively. He studies the movement without blinking, and his mouth parts.

He's hooked. Phase two complete.

"Thanks for the shot, stud."

Winking, I face the bar again, dismissing him.

He takes a moment to gather his composure before taking the remaining three shot glasses to his table.

A few seconds later, deep chuckles and guffaws come from his buddies at the table.

Bet they're teasing him.

Over the next hour, Tomer and Jonesy visit the bartender to order beers. Jonesy attempts conversation, but I instantly shoot him down. He's not the mark, and I need Klein to believe he has a chance with me. Coming off easy won't lure him in.

No. Someone like him needs to feel special, and he seems pure. Although good boys are typically attracted to bad girls, Klein won't spill his secrets to someone he sees as nothing but a naughty one-night companion.

I catch him watching me in the mirror several times throughout the evening.

Unfortunately, he never returns to the bar. I'll have to entice him back into conversation before he leaves. Grabbing my purse, I stroll to the old jukebox in the corner, praying they have something I can use. Judging by his Spotify history, he's got an obvious weakness for Vegas crooners. Let's hope this old jukebox shares the same affinity.

*Jackpot.*

After inserting a few coins, I make two selections and wait. He needs to know *I* played these songs. As the first few notes fill the air, I sway my hips in time to this dreadful tune while casually flipping through the songbook.

You know what? This song isn't *that* bad.

"It's Not Unusual" by Tom Jones plays for less than thirty seconds before Klein appears beside me, summoned by my siren call. Or the siren call of Tom Jones.

Klein's delicious scent fills my lungs. What is that? Butter? Chocolate?

Leaning against the side of the machine, he says, "Interesting song choice for a young lady like you."

Bringing my hand to my chest, I gasp and feign surprise at his sudden appearance. "I guess I'm a bit of an old soul."

His grin spreads, revealing pearly white teeth. "We have that in common."

With him here, it's time for the next phase. Get him talking.

"What's your name, or should I keep calling you stud?"

"I'll answer to stud, but you can call me Cal."

Interesting. By all accounts, he doesn't normally use his first name. On his Redleg employment application he put an asterisk beside his first name and wrote out: *But I won't answer to it.*

Nibbling my lower lip, I hold his gaze. "It's nice to meet you, Cal."

"And what should I call you?"

Blinking, I tease, "I bet you've been talking about me with your friends all night. What have you been calling me?"

Pursing his lips, he hums and flits his eyes upward like he's deep in thought. "I didn't have your name, so I've been referring to you as *mine*."

Another boisterous laugh escapes me. Fuck, that was so cheesy.

But I need to act impressed, so I play it up and invite him to join me at a table in the corner. He doesn't ask my name again, which should be a good thing. After all, I'm here to get intel from him, not the other way around. The focus needs to stay on Cal.

Yet it feels wrong.

For some reason, I want him to know *me*.

And that's a big no-no.

My inner pimp does *not* approve. The exchange of information isn't supposed to go both ways.

Shaking it off, I return to pumping him for intel. We have a few more drinks while I pepper him with seemingly innocuous questions. Family, friends, work — the typical shit. But every question has a purpose. He seems a tad guarded about his family, but he's an open book with everything else.

I bat my lashes and nibble my lip before asking, "When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

He exhales a soft sigh and grins. "You don't want to know that. It's silly."

Chuckling, I needle deeper. "Oh, come on. Don't do that to me. Now I *have* to know."

He squints and shakes his head, waving me off with his open palm. His reluctance is adorable. Every fucking thing about him is adorable.

*Focus on the mission, girl. You can do this.*

I keep my gaze locked on his, pressing my features into a playful yet hard line.

Finally, he spills it as his cheeks turn ruddy. "I didn't know how or why, but I always knew I wanted to help people. I felt like I had a bigger purpose in life."

Not so much as a single nervous twitch when he says it. No tells that hint at a falsehood. It's not a line. He believes those words.

Well, this blows.

He's got a hero complex, which isn't all that surprising considering his career history. Enlisted in the Army at twenty. Joined the Rangers at twenty-six. Left the service at thirty to join Redleg Security with his fellow soldiers. A life of service to others.

But more than that, he seems genuinely altruistic.

That earlier discomfort blooms until it's threatening to cut off my airway.

I don't *want* to hurt him or use him.

But the pimp in me demands I get the intel from him. And you don't dare cross the pimp.

As time passes, we get closer and start touching more. A shoulder nudge here. A brush of a hand there. My palm on top of his thigh and his on mine.

The way we look at each other warms, but it's not all passion.

It's something... *more*.

Nah. It's probably just the alcohol buzz making me see things that aren't there.

Cal tries to pivot the conversation to me a few times, so I do what I do best and distract him by creeping my hand up his thigh or stroking his arm.

The longer this ruse goes on, the stronger he pulls me in until I hang on his every word.

Son of a bitch. I fucking *like* him.

For real.

I should tell him the truth about why I'm here. Perhaps I can simply explain that I just realized we're going to be coworkers. That seems believable, doesn't it?

Not really. If that were true, I'd have said something when he told me he worked for Redleg. He never attempted to conceal his employer — further proof of his trusting nature.

It's too late to turn back now. I'm committed. The only thing left is to stay the course and complete the mission.

Even if it hurts a little.

What's one more stain on my soul? At this point, there's more dark than light.

Disgusted with myself, I order two rounds of shots to help me shake off this unexpected connection I feel to him.

Klein never explicitly tells me why he wants the position so badly, which is unfortunate, but I learn quite a bit about him in the process. I think I have enough to outmaneuver him at the office, keeping one step ahead. He doesn't have the technical knowledge required for the position. That's probably why he hasn't already been promoted.

As the clock ticks on, I realize I'm dragging my feet for no good reason. The mission is completed, and I should go. I've learned more than enough to convince Big Al that I'm the best person for the job.

The only question that remains is, why does completing tonight's mission feel so shitty? It's supposed to feel good and be a thrill — an almost orgasmic high. Zings of light usually pulse through me when I've bested my target.

But it doesn't feel that way tonight. It feels like failure.

The sour taste of regret is offset by the sweet smell of his skin overwhelming me.

So I allow myself a few more moments to get lost in him. Just drowning

in his presence to ease the unusual ache my deceit has caused.

We laugh and flirt the rest of the night away. The next thing I know, it's last call, and I'm seconds away from doing something monumentally stupid.

I know better than to do this.

But I can't help myself.

I want him. Intensely. Desperately.

And fuck me, but I haven't felt a connection to someone in ages. Despite my being a fraud all night, that spark between us is genuine. It's not only carnal or physical, either. And although that should scare me away from doing this, it's making me want him more.

Tonight's my only chance to have him. Once he finds out who I am, this encounter will drive a giant friggin' wedge between us.

I want to indulge for one night.

*One.*

Everything inside me — save for that single voice of reason — is screaming at me to succumb to my desires.

By the time the bar closes, I've made up my mind to give in to the temptation of this magnetic man.

"Will you walk me out, Cal?"

"Of course. What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't take care of what's mine?"

Unbelievably cheesy and utterly adorable at the same time.

Just like him.

"Smooth, Cal. Real smooth."

Like a cobblestone road.

Once outside, I take his hand, savoring the feel of his strong grip and how his large hand engulfs mine. Even his hands are masculine and sexy.

Instead of leading him to the parking lot, I pull him into an alleyway between the buildings. I *need* to kiss him.

Now.

If the kiss sucks, I'll stop this madness and return to my hotel. Alone.

*See? Another perfectly logical rationalization for irrational behavior.*

Planting my feet, I grip his collar and pull his mouth to me like I did with the lime trick.

He takes control, slamming his lips to mine and wrapping his arms around me. I'm intoxicated from not only the booze but also his scent. I don't know what it is, but I need more. If I could bottle and sell it, I'd be raking in

the dough for the rest of time.

Our tongues tangle while I roam my hands over the nape of his neck and across his broad shoulders. Is he carved from marble? He's freaking ripped under this loose-fitting shirt.

Pressing me against the side of the building, he runs his palms along my back and squeezes my ass. It sends a heart-pounding jolt through my entire body, landing in my clit. His sinful hands move to the spot where my hips meet my outer thighs, and he tugs upward, spreading my legs and picking me up. My thighs surround his strong core, and he rocks his thick erection against my needy center.

Oh, that's a *nice* cock. I can tell already.

Cal is packing heat. It'll feel like heaven to have it inside me. I'm powerless to resist the urge to thrust my hips and rub myself against it.

Fucking hell. What has come over me?

*Has the pimp become the prostitute?*

I'm in a dank alley, pinned against a brick wall by my future coworker as he tongue fucks my mouth into sweet oblivion and grinds his hardness against me.

And he doesn't know my name.

Breaking the kiss, I pant out, "Mia."

His brow furrows, and his nose scrunches. "Huh?"

He's so flipping adorable.

"It's my name. Mia. I figured I should tell you before you put your cock inside me."

One side of his mouth quirks. "Is that what's about to happen?"

"If you take me to your place, it will."

"My place it is."

He pulls out his phone, orders a ride, and then rejoins our lips. Those silky cushions of tender flesh set my body alive and work our mouths in a kiss that's half-sloppy from the drinks and half-magnificent from his sheer prowess.

When the car pulls up a few minutes later, we duck into the back seat, hand in hand. Cal holds me close the whole way to his house, keeping one corded arm wrapped around my shoulder. In the tight space, his enticing scent is more pronounced, miraculously overpowering the stale smell of the Hyundai.

Is that... is that cake I smell?

Am I *that* drunk? I sniff again, trying not to be weird but likely failing.  
Is this a cruel trick of my imagination, or does Klein truly smell like cake? If he does, it must be a sign from the heavens.

There's nothing on earth I love more than cake.

Except for information, but I've already had my fix of that tonight.

In my buzzed state, I can't stop myself from burrowing in close and inhaling deeper. "You smell good," I coo, then flit my eyes to meet his. He smiles, and my heart speeds up.

"Is that why you're coming home with me? Because of how I smell?" he teases while strumming his thumb over my shoulder.

A flash of discomfort tries to pierce my euphoria cocoon because... why am I going home with him? I shouldn't be doing this.

Yet... when he grins a second later, I remember precisely why I'm going home with him.

*He's irresistible.*

"No, but it certainly helped seal the deal."

We're silent the rest of the ride through Clearwater, stealing glances and licking our lips while anticipating what's to come. He stays cozied by my side but doesn't do anything disrespectful since we're not alone. No slip of his hand up my skirt or peeking down my blouse. No groping, nipple tweaks, or making out. He doesn't even kiss me or nibble on my ear.

He's behaving like a perfect gentleman.

Except I know he isn't. Well, not entirely.

Gentlemen don't usually pin virtual strangers up against the wall in a dark alley. I know there's a bad boy in there just itching to come out and play with me, and I'm giddy with excitement about it.

Once we arrive at his condo, I get a glimpse of the animal inside him as he presses me against the wall of his foyer and slams his mouth to mine, lips firm and punishing in a claiming kiss. Like he couldn't wait another second to taste me, and the pent-up edging from the car ride drove him wild.

Then he growls into my mouth while his tongue ravishes mine.

*He fucking growls.*

It's hot enough to melt the panties off my body, but it's over so fast that I wonder if I imagined it.

Pulling out of the kiss, he swipes my hair out of my face and gently caresses my cheeks, so tender and doting. "You still good, Mia? Need anything? Water? Restroom?"



Adorable.

Worrying my lower lip, I wrap my hand around his neck, keeping him close. “I’m good. Are you good?”

“I just want to make sure you’re comfortable.”

Of course he does.

“Get down here and kiss me, stud,” I simper, tugging his face to mine.

He claims my lips again, passionate like in the alley, lighting up all my senses. Of their own accord, my hands drift to his waistband to unbuckle his belt. I want that cock in my hand, my mouth, and anywhere else he wants to put it.

And I do mean anywhere.

“Ah-ah-ah. Ladies first,” he chides me, swatting my hand away. Then he scoops me into his arms.

I’m brimming over with a lustful, albeit slightly intoxicated, anticipation as he carries me out of the narrow hallway before setting me on the countertop island between the living room and kitchen. I’m not small; I’ve got curves, but they don’t seem to be slowing him down one bit.

I only have a moment to look around the modest space before he begins divesting me of my clothes, one article at a time, starting with my heels.

Grabbing the hem of my shirt, he holds eye contact with a brow raised. It’s not because he’s attempting to hypnotize me with those hazel eyes, but because he’s ensuring my consent every step of the way.

I nod, and he pulls it over my head.

His hands graze tentatively over my shoulders and down to my waist. “Can I touch you like this?”

“Yes, please.”

My legs spread to make room for him between my thighs, and his mouth is on mine again as he aligns our lower bodies. The sensitive skin of my inner thighs rubs against the coarse fabric of his jeans until I start to wonder if I’ll have denim burn tomorrow. Is that a thing? Like rug burn or beard burn?

He’s an *exceptional* kisser. A mix of tenderness and fire with every nip and teasing smack of his lips and swipe of his tongue. As our passion unfurls, his hands grow more insistent. Until now, he’s been treating me like I’m fragile or made of glass. And now, the bite of his fingertips fiercely digging into my hips is what has me nearly begging for him to fuck me already.

I unclasp my bra and toss it to the floor, hoping he gets the hint that I’m a sure thing.

He bends to place petal soft kisses over the swell of each breast. “You’re so beautiful, Mia.”

“You can stop with the flattery now. You’ve already got me here with half my clothes off.”

“This isn’t flattery. You’re stunning, and I’m worshipping at your altar.”

I want to laugh at his cheesiness, but he’s kicking things up a notch and rubbing his cock against my center as we writhe together more ardently. Then his lips return to mine while one hand plucks my nipple and the other slides up my thigh, inching under my skirt.

“Yes, touch me,” I beg, breaking the kiss once his fingers graze the fabric of my panties, teasing my pulsing clit.

He places the palm of his hand between my breasts, pressing gently and guiding me slowly to the counter. “Let me taste you.” There’s a touch more dominance in his tone. Almost like he wants to boss me around, yet he’s holding back.

I obey and am rewarded by the swift removal of my skirt and panties. Right when I think he’s about to bury his face between my thighs, he freezes.

“Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

He darts off somewhere behind me, returning a few seconds later with a throw pillow, which he tucks under my head. “Here you go, gorgeous.”

*Mia, girl! How can you lie to this unicorn cream puff?*

I can’t believe how sweet he’s being to me, a virtual stranger. It’s not like I want him to rough me up, but his saccharin sweetness incites infinitely more dissonance. The guilt from my deception is approaching unbearable levels.

I need to stop him. Tell him who I am, confess my sins, and beg him to forgive me.

Yeah. That’s what I’ll do.

“Cal, I need —”

My words cut off as he dips his face between my thighs and blows against my naked pussy. I’m instantly distracted from my sudden attack of conscience and find myself holding my breath, anticipating that blissful moment when his tongue swipes along my slit.

Before he does, he catches my gaze like he’s waiting for me to finish my sentence. No, he’s seeking my permission.

Like I’d be stupid enough to object.

When I don’t protest, he dives in, tosses my legs over both shoulders, and

finally puts that magnificent tongue exactly where it belongs. Before I know it, my eyes roll into the back of my skull, and I'm chanting my praise at how thoroughly he's lapping at my sensitive skin, sucking my clit, and sinking his fingers in and out of my drenched core.

My back bows, arching off the counter as he expertly drives me over the edge.

I shatter into a million euphoric pieces, screaming through my pleasure, "Yes, yes, yes. Oh my god, yes!"

He lets me ride out my climax before removing his fingers and his mouth. When he stands, he stares down at me, spread out on his counter like a buffet. A dash of insecurity threatens to steal my orgasm high at how his gaze rakes over every speck of skin. Every freckle. Every dimple. Every line. Every imperfection.

But he bats away all my feelings of inadequacy when he smiles, licks his lips, and pulls off his shirt, exposing his glorious upper body, adorned in bursts of dark ink.

He's *pulsing* with need.

"You're fucking delicious. I was going to lay you down in bed," he unbuckles his belt and starts on his fly, "but I can't wait. I need you now. Here." His pants are off a second later. "Is that okay? Can I have you on the counter this first time? Are you comfortable enough?"

I prop myself on my elbows for a better view of the *big fat cock show* that's about to begin. It's my favorite program, and I'm a huge fan of this episode.

"Have me any way you want. That was amazing."

After he rolls a condom on, we shudder together as he sinks inside me, one glorious inch at a time.

"You're perfection," he whispers.

He fucks me on the counter with my ass hanging off the edge and his arms holding the backs of my legs against his chest. The position affords me a tantalizing view of his delicious arm porn.

Our first round is passionate and frantic. Everything I needed.

We're on the couch for round two, then the shower, where he lets me take him in my mouth. And we end up in bed after that. I lose track of how many times he makes me come, but I think we're in the double digits. Some of the details grow foggy in my mind thanks to the alcohol and delirium from the pleasure overload.

Sadly, though, I can't seem to forget the guilt over what I've done tonight, no matter how hard I try.

So when he falls asleep, I place a kiss on his forehead and swipe the hair out of his face while wishing we'd met under different circumstances.

Wishing I was a different person — one who's worthy of someone like him.

Then I sneak out like a coward.

And once I get to the hotel and lie down, tears begin to pool in my eyes, but I wipe them away before they fall onto the pillow.

Because intel pimps don't cry.

## CHAPTER 4

**FUCK ME**

KLEIN

If looks could kill, Boss would have long been dead by now.

“It’s not personal, Klein,” he says, trying to soothe me.

He might as well bail on that mission. Pretty sure I’m *unsoothable* at this point, and no, I don’t give a flippity fark if that’s a real word.

I thought I had it in the bag. Hell, I was so damn sure I had the position locked down. I never saw this shit coming.

He’s hiring someone else to join Tomer on the intel team, and at best, I’ll continue being a mere filler when needed.

Talk about the ultimate blind side.

How was I *this* wrong?

“I’m not taking it personally, Boss. I’m a professional.” The words sound sharp and severe, cutting past my lips like shards of glass.

Because his decision — while strictly business from his perspective — affects me *personally*.

In a big freaking way, and I have no clue what I’m going to do without this promotion. It was my fail-safe. My only plan.

It’s not about the money; this change would have meant more than I can quantify with my bank account.

When Big Al called me into his office this morning, I was sure it was good news — the decision I’d been waiting for and working toward. I’d even prepared my acceptance speech like I was going to the damn Oscars.

What an idiot.

If I woke up tomorrow with the ability to shapeshift into kitchen appliances, I wouldn’t be as surprised as I am right now.

After the fantastic weekend I had — some of which was spent in bed with a passionate redhead who hasn’t left my mind since — I figured my luck had finally turned around, and the fruits of my labor were ripe for the picking.

Wrong.

You know what? That word isn’t severe enough to adequately describe this situation.

Being wrong implies a simple oversight with minimal consequence. This is more than that.

I was erroneously awry due to misguided, false, inaccurate assumptions

because I'm a fucking dumbass.

"Listen, I know this is upsetting for you," Boss starts, using that same placating tone. It's a tone he never uses because he doesn't need to. He's in charge, and what he says goes. Period.

The mollifying way he talks to me betrays his awareness of how bad this stings me.

But he's made the decision anyhow.

What does that say about how he sees me or my worth to him?

He sighs and purses his lips. "Redleg is growing, and we're entering new territory. Our cases are getting more complicated. We're not simply guarding spoiled rich princesses anymore. Our clients are in real danger, and this new partnership with the Clearwater Police Department is intensifying things. The intel team is key to ensuring the safety of not only our clients but our entire team. Some of the shit that went wrong with the Franco case and the Russians is proof of that. I don't take this responsibility lightly. We need someone with highly specialized computer skills. Although you've been —"

I cut him off, attempting to bring this conversation to a swift end and save a little face. "I'm aware, Boss. And you don't need to justify your decisions to me. It's fine."

It's not fine.

The bitter reality is that without this position, I might need to leave Redleg.

I've risked my life for this company, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The men and women here are more than my coworkers — they're my family.

But my blood family needs me more.

Big Al's face softens as much as it ever does, which is minimally. Boss is a hard-ass with the weight of the world on his broad shoulders. Normally, I respect his decisions without question — years of military service instilled that obedience in me. Soldiers learn to trust their leaders to make the best decisions, knowing they have more information.

But this time, he's wrong.

No one would work harder for Redleg than me. For our clients. And for my team. Whatever I don't already know, I'm capable of learning.

"After the new person starts, we'll talk more about how things will work between the three of you. For a while, I expect it to be fluid, so your flexibility is appreciated. Any questions?"

Forcing silence, I shake my head and press my lips together to ensure I



don't tell him to take a long walk off a short pier or pound sand. Not only is it out of character for me, but until I have another plan, I can't afford to burn any bridges.

He tips his chin, then inclines his head toward his office door, wordlessly dismissing me. When I stand, his desk phone rings, and he raises his index finger at me.

"What's up, T?" he answers in a clipped tone.

His eyes widen, and his shoulders stiffen at whatever Tomer is telling him. "What do you need?" he barks out.

Another pause as tension rewrites his features.

"You got it. I'll send him down."

He hangs up and meets my eyes. "Tomer needs you. Looks like we've got some type of network breach."

*My, my, my.* The irony of him telling me he doesn't need me on Tomer's team and then immediately getting hacked, thus needing me, is poetic justice. Part of me wants to laugh in his face and scream, *that's what you get.*

But I'm not an asshole, and Redleg is still my family. Even if I might not be working here much longer.

Before I get to the doorway, he stops me. "Tell Tomer I'll be there after my next meeting. I can't miss this." To himself, he adds, "Especially at a time like this."

"Yes, Boss."

While hustling down the hallway, my phone buzzes with an incoming text. I give it a quick glance. It's my sister. *Dammit.* Not now.

CAROLINE

We need to talk. I think it's time.

KLEIN

Can't right now. Issue at work. Call you later.

CAROLINE

You better not be bullshitting to get out of talking about this, or I'll bust your ass. 🖐️🍑 <hand emoji> <peach emoji>. We can't put this off forever.

KLEIN

🙄 <eye roll emoji>

I can't deal with her right now. There's enough bullshit on my plate.

Initially, I'd planned on spending some time today trying to find out Mia's last name and seeing what I could dig up about her. Not trying to be a stalker, but she's a mystery I'm itching to unravel. I'd love to see her again. There's no freaking way the connection I felt was one-sided.

But maybe it was.

After all, she snuck out before I woke Sunday morning without leaving a note. If she wanted to see me again, she would have left her number. She seemed satisfied. Very much so. I sure as hell felt sated by the time we finally collapsed in the wee hours of the morning.

Foolishly, I thought she was different. She seemed genuinely interested in getting to know me. Although we were hot for each other, it didn't feel like a one-time fling, even if we did end up in bed on the night we met. Well, technically, it was the kitchen counter, the couch, then the shower before we made it to the bed.

I thought we were starting something.

Wrong again.

After swinging by my office to grab my laptop, I hustle into Tomer's lair. He's staring at his screen while tugging at the roots of his short blond hair with both hands.

Oh shit. The typically unflappable, emotionless guy is at the end of his fraying rope.

"Talk to me, T. What do you need?"

He rolls his shoulders and gives his head a shake like he's batting away the stress. "We're fucked."

Sliding into my chair, I roll up beside him at his large desk. "What happened?"

He groans and drags his mouse across the screen. "All morning, my system has been glitchy."

"Same. I noticed but figured you were doing some debugging."

"No, I wasn't," he seethes.

"That doesn't sound too good."

He growls. "It gets worse."

My stomach bottoms out. If Tomer's reaction is anything to go by, then we are truly fucked. "What else do you know, buddy?"

"I launched Big Brother and saw this." He taps his fingertip on his primary screen, which is open to the server monitoring program he designed.

A big red blob is flashing on the middle of the screen — in the shape of a

bird finger.

Someone is digitally flipping us off.

This day is getting better by the minute. Is it too late to go home and pretend I overslept?

Three hours later, we've sealed off the path the hacker took to get inside the Redleg network, but we're still searching for any signs of damage they did after infiltrating the system.

So far, we haven't found a thing.

Aside from the flashing red bird finger that's mocking us.

"It doesn't make any fucking sense," Tomer mutters.

He's said the same thing about seventy-seven times thus far, and he's right.

Not a single file is corrupted. There's no sign of compromised client information. No bugs left behind. No viruses implanted. No large waves of data pulled from our system. And no incoming heaps of garbage to hide anything malicious.

Nothing.

Whatever they did, they simply got in, looked around, and left the little bird finger so we knew they'd been inside the network.

From what we can tell, the server is running slowly because of something hidden in that red bird finger. But Tomer can't crack it, and I'm no help there. This type of thing is his specialty, not mine.

I'm more of the tech supply guy; the one you call when you need fancy toys to make the job easier out in the field. Sure, the toys I find and test out have technical components that need some know-how with software and hardware, but nothing like what Tomer's dealing with. I can help with digging through the internet for research too. But the true technical hacker shit is out of my wheelhouse. Everything I know about coding and the real IT component of this job is what he's taught me.

For the first time, I think Boss was right not to give me the promotion.

And speaking of him, he said he'd head down here once he finished his meeting. That was hours ago. What the fuck is he doing that's more important than our network vulnerability?

We need to show him what we're dealing with. If he hasn't come to us, then I'll go to him.

"I'll be right back," I announce to Tomer, who doesn't respond other than a grunt. "I'm going to brief Boss."

After grabbing my laptop and striding down the hall, I pause in front of Peggy's desk and point over my shoulder at Big Al's closed office door. "We need him. Is he busy?"

The older woman looks at me over her wire-framed glasses and grins. "He is, but I'll tell him you stopped by."

Her smile grows wider, making my chest constrict. She's roughly my mom's age, with the same pleasant demeanor. They're both caring and generous. Comforting and loyal. Hell, Peggy often ties her salt and pepper hair up in a soft bun like Ma does.

The differences between them are few. The most glaring is that Peggy isn't slowly losing her grip on reality.

I swallow a thick gulp and focus on the pressing issue. One thing at a time.

"It's important, Peggy. Maybe we should interrupt him."

She cricks her neck to one side and offers a subtle head shake. "Given the look on your face, Klein, I'm guessing you want to talk to him about the system issues, right?"

Interesting. How does she know about that? Perhaps she overheard, or Big Al told her.

"That's right. Tomer and I have been working through it for a few hours, and Boss said he'd come and see us earlier, but he never did. We need to brief him."

Her nose wrinkles, and she shakes her head once more, this time more dramatically. "It's not necessary. He's aware of everything. That's part of what his meeting is about. Didn't he tell you not to worry about it earlier?"

My fists clench at my sides, and my pulse spikes. "No. He didn't. And what is..." I trail off, unsure of what question I want to ask first.

Sensing my rising frustration, she leans across her desk to comfortingly grasp my hand. "Relax, kid, or you'll go gray way before your time." She smiles and squeezes my hand before letting go. "Boss must have forgotten to tell you guys to stand down. But he should be wrapping up with the new hire any minute. Head down there and tell Tomer I said he should take a break. You both can stop whatever you're doing. It's all going to be fine, honey."

Before facing her computer again, she winks at me.

The new hire? Already?

That's a super-duper way for this day to turn out.

Well, whoever he is, I hope he's ready for the shit show. Nothing like

being thrown into the soup when it's at a full boil. But why the hell would Big Al want us to stop trying to fix this mess? It doesn't make sense.

When I return to Tomer's lair, two other Redleg guards, Shep and Kri, are hanging out in the doorway. Looks like they're trying unsuccessfully to get Tomer to respond to them. Kri's still out on medical leave after suffering a life-threatening injury when she was attacked on the job a few months ago. She's been staying at Shep's place since she got out of the hospital, and I guess they decided to get out of the house today and come to the office.

I blow past the love birds, frustration seeping out of my every pore. "Move it. Coming through."

From over my shoulder, I hear Kri mumble, "They seem... busy."

Never one to back down from a challenge, Shep ambles into the office. I try to ignore him, but when he pauses in front of my temporary workspace, he wiggles my laptop lid like he's threatening to close it.

My pulse thrums loudly in my head while I attempt to pull my focus away from the fact that my replacement is already sitting in Boss's office. "Don't you fucking dare, Shep. It's not the time."

Shep grunts and squats down to come to my eye level. With his face next to my laptop screen, it's impossible to ignore him. "Hey, man. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

Rolling my shoulders out, I lean back and stretch my arms over my head. Might as well tell him. He's never going to shut up until I do.

"Things are most definitely not okay. Redleg has been fucking hacked."

Kri gasps. "What?"

My gaze shifts between Shep and Kri, who are both understandably shocked. This is unprecedented for Redleg.

Heavy footsteps capture everyone's attention but Tomer's. Scrolling through endless code, he keeps his focus locked firmly on his screens.

Boss sticks his head in, wearing a downright cheery expression.

He knows about the hack, so why is he unbothered? Have I been sucked into a wormhole and emerged in an alternate reality where up is down and Boss is calm?

His face brightens more when he sees Kri and Shep. "Oh, good. You two are here. By the way, congratulations on getting the temporary guardianship extended."

Kri and Shep became guardians to a fifteen-year-old orphan named Valerie Franco, a recent client. I guess they're on their way to becoming one

big, happy family.

How sweet.

Kri's concerned face softens. "Thanks, Boss."

Boss taps his hand on the doorjamb. "You two should join us in the conference room. Tomer, Klein, come on. Now."

"Big Al is exceptionally chipper, considering Redleg was hacked," Kri whispers as she and Shep depart, jumping at Boss's order.

Having heard his name, Tomer lets his focus stray from his task long enough to give me a sharp glare. I read it loud and clear: *He wants to have a meeting now of all times?*

Like Tomer, I don't feel like complying with Boss's demands.

He made us wait for more than three hours while he wined and dined my replacement — or so I assume — and now he wants us to join him at the crack of his finger while we're working frantically to un-fuck the clusterfuck?

The urge to disobey him grows exponentially. He probably wants to do some bullshit introduction with the new guy.

Screw that.

I don't mean to come off like a whiner, but I'm not in the mood to play nice. Was it too much to ask for a day or two to lick my wounds?

Diving into my task, I quickly lose track of time. No matter what Peggy said about stopping our efforts, we need to fix this shit.

A handful of minutes later, Boss must get tired of waiting for us because he storms into the office. "You two have a fucking hearing problem I need to know about?"

"It's not the time for —" Tomer starts, only to be cut off.

"I didn't ask what time it is. Let's go. Now."

His tone leaves no room for arguing, and in all honesty, we knew we were taking our lives into our hands by ignoring him.

Reluctantly, Tomer files out behind Boss. After exhaling all my frustrations and scratching my hands roughly over my scalp, I grab my laptop and follow suit.

The laptop feels like a security blanket. I probably won't need it for the introductory meeting, but it feels safer to bring it with me. Plus, I'll be ready to show them what we've been dealing with all morning.

When I approach the open conference room doors, Big Al's booming voice announces, "I found them. Take your seats."

Still agitated, Tomer protests, "Boss, this isn't the time for a meeting. Did

you not hear me? We've been hacked."

A feminine voice chirps, "I know. I did it."

My steps faltering, I attempt to identify the woman who just admitted to infiltrating our network. Once I enter the room, my feet shuffle to an abrupt stop.

The woman who rocked my world this weekend and left without a trace is staring at me, grinning and licking her lips. She's the picture of innocence, but I know she's not.

Not even close.

A zing of excitement streaks through me, but it's quickly replaced with shock and awe.

And I mean that expression in the way the military refers to a massive bombing campaign. It's as if a string of B-52 bomber jets have flown over Redleg HQ and dropped a shitload of cluster bombs directly on top of us.

"Mia?" I ask, my voice shaky.

In the chaos of the day, I'd nearly forgotten about her, but faced with her again, I'm struck by those captivating green eyes and luscious red hair. Hair that looked so fucking good wrapped around my wrist when I slammed into her from behind. The corner of my mouth twitches as a smile threatens to spread.

Despite the shitty day, it feels so damn good to see her again. I thought she was gone forever. Hell, part of me thought I dreamed her up to escape the grim reality of my life.

"Hey, Cal. Nice to see you again."

*Wait. Something's hinky here.*

My pulse shoots through the roof, and my heart plummets to the floor and flops around like a fish on a dock as realization dawns. So much races through my mind that I can't track it all.

But I know it's not good.

*Whatever is happening here spells doom! Doom, I say. Doom!*

Why on earth is she here? Shouldn't she look as surprised to see me as I am to see her?

She doesn't. There's not a speck of shock on her heart-shaped, lightly freckled face.

Shep angles his body to place himself in my line of sight. "You know her?"

I can't speak outwardly, but inside, I'm screaming, *fuck yes, I know her.*

*Intimately. Every inch of her body is branded into my memory. Her scent lingers on my bed sheets.*

“Oh, we’ve met,” Mia answers proudly, complete with batting eyelashes.

What is happening right now? Did that wormhole suck me up again?

*Doom! Doom!*

Maybe I never woke up this morning, and this is all a bad dream. Losing the promotion, the system getting hacked, and Mia waltzing into Redleg. All of it’s just a nightmare brought on by acute stress.

Makes perfect sense. Mystery solved. Any moment now, I’ll wake up in my warm, comfy bed.

Boss claps his hands, drawing a speck of my attention away from the vixen on the other side of the conference table. She holds my gaze, not backing down one iota.

My mind works furiously to piece together what’s happening while my heart pounds so loudly that I wouldn’t be surprised if Peggy hears it from the other room.

If Mia is our new hire *and* she’s not surprised to see me, then she knew who I was the whole time. It was intentional. I was part of some game. She tricked me.

But why? To fuck with my mind?

No. I’m jumping to conclusions. I’m sure she’s not the new person. There’s got to be another explanation. A reasonable one.

There’s no way my one-night stand from this weekend got my fucking job.

*No. Damn. Way.*

Big Al answers all my questions with one simple sentence. “Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to our new intel and data specialist, Miriam Owens.”

No, no, no.

*Doom! Doom!*

Frank Sinatra’s voice echoes in my psyche, singing, *on a scale of one to ten, my friend, you’re fucked.*

Vaguely, as if off in the distance, a clattering sound makes me flinch after my laptop slips from my hand and falls to the floor.

“Fuck me.”

I barely register the shocked gasps echoing around the room.

That epic night we spent together was part of some game. I was a pawn. It meant nothing to her.



Why the hell would anyone do that? What kind of sociopath did Big Al hire?

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, what the hell is happening?

## CHAPTER 5

**A NOT-SO-WELCOME TO  
REDLEG**

## THREE WEEKS LATER

MIA

If looks could kill, I'd have been long dead by now.

Not a great start for my first official day at my new job.

When Cal walked by my office this morning, he did a double take and glared at me with so much vitriol that it felt like a dagger to my heart. Neither of us spoke. We just stared at each other for six, maybe seven seconds. And then he stomped off, grumbling to himself.

I've spent the last three weeks relocating from Virginia to Florida. Silly me to hope he'd use that time to get over the shock of my appearance at Redleg.

Needless to say, he did not.

I expected as much, but it still chaps my thighs.

Once I take my seat, Peggy clasps her hands in front of her and smiles warmly. "Do you need anything else, dear?"

"No, thanks, Peggy. You've taken great care of me. I think I'll be fine."

Everyone here appears to have a genuine affection for Big Al's assistant, and I can see why. She's a kind older woman with a grandmotherly vibe.

"My desk is right down the hall in front of Big Al's office if you need anything. And my extension is preprogrammed on your phone. Don't hesitate to ask me for anything."

I flash a genuine smile. "I appreciate that."

Before she departs, she adds, "Boss has you penciled in for ten sharp. Unless something urgent pops up, I'll see you then."

She squeezes my shoulder affectionately and strolls off in no particular hurry.

With a deep breath, I study my surroundings and try to center myself. The pounding of my heart drowns out the muted conversations and clack of fingernails across the keyboards from the cubicles outside my office.

It's been a long-ass time since I've had a first day on the job, and my nerves are making themselves known.

Forcing one more calming breath, I shift my gaze to the bank of monitors

on my spacious desk. All of them are pristine and shiny, ready to do my bidding. A new laptop with the Redleg logo on the lid sits waiting for me, along with two tall, high-powered tower desktop computers.

Big Al did a nice job of ensuring my specifications were met.

My office is darkly lit — the way I like it — with recessed lighting that I can adjust with a dimmer. There's a climate control switch on the wall that affects the temperature in this room alone. And there are two boxes on the small worktable in the corner, both containing brand-new cooling fans. He even got me the fancy-ass ergonomic keyboard and mouse I asked for.

A touch of guilt hits me because I didn't really need those. I can get by with standard stuff, but I needed to know whether he was as accommodating as he seemed. My intel pimp made me do it.

So far, I'm impressed by Big Al's efforts. It reveals a lot about his character and how committed he is to the success of the company. From what I discovered during negotiations with him, conversations with Shep, my online fact-finding — some may call it snooping — and this little test, it's a safe conclusion that my new boss is willing to do what's necessary to provide for his staff.

Which is more than I can say for the management team in my former role at the CIA as an information specialist.

It had become an *every man for himself* situation at the company — that's what we called the CIA to alleviate suspicion and prevent an unintentional slip when in the field by calling it the agency, or heaven forbid, calling it the CIA.

It's going to take a bit to downshift from that mentality and accept that someone here has my back.

After setting up my workstation and ransacking the supply closet for stationery and other related supplies, it's only nine-thirty. Now I have nothing to do but kill time until ten when I meet with Big Al.

Me and idle hands? Dangerous.

I rap my fingernails across my desk and contemplate what to do next that doesn't involve staining my soul with my *creeperific* activities.

Perhaps Boss thought I'd need more time to settle in. With all my new hire paperwork completed, he gave me instructions to make myself at home, get with Peggy for a tour of the facility, and get to know the support staff. We did all that.

She showed me the locker room and gym facility on the first floor,

complete with cardio equipment, sparring mats, and weight machines. There were a few guys on the mats sharpening their hand-to-hand grappling skills. The eye candy was a free perk of the tour. The indoor shooting range was also quite impressive. There's even a bunk room here that I can use if I pull an all-nighter and need some quick shut-eye. Then we went floor by floor, and she introduced me to anyone who was around.

Most of the guards aren't here since they're in the field. Despite the lights and computers being on, Tomer the bland wasn't in his office. But he's likely still in the building. It would have been nice if he stopped by first thing to welcome me to his team.

*But nooo*, she thought with the attitude of a third grader.

I expected the daggers to be thrown at me from Cal, but Tomer has no reason to distrust or dislike me. I apologized for the friendly hack when I met him on the day Big Al offered me the job, and he didn't appear all that bothered. So why the cold shoulder now?

Maybe Cal told him about my covert seduction.

He probably did — the rat. Cal is the open-book type of man. Emotions on his sleeve and nothing to hide. Easy to read and even easier to manipulate.

A sour feeling sets in my gut.

*Fuck off, guilt. Regret and shame have already taken all remaining rooms at the inn.*

Besides, Cal's not the rat; I am. But I did what I had to do.

Sort of.

Did I have to sleep with him? No. He'd already told me most of what I needed to know. Opened his insides and let me poke around like a surgeon.

But fucking hell. He charmed the panties off me — quite literally.

Sweetheart smiles and cheesy jokes. The innocence of youth mixed with the life experiences of a man. A soldier who's seen the worst side of humanity but somehow retained an almost gleeful positivity.

Despite knowing how the world works, he chooses to see the good in people. To give the benefit of the doubt and look on the bright side. He was downright effervescent.

Was it so wrong to want that light to surround me for one night? To pretend I wasn't a monster who'd do anything it takes to accomplish her mission, regardless of the cost?

Given the entirety of the situation, I'd almost consider it a justifiable action. A biological need for companionship and human connection.

Hell, I'd *like* to say there was no harm, no foul, and that it was a mutually beneficial experience.

But the darkness in my soul disagrees vehemently.

No sense lamenting about it now, though. The deed is done.

And by *deed*, I mean hot-as-hell, sloppy-drunk sex that'll live on in my mind until my vagina has long shriveled up from nonuse and old age.

A twinge of physical pain shakes me from my memories. *Shit*. I gnawed so hard on my lip that I broke the skin.

The memory of Cal playing my body like a fiddle returns once the sting of my mouth fades. No, a fiddle isn't the right metaphor. Although he does have a mighty impressive bow — heh, heh — I think he played me like a flute.

Cause you know... all the holes.

Who knew good boys could fuck like that? Rough and gentle. Passionate and intense.

Nothing kinky and not much dirty talk, but he didn't need it. He was perfect exactly as he was.

Although I had quite a bit to drink that night, I don't think booze goggles are to blame for the way I continue reminiscing with such... carnal fondness.

I'm not a tiny woman, but that didn't stop him from tossing me around and moving my body into every delicious position imaginable.

*Ouch*.

Bit my lip again.

Rolling out my shoulders, I stand abruptly and set out on a noble quest to find the bathroom, refill my coffee, and see what kind of info I can gather about my new coworkers with face-to-face interactions.

Time to serve my inner intel pimp and make sure what I dug up online matches the real thing.

Unfortunately, the break room is empty. After filling my *Fuck the Patriarchy* mug with java and some caramel-flavored creamer, I toss the stirrer in the garbage. When I turn around, the man who's been starring in my wet dreams stands in the doorway, broad arms crossed at his chest. Tendrils of black ink peek out from the neck of his shirt and short sleeves.

Could that top pull any tighter across his muscular chest? He should probably buy a larger size, but I'm not mad he didn't. In fact, I'm grateful he shops in the boys' department.

Anger and loathing radiate off him.

His eyes are normally hazel, but they have a reddish tint. Apparently, when you mix fury with hazel, the resulting shade is vampire red.

With his stiff posture and smoldery scowl, he should be on a book cover. Strike that. He'd be a better mattress cover. For my bed.

*Bad Mia. Reduce hormones by 69 percent.*

I should speak first and offer an apology. After all, I owe him one or five. But something stops me from doing it. I'll analyze potential reasons for my reluctance later.

Plastering on a friendly smile, I wait for his words to match the ire on his face.

He doesn't make me wait long.

Leaning forward, he narrows his eyes at me while clicking his jaw. "Well?"

"Well," I parrot for some reason. My voice is softer than his, although there's a distinctively antagonistic tone.

*Make peace. Don't make it worse, girl.*

He scoffs, heaving his eyes to the roof in a showy roll. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

My plastic smile widens while the rock in my gut grows heavier. "Good morning. Lovely to see you again."

"No, it really isn't."

"It isn't lovely to see me, or it isn't a good morning?"

"Both."

Being face to face with him is proving a teensy bit more painful than I expected.

In the past, I've gone into the field to help CIA operatives snuff out intel or convert assets to our side of the game. That often requires less than honorable tactics. While my primary role was to feed intel to the field operatives, I've had my share of playing dirty spy.

I'm not ashamed to admit I've slept with assets and marks before. Good luck finding someone at the company who hasn't used their powers of seduction to get what they need for the job.

But no one *enjoys* manipulating innocent people.

Well, I suppose some people do. But I never did. I pushed through the discomfort because it's what the op required. It never felt good, per se.

But it sure as fuck never felt this icky before.

I have a strange urge to take a shower. The sweat under my boobs is only



partially to blame for that. Mostly, it's because facing off with Cal makes me feel filthy.

Rolling my shoulders back and raising my chin, I try for something light. "Perhaps some coffee would help improve your mood. I could pour you a cup if you like."

There. Professional. Cordial. Warm.

And it went over like a balloon filled with shit. One that thudded to the ground, burst open, and soiled my shoes.

"Fuck the coffee," he seethes. "The only thing that's going to improve this day is the sight of you walking out the door, never to return."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think?"

"You would know harsh, wouldn't you?"

My cheek twitches, but I throw on my tough chick mask so he doesn't see what I'm really feeling.

Regret. Shame. Guilt.

It's a triple-layer cake of self-loathing with bitter frosting.

But on the outside, you'd never know how disgusted I am with myself.

After years of working in a male-dominated field, I've learned to establish myself as a hard-ass right away. Otherwise, I'll always be seen as weak. If I lose my footing now, I'll never regain it.

So no matter how much I hate what I did to him, I can't let it show. I need to remember the key to handling difficult people is never letting them know they've gotten under your skin.

Only Cal isn't difficult. He's hurt; rightfully so.

But I was hurt once too. And so was my sister. Worst of all, it wouldn't have happened if I'd known who he was. If only I'd have taken a closer look.

That's why I'll never be caught unprepared again.

*Never.*

Now isn't the time to let guilt win. It's time to fortify my shield and remember why my actions were a necessary evil.

With an unaffected shrug, I toss, "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. But I don't plan on leaving anytime soon."

His jaw clicks harder than before, and he mashes his lips together. I hope he has a good dentist. If you looked up *holding your tongue* in the idiom dictionary, you'd see his picture at this very moment.

Clearly, there's a lot he wants to say to me.

None of it nice.

But he's holding it back because... well, because he's a good fucking guy.

And dammit to hell. I still *like* him.

Stiffening my spine, I inject a touch of ice into my tone — as much for my benefit as for his. “After what happened, I’m not surprised you’re mad. You don’t have to like me, but I’m not leaving. Better get used to it.”

“Not leaving, huh?” His brows raise, and he leans forward. “We’ll see about that.”

My head cricks back sharply, but I gather my composure instantly. “If you think I’m going to be intimidated by you, prepare to be sorely disappointed. I’ve gone toe to toe with far more threatening men than you. You’re like a puppy, Cal.”

He laughs humorlessly, running his tongue along his lower lip.

I want to suck on that lip. Or that tongue. Or both.

Yeah. Both sounds good.

“You don’t get to call me that anymore. The name is Klein. And this puppy bites back, so steer clear, or you’ll get hurt.”

And with that, he storms off.

The big baby.

Big *sexy* baby.

Creeping to the edge of the break room, I lean my head out to watch him stomp down the hall. He has a delectable ass. Firm, round, and so squeezable. I didn’t find anything in his past to indicate he was a baseball player, but he has the ass of a catcher. The memory of how it clenched in my hands when he drove into me pops unbidden into my mind.

*Hate to see you go, but I love to watch you leave.*

*Ouch.* Bit my lip a-fucking-gain. Clearly, my lip is in grave peril if he’s in my vicinity.

I shake my head to blow off the fog of arousal that his presence incites. Glancing over my shoulder, I’m met with the striking azure eyes of Redleg’s profiler, Sue. She’s also the wife of Leo Mason, the giant bodyguard who is often thought of as Big Al’s second in command.

I haven’t been formally introduced to her, but I know who she is from my *research*.

Yep. That’s what we’re calling it. Research.

Boring, non-invasive, and totally not-illegal-to-gather research.

I stick my hand out for a shake while wondering how she was able to

sneak up on me that well. “Hi, Sue. I’m Mia.”

She glances at my hand, back to my face, then at my hand once more before shaking it weakly. “How do you know my name? Isn’t this your first day?”

Odd greeting, but fitting. She wasn’t in the impromptu meeting when I was introduced to some of my coworkers on the day Big Al hired me.

Offering a pleasant smile, I reply, “I did my research on my new coworkers.”

Her face pinches. “That’s kind of creepy.”

She’s right. It *is* creepy.

Because I’m a creeping creeper who creeps.

“Sorry.” I dip my face and shrug my shoulders, trying to match her energy. “Just wanted to know who was going to be on my team. I don’t like surprises.”

Her expression softens, and her eyes flit back up to mine. “Same. Surprises suck.”

We share a slightly awkward chuckle.

“Well, it was nice to meet you officially, Sue. I guess I better be going. I’ve got to meet with Big Al soon.”

She bobs her chin in a curt nod, but before I can pass by her in the doorway, she leans close and whispers, “I won’t tell anyone Klein hates you. I don’t like to talk to people anyhow.”

A deep laugh bubbles out of me, which makes her grin grow wide.

She’s pretty in an unassuming way. I bet she has no idea how attractive she is. Her laugh is infectious too.

I guess she witnessed my interaction with Mr. Grumpy Pants with the squeezable catcher’s tush.

“Thanks, Susie Q. However, I suspect he’ll make his feelings for me known. I don’t think he’s the type of person who can hide his emotions.”

“He’s not. Even I can tell what he’s feeling most of the time.” Her eyes narrow suspiciously at me, and her smile fades. “Wait. Why did you call me Susie Q?”

*Oh shit.*

Is this the part when she figures out that I’ve read most of her recent text messages with her large Irish family?

Nah. She won’t be able to tell that I invaded her privacy.

Just more of that *research*, said the creeper.

Playing it off, I casually flick my wrist. “Just seemed fitting.”

I can tell in an instant she doesn’t believe me. *Fuck a duck named Chuck. That’s just my luck.*

One side of her mouth quirks, and her gaze slips to the floor. “Only my family calls me that.”

*I know.*

“Oh, sorry. I won’t do it again if you don’t like it.”

“Thanks,” she mutters as she passes me to enter the break room, effectively ending our chat.

Great. Racking up the strikes. That’s two in as many minutes. Nothing like tripping out of the gates.

Usually, I put people at ease with little effort. All it takes to endear them to me is a few smiles or a witty joke. Especially when I’m not in disguise. Something about my red hair and freckles is non-threatening — unless you’re one of those people who thinks ginger is soulless monsters. And if you are, fuck off.

I have a soul.

Somewhere inside that hollow cavity under my neck. It’s just buried deep.

Situation with Cal — err, Klein — aside, I’ve been known to be quite caring.

But today, I’m not making many friends. Other than Peggy, no one seems to care that I’m here. And I don’t know if I can count her because she probably loves everyone. I bet she’s the type of person who gets rear-ended and then apologizes to the person who caused the accident.

Dawdling to my desk, I’m met with a few gawking looks and the occasional smile from a passing staff member.

No one attempts to speak to me. Something feels... off.

Do they all know what I’ve done? How I manipulated one of their own? Hacked the server? Or maybe they know I’ve investigated every single one of them. I can *feel* their judgment burning into me.

*Paranoia, paranoia, everybody’s coming to get me.*

I’m being silly. They’re not judging me. No one knows what I’ve done, except Klein. But he’s not the kiss-and-tell type. Besides, admitting that he fell for my tricks isn’t a good look for him.

I expected a far more welcoming environment. They tout the whole *Redleg Family* vibe like it’s part of their creed. But if it *is* a family, then I’m

the black sheep. The one they'd like to adopt out at the soonest opportunity.

I'll need to expend some effort to win over my new coworkers.

*Oh, I know.* I'll bake a big cake and invite everyone to my office for a slice. Everybody loves cake.

Speaking of being adopted, Sawyer comes bounding down the hall. He's whistling and looks as cheery as a pig in slop. His dark brown hair is styled to perfection, and he's well-dressed in pressed black denim and a crisp button-up shirt.

I watch him from my end of the hallway like a creeping creeper since that's what I do best. It would be easier for me to observe everyone from the security feeds, but that feels redundant at this point.

Like the observant bodyguard he is, Sawyer notices me spying on him, so I wiggle my fingers in a subtle wave. After giving me a tip of his head in response, he lifts one finger in front of his lips in a shushing gesture.

But I wasn't saying anything.

What's he up to?

His smile grows impossibly wider as he stops at the office near mine. He peeks inside Tomer's empty workspace, then reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a shiny piece of slim plastic and what looks like a roll of tape.

For some reason, I'm drawn closer to him. It might be because I'm perpetually nosy, given my need to know everything that's happening around me. Or it could be because Sawyer smiled at me, and I'm suddenly craving a friendly face. I know he's very much taken, but I'm not interested in him that way. I need to make some damn friends around here and fast.

My feet carry me steadily toward him. His shoulders are shaking with silent laughter while he fiddles with the tape. Once I'm about five feet away, I see what he's doing.

A deep belly laugh rips from me, and I cup my mouth to contain it.

Sawyer whips his head at me, eyes widening in a silent warning, but the corner of his mouth quirks a half second before he joins me in raucous laughter.

He placed a new sign on Tomer's door plate that reads *Chuck Nofunfuck*.

With one act, Sawyer has officially beat out Peggy as my favorite person at Redleg.

Primarily because the person he's teasing with that sign is the one who seems to be ignoring me on my first day joining his team. And this pimp holds a grudge.

After Sawyer ensures the sign is placed *just* right, he turns to me and extends his hand. “I’m Sawyer.”

*I know.*

“Hi, Sawyer. Nice to meet you.”

“New guy in the chair, right? Miriam?”

I nod as we shake, secretly pleased he didn’t adjust the phrase to *girl in the chair*. “Call me Mia. And wow. For a tough guy, you’ve got soft hands.”

He glances at his hands and shrugs. His face contorts slightly before he throws his voice into some type of hoity-toity-sounding impression. “Pish posh. Only peasants have rough hands.”

We laugh together for a beat, then his smile lessens. “Nice to meet you, finally. Welcome aboard. I’d give you a tour, but I’m due at a detail across town in twenty. I just popped in because I heard he took the sign down again.”

“No worries. Peggy already gave me a tour.”

“She’s a sweetheart, isn’t she?”

I nod, then tip my head at the *Nofunfuck* sign. “Is that something you do a lot?”

“Tomer loves it,” he lies through his pearly white teeth.

Rolling my eyes, I quip, “Oh, I’m sure. Who doesn’t love being called a no-fun fuck?”

His brows pinch. “It’s good-natured fun. And there’s a whole story behind it.”

“Love to hear it someday.”

Once he’s gone, I’m left alone again. Scanning the work area, I see the few employees in the vicinity of my office are all hard at work. Three of them are viewing security feeds. It seems they’re doing remote surveillance, likely of clients who don’t want in-person guards around all the time. One woman is doing data entry. Another is flipping through a spreadsheet.

My fingers click against my coffee mug while I wait, hoping someone will approach me.

But they don’t. They’re all contently working away.

At least they don’t look miserable. The vibe is good despite my paranoia that I’m being ostracized before having a chance to prove myself.

I peek at my watch. There’s still fifteen minutes until my meeting with Big Al.

After entering my office, I grab my box of belongings from the corner to

finish unpacking. Opening the top drawer, I toss in various stress balls, fidget spinners, and other colorful items. They may look juvenile, but they help me focus when attempting a challenging hack.

Once they're put away, the only hardcover book I own stares at me from the bottom of the box.

*A Blind Eye No More* — by Luciana Francisco.

Like always, my fingertips trace the embossed gold foil lettering on the cover. I turn it over, gazing fondly at the author's picture on the back. A sad smile tugs at my lips as pride reinvigorates me, reminding me that I'm not the monster I often think I am. She's living a life of purpose, having healed from one of the most horrific nightmares imaginable.

She's free because of me.

I quickly flip to the dedication page, and my heart rate accelerates as I read the inscription for the thousandth time.

*TO THOSE WHO refuse to turn a blind eye to the atrocities of the world. And to the woman who found me when everyone else had given up. Although I don't know your name, not a day goes by that I don't think of you with the utmost respect and gratefulness. On behalf of all the others you've found, this book is for you.*

SAY what you will about my creeperific obsession, but my quest for intel has made a difference in the lives of many women like her.

I slide the book into place on my bookshelf, and something slips from between the pages. My heart leaps into my throat as I retrieve it from the floor.

A Polaroid of my two sisters and me. We're gathered around Portia's fifth birthday cake, arms draped over each other's shoulders.

A whole world ahead of those three girls.

Who would have predicted the tragedy waiting just ten years down the road?

When I feel tears pooling, I stuff the photo between the pages and place the book on the shelf.

That's enough for memory lane today.

While plopping down at my desk, I decide it's probably remorse regarding Cal that's causing the paranoia about my *less-than-cheery* welcome. No one here is shunning me. It's all in my head.

Despite the good I've done, the shame consumes me at times.

Even if the men and women of Redleg *are* judging me, I've already judged myself *far more* harshly than they ever could. Even more than Klein has.

I've convicted myself on all charges.

And I deserve it.

Wait. No. Fuck that.

Miriam Bennett — err, Miriam Owens — doesn't take anyone's shit.

*Although it feels slimy, I had damn good reasons for doing what I did.*

If Tomer won't come and greet me, then I'll go to him. I won't be pushed aside or treated like a second-rate citizen. I have the skills he needs on his team, and he's going to respect me. Dammit.

As soon as I find him.



## CHAPTER 6

**SURPRISE! YOU'RE STILL  
FUCKED**

KLEIN

Tomer cuts a harsh glare at me over the rim of his glasses. “Are you going to help, or are you going to continue brooding?”

For once, we’re in my office instead of the lair. Tomer popped in to discuss the changes he’s making to Big Brother in response to Mia’s hack.

*Ugh. Mia.*

I’ve known she was getting *my* job for three weeks now, but I’m still fuming. No one knows what to make of my attitude since I’m normally a happy-go-lucky guy. The scowl I’ve been constantly sporting is giving me wrinkles around the sides of my mouth, and my forehead is rapidly becoming permanently creased. If this continues, I’ll look way older than my thirty-five years.

Then again, Sammy Davis Jr. had a famously wrinkled forehead, and he was a god among men. Perhaps it’s not a bad thing.

*Keep tellin’ yourself that, sonny boy.*

From across my desk, Tomer stares me down. Waiting for my response.

“Sorry, T. Yeah, I’m going to help. I just ran into Mia in the break room, and it was,” I pause, searching for the word, “unsettling.”

Unsettling. Confusing. Frustrating.

And most inconveniently... arousing.

Tomer’s eyes roll backward in annoyance as he heaves a mix between a groan and a sigh. Would that be a grigh? A soan?

He leans back in his chair and studies me. “What’s your problem with her anyway?”

For a fleeting moment, words fail me, and I sputter out inarticulate gibberish. “Ar-her-at-sig-she-gah-I.”

I should be used to dodging this question since everyone, from Peggy to the mail clerk, has asked me how I know her. Word of my reaction to seeing that sexy scoundrel traitor in the conference room and my shattered laptop spread around the building like wildfire.

But if Tomer was curious, he would’ve asked by now.

He doesn’t care about interpersonal dynamics, and that’s part of what I love about working with him. He’s one of the few people I know who doesn’t come to me for emotional support. It’s refreshing.

Fortunately, he had a bit too much to drink that night at the Sassy Parrot, so he doesn't seem to recognize her as the woman at the bar. The one with the salt, lime, and tongue.

Jonesy will probably remember her, though. Fortunately, he hasn't been introduced to her yet. So I've got a few more days before I'll have to fess up to our night together and then promptly suffer everyone's judgment.

From that point on, I'll look like a fool. Unless I can convince Jonesy to keep it between us. Knowing him, it'll be a blackmail option.

In response to my nonsensical nonanswer, Tomer puts his palms up and shakes his head at me. "Never mind. I forgot I don't care. But whatever it is, you need to get it together because I talked to Boss this weekend, and he might —"

He's interrupted by the feminine voice that's been haunting my nightmares — and fine, also my sex dreams. "Good morning, gentlemen."

Tomer rises instantly and meets her in the doorway, his hand extended. "Hey, Miriam."

I stay seated, arms crossed at my chest, and let my angry scowl seep into her skin.

Petulant asshole here, reporting for duty.

No regrets about my current mood. My only regret is falling for her bullshit. I only wish I knew what she gained by hurting me. Other than all the orgasms.

"Call me Mia," she responds to T. "I wasn't sure if you knew I was starting today, so I thought I'd come and find you."

Appearing puzzled, Tomer glances questioningly at me and shrugs. "I knew you were starting today."

"Oh, so you're intentionally ignoring me. I promise not to take that personally."

The words she says are harsh, but her tone is playful and light. A confused look passes over Tomer's face when he realizes he inadvertently started off on the wrong foot with his new teammate.

Tomer's the best at *peopling*, said no one ever.

No skin off my ass. The sooner she realizes we don't need or want her at Redleg, the sooner Mia can fuck off out of my life.

*Don't let the door hit ya where the good lord split ya, dame.*

Tense silence fills the room as Mia looks from Tomer to me and back again. Neither of them seems to know what to say next. I'm certainly not

going to bail them out. She's Tomer's problem now. Not mine. I'll be back in the field by the end of the week once she's up and running.

Wearing a fake-ass smile, she asks him, "Well, what are we working on first? Ready to read me into the current ops?"

"Uh... well..." Tomer clears his throat. "Klein and I are working on some enhancements for our server monitor prog —"

She interrupts, "Big Brother?"

Tomer's lips press into a hard line. "Yeah. I guess you would know what the program is called since you already..." His words trail off, and his cheeks redden.

"Poked around inside it," Mia finishes for him. "Like I said the last time we talked, I'm sorry about that. It was just part of my interviewing process."

He's still a tad butt hurt that she hacked into his baby, as he should be. The changes we're making should prevent future breaches like hers. Although I hate to admit it, her cyberattack helped us find a vulnerability.

Tomer pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Big Al asked you to do it?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that." Her pink tongue darts out of her mouth to swipe at her lower lip. Not seductively, just innocently. But it makes my dick stir anyway.

*That's just perfect.*

She continues. "It was more like my way of interviewing Redleg to see if this was a place I could be useful."

Without responding, Tomer looks over at me, brows lifted. "Is it ten yet? We're meeting with Boss."

That's one way to end the conversation. He's always so tactful.

Palms on my desk, I push to a stand. "We've got five minutes."

"Wait." She narrows her eyes. "I have a meeting with him at ten."

"We're all going to be there," Tomer answers.

"We?" she squeaks, her right eye twitching.

"Me, you, and Klein." He flips his thumb in my direction.

Her head rears back, and her mask slips. I can't help but pounce on that momentary lapse in her facade. "Is that a problem, Miriam?"

The skin near the corner of her eye bunches, but she quickly recovers. "No, not a problem. I didn't know it was a group thing." Her green eyes fall to the floor. "I'm not used to..."

"Not used to what?" I needle further.

Her eyes snap to mine. “I’m just not fond of surprises.”

Oh, irony is a silly little bitch.

Unable to resist another attempt to intimidate her, I take two large steps while holding her gaze. With some ice in my normally warm tone, I say, “You like to be the one doing the surprising, huh?”

“Come on, you two. We don’t want to be late.” Tomer tips his head toward my office door and does another one of his groan sighs. Apparently, that’s his new thing. Henceforth, I shall call them *grighs*.

Heh, heh.

Looks like some of my internal sense of humor remains intact. I’ll take that as my win for the day. It’s the best I can hope for, all things considered.

Two minutes later, Peggy ushers us into Big Al’s office a tad early, but he’s ready. In his hand is the shiny new tablet I ordered for him a few days ago. He finally gave up on locating his old one.

Boss directs us to the cozy four-person table in the corner of his spacious office.

*Great.* I’ll be so close that I’ll be able to smell her.

Tomer sits first, and I wait for Mia to select a chair so I can avoid sitting next to her. She must be on to me because she moves annoyingly slow. Perhaps she’s trying to do the same.

Once our sluggish steps become awkward, I begrudgingly take the seat on Tomer’s left. Mia takes the seat opposite me on Tomer’s other side.

But now we’re facing each other. Not sure this is any better.

*Suck it up, kid.*

Boss joins us at the table. “Thanks for coming in. We have a lot to discuss.” He looks at Mia. “Peggy said she took care of you this morning. Everything good so far?”

“She did. Thanks. I’m settled in and ready to join the team.” Her gaze flits from me to Tomer before resting on Big Al.

Team?

I can’t bite my tongue. “It’s more of a duo. Just you and Tomer.”

Why am I even in this meeting? Torture, perhaps? Maybe Big Al thinks I’m the one who hid his tablet. But it was Leo. We’ve all suspected Boss is sneaking around behind everyone’s back with Leo’s mom. When Lionheart found the tablet at her house, he sort of snapped and hid it in a signal-blocking box so that Boss can’t find it even with GPS tracking.

Boss cricks his head to the side. “Funny you should mention that. That’s

part of what I want to talk about.” He takes a deep breath, then delivers a one-two punch to my nuts. “Tomer and I discussed this on Friday, and I took the weekend to reach a decision. I’m making this a three-person team on a trial basis to see how you work together. If you can be a cohesive unit, having three of you would position Redleg for the next stage. We’ve hired several new bodyguards to backfill for Klein’s move out of the field and to account for all the new cases we’re taking on. I think the skills you bring collectively are exactly what we need.”

Tomer claps his hands, a big smile splayed across his face. “Hell, yes. Finally.” He’s been asking for help for eons.

Big Al grins at Tomer, clearly pleased that he’s kept the brains of the organization from quitting.

Mia and I are locked in a dead stare as the implications sink in. This isn’t going to be a few days of suffering while we ensure she’s trained. By the end of the week, I won’t be heading out to the field where I could avoid her.

We have to work together.

Every day.

Close.

On the same three-person team.

Kill me now.

With my pulse racing, the whooshing of blood rushing through my head drowns out whatever Boss and Tomer are saying. I see their lips moving as they talk animatedly, but I’ll be damned if I know what they’re saying. They could be swapping pie recipes or planning a Redleg retreat to the moon, and I’d be none the wiser.

“Wipe that look off your face, Klein,” Big Al chides, giving me a playful nudge. “You’re still on the intel team. This is what you wanted. I thought you’d be happy.”

Mia looks at the table, her eyelashes fluttering while she gains her composure. Attempting to do the same, I roll my shoulders and offer a grin at Boss.

He’s right. I *should* be happy. This is what I wanted.

What I needed.

*There you go, kid. Focus on the positive. That’s my boy.*

But not with Mia.

*Dammit.*

“Sorry. Yeah... this is great news,” I force out, letting my hands fall flat

to the table with a soft thump. “I guess I’m just shocked.”

“Excellent. Now, here’s how I see it playing out.” He quickly shifts into Boss mode. “Tomer will be ultimately responsible for deciding how to best utilize the two of you until further notice.” He looks at Mia. “You’ve got skills that we need desperately here, and I want you to teach these guys everything you can. In turn, they’ll get you up to speed with how we operate at Redleg. Our priorities, procedures, communication systems, and so forth.”

“Not a problem,” she answers coolly, then looks across the table at me. “I’m sure we’ll make a great team.”

Big Al’s shoulders roll, and his perpetually furrowed brow loosens for the first time in weeks. To Tomer, he adds, “I know you’ve been working solo for a long time, with the exception of Klein here joining you recently, but this is your chance to make sure the unit is set up the way you want it. Utilize their skills and give them a chance to sink or swim occasionally. Once their training wheels are off, you can even take that vacation.”

Idly, I wonder where Tomer would go for a vacation. Not to Vegas or the Caribbean — too fun. Not a cruise — too many people. He’d probably do something like tour a mustard factory, visit the largest ball of wax, or lock himself in the Library of Congress to read historical documents and analyze their classification system, ultimately suggesting improvements.

“Everyone good?” Boss asks several moments later, mentally dragging me back to the meeting.

Around the table, we all nod repeatedly, making us look like a bunch of bobblehead dolls. Tomer seems genuinely excited, which is an emotion he’s never revealed before in my presence. Good for him. Despite how tragic this is for me, I’m glad to see him so energized.

Mia seems jittery but forces herself to stay calm. You can see it by the tight set of her jaw and the occasional twitch of her left eye. Seeing her frazzled makes me feel warm inside. She deserves it.

As for me? No clue what my face is showing. Probably everything I’m feeling — shock, apprehension, anger, elation, anticipation, and a million other emotions I haven’t processed yet. I’ve never been able to avoid wearing my heart on my sleeve. No sense in trying now.

“Let’s touch base formally once a week so you can update me on how things are unfolding. I’ll have Peggy get those scheduled.” He stands and pulls away from the table before slicing my gut with his next words. “I know you all need your own office space, but I’d like you to spend the next few



weeks working together in Tomer's office as much as possible. I think it's important for team cohesiveness and will get you on the same page. It'll be easier for you to get Mia up and running that way too. Likewise, she can share her specialized skills with you."

Why do those words make me think of the way she worked my cock deep into her throat when she was on her knees in my shower? She has specialized skills, all right.

And I wish I didn't know that so well.

How the hell am I supposed to work beside her knowing how she tastes, how good she feels wrapped around my dick, and the way she screams when she climaxes?

Yep. I'm still fucked.

## CHAPTER 7

# WRONG TYPE OF THREE-WAY

MIA

If karma were a dildo, it would be a minimum of fifteen inches long with a girth of at least eight inches and covered in barbed wire. Currently, *my* karma dildo is without lube and positioned a centimeter from my sphincter. If I flinch or sneeze, I'm screwed in the worst way.

Oh, who am I kidding? The sneeze is unnecessary at this point.

No amount of digging or, ahem, research will get me out of this mess.

With pep in his step, Tomer leads Klein and me down the hall. It's quite a change from how he marched to Big Al's office before the meeting with his shoulders hunched and head down, while he muttered gruffly. I get the feeling that's his default mode. Sort of like the factory settings for Tomer Stillman.

He's gotten a mood upgrade today with the news about having a three-person team at his disposal instead of just him and me. At least one of us is *thrilled* with Big Al's grand plan.

Klein and me? Not so much.

He did a semi-decent job of schooling his reaction after Boss called him out on his stunned silence, but when the bomb first dropped, I thought Klein was about to slip into a surprise coma.

As we pass my office door, Tomer pauses abruptly and faces us. "How about you both get your laptops and come to the lair? I want to start immediately."

With that, he turns on his heel and bebops off. Klein and I stand in silence, watching as our human buffer disappears into his office.

Should I say something to Cal to crack the tension?

It didn't go well the last time I tried to make peace. The rules of engagement say that it's his turn to extend the olive branch.

Side note: those rules exist, right? This is a totally normal situation. Happens every day. No doubt other women across the country are standing beside the man they seduced under false pretenses at this very moment. Of those, a minimum of 80 percent — give or take a few — have likely been blindsided with a death sentence. Oops. Did I say death sentence? I mean an *assignment* that consists of working with said sexy man in close quarters indefinitely. Maybe even 90 percent.

*Play it cool, Mia. You've got this.*

Okay, fine. If he isn't going to speak, I'll just let him stew some more. At some point, he'll unload all the ire he's holding back. And that's fine.

Really.

I'll listen and apologize. Then we'll move on. Easy peasy. Piece of cake.

*Mmm. Cake.*

I think I'll have red velvet tonight. Today is a red velvet-level day.

Without a glance in his sexy direction, I grab my laptop and sweater from my office. Tomer is my de facto superior, and he wants me in his office. So off I go.

Why have a confrontation now when we can put it off until... the apocalypse, perhaps? Until a meteor is headed to Earth? Some other natural disaster with planet-destroying potential? Any of the above suits me just fine.

Avoidance, it's the spice of life.

By the time I've gathered my things, Klein has vanished.

Good. But sadly, I missed the view of his retreat. Pity.

Oh, it just hit me. I must be drawn to Cal's ass because of my affinity for cake. He's got a double-layer cake that just won't quit. I want to take a *big* bite.

*No, stop it. No cake for you!*

I beat Klein into Tomer's lair — hilarious name, by the way — which feels like an odd victory to celebrate. Yet I think my conscience did a fist pump. Weird.

As I approach, Tomer's busy clearing off a portion of the long desk surface in front of a docking station and large monitor.

"Here," he says, not making eye contact while jabbing a tube of disinfectant wipes at me. "If you're anything like me, you like a clean space. Not saying the space is dirty, but... well, whatever."

Considerate for a robot. He's becoming sentient.

I set the laptop on the docking station, drape my sweater over the chair, and go to work wiping the keyboard and mouse while I take in my surroundings. A wave of giddiness rocks through me.

Tomer's got five desktop tower PCs in here with a whole bank of monitors running down one side of the room. My best guess is that each tower is used for different tasks, based on its power and capability. One for coding, one for hacking tools, one for tasks that require dedicated processing power like hashing, another to run Windows, and so forth.

I'm about to dork out so hard in here.

At the company, I had a laptop with monitor and docking station, along with two desktop towers. Three monitors in total. But this is something else.

Am I impressed?

My stupid pride wants me to say no, but my inner pimp is gleeful as hell just thinking of all the trouble I can get into with toys like this.

No. Not trouble.

Respectable, legal, and morally justified research. For the good of Redleg and their clients. Not for me and certainly not for some politician who doesn't deserve it. Not for some bullshit military operation that's a cover for greed and corruption.

For real people who need help.

At that thought, my shoulders roll back, and my chin lifts. For the first time all morning, a real smile tugs at my mouth, and I let it come without schooling it into a calculated expression.

I had hoped that leaving the company and working for a reputable firm would give me peace. I just didn't realize it would happen so soon. Even if the greeting this morning has been mixed, I'm hopeful Redleg was the best move for me.

But like all good things in my life, my peace is quickly shat upon the moment Klein comes stalking into the room and stops behind me. I can sense his gaze burning into me, so I spin around in the chair, wearing my *plain face*.

It's the face I use when I don't want to reveal an ounce of what I'm feeling. No pinch at my eyes or lips. Nary a crease anywhere. I simply let every muscle in my face go limp.

But not so much that I look like I'm having a medical episode that will make people start asking me stroke questions.

Glancing up, I study the man in front of me, and my mouth waters. Like the stubborn ass I am, I refuse to gulp in his presence. Unfortunately, that makes saliva pool. If I don't tighten my lips, I'll drool all over myself. My plain face doesn't work when my mouth is impersonating a waterfall.

Unlike me, Klein doesn't have a plain face. He has a sexy as fuck face that is begging to be ridden. And it reveals everything he's feeling.

"That's my seat," he grits out, cutting and pained sounding.

Funny. I was *just* thinking the same thing about his face.

Tomer doesn't look up from his PC. "I put her there. I figured she should

be between us so we can alternate showing her shit and vice versa.”

Pretty sure lots of pornos start like this, with the girl in the middle of the two hot guys. But this isn't *that* type of three-way. Unfortunately.

Klein's nostrils flare. “Fine.”

He takes three steps to my right and yanks out the chair from the other workstation.

Honestly, if I were in charge, I'd always have the intel team work together. It's a huge area with lots of space, and this job is ripe for collaboration.

But I'm not in charge and never could be. Not my jam. Not my kink.

Although I can be quite social, I need time to recoup and recharge my battery. For the most part, I like people best when they are on the other side of an internet connection. The time I spend in *my* office will give me the quiet time I require.

Beside me, Klein mumbles something sounding like “gets my job, and now she gets my seat. Perfect plan because —” He's interrupted by the buzz of his cell phone.

After swiping the screen, his shoulders sag. I try to ignore him, but that's not something I'm capable of. Not in this lifetime.

“Okay, here's what I want to do first,” Tomer announces, turning his chair to face me. “We'll start by going over our current caseload. You should be read into the big ones, at least.”

“Excellent. What else?”

“After that, I'll get all your access set up. All the programs you'll likely need for portability are preloaded onto your laptop. This desktop has a few others for when we're guiding field ops and need faster processing speed.”

“Makes sense. What will I do while you do that?”

“I'll show you where the SOPs are saved. You can start reading through those. You'll need to be familiar with our procedures.”

Already am, but he probably doesn't want to know that.

He continues. “You'll need to know the guards' procedures and those for internal staff. You should know what everyone does here.”

For the most part, I already do. Again, not telling him that.

“So I'll be reading all day?”

“Let's start there,” the bland one decrees. “I have to trust that you know this shit like the back of your fucking hand, because when shit goes ass up — and it usually does — you need to be able to act without thinking. Lives

depend on it.”

Oh, colorful language. I like it. Far less bland.

“Yes, sir,” I toss playfully, even adding a two-finger salute.

Not to be confused with a one-finger salute. Tomer’s brow furrows at my attempt at humor.

I smile and tap his arm. “Lighten up.”

Before Tomer can reply, Klein cuts in from behind me. “Tomer doesn’t like to be called *sir*, but Boss does. It’s a show of respect. Be sure you do that next time.”

Oh shit. I didn’t call him sir this morning. Did I do it during my interview? I can’t remember. But wait...

Twisting in my chair, I face Klein. “You didn’t call him *sir*.”

“We’ve known him a long time, and he’s given us permission to call him Big Al or Boss. But he likes new people to call him *sir*.”

Why does his expression remind me of a cocky squirrel with big nuts?

Tomer groans loudly, making me spin to face him.

“What do you want me to do, T? Keep working on the coding changes to Big Brother like you showed me?” Klein asks.

Like a freaking ballerina doll, I spin back. Dammit. I’m getting dizzy. I no longer like this three-way seating arrangement. Luckily, this chair swivels.

“Yeah, that’ll be good.”

“Coding changes?” I ask, unable to fight the hint of glee in my tone. “Would this have anything to do with my little... uh... test?”

“What do you think?” Klein snaps. Then he throws in his earbuds and gets to work.

I take a cleansing sigh and studiously avoid watching the way Klein’s skilled hands roam over the keyboard.

Unfortunately, memories of how he pinched and rolled my nipples between those deft fingers pop unbidden into my mind. In response, my high beams flash on.

Immediately, I toss my sweater on to hide them. It’s cold in here, so it’s not like he’d know it was because of him, but I don’t need to give him any ideas.

With my nips hidden from everyone’s view, I tell Tomer I’m ready, and he pulls up a database on his screen, asking me to slide closer.

“This is our client management program.”

I know.



“Uh-huh,” I respond.

“We call it *Bruce*.”

“Why?”

“Because Boss knows it all, and Bruce Springsteen is the Boss.”

That’s a hilarious name now that I know the story. I chuckle, but his lip barely raises.

He points at the top of the screen. “You see these tabs here? These are the segments that separate clients by risk and priority.”

I know.

“Open ones are here. Closed cases are here.”

I know that too.

Part of me wants to tell him I already spent lots of time poking around here. Bruce is how I found out about the Lenkov Russian mafia connection to Redleg in the first place.

I let him drone on for a few minutes before I interrupt him. My pride and competitive nature can’t stand it for another second.

Placing my palm on his forearm, I halt his mouse-clicking movements. “Tomer, stop. I have a confession.”

Klein scoffs, “Oh, this should be good. You’d need a priest to hear *your* sins.”

Peeking over my shoulder, I cut a harsh glare at him. “I thought you were listening to music.”

“Dead battery in my earbuds,” he lies.

So transparent.

“So you just leave dead earbuds in your ears?”

“Anything to drown you out so I can focus on coding.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you were coding, what with the lack of results and all.”

“Well, I’m *trying*, but I keep getting interrupted.”

“You are trying, aren’t you? Very trying,” I quip.

His gaze darkens. “Quit trying to push my buttons,” he snaps.

“Oh, you have buttons? Cool. Where’s the mute? Or the fast forward so you can get through that coding before the world stops spinning.”

He opens his sexy mouth to snap back at me, which I totally deserve. But he’s interrupted by a series of increasingly loud tones on his cell phone. Jumping up, he grabs his phone and dashes to the door. “Got to go, T. Call you in a few.”

Tomer and I watch him retreat. Once he's exited the room, we meet eyes. When Tomer doesn't say anything, I ask, "What was that about?"

"Not sure. It happens every now and then."

My head kicks back. "And you don't ask him where he's running off to?"

Tomer's eyes pinch tight and lips purse. "That would imply I give a shit."

One of my boisterous laughs escapes. It makes him smile.

*Finally.*

Wow. Tomer has a nice smile. I'm fairly certain I've never seen it before. I point at him while my chuckling dries up. "You're low-key funny."

His smile falls minutely. "No, I'm not. I'm the no-fun fuck, remember?"

*Oh.* My throat gets thick as I get a glimpse of his pain.

He's hiding some hurt over the way he's treated, but it's not the time to explore his wounds, so I let it pass for now.

But I decide then and there, I'll never tease him like the others do.

"Okay, so you don't give a shit about people. Fair enough."

"People are not my problem. And he always comes back. Sometimes it's five minutes, sometimes an hour or two. But Klein's reliable and loyal." He shifts in his chair and pushes his glasses up his nose. "Where were we?"

His tone has returned to the flat, monotone quality. Factory mode has been reset.

"Uh, I was going to make a confession," I start, scrunching my nose and looking at him from under my brows. "I've already —"

He interrupts, "You've already looked at this shit, haven't you?"

Hiding my sheepish grin, I bunch my mouth to one side, nibbling my bottom lip. "Maybe."

Exasperated, he lets his head loll. "I fucking knew it."

"Sorry," I admit, needing to come clean with him. He seems like a good guy, and there's no reason for me to mess with him. And selfishly, I want to accelerate my training and get to work on some actual good shit.

"In fact, I've already read the SOPs and the partially completed draft of the job responsibilities document you started but never finished, and I looked up all the clients in Bruce. Found something interesting, if you'd like to know where you can tighten your client screening process."

"Wow, Miriam. Fuck. Nothing like getting an ego check on someone's first damn day in the chair."

Despite his intense words, I can't tell if he's impressed, frustrated, happy, sad, tired, energized, or dead inside.

The need to defend myself rises, but I quash it. He doesn't need to know my *whys*. Only the *whats*.

"I prepared a document with my assessment," I offer, pulling out a jump drive and waving it in his face.

He eyes it carefully, probably debating whether he wants to risk letting me put the drive into one of his network PCs. But he's going to have to get over that shit if we're going to work together.

And I want this job. I want him to trust me, and not for nefarious reasons.

I didn't realize how badly I wanted it until I left the CIA and felt a freeing sensation unlike any I've ever felt before.

I *will* make this work, and getting Tomer to see my value is key. Once he does, the others will follow. He's a leader, even if he doesn't want to be. Even if it's not in the traditional sense like Leo and Big Al. Those guys are the head of Redleg, but Tomer is the brain inside.

Trying to ease his mind, I offer, "Tomer, look. I know you don't have any reason to trust me. In fact, quite the opposite. But Shep trusts me; that's why he recommended me. And Big Al hired me after intense vetting." I lean forward, infusing sincerity into my voice and expression. "Believe me, I'm here to help. I'm part of the team now. I will be an asset to Redleg. I promise I'm not a liability."

"No background check or vetting process could look into your CIA file. And I already know your real last name isn't Owens. So I hope you'll forgive me if I don't share Big Al's enthusiasm and trust."

My shoulders sag. He's right.

Redleg will never get a full file on me. It's been sealed and sealed again, locked in a *Jumanji* case and thrown into the ocean. One that will not wash up on a beach somewhere.

"Although most of my CIA career will never see the light of day, he called his contact at the company and did his due diligence on me."

He holds my stare while rubbing the nape of his neck.

I purse my lips as I realize I'm going to have to give him something. "Hang on. I'll be right back."

Scurrying out the door, I bop into my office to grab my shit before returning. Sitting down, I surrender the items to him. "Mobile AirCard so you don't have to use the Redleg Wi-Fi." I point to my laptop. "This is my personal device."

He eyes me cautiously. Loads of intelligence in his gaze but not much

emotion.

After I flip open my laptop and place the jump drive in the USB port, I open the document and slide the device down the desk so it's in front of him.

“As you can probably guess, my PC has oodles of my data. And I'm giving it to you. Look at the document I prepared while you're at it. It's an analysis of your network, firewalls, and related vulnerabilities. No charge for that. Did it off the clock.”

Heaving a deep breath, I add, “You can hold on to my laptop for a few days. Poke around. See what you can dig up on me. No restrictions. Bank accounts, investments, contacts, software. You name it, you can have access to it.”

My stomach rolls, but this is what I'm prepared to do to earn his trust. If I expect him to place his confidence in me, I need to be willing to do the same. It's a leap of faith, but I want this to work more than I've wanted anything in a long time.

Nothing on that device can tell him about my past at the CIA — that's not something you can take when you leave the company. But it's got the rest of me on it.

The real me. Miriam Bennett.

“Why?” he asks flatly.

“I'm asking you to trust me, so it's only fair I show that I trust you too. I want to be part of this team.”

This family.

His gaze glides between my face and the offered laptop a half dozen times while he rolls his tongue over his teeth. “Okay.”

He takes my laptop, closes it, and slides it into a desk drawer on the far side of his desk. Away from me.

“So what questions did you have about our cases?”

Tension broken and trust *tentatively* forged. Groundwork laid. First step complete.

Only this time, I'm not aiming to manipulate my target. My mission is genuine. Earn trust. Join the family.

Then I can rebuild my own.

## CHAPTER 8

**WALKING, BUT NOT AFTER  
MIDNIGHT**

KLEIN

It's a great day to be me.

The best day. The day of days.

While dashing to the elevator, I throw my phone to my ear and wait impatiently for my mother to answer. "Come on, Ma. Pick up, pick up."

The call rolls to voice mail.

"Son of a bitch."

I call her neighbor Gloria, but she doesn't answer either.

Too impatient to wait for the elevator, I bound down the stairs and through the lobby at full speed while dialing my sister and trying to calm my spiking pulse.

I can't help my mom if I don't stay calm.

"Hey, bro. What's up?"

"Have you talked to Ma today?"

"No, what's wrong?"

"Maybe nothing. I got a perimeter alarm. She's a few blocks from the house right now."

Caroline's voice takes on a harsher tone. "Dammit. I told you we couldn't put this off. If something happens to her, it's on you. I swear to shit."

*Real nice, sis. Like I need to feel worse.*

"Don't worry. I'm on my way. If anyone calls you, just be sure to answer."

"I will. Let me know when you find her. Stay calm. Maybe she's just taking a walk."

"Yeah," I agree, although I don't believe for a minute she's taking a walk.

We've talked to her about that. If she's lucid, then she knows to let me know when she's leaving the house, and she's supposed to take Gloria, who knows to call me if they're going somewhere. So if Ma's going for a walk, she's not in her right frame of mind.

Which means she might be wandering, looking for something she can't remember.

When I jump into my Redleg SUV and fire it up, Manilow's "Looks Like We Made It" blares from the speakers. After quickly silencing it — no offense to Barry, but I need to focus — I order the voice assistant to text Big

Al and Tomer to let them know I'll be back shortly. Then I ring Gloria again, but it goes to voice mail. I try my mom two more times before I give up on the phone calls.

Fuck.

Part of me wonders if this is another reason Boss hired Mia instead of giving me the job. He knows I have had several unexpected absences over the last few months, even if he doesn't know why.

Nothing excessive. But enough to raise eyebrows. Especially since I'm single and childless.

As I race through town, I check the tracking on my phone for Ma's location at every red light. She's still moving, having gotten about a mile from the house.

*Dammit.*

I should have set the perimeter alarm for a smaller radius around the house. I'll be changing that for sure. And I think it's time I install the cameras inside the house so I can check on her. I would have done it by now but didn't want to invade her privacy to that extent.

My conscience tsks at me. *Really, kid?*

Fine. I didn't do it because each time I put something like that in place, it makes what's happening all the more real.

At the next traffic light, I check her location, and my heart plummets. She's approaching a major intersection, thus beyond the relative safety of her quiet suburban neighborhood.

No longer concerned about a speeding ticket, I floor it and call 911.

After the dispatcher answers, she asks, "Is your emergency police, fire, medical?"

"Uh, police or medical maybe. Not sure."

"What's the situation?"

"My mother is..."

Lost? Wandering? Taking a fucking walk?

"Has your mother been injured, sir? An accident?"

"I don't know. She has early-onset Alzheimer's. I got an alert that she's left the house and is approaching Highway 60 from Maywood Avenue. I'm worried she's going to get hurt. She knows not to leave the house alone, and she's not answering her phone. I'm on the way, but I'm still about eight or nine minutes away."

"Do you have her specific location on your tracker, sir?"



I relay the GPS coordinates.

“We’re putting a call out to all units in the area to be on the lookout. Can I have her description?”

“She’s sixty-two, Caucasian, shoulder-length salt and pepper hair, five foot six, medium build.”

“Any idea what she’s wearing?”

“I don’t know. I was at work.”

Fuck. I should know what she’s wearing. I should see her every morning *and* every night. She shouldn’t be living alone with only my quick drop-ins and Gloria’s visits.

Guilt constricts my chest, making it hard to get a deep enough inhale.

“Her neighbor checks in on her a few times each day. But she’s not answering her phone right now either.”

I answer a few more questions while speeding through town. The dispatcher hangs up after getting all the information I can provide and assures me that the officers are looking for her and will call me if they find her. She said I should call 911 again if the situation escalates.

Escalates?

Like if she...

No. That’s not going to happen. She’ll be fine. I’ll find her, or the police will. She’ll be safe. She has to be. My mother is the kindest person I know, and nothing bad is going to happen to her.

It can’t.

From here on out, I’ll stop procrastinating and make sure she’s safe. I can’t keep pretending this isn’t happening.

Seven minutes later, I pull into a CVS Pharmacy parking lot on two wheels. My stomach flip-flops at the sight of the flashing lights of a patrol car and an ambulance.

*An ambulance.*

The pulse in my neck thrums wildly, and my throat feels tight. Without bothering to find a parking space, I pull up on the curb, throw it in park, jump out, and sprint toward the scene.

Then I see her.

Pressing my palm to my chest, I release a strangled breath.

My mother’s sitting on the back bumper of the ambulance with a paramedic beside her. She’s not even on the stretcher. *Thank Frank.*

My phone rings upon my approach, but I disregard it. It’s probably Boss

checking on me.

Work doesn't matter.

Her eyes flicker with immediate recognition when she sees me. *Oh good.*

The nauseating fear that soon she won't recognize me bunches in my gut. But for now, she knows who I am.

"Ma, are you okay?"

She opens her arms for me, a beaming smile spread across her face and brows furrowed in confusion.

Wrapping her in an embrace slowly soothes my racing pulse. Thankfully, she's unharmed.

She's fine.

This time.

"Calvin, what are you doing here, my love? Why aren't you in uniform? Why didn't you tell me you were on leave? This is such a lovely surprise."

Her words confirm what I already knew to be true. Reality isn't in her grasp now.

If her disheveled appearance didn't clue me in to her mental state, the fact that she thinks I'm still in the Army would be a big red flag flapping in the breeze.

Aside from the fact that her clothes don't match and her hair isn't combed, she looks fine. Physically.

"I'm here, Ma." I give her a nonanswer, trying not to alarm her or cause her reason to panic. The key is to keep her calm.

She pulls away after a few seconds, freeing herself from my overzealous hug. Looking at the paramedic beside her, she raises her chin and declares, "My son is an Army Ranger."

The paramedic eyes me skeptically, her eyes searching my face for confirmation.

I lean closer and mouth the words, "I was."

She nods, understanding clear in her compassionate eyes. Paramedics and law enforcement must see this sort of thing all the time.

"I need to take your blood pressure now, Mrs. Klein."

My mother shrugs away from her.

"Ma, let the paramedic check you out. I'll be right here."

She lets go of my hand and looks at the paramedic in confusion. She blinks repeatedly and shakes her head softly. But instead of asking what's happening or refusing, she dutifully extends her arm for the blood pressure

cuff.

Even if she's not entirely lucid, her gentle soul remains.

A uniformed patrol officer eases beside me. "Can we speak?" He inclines his head to the side, beckoning me to follow him.

I place a kiss on my mother's forehead. "I'll be right back, Ma."

She smiles at me and nods.

Out of earshot of the others, the officer looks at me with an air of distrust — his brows furrowed, his lips tight, and his eyes discerning. "Are you the one who called 911?"

"Yes, sir. That's my mother."

"Okay, that explains why you didn't answer my call a moment ago. So, tell me. How did you know she'd wandered off?"

"I have a tracker on her and get alerts when she leaves the perimeter."

He nods, but I see something there. Behind his eyes. The judgment.

"Do you often leave her alone?"

There it is.

"Her neighbor usually visits her a few times each day to check on her. I stop by once a day too. And I have the tracker."

"But she lives alone?" He raises his brows and tips his head at me, holding my gaze. He's telegraphing my deepest fears and the harsh judgment I've already heaped on myself.

Or he's considering arresting me for endangerment or neglect.

"Yeah, I know, sir. I'm trying to get that worked out. She's never done this before. It's not usually this bad."

"Okay, good. I'm just glad she was okay this time. It's not always a happy ending."

"Noted, sir."

With a quick tip of his chin, he conveys the rest of his message: *Take better care of your mama.*

After telling me he's clearing the call and leaving it to the paramedics to decide whether she needs additional care, he walks away. On his way to his patrol car, he says something to my mother, and she smiles blankly. As he goes, he gives me another glare over his sunglasses.

*I freaking get it, buddy. You're coming in Lima Charlie.*

The paramedic lets me take Ma home a few minutes later. She's confused the entire drive, peppering me with questions about how my deployment was and how long I'll be on leave.

I grip the steering wheel and nod along, giving her bullshit answers while my heart saws itself in two.

Once I get her home, I convince her to lie down for a nap. More than likely, when she wakes up, she'll be back to her old self.

I hope.

But one of these days, she won't.

She'll be gone forever.

These episodes are happening more often lately and for longer periods. Given her condition started when she was in her late fifties, the doctor said it might accelerate at a different pace than someone who gets it in their seventies or eighties. While we were initially terrified, I grew comfortable when she hit a plateau. For most of the last year, she's seemed to be in a holding pattern. Or so I've told myself.

But now, I see her slipping from my grasp. Faster and faster, the rug is being pulled from under her.

I sit in the armchair in her room and watch her, reassuring myself that she's okay. Lying to myself is more accurate.

While I wait for her to fall asleep, I text my sister an update, then fire off another to Tomer to let him know I'll return to work in another hour or so.

After she falls asleep, I'll go next door to see if Gloria is home. If so, I'll ask her to come and sit with Ma until I get done with work. Or maybe she can invite her to her place for the rest of the day. And if she can't, I'll tell Boss I can't come back.

My thoughts race as the implications pound me like cymbals crashing on both sides of my head.

I've officially run out of time.

I need to sell my condo and move in with her. No fucking clue what I'll do when I need to leave for work. I'll look into those daytime memory centers, but I don't know if we can afford it. All chances of a social life are gone for a long time; not that it matters, though.

I'd give up the world for her. She's sacrificed so much for my sister and me throughout her entire life without complaint. But this isn't about a debt I owe her. It's not her turn to collect.

This isn't an obligation.

She's my mother. I love her.

And she needs me.

## CHAPTER 9

WELL, THAT ESCALATED  
QUICKLY

MIA

Having reached some type of tentative truce, Tomer and I fall into a groove of information sharing for the rest of the afternoon. He's reserved and holding some things close to the vest, but I get it. I am too.

I still have some aces up my sleeve that I can pull if he shuts down again and needs me to prove myself worthy.

For now, we're good.

The fact that Klein disappeared a few hours ago and hasn't returned might have alleviated some of the tension. It's certainly made me relax. Too bad it can't always be like this.

As if he was summoned by my thoughts, Klein returns and plops down at his desk. His hair is tousled like he's been running his fingers through it. Or maybe he drove with the windows open.

Not that it matters. His physical appearance is inconsequential. Likewise, where he ran off to means bupkis.

If I repeat that enough, there's an icicle's chance in hell I'll believe it.

Tomer and I lock eyes, and he mashes his lips together before reluctantly asking, "Everything okay, man?"

I can't hold back the internal eye roll at his tone. The words are compassionate, but his tone screams, *please don't answer because I was only asking to be polite*.

Klein pauses, staring at the vacant space above his laptop screen, deep in thought. After a few seconds, he exhales and rolls his shoulders. "Yep. All good. What did I miss?"

Without pressing for the truth — which is what I would do — Tomer brings Klein up to speed on everything he's shown me today, noticeably leaving out how I handed over my laptop.

Interesting.

Klein nods curtly once Tomer's done with his recap. "Great. I'll continue the recoding. I was almost done before I left."

He asks no questions. Makes no snide remarks. Pays me no mind.

After slipping in his earbuds, he taps his phone screen. A few seconds

later, the sound of muted music sails toward my ears. Saying nothing else, he gets back to work, acting like nothing is amiss.

And I don't know why it bothers me.

But I shake off my concern. *Not my freak show. Not my bearded lady.*

If Tomer doesn't care that Klein disappeared without telling anyone, why should I? After all, Redleg seems to treat their own like adults. As long as the job gets done, what does it matter if you race off for a few hours in the middle of your workday?

*I'm doing a fantastic job bullshitting my inner pimp. Four stars.*

Tomer continues my training, undaunted by Klein's obviously *Pinocchio-esque* answer about his current emotional state. "This is the inventory of our tech gear. The guards are responsible for logging shit in and out, but sometimes they don't. So we do a monthly reconciliation. The expensive shit has trackers, but we..."

Tomer's words trail off because all I can hear is my inner pimp screaming at me to find out where Klein went and what's wrong with him. Why is he frazzled and lying about it?

*No, Mia. Bad, Mia.*

But what if he needs help? What if something is wrong that I can fix for him? That would be a huge leap toward showing him I'm sorry for what I've done.

I want his forgiveness. Badly.

For no other reason than to ease the tension and make the working environment less hostile. Scout's honor.

I refocus my attention on Tomer as he continues talking me through the equipment tracking. Some of it is familiar to me, but some is new.

A lot of what they use is for more than just basic security shit like I would have expected if I hadn't investigated their past cases thoroughly. It's a military-grade surveillance and defense gold mine. They also have an impressive array of weaponry that Tomer says he'll have Leo Mason show me later in the week. He wants me to feel comfortable knowing what we have in the arsenal, so to speak.

The second Tomer finishes his lengthy review of the inventory log, Klein interjects. "Did Boss say if she was going to need time at the gun range? I think Leo is doing a certification out there next week for the new B-team guys."

"I'll ask him," Tomer replies in a clipped tone. His fingers fly across the



keyboard, quickly typing a message to Big Al in the chat program that's always up on his smallest monitors.

Did either of them think to ask me? Before I can mention how rude it is to talk about me like I'm not here, Klein does it again.

"She probably needs time practicing hand to hand too. Sawyer should evaluate her skills. It's likely been a while since she's seen any... *action*."

The way he intentionally added heat to the word action makes my cheeks flush and my thighs squeeze.

He knows about the *action* I've seen lately. He brought the action.

Repeatedly.

I clear my throat to remind the guys that I'm sitting right here.

Tomer ignores me and adds Klein's second question to the chat window. "Heard."

"What about evasive driving with Henderson?"

Seriously, guys? I clear my throat again, louder this time.

Tomer grunts his reply and fires off a third question to Big Al, who still hasn't seen the first one.

"While you're at it, check to see if he wants her to do a shift —"

Slamming my palm against the desk, I slide my chair back a few feet so I can see them both simultaneously instead of whipping my head back and forth like I'm seated center court at freaking Wimbledon.

"Excuse me. I'm sitting right freaking here. Did either of you consider asking me? Did it not occur to you that I might have already talked to Boss about some of these things and know what the plan is?"

Tomer's face falls, but Klein's grows impossibly tighter. One of his sexy eyebrows arches higher than the other. "Do you know the plan?"

Shit.

Deflect. Deflect.

"That's not the point."

He narrows his eyes into a squint. "Isn't it, though?"

"No, it's not. The point is that you guys were talking about me like I'm not here, and I don't appreciate it. I know I'm new and all, but..."

My words trail off when he leans forward. He shifts in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and flashing a smirk so damn smirky that I'm consumed with the urge to lick it off his face.

Attempting to continue my sentence, I stammer, "But, uh, well..." What the fuck was I saying before he smirky-smoldered at me like fucking Flynn

Rider? “I know I’m new, but that —”

He rolls his eyes and cuts me off. “It’s a simple question, Mia, if that’s even your real name. Do you know the plan or not?”

My neck kicks back at his snide words like I was sucker punched.

Tomer tries to defuse the mounting tension. “Klein, easy.”

“It’s not about the plan. It’s the principle, Cal,” I insist.

“I told you to call me Klein,” he snaps, dark and raspy.

Tomer shifts in his chair, momentarily distracting me from the vitriol being slung at me. “Kill me now.”

Cal pounces on my hesitation. “If you want to be part of this team, you’re going to need to jump in when you have something to say. We move fast around here. If you have an answer to a question someone is asking, put on your big girl panties and answer it.”

I bolt up, steam practically billowing from my ears. “Excuse me? My big girl panties?”

He lurches to his feet with equal force, eyeing me down and towering over me by half a foot or more.

I don’t usually let people rile me up like this. I’m often ten steps ahead of others, thanks to all my diligent *research* and the time I put into planning my tactful approach — just like I did with Tomer earlier when I surrendered my laptop. That didn’t just come to me in the moment. It was in the can and ready to go.

But something about Calvin motherfucking Klein has shaken me from my game.

*Yeah, his name is hilarious. Go ahead and laugh. I’ll wait.*

My boobs are sweating, and I feel the freaking blood rushing into my cheeks and neck.

Squaring my shoulders and raising my chin at him, I poke him in his way too firm chest. Right where the damn angel wings tattoo is. And I really wish I didn’t know it was there, but I do. And I can’t get it out of my mind, so that’s where I’m poking him.

“You heard me. What’s the answer to the question, Mia? Do you know the plan for your field training or not? Because if Tomer is going to devise a training plan and get everything coordinated with other people, then he needs to know.”

*Come up with something, Mia. Think fast. Faster than that. Think at warp speed.*

I need to snark back. Put him in his place. Assert myself before he gets the upper hand.

Today sets the tone for my role on the team. As a woman in a man's world, I come into these situations at a disadvantage. If I'm a pushover now, then that's how they'll always see me.

But I biffed the shit out of this.

Instead of flipping my lid, I should have made a playful joke about the way they were talking over me. Something to lightheartedly bring it to their attention without devolving into this shit show. Now I've left myself without a response, seconds from making a fool out of myself.

I order my face to soften and blink the irritation away. "Like I was saying, I won't stand for being treated like —"

"Like what? Like you can't be trusted?"

I'm stuck trying to determine whether that's a low blow or a justified point. While I consider the question, sounds escape my mouth hole that are the linguistic equivalent of a six-month-old's babble.

I stop sputtering when his smirk slips into an outright cocky smile. He folds his frame back into his chair, brings his arms up, and folds his hands behind his head. The tattoos peeking out over his bulging biceps stop me short.

This man has officially rendered me speechless with only his sex appeal.

Well, that and also what I've concluded is a solid, logical point. I'm not to be trusted.

Certainly not by him.

Our gazes remain locked, his triumphant, while mine is probably closer to an inconsolable giraffe baby.

In my periphery, Tomer stares at us from his front-row seat. The tension zapping between Klein and me is probably hazardous to Tomer's health at this distance. Like he's in a blast zone or something. Probably needs a hazmat suit or PPE.

Seeing no way out, I soften my tone and reply, "All I know about that plan is that Big Al mentioned he'd want to make sure my skills were fresh so I could defend myself should the need arise."

The clack of keys from over my shoulder signals that Tomer has grown weary of our show. Either that, or he's typing a transcript to blast around the office.

Klein's answering grin stabs me in the clit. "Did that hurt, Mia? Telling

the truth? Looked a little painful from here.”

With that final dig, he swivels his chair and faces his workstation.

Once I return to my seat, I steady myself before facing Tomer. “Where were we?”

He stops working and takes his glasses off, squeezing the bridge of his nose. “Let’s move on to my facial rec program. Maybe you can figure out how I can speed up the processing time.”

Without delay and devoid of emotion, he shifts seamlessly into training mode.

If he were any other person, he’d be demanding to know the history between Klein and me.

But thankfully, Tomer genuinely seems to not care. Either he has no bandwidth because he’s so overworked, or he really has no fucks to give.

Both are probably true.

For a moment, I envy him, wishing my cup of fucks was empty. It used to be, and it was easier to live with myself that way.

But I have fucks now. Too many fucks to give.

I want to make peace and for the people here to like me. I want some homeostasis in my life — balance, harmony, and all that bullshit.

I haven’t had any type of serenity for more than a decade. I miss it.

Is it wrong to crave comfort? To want people to see me as more than an asset or a liability? To be given grace when I fuck up and give it back in return?

If I wanted to live a cold life where I didn’t give two shits about what people thought about me or who I hurt, I’d still be at the company.

But I crave the tranquility of a balanced life — personal boundaries to protect myself, but not at the expense of hurting others.

No. I don’t really envy Tomer. I *want* to have fucks to give. And I want to be surrounded by people who give a fuck about me too.

The thing is... I don’t deserve it.

## CHAPTER 10

**IT WASN'T WHISKEY DICK**

KLEIN

There isn't enough Sir Tom Jones music on earth to drown out the sound of Mia and Tomer talking. Whispering. Strategizing. Plotting. Snickering. Laughing.

Yes, *laughing*.

Tomer laughs now. Often. The no-fun fuck is having fun. At work, no less.

You know who's not having fun?

Me.

Redleg used to be my happy place. My escape from what's happening with my mom.

Until Mia got here and ruined it all with her curvy body, hypnotic voice, and intoxicating scent.

And most of all, her fucking mouth.

Every time I look at her, I remember how good those lips looked wrapped around my dick. And how good it sounded when she called out my name. The only time my name sounded like music to my ears.

Damn her.

Mia's officially been my coworker for two weeks. Everyone here loves her. They've welcomed her with open arms. Marley, one of the female guards, organized a girls' lunch to welcome Mia to the Redleg family the other day. Even Sue went along.

Two weeks of being stuck in a room with her. Seeing her every day. Listening to the playful lilt of her voice and analyzing the differences in her laughs. Watching her soft ivory hands stroke across the keyboard in my periphery. Learning how her brain works and why she's so good at what she does.

Worst of all, it's been two weeks of smelling her delicate beachy scent. My dick is so permanently hard that I could use it as a crutch if I broke my leg.

An excruciating two weeks of listening to her and Tomer become BFFs. I wouldn't be surprised if they came in tomorrow with matching charm bracelets. Pretty sure they're falling in love right before my eyes, and it's killing me.

All day long, they share their little secrets and swap hacking stories.

Stink on shit. White on rice. Peas in a pod. Cling wrap to itself but never the dish you want to cover.

Another one of her patented boisterous belly laughs shakes my concentration from the new *Throwbot* I'm testing. It's a tactical robot, smaller than a shoe box. You can throw it on a roof or into an off-limits area and get audio and video footage. And it can climb and move over all types of terrain to get into areas we can't. Cool shit.

But I can't enjoy it because her laugh distracts me from new toy playtime.

*That freaking laugh.*

So loud. So real and unreserved. It shouldn't be as enchanting as it is. I wish it annoyed me so I'd stop craving her the way I do. I'd give just about anything for something about her to be a turn-off.

Literally anything.

Reminding myself about her duplicity is all that keeps me from throwing her on the desk and fucking her senseless.

After tossing my *supposedly-noise-canceling-but-don't-really-cancel-shit* headphones onto my desk, I walk out of the office.

Walk. Stomp. Storm. Flee. Whatever.

The point is, I'm leaving *immediately*. I need to clear my head and my olfactory system before my dick gets so hard it breaks off.

Maybe I'll take a lunch break today to return those stupid headphones. They don't work for shit.

Where's Sawyer when you need him? I bet he knows the best brand to get. If only they made smell-canceling nose plugs. And also something to wipe the memory of how she tasted from my brain. While I'm dreaming big, is there a pill I can take to remove the knowledge of how she sounds when she comes from my mind? Because that would be *really* helpful right about now.

Marching down the hallway with no real destination in mind, I catch sight of Shep heading to the elevator.

He waves me over. "Hey, man."

We do that guy thing where we shake hands and pat each other's upper back. You know? The bro hug double back pat?

I've always found it strange. We see each other all the time. We're not being introduced either, and it's not like I'm congratulating him for something. So why do we do this?



No clue, but it is the way of my people.

“Not on detail today?” I ask him.

“Just got off. Working a half day because I’m taking Kri to an appointment.”

“She okay?”

His smile grows. The smitten fool. “She’s great. It’s just another CT scan to make sure she’s still moving in the right direction with her recovery.”

Shep’s lady love, Kri, is one of our coworkers. She suffered a traumatic brain injury when she was ambushed on a detail a few months ago. I’ll never forget how gutted Shep was the night we found her on the side of the road, bludgeoned and bloody. His anguish during the hours we spent in the hospital waiting room is branded into my mind, as is how he fell to his knees when he got word that she’d made it through surgery.

That’s love.

Even if he didn’t know it at the time. He knows it now, though.

It doesn’t make me one bit jealous.

Sounded believable, didn’t it? *Well, gotcha!* I was full of shit. I’m ridiculously jealous.

Although Kri hasn’t been cleared to return to bodyguard duties yet, she’ll make it back one day. No doubt.

Funny thing is, part of what made me more determined than ever to get a position behind the scenes instead of in the field was Kri’s accident.

It’s not that I’m afraid of being hurt — well, no more so than anyone else. It’s that I can’t risk getting hurt and not being able to take care of Ma.

I’m all she has down here. My sister and her family live in Atlanta. So it’s on me to care for our mother. If I got taken out, what would happen to her?

Even something simple like a broken leg or a minor gunshot wound could make it harder for me to get to Ma if she needs me. It’s a risk I can no longer take in good conscience.

Caroline’s already said she wants to put our mother in a residential nursing facility since we’re not equipped to care for her.

I can’t allow that.

Maybe it’s pigheaded of me, but I’m simply not ready.

Shep taps the elevator call button. “So how is it going with Mia?”

*Oh, come on, man.* Can’t we talk about something else? Like politics or religion? Something less incendiary than Mia.

Shep’s forehead wrinkles, and he eyes me cautiously.

“She’s doing good. Fast learner.”

*Gotta do better than that, kid. You’re not fooling anyone.*

The elevator doors open, giving me a spark of hope that he’ll say goodbye so we don’t have to talk about my nemesis anymore.

But the feeling is dashed when he plants his feet, crosses his arms, and stares me down. “Talk.”

I motion to the elevator with an open palm and playful butler bow. “Your car awaits, sir. You don’t want to be late for your engagement.”

His sky blue eyes sparkle with mirth. “Thanks for your concern, dick, but I’m good on time.”

And he waits.

And waits some more. He waits so long that the elevator doors close with him still here instead of behind them.

This is the curse of never being able to mask my emotions. Observant fuckers like Shep pick up on the smallest shit and then badger it out of me.

“It’s fine, Shep.” I lift my palms in a placating gesture. “Nothing to talk about.”

He tips his head to one side, making a tsking sound. “I’ve never claimed to be a human bullshit detector, but you’re giving off some pretty foul-smelling signals. Cut the crap. Talk. We can do this here or take a walk. Your choice.”

My eyes roll as I capitulate. “I hate you.” I mash the elevator call button with too much force, and my finger bends back a touch, sending a bolt of pain up my hand. “Ouch.”

The doors open again, and I enter, waiting for Shep to follow.

Once the doors close, he needles more at the topic *du jour*. “How do you know Mia? You never told me.”

“She didn’t tell you? I find that hard to believe, given how *close* you two are.”

“We’re not *that* close. Sure, we have a past, but it’s not like we’re best friends or anything.”

My spine stiffens, and my jaw grows tight. “What do you mean a past? Did you guys —”

Why the hell is the thought of her with another man causing such a visceral reaction? I’ve never been jealous or possessive. Quite the opposite, actually. Women are *not* something you can own.

But I feel like clocking the shit out of my friend right now at the mere

idea that he has been in her bed... or body.

“The fuck? You’re worse than Kri. No, we don’t have that kind of past. We worked together on that trafficking task force.” He shakes his head at me while I force my pulse to steady.

The day Mia breezed into Redleg and was announced as the new intel specialist, Big Al told us that Shep was the one who referred her for the position.

I’ve forgiven him for snubbing me. He was just trying to help Big Al and Tomer by pointing out a suitable candidate. It’s not his fault she ended up being a succubus viper with the oral suction to rival a Dyson vacuum.

While I’m trying to calm from my completely out-of-character rage flare-up at the idea of another man being with Mia — even in the freaking past — Shep jumps my shit. “Well, how do you know her? That was straight-up jealousy on your face. I’ve never seen this side of you, Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky. Spill it before I get Sawyer and Leo to tie you down while I clamp jumper cables to your nipples.”

Instinctively, my hands cup my nipples to shield them, and I step back.

Shep’s returning laughter soothes my ruffled feathers, and I prepare to spill the beans. What’s the point of hiding it? Once Jonesy sees Mia, he’s going to tell everyone — as per Redleg’s ball-busting tradition.

“So Mia and I had a... um...” How does someone who never kisses and tells put this respectfully? “We *met* a few nights before she showed up here.”

“The day you dropped the laptop?”

“Yes, thanks for reminding me of that. Again. Real big of you, ya jack nozzle.”

“We need to work on your insults, man. That is shit. What the fuck is a jack nozzle?”

“I’m having a rough few weeks, okay?”

His eyelids flutter. “Back to Mia, please. Something tells me this wasn’t a casual conversation you had with her that night. Sounds like you went to bone town.”

“Shep, do you have to be so crude?”

He dances his brows suggestively.

I don’t often visit bone town, as my friend so eloquently called it. I make nice, passionate, sweet lovin’ that leaves both parties satisfied and sated. I make breakfast the next morning and offer a ride home. I’m polite, considerate, and attentive — that’s how I was raised. And I’m selective with

the women I bring into my bed. One-night stands aren't common for me.

Mia was an exception.

With her, I wanted to do depraved things. Still do.

And that's why I needed to get out of that office and clear my head. But Shep's finally getting the details from me. The persistent prick.

The doors open, and we walk into the lobby, passing the reception desk that's staffed by one of the D-squad guys. They're the guards who haven't proved themselves worthy of being B-team or even C-team, so they do the grunt work. Poor bastards.

Fortunately, I bypassed that and went straight to A-team — not affiliated with the show or movie franchise — since I served with Big Al and a few others in the Rangers. It was sort of like having a fast pass to the front of the line.

Once we're out of the guard's earshot, Shep says, "Fine. You shagged Mia. Big deal. Why all the angst? Was it shitty or something?"

"Shagged? Are you channeling Sawyer or something with the fucking accents and Brit-speak?"

"Sometimes I hear British shit in my head, and it comes out of the round hole on my face. Whatever. Never said I was normal. Stop deflecting. Back to the question. Why are you so pissy about Mia? So you fucked, and now you work together. Not ideal, but no big whoop. Consenting adults have sex all the time. Hell, Kri and I have had sex *thrice* in the last twelve hours, and you don't see me all broody and ornery about it."

His grin grows obnoxiously, overtaking his entire face, so I shove his shoulder, knocking him off-kilter. He's intentionally fucking with me. Either to make me laugh and lighten the fuck up or to just dick with me. You never know with my Redleg brothers.

When I don't answer his question fast enough, he puts his arm against my chest to slow our pace and catches my gaze with faux concern. "Did you have performance issues, buddy? I know you're an old soul and all, but I didn't think you had the willy of a ninety-year-old too. Maybe Big Al has some blue pills for you. I'm happy to give you some tips, because I've done some freaky-ass shit in my day. And don't forget you can always rely on other body parts to do the job when your pecker isn't playing nice. Vibrators are also great additions to your arsenal. I'll send you a link to one that —"

He can't finish his sentence through his laughter, which cracks me up too. All my earlier tension fizzles.

Once he can formulate words again, he makes it worse, because he's Shep. "Was it whiskey dick? Were you drinking whiskey?" Shaking his head, he adds, "Never drink whiskey when you're trying to hook up. Recipe for disaster. Have I taught you nothing?"

I flip him off as my shoulders shake with laughter.

Outside now, I take in the fresh sea breeze and bright sun rays, letting it lift my spirits. I love living in Clearwater. Sure, it's hot, and we get nasty afternoon thunderstorms half the summer, but it's also freaking paradise.

Guess it's time to explain my *real* issue with Mia and why she's dead to me. Maybe he'll have some sage advice. He managed to navigate romantic entanglements with a coworker for a few years.

"You're wrong on all accounts. It was not a bad *shag*. No performance issues. In fact, it was the most amazing night of my life."

Wow. I just said that. Shit. Damn. Hell.

*Note to self: invent a time machine so I can go back and stop those words from escaping. And while I'm at it, go back in time and never sleep with Mia.*

Shep's feet stop moving, and his face grows serious. "Holy shit. You *like* her, don't you?"

The furrow of his brow catches my attention. Rather than looking him in the eye, I focus on that spot while I confess, "I did. I liked her a lot. She made me think we had something special."

Until I found out I'd been played. My throat thickens when the memory of that gut punch chokes me as acutely as it did a few weeks ago.

Sucker. Fool. Chump.

That's me.

As Sinatra and the boys would say... a Harvey.

Can't be on the intel team when you're a Harvey.

"And then?" Shep prods.

"Then I realized she knew who I was the entire time but never told me. She was screwing with my head just like she did with that little hack. She played me for a fool."

"So that night, you didn't know she was down here to interview for the position?"

"No."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but did you guys talk enough — with actual words — for her to have the chance to tell you? Maybe she really didn't know who you were."

“We spent a few hours talking in the Sassy Parrot that night before we left together. I told her my name and that I worked for Redleg. We talked about my childhood and what I could about my time in the Rangers. All kinds of shit. She was so damn curious about me. Asked a million questions.”

Shep cringes as realization dawns on him. “You were a mark.”

My stomach cramps. “Now it makes sense how she dodged questions about herself, always pivoting back to me. At the time, I thought it was because she was interested in getting to know me, which was refreshing. But now...”

He finishes my thought. “You think she was only there to pump you for intel.”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand why she was so deceptive about it. We could have had a conversation about working here. She didn’t need to lie.”

Shep rubs his hand over his head from back to front like he’s punishing his scalp. After a beat, he says, “Man, I’m sorry. I don’t know why she did it, but she worked at the CIA for a long time. That can change people.”

“You don’t think I’m overreacting?”

I was prepared for the first person I unloaded this on to tell me how overdramatic I was being. To toughen up. Suck it up and drive on. Take the victory of an epic night of hot sex.

But Shep isn’t doing any of that.

“Knowing what I know about Mia, I don’t think you’re overreacting at all. She’s not the type who walks into any situation unprepared.”

There’s a slight hitch in my chest as his words validate my feelings.

“Any idea why she picked me? There were three other guys there that night who work here. Jonesy and Tomer tried to talk to her, but she blew them off to go after me.”

Shep’s gaze flits to the clouds while he considers my question. “Did you have email or chat communications with Big Al or Tomer or anyone else about wanting that position permanently?”

All the dots connect at once.

“Yeah. Plenty. With both of them.”

With a nod and a bonus cringe for good measure, he says, “You were her competition for the job, Klein. She needed to know who she was up against.”

Those words confirm every fissure of pain I’ve felt since I found out I’d been nothing more than a mark to her.

She didn’t pick me because she wanted *me*.

I was an op. Nothing more.

The connection wasn't real.

That explains why she slithered out that morning without looking over her shoulder.

And now I have to work with her every damn day.

I can't do it. Either she goes, or I do. Asking to return to the field is out, so I either find a new employer or get her to leave.

But I'm not built that way. I'm not manipulative or underhanded. And I don't want to be. I need to be the better person and stick to my moral compass.

Even if it sucks.

But wait. The timing doesn't line up. She hacked our system after we'd already slept together.

Unless...

"The day we found out about the hack wasn't the first time she was in our system, was it?"

He laughs humorlessly. "Not likely. We used to call her Ghost for a reason. She was invisible and could go anywhere she wanted. In and out without leaving a fucking trace. That's why I wanted her at Redleg. She's fucking good at what she does."

Understatement of the year.

I blow out a sharp exhale. "I guess you can take the girl out of the CIA but not the CIA out of the girl."

"You know why, right? As a Ranger, we had our share of shit to deal with. Enemies hiding behind every corner. Paranoia eats at you. But when we got home, we could leave it behind us. But that's not the case for her. She never got to come home to her family in the airport holding balloons and a hand-painted sign, knowing that the threats were behind her. She knows too much and will never stop looking over her shoulder. How do you downshift from that? Not making excuses for her, but I understand." He holds up his fingers in front of his face, thumb and index finger almost touching. "A little bit. This much."

My head lolls around my shoulders while I try to shake out the tension and shame. "I feel like a fucking fool."

"Dude, I'm the one who brought her here. I should have warned you. If I'd known she'd go that far, I'd have done things differently. I'm sorry, Klein."

“Don’t beat yourself up, man. You had bigger things going on at the time, what with becoming an insta-dad to a teenager and falling in love with your dream girl.”

He grins and jokes, “And the whole thing with the Russians abducting them both. Not that it was a big deal or cause for concern.”

“That too,” I toss ironically. “Just an average day in sunny Florida.”

He checks his watch and tips his head toward the parking lot. “I should go. We good, man?”

“We’re good.”

Like our fathers before us, we do the goodbye version of the man shake custom for unknown reasons.

Once he leaves, I walk the facility’s perimeter, taking a few laps to recenter. Pausing to check the app, I confirm via live feeds from inside Ma’s house that she’s safe. She’s watching TV with Gloria in the living room.

After her recent wandering fiasco, I upgraded the tech at her house, adding interior cameras and panic buttons, along with door sensors for the inside and outside of the house. The works.

I’ve also slept there every night, making myself at home in my old bedroom. Gloria has graciously stepped up her time with Ma during the days until I hire a caregiver or develop a better plan. It’s kind of her, but it’s a lot to ask of a neighbor. Even a friend.

And as for what our long-term options are? Yeah. I’m at a total freaking loss.

I’ll call Caroline tonight after I get Ma to sleep, and we’ll figure this shit out.

No matter how much Caroline insists, I’m not sticking our mother in some facility to live out her days. I won’t make her sell the family home either. There has to be another way.

A few minutes later, I return to our shared office space, feeling at ease. The talk with Shep gave me some much-needed perspective.

Does it make what Mia did okay? Not even close.

But it did answer that nagging question of *why* she did it. That’s been plaguing me. Perhaps now I can stop this pouting and antagonistic bullshit.

It’s time to make the best of it. After all, I still have the job I needed.

Yep. This will all be fine. I got this.

And then I walk into the office and see the way she and Tomer are sitting. She’s facing her computer, and he’s pulled his chair so close beside her



that she might as well be on his lap. Their heads are inches apart, and his arm is slung over the back of her chair.

And I see red.

No, scratch that. I can't see *anything*.

## CHAPTER II

**IT'S JUST RESEARCH**

## TWENTY MINUTES EARLIER

MIA

As I walk Tomer through my suggestions for improving his facial recognition program, he eats it up like candy or crack. Or crack candy. Candy crack? That sounds like something they sold in the fifties when no one cared about corrupting kids. Like candy cigarettes.

Wait. What was I talking about?

Oh yeah. Tomer's like a kid at Christmas.

He and I have found our groove for sure. In sync like the boy band. He's a sponge, sucking up everything I throw at him. There's nothing he can't learn.

Once he got over the blow to his pride from my hack-test thing, he realized what an asset I could be for him and for Redleg. He's not an overly emotional man, and that serves him well.

As my first two weeks on the job have marched on, we've developed this weird connection. He always knows what I'm trying to say, even when it gets muddy because I'm so engrossed in the technical details. He gets it like he's inside my brain. I'm considering charging him rent. At a minimum, he should chip in for groceries or utilities.

If we keep progressing at this rate, we're going to need to wear matching outfits and come up with a secret handshake. Maybe something with a hip check.

Tomer's becoming the older brother I never had. He's my yang. And he's also teaching me the military-related shit for this role, which energizes me. I'm being tested and stretching my wings. And I love every minute of it.

And newsflash, he's not bland. Not at all. He's often misunderstood because he doesn't speak the same language as everyone else. They see him as disinterested, but his mind is on another level.

But I get him. I *see* him.

Makes me wonder if anyone else has ever bothered to get to know him, and that makes my heart pinch uncomfortably.

"Wait, wait, wait," he says with a snicker. "Get the hell out of here. I had

no idea you could write the script like that. *Ah!* Everything I've known is a lie."

I join him, chuckling along at his reaction. "Yep. Your way still works, obviously. But by coding this way, you're checking multiple expressions for TRUE, and your code executes as soon as it finds one, triggering your code blocks sooner. So you're eliminating all this overly complicated and superfluous code."

I wag my finger toward the screen, tapping at all the unnecessary steps he's worked into the software he designed.

Shaking his head, he says, "This is going to accelerate processing by, like, 18 percent. Maybe more."

One of my rambunctious laughs bubbles up. I can't stifle it, so that fucker flies, echoing around the room. Tomer chuckles along, but much quieter.

Who the *hell* does math like that? Tomer does.

But as I think about it further, he's probably damn close with his off-the-cuff estimate.

Suddenly, Klein's headphones slam into the desk, causing Tomer and I to flinch. Before I can apologize for being too loud, Klein storms to the door in a huff.

Big baby.

Big sexy baby.

Tomer groans and screws his face to one side as we watch Klein make his dramatic exit. When Tomer faces me again, his blue-green eyes sparkle bright with the reflection of the computer monitors. He's wearing his contacts today, so it's a change to see his eyes so clearly. Although he's not my type, and I'm not interested in him *that* way, he is an attractive man. I'm shocked no one has snagged him yet.

They probably can't see through the stoic exterior. That's their loss, though. One day, he'll find the one who will see him. Too bad it's not me.

Not that he seems interested in me anyhow. I've gotten zero flirty vibes from him. Perhaps that's why we're able to work so well together. No sexual chemistry to create tension.

Unlike the exceedingly icy glass of water who just exited hastily, leaving a cloud of nipple-hardening pheromones in his wake.

I'm suffering from that pesky feminine urge to ride the cock of the broody hot guy who can't seem to stand me.

Why do we do this to ourselves? It makes me wonder if guys self-

sabotage and torment themselves the way women do.

It's the whole *I can fix him* energy, sprinkled with a dash of *please like me* and *I promise I'll be a good girl if you pet my head and tell me I'm pretty*.

Tomer stands and stretches, his long, lean frame lengthening more with the motion.

"I'm going to take a break. My head is spinning from all this."

Oh. A break?

Excited about the possibilities a quick break can provide me for *research* time, my inner pimp dusts the lint off her bright purple faux fur pimp coat.

Nodding, I respond, "Okay, I'll take a few minutes in my office. Wanted to check on something."

Technically, it's not a lie. I *do* want to check on something. Entirely honest statement. No lies detected.

Klein's behavior has been sketchy. Frequent calls taken in secret. Constantly checking his phone and rudely doing so in a position where I can't peek over his shoulder to see the screen. The nerve.

With all the animosity and tension between us, his behavior is growing increasingly suspicious. What if he's conspiring to get me canned?

I haven't forgotten how he threatened to get rid of me that first day in the break room. He's clearly not gotten over what happened between us, and I have an inkling that he's angling for something.

And dammit, I want to stay here.

Not only are Tomer and I clicking like crazy, but I'm digging up intel for some of the cases being fed to us from the Clearwater PD. I'm making a difference, and it feels really fucking good.

I want to make peace with Klein, but he won't let me. I've tried repeatedly, yet he shuts me down before I even get close to an apology or explanation.

He's up to something. I just *know* he's going to fuck me out of this job. And that's not the kind of fucking I'm interested in from him.

I'm going to find out what his plan is *right friggedy frucking now*.

Once I'm in my office, I close the door for privacy. After a few clicks, I can see Klein by the elevators, talking to Shep. There's a hint of tension between them. Shep's giving him a stern glare with his broad arms crossed.

My inner pimp regrets not knowing how to read lips. I wonder if there's a Rosetta Stone course on lipreading.

There's no audio from that video feed, which is a huge oversight on Big

Al's part. I've already included that in my list of recommendations to beef up things around here. As secure as this place is, it's not perfect.

While I'm waiting for Shep and Klein to get into the elevator — which does have a microphone for audio — I split the screen and open the GPS tracking for the Redleg fleet to see where he's been running off to.

Ever since my first day, it's been *killing* me not to investigate why he flew out of here in a hurry, only to return a few hours later without an explanation before promptly picking a fight with me.

But I've been a *good* girl — mentally pats self on head — and suppressed my need to investigate his disappearance. I respected his privacy and upheld my vow to be the new and improved *trusting* Mia. The 2.0 version.

But not today.

Today is about self-preservation. Most experts say that it's okay to put yourself first. If you don't believe me, look it up.

Klein and Shep are still talking by the elevator bank while I access the log from Klein's SUV and track the route he took on my first day at Redleg.

Wait, wait, wait. That's not a residential street. Where did he go? To get gas? Rob a drugstore? What's over there?

Toggling over to Google Earth, I determine he stopped at a CVS drugstore for twenty-seven minutes.

If he was picking up a prescription, that's a really long wait. And I don't think he's on any meds unless that's a new thing since I last did... umm... research on him.

*Shut up. It's technically research.*

While thinking how to best see what he was doing there for that long, I'm interrupted as Shep and Klein enter the elevator, so I return my focus to the video. I swap to the elevator camera feed, selecting the right car and turning on the volume.

*And this is why you close the office door before doing shady shit, boys and girls.*

Shep asks Klein, "How do you know Mia? You never told me."

Oh shit. *Abort! Abort!*

Shep, that is *not* any of your business. Do not pump that cake-assed man about me.

*And yes, I know how hypocritical that is, given Klein hates me because I pumped him for information. If you're trying to make me feel guilty, take a number, sweetheart.*

My only hope is that Klein deflects Shep's questioning, thus concealing the reason I'm a cuntasaurus rex.

And if he does, I hope Shep can eventually forgive me.

Not as much as I want Klein to forgive me, though. Yet even as I crave his absolution, I continue invading his privacy. Literally at this exact moment. That's what cuntasauruses do, after all.

On my screen, Klein holds Shep's scrutinizing gaze. "She didn't tell you? I find that hard to believe, given how *close* you two are."

Do I want to hear this? My pulse spikes a tad as I lean closer to the speaker.

Shep responds, "We're not *that* close. Sure, we have a past, but it's not like we're best friends or anything."

Ouch, Shep. I mean, he's right. But it would be nice for him to speak about what an amazing ball of sunshine and virtue I am. Granted, I'm not any of that. But it would be nice.

Klein's entire body stiffens. "What do you mean a past? Did you guys —"

He sounds... angry? Jealous?

Because of Shep? Huh.

I thought Klein hated me. Why does he give a shit about who I bang now or in the past?

Unless he doesn't hate me.

*Hope springs eternal, right, clitoris?*

Before I know what's happening, the mouse pointer clicks the red X in the corner to close the window. My office goes silent.

I look at the mouse, shocked to see my hand there. After pinching it, I can confirm it is indeed *my* hand.

Holy buckets! My *hand* has suffered an attack of conscience. But I'm not mad about it. If anything, I feel better.

That conversation isn't meant for me.

A strange feeling takes root in my chest. Is that... *pride*?

No, that can't be right.

After staring at the oddly honorable hand cupping the mouse for a few seconds, I blink the haze of confusion away and refocus on my goal. I need to know about the emergency situation at CVS that had him racing across town.

After accessing the dash cam footage from Klein's SUV, I scroll to the file that should have recorded what happened when he stopped at the



drugstore.

“Shit. Cal. What is...”

There’s an ambulance and a police car on the scene.

Is his hero complex to blame for this? Was someone he knows hurt? Are they okay?

I try to zoom in, but the footage isn’t ideal, and people are blocking the back of the ambulance where Klein ran after jumping out of the vehicle.

Still, the shot does give me a nice view of his rideable rump, so that’s something.

*Bad Mia. No. Stop it. You do not get to lust after him. He hates you.*

My mind searches through the potential ways I can find out what caused him to rush from the SUV to whatever happened in that parking lot.

I could call CVS, pretending to be a reporter following up on a lead. *Nah.*

Or I could *lovingly* access the store’s security cameras to see if I can get a better angle. *Better.* But it’ll take time, and I doubt I’ll get a better view. There are too many people surrounding the ambulance. Why are people so nosy? Can’t they let the emergency responders work without snooping?

*Don’t laugh at that. My snooping is different. Remember what I said about self-preservation?*

Anyhow, the cameras aren’t going to reveal enough. I don’t have time to scour social media to see if any of the onlookers recorded and posted something. I need something more tangible that I can get my hands on quicker.

Like info from the 911 call.

*Yes, queen.* If an ambulance and the cops were dispatched, there is a paper trail. God bless the government and their compulsive need to document everything.

I wonder if the patient was transported to a hospital. Maybe that’s why Cal’s been distracted.

Perhaps it has nothing to do with me. *Gasp.* Can you imagine?

I’m kidding. I know Klein’s world doesn’t revolve around me like it did for those blissful few hours the night we met.

I jot down the time and date of the incident, along with the number of the patrol car and ambulance on a sticky note and slip it under my keyboard for later. I’m going to need a bit more time to poke around CPD’s system to see who was involved in this situation. Fortunately, the partnership between Redleg and CPD gives me a back channel to their system.

Remind me to send Big Al a gift basket for making that possible. He's saved me hours of hacking attempts.

Of course, I could always follow the rules and request a transcript of the call via public records request, but the government takes forever with those. Hard pass.

Before I can advance the playback on the SUV dash cam to see how this situation unfolds, Tomer knocks on my door.

*Balls.*

Time's up for now.

"Coming," I yell while exiting the program and locking my workstation.

When I open the door, he wears a wide grin and hands me a Diet Coke.

I chuckle and take the beverage. "Diet Coke break?"

"Is there any other kind?" he jokes.

The other day, we talked about old commercials that refuse to leave your mind even after decades have passed. We cracked up reliving the beer commercial classics, impersonated the Budweiser frogs and traded *wassssuuups* back and forth for a solid four minutes. First in English, then we tried stumping each other in other languages. Once that was no longer funny, we cackled about the thirsty women who watched the construction workers on their Diet Coke break and discussed how it was the opposite of the Cindy Crawford Pepsi commercial. A little while later, he acted out the Life Alert commercial by literally falling to the ground and wailing, "I've fallen and can't get up."

See? He's totally fun.

"Let's go. We've got a new case. You're going to love it. Right up your alley."

My shoulders involuntarily shimmy at the prospect of a new case and how good it feels to take another leap toward becoming part of this freaking team.

When we pass by the entrance to the lair, I rip off the *Nofunfuck* sign and toss it in the trash.

*Gone!*

I'm officially over Tomer being mocked, and I won't stand for it any longer.

Our butts are in our seats a few seconds later, and he gives me the reins to prepare the dossier that will be used to brief the protection team. Of course, he'll be by my side the entire time, serving as my safety blanket.

Although I typically detest people thinking that I can't do something, I get where Tomer is coming from. He doesn't think I'm incapable; he's cautious because he puts nothing above the safety of his teammates and the Redleg clients.

Nothing.

He's worked with Redleg from the beginning, building it from the ground up, and he wants to make sure it's run the right way. I can respect that.

"Okay, Mia. It's your time to shine. I forwarded you the email I got from Big Al about the case. You're officially read in from the get-go. Drive."

He leans back in his chair and dramatically pushes away from the workstation — very un-robot-like. Jokingly, I grab the arm of his chair to halt his retreat. "Don't leave me, oh wise one. Help me, I'm skerred."

He chuckles and tosses his arm over the back of my chair while I read the email.

"Threats against a politician's daughter. Juicy," I muse.

I read through the case intake form and open a notepad app where I'll create a brainstorming to-do list. It's not my normal approach, but Tomer's method has merit. Especially since we juggle multiple cases, and shit can fall through the cracks. If I need to shift my attention to another case, Tomer or Klein can pick up where I left off seamlessly.

At the company, I worked one case at a time. Sure, there were multiple components, but it was all connected, and usually, I was the only one doing the digging. So why take the time to list what I needed to do when it was all in my steel trap?

Tomer leans closer, reaches toward my screen, and points at the third bullet. "And this is why Big Al hired you. I wouldn't have come up with that. Not at this stage, anyway."

I bump into him, barely grazing his chest with my shoulder. "Thanks, T-to-the-omer. You're not so bad either."

He gives my head a tousle, exactly as one would a kid sister. Because we have that sibling dynamic in spades.

Suddenly, a growling, grunting feral beast attacks us from behind.

Okay, not quite.

But that's what it sounded like.

Tomer casually turns around to see if *Gozer the Gozerian* sent the *Keymaster* or the *Gatekeeper* into our office to murder us.

Get it? Cause of the grunting animal noises like in *Ghostbusters*? Oh,

forget it.

I twist around and am greeted by an *extremely* tense Klein, staring down at us, looking far too stabby for my liking. His chest expands and contracts in noticeably deep breaths. His fists are clenched tightly at his sides, and his lip is curled back in a look of... is that disgust?

I don't know what his problem is now, but he's hot as fuck. Makes me want to take those curled lips out for a test drive.

*Not now, hormones. The sexy baby is having another tantrum because I dare to exist in his space.*

Tense silence fills the room. Tomer and I share a confused glance, then fix our eyes on the figure lording over us in a visible murderous rage.

Is he going to say something or stand there sounding like Darth Vader?

Klein's eyes shift from Tomer's face to the back of my chair where his hand rests. Then he meets my eyes briefly before repeating the circuit. *Tomer, hand on chair, me. Tomer, hand on chair, me.* Again and again.

It hits me like a bolt from the blue. *He's jealous.* His reaction in the elevator makes sense now.

He *does* still want me.

The thing is, he doesn't want to want me. But that doesn't mean he wants Tomer to have me, just like he didn't want Shep to have had me.

Tingles dance across my skin, electrifying me to my core.

He wants me.

Klein.

Wants.

Me.

And I sure as hell still want him.

"You okay, man?" Tomer asks timidly, brows drawn tight.

I can already tell from his tone of voice and the fact that he didn't remove the offending hand from my chair that Tomer has no clue why Klein is about to have a reason to Google *where to bury a body near me*.

Thankfully, Tomer already taught me most of his tricks; so after his death, Redleg will carry on without him.

Sad, though. I'll miss my brother from another mother.

Through gritted teeth, Klein finally forces out, "Fine. No problem."

Then he stomps over to his seat, throws on his headphones, and turns up Tom Jones so damn loud that I'm fearful for his eardrums and mine. The *whoomp* horn blow at the beginning of "What's New Pussycat?" alone will

cause him to need to learn sign language by the time he's fifty.

Tomer and I remain frozen for a few seconds. It's like we're watching a bomb that'll detonate if we so much as exhale.

Feeling our eyes on him, Klein twists his head to eviscerate us with a glare so fiery it ignites my panties. "What are you looking at? Get back to work or get a room!"

Adorable sexy *jealous* baby.

How do I want to play this? *Think, Mia, think.*

On one hand, I've made him suffer enough, haven't I? I should immediately deescalate the situation by reassuring him there is nothing between Tomer and me. While I'm at it, I should give him a heartfelt apology for wronging him and vow to make it up to him. Then we'll kiss, fall in love, have a million orgasms, make beautiful babies, and grow old together.

That's what *should* happen.

But what does happen is the complete opposite.

Remember when I said that women are usually their worst enemy?

Allow me to demonstrate.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you open up your hymnals to page eighty-three, you can join me in singing today's hymn, "Oh, Mia, What The Fuck Is Wrong With You?"

## CHAPTER 12

**SHE MAKES THEM GOOD BOYS  
GO BAD**

KLEIN

“Klein, as you know, I was recently tasked with reading the Redleg operations manual and employee handbook from cover to cover. Turns out, there isn’t a policy prohibiting fraternization between employees. So what’s happening here doesn’t violate any regulations, nor does it concern you.”

Tomer’s frame stiffens, and he drawls, “*Uh, what?*”

He slides back, finally extricating himself from Mia’s personal space. It’s quite possible he just saved his life.

Without taking her eyes off me, she puts her hand on the arm of Tomer’s chair, halting his retreat. “If you’ll excuse us, we’re working on a new case.”

Now they’re fucking working a new case without me? Tomer’s remaining life minutes are once again numbered.

Mia makes it worse when she licks her lips and adds, “Together. The two of us.”

Pushing himself away with more vigor, he breaks Mia’s hold on his chair arm and springs to a stand, lifting his hands like he’s been caught robbing a bank.

And he has. The bank of *Hands Off Mia Because She’s Fucking Mine. FDIC insured.*

“You guys need to work out your issues. Kiss, fuck, or kill each other. I don’t care, but I’m not getting involved in this. I’m going to lunch. You’ve got thirty minutes to fix your shit.”

He slams the door on his way out of the office.

Never seen Tomer angry before.

Don’t give a fucking shit right now.

I’m boiling with so much rage I wouldn’t be surprised if you could see the blood bubbling in my veins through my skin.

After all the bullshit I’ve endured recently — my mom, the half-assed promotion, the influx of cases, and being forced to work beside Mia — I’ve not only found my breaking point, but I’ve pole-vaulted over it.

Mia holds my gaze, arms crossed over her chest, making her cleavage more pronounced.

Like my body is no longer under my control, I jerk to an abrupt stand so



I'm looming over her. Refusing to shy or cower, she rises to her feet and gets right in my face.

And her dick-stiffening beachy scent assaults me.

*Daaammit.*

The longer we stand here, toe to toe, with rage wrapping around me like a blanket, the more aroused I become. The red in my field of vision is a blend of lustful burgundy and angry crimson.

I'm blinded by it.

My cock is throbbing, begging to get inside her. But not in her tight pussy. No, she'd enjoy that too much, and more importantly, she hasn't earned it.

Instead, I want to thrust it down her fucking throat and silence her taunting. To feel those fucking luscious lips surround it, holding it deep inside her wet, warm mouth. I want to fist that fiery red hair to the point of pain and shove her face so flush against my body that she can barely breathe.

I've never wanted to punish a woman like I want to punish her.

I want to take from her and give nothing in return. And I won't let her up for air until she's used that sassy fucking mouth to tug, suck, and swallow every damn drop of my release.

Mia should be on her fucking knees in front of me, begging me to ease her ache. And then I'll deny her.

That's what I want.

That's what she deserves.

*Who the fuck has infiltrated my thoughts?*

I am *not* that person.

I'm a nice guy. A passionate lover. A giver.

But she makes me want to do things I've never even fantasized about.

No. No way. That's not happening.

I could *never* do those things. It's the green monster that's been unleashed who's thinking these things. First with Shep in the elevator and now with Tomer buttered up to what's mine.

No, dammit. She's not mine.

I don't want her.

Shaking off the arousal and these insane dark thoughts, I blink and attempt to deescalate the situation. "What game are you playing here, Mia?"

"Do you mean today or life in general? Be specific. I can see you're angry, so I want to be sure I get this right. Heaven forbid I anger you any

more.” One side of her mouth quirks. I have a momentary vision of smacking her mouth with my cock.

“Today. This week. Since we met. Take your pick, woman. What the fuck did I do to deserve your bullshit?”

For a split second, she looks contrite, but it passes as quickly as it appeared. Replacing that momentary glimpse of decency is a raised chin of defiance.

She is absolutely begging to be punished.

“Well, today, I was merely responding to your Neanderthal jealousy over Tomer touching my chair. Grow up.”

“Grow up? *Grow up*? Did you really just say that to me?”

“Did I stutter? You’re like a baboon flaunting his showy anus.”

My jaw clicks, and my nostrils flare. “After what you did to me, you’re telling *me* to grow up?”

The skin between her eyebrows pinches.

Seeing her rattled, I lay into her with weeks of frustration and anger without trying to check my volume. “Should I treat you the way you treated me? Should I be the type of adult who lies, manipulates, and uses someone like an object in order to get a fucking job? An adult like you?”

Her face softens. “Cal, please,” she starts but freezes when she sees the intensity of my gaze.

“Klein. Call me Klein or call me nothing. In fact, I’d prefer nothing. Because that’s how you made me feel.”

Her shoulders sag, and her eyes drop to the floor. When her throat bobs with a tight swallow, I wonder if I’ve gone too far.

This isn’t me.

The anger. The hate. The vitriol.

I’m the guy who bakes pies with his mother. Who helps his friends move. Who treats ladies the way my dad treated my mother until the day he died. I like old show tunes and rom-coms. I’m the guy you talk to when life gets you down because you know I’ll help you find the silver lining.

I don’t raise my voice in anger and *never* at a woman.

I don’t fling hateful insults.

And I certainly don’t want to punish a woman for wounding my feelings.

But she infuriates and confuses me. I want her so fucking bad, even though she hurt me and annihilated my trust. Now that this darkness has infiltrated my psyche, I can’t escape it.

Without meeting my eyes, she speaks in barely a whisper. “No.”

I lean in to hear her better. “What? Did you say no? No what?”

A little louder now, she says, “No, I don’t want you to be like me. I don’t want anyone to be like me. I don’t even want to be like me. Especially not you. You’re too...” Her voice cracks, and her words trail off.

My toe taps inside my shoe as the storm brews inside me, frantic to escape. “I’m too what?”

“You’re too good. Too kind. Too innocent. Too honest. For you to be more like me would be a tragedy.”

I have no idea how to respond to that.

Part of me wants to comfort her because I don’t like seeing her upset. But that part of me is not in charge right now.

It’s not like she cared about my feelings, so why do I care about hers?

“Is that why you went after me? Because I was good and honest? An easy target?”

She meets my eyes, finally brave enough to look at me. “That’s not why, Cal. I mean Klein.”

“Because I was your competition for the job, right? That’s why?”

Her eyes fall to the floor again, and she sucks her lips into her mouth like she’s forcing herself to be quiet.

And she nods.

My voice softens at her admission, and my heart squeezes painfully. Although I already knew why, I’d held out hope I was wrong or that there was a better explanation.

But that hope is gone now. Long gone.

“Was it worth it? Did you get what you wanted, Mia?” I hear the hurt in my shaky tone, but I don’t know if she does. Does she even have empathy?

She shrugs while twisting and fidgeting with her hands, evading the question.

“And sleeping with me was what? A bonus for a job well done? A perk of the con? Or did you plant something in my condo? Steal something when I wasn’t looking? Clone my phone? Get something off my laptop while I slept?”

Her eyes shoot to my face, and she shakes her head vehemently. “No, that’s not why. Sleeping with you was *never* part of the plan.”

There it is. Another reminder that I was part of a plan. An op. A mission.

My teeth grind, and it feels like I’ve been socked in the stomach by one

of Sawyer's body blows.

"You expect me to believe it just happened? You sure it wasn't on your checklist? Find the mark. Check. Set up a chance meeting. Check. Flirt with him." My volume increases as the rage boils over. "Get him drunk. Ask him everything. Take what you want from him without regard. Treat him like a computer and hack into him. After all, he doesn't matter since he's not a person. Check. Oh, and if you have time, fuck his brains out and sneak out the door like a fucking coward. Check, check, check, motherfucking check."

The red in her cheeks isn't from shame or guilt anymore.

She's mad. Good. I am too.

She jabs her fucking finger into my chest and snaps, "Stop it. That's not how it happened."

"I had a few drinks that night, but that's pretty much how it happened. You took what you wanted from here." I point to my head. "And then took what you wanted from here." I cup my impossibly hard dick through my jeans to illustrate her secondary target.

"That's not how it was supposed to happen. I didn't want to sleep with you."

My head rears back at her words, confusion swirling. "I didn't force you. In fact, you were the one who proposed we go to my place. I didn't coerce you or pressure you. I checked in with you the whole fucking time."

The mere idea of forcing myself on her or any woman is repulsive.

Backtracking now, she stammers, "No, of course, you didn't f-f-force me. It-it was consensual. You made sure of that the entire time." She sighs, hands falling to her sides in a huff. "That's *not* what I meant."

I run my hands through the sides of my hair in frustration. "Mia, Tomer's going to be back soon. He gave us thirty minutes, and half of that time has been you shaking your head and telling me I'm wrong. Let's cut to the chase. Are you physically able to answer one simple question with a simple answer?"

She fists her hands on her hips and sharpens her glare. "Yes. What question?"

Fuck, she's sexy when she's flustered and angry.

And I hate her for it.

"If you didn't *plan* on seducing me, then why did you go home with me?"

I cross my arms and wait her out while praying to the Rat Pack in heaven that she gives me a straight answer. Just this freaking once.

“Because I fucking like you,” she seethes, eyes glistening. “I have never wanted someone the way I wanted you that night. And every damn day since then. I couldn’t resist you, okay? I wanted you to make me forget who I was. I wanted one night to experience... whatever that thing is between us. That spark. That fire. *Dammit, Cal, I wanted you.*” Stomping her foot, she sucks in a stuttered breath.

When she speaks again, her volume is low and her words are braided with anguish. “I still do. And I hate myself for it, but not as much as I hate myself for hurting you.”

This woman is the most confusing and maddening human on the planet.

As furious at her as I am, she’s got me questioning everything and my heart aching.

*For her.*

Yet I don’t know if I can believe her. Is she playing me again? Is this more of her bullshit scheme? Continue to knock me around and play with me like a fat house cat with a mouse?

And why in the freaking hell does she look like she’d sell her soul for me to kiss her right now?

She’s inched so close to me you couldn’t fit a piece of paper between us. She’s licking her lips and breathing heavily, and her pupils are dilated, removing all but a sliver of an emerald circle. Her entire body begs me from the quiver of her chin to the pleading in her eyes and the heaving of her breasts.

But she’s not taking what she wants this time.

She’s not grabbing me by the shirt and yanking my mouth to hers like she did that night in the alley.

She wants me to make a move.

Tough shit. I’m not feeling especially generous right now, and I have no reason to believe her. But I have plenty of reasons not to.

Without thinking through a plan — there is no plan, because I’m not conniving like her — I just act.

Or react.

Swiftly and boldly, I capture her cheeks between my palms and tilt her face up.

Her long lashes flutter, and her mouth parts with a soft gasp as she gazes at me, silently begging me to kiss her.

But I’m not going to kiss her because it’s what *she* wants.

I'm doing it because it's what *I* want.

This is for me.

I forcefully slam my mouth to hers, sucking her lips between my own without an ounce of tenderness. Her mouth softens and opens for my commanding invasion, immediately granting my tongue access.

Our kiss is wild, angry, and animalistic. I pour all the rage into her through the kiss so she knows, without a doubt, how livid I am. How much I despise her.

And how violently I want her.

With a faint gasp, she winds her silky hands around my nape, holding me in place. But fuck that. I'm the one controlling this.

Pinching her lips between my teeth, I take what I want from her, letting my hands roam over her lush body, groping and unyielding. I want to see her skin marred when we're done, red and blotchy. She deserves to feel the throb and sting my touch leaves behind.

Her sighs and delicate moans go straight to my cock, making the head press painfully against the back of my zipper.

The pain feels good, though.

This woman has unleashed something inside me that I didn't know existed. And I don't know if I like it.

I feel out of control. *Feral*.

I don't want to hurt her, but I want... I want... I want her *to hurt*.

No, that's not quite right. I want to *punish* her.

But that's not me. That's not the man I want to be.

So I stop, breaking the kiss and pulling away from her. My palm rests on her upper chest, and I press her back another step so I can freaking think without feeling her imprinted on my skin. Our frantic breaths only partially drown out the thoughts racing through my head.

Finally, I can speak. "Mia, are you being truthful with me today?"

"Yes." There's a pleading quality to the simple word that only serves to confuse me.

I close the space I put between us seconds ago, aligning our bodies from head to toe, and take her chin in my firm grip. "Am I supposed to believe that sleeping with me wasn't part of your twisted game? That you wanted me then, and you still do now?"

"Yes. It's true. And I do want you. But I know I don't deserve you."

She attempts to drop her gaze, but I nudge her chin up farther, forcing her

to keep her eyes on me. “No, you don’t deserve me.” I lick my lips and barely resist the urge to reclaim her mouth. “Do you want me to fuck you again like I did that night? With my tongue? My fingers, my face, my cock? Bury myself so deep inside your tight pussy you won’t want another man as long as you live?”

She warbles a guttural sounding “uh-huh.”

“Then I guess you have some work to do.”

Through shaky breaths, she asks, “What?”

“Prove it. Make me believe you. Earn me.”

“How?”

Possessed by a sadistic monster who apparently dwells inside me, I grab her hand and guide it to my rock-hard cock. “Use your imagination.”

She pulses her hand around my erection. “Now?”

Our breathing increases when I tilt my hips forward, driving myself into her touch for a few sweet seconds. With our eyes locked on each other, the tension crackles between us.

Roughly grasping her wrist, I reluctantly halt her movements. “It’s going to take longer than the few minutes we have left.”

The look on her face is priceless, but I don’t want her to think it’s only about sex.

“It’s not only the lack of time working against you right now. Trust can’t be earned on your knees. But it’s a good place for you to start.”

Her gasp makes my dick twitch.

I take a strand of her curly hair, twist it between my fingers, and give it a tug before dropping my hand. “Word to the wise. Don’t try to fucking make me jealous again. You really don’t want to give me any more reasons to punish you than I already have.”

She looks shocked.

I feel shocked.

We’re all shocked.

Except my cock. It just feels hard and ready to blow.

“Okay,” she simpers.

If I don’t get out of here immediately, I’ll end up fucking her against the office wall with whatever time we have left. I’d probably only need a minute at this point because I’m so turned on.

Brushing past her, I double-time it to the bathroom, refusing to make eye contact with anyone on the way and trying to discreetly cover my raging

hard-on.

I'm not saying I'm going to fuck my hand in the bathroom at work while on the clock, but I'm also not ruling it out. Let's play it by ear.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'm definitely going to do it.

Once I'm hidden behind the cold, silver stall doors, I open my pants enough to allow my hand room to grip my rigid cock. No patience to fully unzip them. The second I take it in my palm and fist it hard, a shuddering breath shoots out of me.

Thank fuck there's no one in here to witness my descent into lust-filled madness.

While I silently stroke and tug my throbbing erection, my mind races through everything that just happened.

What the fuck did I do, and why did it feel so good?

Why did I say those things?

What is wrong with me?

Should I call a priest? Have an exorcism? A prayer circle? Smoke peyote and go on a vision quest to banish these demons?

Like I'm punishing myself, I squeeze and yank my dick brutally. Shame coats me, but I can't stop. Faster and rougher, I pump my fist over the tight flesh until the tingles start at the base and my climax overtakes me.

When my vision clears, I realize there is no toilet paper in this stall to clean up my mess.

Why would there be?



## CHAPTER 13

**TURN RIGHT ON SPANK ME  
DADDY AVENUE**

MIA

As soon as he storms out of the office, my knees teeter and buckle, forcing me to drop into my seat. Immediately, I regret not having a towel on my chair, because I'm certainly a bit... uh... moist down in my no-no square.

*Prove it.*

*Make me believe you.*

*Earn Me.*

How do I do that?

Was that a not-so-covert way to suggest a blow job apology? A *bjology*?

I'd drop on my knees right here and now for another kiss like that, mouth open and hair tied up.

*Don't tempt me, Cal.*

On second thought, maybe do tempt me. Yeah. Go ahead. Tempt away.

Where did that dirty-talking mouth come from? And more importantly, what are the chances that security cameras with microphones have been installed inside this office so I can play it on repeat while I fiddle my bean tonight?

*Punish me.*

Cal. The pure, innocent sweetheart with an ooey gooey heart wants to *punish* me.

That shouldn't be hot. Right? I'm an adult, not a child. I don't need to be sent to bed without supper to know I fucked up. I've already come to that conclusion on my own and apologized accordingly.

But I want to be punished. By him.

Repeatedly.

That's crazy town.

My hands grip the edge of my desk, and I give it a shove, spinning my chair in a circle and gazing at the ceiling while my mind takes a one-way trip down *Spank Me Daddy Avenue*.

A soft knock against the doorframe shakes me from the decadent idea of Klein making me pay for my transgressions, and I bolt upright.

"Is it safe to enter?"

"Come on in, T. The coast is clear."

I wipe my mouth, assuming my lipstick looks like it was applied by Dingleberry the Clown.

When Tomer returns, his posture is rigid, reminding me of the bland robot man he was when I met him. Once he's situated at his desk, he clicks through his chat window to see if he missed anything urgent from the field.

I'm too wired to focus on anything work-related right now, so I simply stare off into space, my eyes remaining unfocused while Cal's filthy words scroll through my mind.

*Do you want me to fuck you again like I did that night? With my tongue? My fingers, my face, my cock? Bury myself so deep inside your tight pussy that you won't want another man as long as you live?*

Off the top of my head, I can answer his questions in fifteen languages other than English.

*Ja, sí, oui, si, sim, ja, evet, tak, da, naeam, ye, ano, shì de, erê, Ām.*

Translation: yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Incidentally, that last sentence reads like a transcript of what I said when he railed me that night.

Tomer's soft taps across the keys help ground me and bring my attention back to my job instead of how it felt to be filled with Cal's decadent cock.

My shoulders rise and fall with a cathartic sigh, and I smack my hands together. "Are you ready to continue?"

"Umm." Tomer twists in his chair enough to partially face me. "Is Klein coming back?"

A puff of air forcefully escapes my mouth. "I think so. Sorry, it got out of hand. We'll be fine."

"Let's never speak of it. I'm trying to wipe it from my HHD."

My forehead creases with confusion. "Your HHD?"

He taps at his forehead with his pointer finger twice. "Human hard drive."

A snort laugh escapes me, making me cup my mouth and nose to cover it. "Well, if you figure that out, I hope you'll share your secret with me. There are quite a few files in my HHD that I'd like to delete permanently."

Still sounding and looking a little stiff, he rolls his neck to force himself to relax. "Okay, so where were we?"

Before I can respond, my brain short circuits at Cal's reappearance in the room. He takes his seat wordlessly, looking cool as a cucumber. You'd never know he had his tongue down my throat and my hand on his erection five

minutes earlier.

Stealthily, I glance at his lap region to see if he's still pitching a tent. *Oh, drats.* Can't tell.

My eyes snap forward when he casually asks, "What's the new case? You need help?"

His nonplussed tone is quite a change from the throaty growls he was emitting earlier. I can still hear them boinking around the recesses of my hormone-drunk mind.

*Yes, boinking. Because that's what I want to be doing with him.*

Tomer answers flatly, "We're good for now. I'm using it as a training exercise for her. A test run to see if she's ready to handle this on her own, which she probably is."

Klein nods, offering a silent agreement and revealing nothing about how he's feeling. It's so unsettling since he's normally the scotch tape level of emotionally transparent.

Tomer's continued explanation draws my attention. "The principal is the daughter of Senator John Higgins. She's gotten three death threats via email in the last week."

Klein's mouth falls slightly agape. "A US senator?"

My head whips toward Tomer, and once again, I'm a ping-pong ball being volleyed between these two. "Nah. He's a Florida state senator. Lives here when he's not in Tallahassee."

"Is it a full protection detail or an IT consult?"

I swivel my head to see how Tomer replies, since Klein's question is directed at him. Should this conversation continue much longer, I'll need to book an appointment with a chiropractor. If we're going to keep working in this shared space, we should redesign the desk configuration. Maybe a triangular setup would work better.

Tomer faces his computer again, grabs his mouse, and tips his chin in my direction. "Mia is point on this one; ask her."

That bland man is so damn cunning. He doesn't believe for a hot minute that Klein and I resolved our *substantial* issues in thirty minutes, so he's testing us.

Klein's impassive face shifts to mine, brows raised in question.

After clearing my throat and forcing a swallow, I channel my inner Buddhist Monk, aiming for a Zen-like tone. "A little of both so far. Big Al sent Henderson for in-person protection, and Junior is scheduled to relieve

him tonight. That should buy us time to see if we can track down the tango. It's the senator's hope that we get this resolved as quickly and quietly as possible so we don't disturb his daughter's life or gain media coverage."

Cal lifts a shoulder in a half shrug and rolls out his lips like he's offering me a seat. "That's what they all want, but it's not usually up to us."

"Any other questions?"

My voice is so chill that you'd never know I'm picturing myself on my knees under his desk, choking on his cock.

But you better believe I am.

Our gazes lock for a heated moment before his eyes drop to my mouth. When he bites his lower lip, I force myself not to devolve into a puddle of Mia juices on the floor. Someone could slip.

"Do you need any help?" He lifts his chin, pointing it at my monitor. "With the case?"

"No, thank you. I'll ask if I have any questions."

"Okay." The word falls from his mouth so gently it practically caresses his lips as it passes by.

At the bottom of my field of vision, I detect movement, but I'm too enraptured by his mouth to pay it any mind. Slowly and with deliberate intention, he brings his hand up to my face, thumb extended. Instinctively, I shy away from his touch, but he catches me and drags the pad of his thumb across my lower lip, swiping it from left to right, then back again.

My jaw drops slightly, parting my lips, and my breath hitches. My eyes track the delicate way he pulls away, revealing a bright pink smudge across his thumb.

With a voice of plush velvet, he whispers, "Your lipstick was smudged."

At his words, my hand shoots up to wipe my mouth, probably smearing whatever is left of my lipstick. "Thanks."

Tomer shifts in his chair behind me, the squeak ending the moment.

Thank goodness.

I was no more than eight seconds away from slipping under Klein's desk and earning his cock in all the depraved ways he desires.

A little under two hours later, I've prepared a detailed dossier on the senator, his wife, and his daughter. All the basics are laid out to ensure the field team has the information they need to protect her safely. Demographics, close acquaintances, school and work schedule, social media profiles, and more. Basics on the neighborhood and surrounding residents are also

included, and there's even a summary of legislation the senator's involved with, which might point to potential adversaries.

Tomer looks over my shoulder to ensure I crossed all my *t*'s and dotted the *i*'s. "Does it pass muster, T-man?"

"Looks good. Send it to Henderson and Junior, and copy Big Al. Then you can start on your task list. Let's see how long it takes to bust the bad guy." He lifts his wrist and pinches both sides of his G-SHOCK watch. "I'm timing you. Go."

I flip him off, drawing the tiniest grin from him. It's nice to see he's not still mad at me for using him to bait Klein.

Why did I do that? What the hell is the matter with me? When will I grow up?

There's this thing called impulse control. I don't have it.

If it hasn't happened in the first thirty-six years of my life, the odds aren't good it's going to happen anytime soon.

As I work through my brainstormed task list, something nags at the back of my mind, but I can't focus on it while I'm sitting next to Klein. His hotness is even more distracting now that I know he still wants me.

I log off and lock my workstation. "If you will excuse me, I'm going to do some of this in my office. I need a change of scenery. Feeling stir-crazy."

"We're here if you need us," Klein says without looking away from the screen.

Tomer flicks his wrist at me, giving me an awkward wave.

By the time I get to my office, close the door, and boot my tower PC, I have a private chat message from him.

TOMER

Stir-crazy? Really? You can do better than that.

A WIDENING grin pushes my cheeks up.

MIA

It's true.

TOMER

Okay. I “believe” you.

MIA

👉 <middle finger emoji>

TOMER

The stopwatch is still running.

BEFORE I CAN OPEN the task list to start working through it, another chat window pops up.

*Really, guys? Both of you messaging me not sixty-seconds after I leave our shared space?*

KLEIN

Did I make you uncomfortable?

MIA

Not at all.

KLEIN

I don't know what came over me earlier. Sorry if you felt like you couldn't work in here after that. It won't happen again.

MIA

I promise that's not why I left. But...

KLEIN

But what?

MIA

But it was a little hard to concentrate in there.

KLEIN

Why is that?

MIA

I think you know why.

KLEIN

Yeah, I guess I do. I still want you to tell me, though.

MIA



If this chat wasn't viewable by T and Boss, I'd tell you why. In detail.

KLEIN

Explicit detail?

MIA

Very.

HE DOESN'T REPLY after that.

Shaking off how *perfectly Cal* it is that he's concerned he made the workplace *sexually harassy*, I get back to tracking the email threats.

Five minutes later, I'm rolling my eyes at my screen. The stupidity wafts from my PC like burnt popcorn.

*Unbelievable.* This moron threatened the senator's daughter using the same email address he used on the *Pegging Pals* dating app to create his profile.

What a dumbass.

Once I get his profile picture from the app, I quickly identify him with a simple reverse image search.

I fear for humanity with people like this out there.

It's the daughter's ex-boyfriend. Quite the shady-looking character, complete with a DUI arrest about a year ago. He reeks of entitled frat boy. And not an intelligent one; he didn't even attempt to hide his tracks.

He needs to be brought in for questioning by law enforcement. But since they didn't go to the cops in the first place, the senator must not want to involve them for bullshit political reasons. If that's the case, Big Al will probably send someone to have a little *chat* with him. Or maybe the senator will handle his dirty work on his own. But knowing what I do about people like him, he won't.

*Damn.* The ex-boyfriend. That hits a little too close to home.

My heart goes out to the senator's daughter when she finds out he's behind the threats. Sounds like her luck is similar to mine in the boyfriend department. Nothing much worse than being burned *badly* by someone you trusted. Far too relatable, sadly.

Unlike me, though, she escaped before someone's life was irrevocably ruined.

My stomach clenches uncomfortably as a lump settles in my throat.

An image of blood pooled on the unfinished concrete slab flashes across my mind, and the smell of lumber assaults me as if I'm in that building again. Just like it was yesterday instead of fifteen years ago. The sounds of the pained groans and labored breaths ring in my ears.

I blink and shake my head to force away the haunting memories.

As the horrific images fade from my mind, they're replaced by memories of a betrayal by someone I cared about. The bitterness slithers through my veins, sending an uncomfortable tension rippling and piercing under my ribs. And it happened to me not once, but twice. First back in college, then again a few years ago on the trafficking task force by my former pseudo-boyfriend, Tony.

How can someone intentionally harm an innocent person they claim to have feelings for?

Then the hypocrisy hits me, and the discomfort blooms exponentially. While not nearly on the same par, I betrayed Cal. Even after I realized I liked him.

*Son of a bitch. Cue the self-loathing.*

Even if Klein didn't have time to genuinely begin to *care* for me, I did set him up for a similar heartbreak. Especially once I realized how sweet and trusting he was and how much he liked me. It wasn't the start of a drunken one-night stand — not for him. You don't spend all night opening your heart to someone you never plan to see again.

My shoulders rise and fall with a shaky breath.

*Focus on the here and now, Mia. Back to work.*

After I send a message to Tomer to let him know what I found about the senator's daughter, he tells me to send it to Big Al.

*No doy.* The email was already partially typed.

Once I send the email to our fearless leader, I spot the sticky note with the police and ambulance information from Klein's CVS emergency.

*Come and play with me,* it calls like a siren. *You know you want to.*

While worrying my lip, I stare at the offending paper.

*Be gone, devil! I banish thee!*

Three seconds. Then four. Five.

And the damn thing still doesn't ignite.

What would it hurt to look up one little 911 call? Technically, they're public records. Any news reporter could call the county and request the

transcript or audio file.

*Don't do it, Mia. This isn't how you earn him. If you want to know what he was doing, just ask him.*

But he won't tell me. He doesn't trust me.

*And you think this will get him to trust you?*

What if he needs help? If I assist him with whatever is wrong, then maybe he'll give me another chance.

*You aren't built to help people. You're built to be a creeping creeper.*

The square of hot pink paper screams at me, drowning out all other thoughts. I peek at my office door, contemplating walking out of here so I'm not tempted.

But when I glance down, the offending note taunts and entices me.

Sadly, I don't know any witches who can cause paper to disintegrate, and I don't have a lighter. I need to rip it up. Then I can face Klein and Tomer with my head held high, conscience clear, and guilt silenced. I just need to put my little pimp in the corner.

*Right. You can do this, girl. Grab it and rip it up.*

Okay, I've picked it up.

Now to shred it.

*Rip. It. Up.*

*Rip... it... uhhh.*

What happened to the noble hand that helped me earlier? Like the left one, my right hand hath forsaken me too. Are they on my pimp's payroll?

I think I may be battling a legit addiction. The pimp got me hooked.

Not only are my hands refusing to destroy it, these Benedict Arnold ten-fingered motherfuckers are bringing it closer to my face so I can read the numbers clearly.

The backstabbing sons of bitches.

*Forgive me, father, for I have sinned.*

*Again.*

Eight minutes and twelve point four seconds later — give or take — I've tapped into the CPD database and entered the responding officer's patrol car number. A rapid series of clicks later, I locate the dispatch records for the corresponding time frame.

And lo and behold, there it is. *Eureka!*

As I pore over the call transcript and dispatcher's notes, my heart lodges in my throat. A look at the responding officer's incident report barely eases

my mind. Fortunately, Klein's mother was found unharmed. Unfortunately, she wasn't lucid.

*Oh, Cal. You poor thing.*

No wonder he's been a wreck this week. He isn't plotting to get rid of me like some diabolical villain.

The only villain in this story is yours truly.

Cal's merely worried about his beloved mother. It all makes sense now.

*The crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he checks his phone.*

*The tight set of his jaw.*

*The clenching and releasing of his fists.*

None of it had anything to do with me.

And here I've been, making his time at Redleg a living hell when it's likely his only escape from a stressful home life. My gut threatens to retch.

I hate myself.

I'm a disgusting human, forever coated in shame.

How can I *ever* make amends for what I've done to him? For the hurt I've caused? And for the distraction he didn't need when his thoughts should have been elsewhere?

His sister doesn't live locally, so I'm sure she's no help with his mother beyond emotional support. His dad is deceased. No cousins or extended family nearby. It's probably just him carrying the weight of his mother's needs on his very broad and sexy shoulders.

While I read and reread the file, I imagine the panic that must have been in his voice when he pleaded with the dispatcher for help. I can hear it so clearly in my mind.

On the screen, my mouse pointer hovers over the audio file. I don't want to hear it.

But it's what I deserve.

So I click the file.

Once it's loaded and playing, I lean back and fold my arms around myself. And I sit there, forcing myself to listen to every heart-wrenching second. The tone of his voice is utterly anguished but with a clipped calmness, revealing his experience in high-stress situations.

My chin wobbles as he tells the dispatcher about her condition and about the perimeter alarm. When he describes her physical appearance, his words are infused with a tangible pain. A desperation I can't quite relate to. But I feel it all the same.

There's no one I'm that close to anymore. No one I can't live without, which was largely by design.

The downside is that no one loves me, either.

When the call ends, I sit silently, my thoughts heavy and scattered.

I don't know how much time has passed when I'm finally shaken alert by the chime of my personal cell phone. There are three texts I didn't see. I guess while I was in my emotional spiral, I tuned out my cell phone.

When I tap the screen, my sadness is quickly replaced by a zing of excitement, followed by a wave of guilt that slams into my chest.

Although his name isn't saved in my personal cell, I know it's him.

KLEIN

The texts on our private phones aren't backed up by Redleg.

KLEIN

So tell me here.

KLEIN

Tell me why you weren't able to concentrate. In explicit detail. Like you said you would. Unless you weren't being truthful.

HE KNOWS the exact buttons to press. Not sure whether I should be wary of that. Very few people know what makes me tick. It's dangerous to reveal your weaknesses.

But I want to answer him. I *want* him to know how he affects me.

Much like the night we met, I very much crave revealing the real me to Cal.

I've already distracted him from what's going on with his mother in a spectacularly shitty way, but maybe I can be a positive distraction from here on out. Make him feel good. Treat him the way he deserves.

And by that, I could possibly earn him.

MIA

Are you sure you want to read this while you're sitting next to Tomer?

KLEIN

Do I need privacy for this?

MIA

Considering the size of your third leg, I'd suggest it.

KLEIN

I left Tomer's office a few minutes after you did. Start talking.

MIA

Awful bossy of you. Where are you?

KLEIN

The Twistee Treat around the corner. I wanted ice cream.

MIA

Really?

KLEIN

No. I'm in my office.

MIA

Okay, give me a minute to collect my thoughts.

WHILE I FIGURE out how to tell him some of the shit racing through my mind, a notification on my phone appears.

*Odd.*

One of my intel-gathering programs always runs in the background on my personal laptop, scouring public records and some not-so-public sources for certain keywords and names.

And I've got a hit.

Normally, once I've completed my entirely legal aboveboard research — cough, bullshit, cough — I turn off my alerts for the search unless it's something I suspect might change in the near future. But I must have missed turning this one off after I was done investigating my new coworkers.

A missing persons police report has been filed south of here in Sarasota County.

Someone very important to the Redleg family has gone missing.

*Shit.*

MIA

I need to pause this conversation until after work. I want to tell you all the illicit thoughts I have about you, and I promise I will. But something urgent just came up with a case.

SON OF A BITCH. I promised myself I wouldn't lie to him anymore.

But did I just lie to Cal?

Well, I suppose that depends on how you look at it. It's not a Redleg case. Not yet. But it *is* a police case. Ergo, not a lie.

Yep. Perfect justification.

## CHAPTER 14



**TELL ME WHY (AIN'T NOTHING  
BUT A MISTAKE)**

KLEIN

Well, *that* was anticlimactic.

I toss my phone on the desk and sag in my chair, letting disappointment wash over me.

You'd think my special private bathroom time would have reduced my desire for Mia enough to allow me to focus on my job.

Yet she's all I can think about.

Her smell. Her taste. The way she gasps into my mouth when I claim her lips. Her moans. The feel of her tongue stroking mine. The way she gripped my cock for those precious few seconds. How she melted against me.

She's becoming an obsession.

Kissing her was clearly a colossal mistake. It's made me crave her even more, and I don't know how I'll be able to resist her after that. Especially knowing she wants me too.

But I still can't make myself regret it.

Despite her not wanting to have a little naughty text time now, I suspect she may be willing to prove herself to me. I sure as hell hope so.

Unfortunately, I don't know exactly what I meant by that asinine demand. *Prove it? Earn me?* What does that even mean?

In the abstract, sure, it makes sense. But how does that look in reality?

And am I up so high on the horse that I think it's okay to go around barking out demands like that?

My father would be so disappointed in me, having always worshipped the ground my mother walks on.

I don't know the first thing about punishing someone... sexually. Not the way I want to punish her.

Sure, I've been around the block enough to know that some people partake in sexual relationships involving physical consequences and even pain. But I've never dipped my toe in those waters. Where would I even begin?

My mind is a mash-up of lewd thoughts, none of which I know how to implement, and crippling judgment of myself for considering this.

The worst thing is, I legitimately don't know what I want from her —

other than her entire body. No clue what it'll take for me to trust her again. A large part of me thinks it's an impossible feat, so why bother encouraging her to try? It'll only make the eventual demise more disappointing.

Rolling out my shoulders and neck, I shake off the jarring thoughts and return to the lair. They might need help with the case that drew Mia's focus from our texting exchange. Perhaps something is heating up with the senator's daughter, or it could be one of the CPD files she's been evaluating. There were some cybercrimes and cold cases that CPD homicide was hoping Redleg could give fresh eyes.

My steps falter as I enter our shared workspace. "Where's Mia? What's she working on?"

Tomer's head is down while his fingers speed across the keys. "Hasn't come back yet."

Hmm. I figured they'd be working together on the urgent situation.

"What's the big news? Which case is going ass over tits now?"

The clacking from his keyboard ceases suddenly, and he cricks his neck to face me with his nose scrunched up tight. "What are you talking about?"

Lowering into my seat, I fling my thumb over my shoulder in the general direction of Mia's office. "Mia said something urgent came up on a case."

His eyes narrow to slits. "I thought you didn't know where she was or what she was doing."

"I didn't. I don't," I stammer.

*Nice job, sonny boy. Sounding like a real cad.*

He studies me for three long, awkward seconds before returning his focus to his screen. "No clue what you're talking about. She identified a suspect for those email threats on the senator's daughter. Took her about four minutes. Far as I know, that's it."

"Huh."

What the fuck was so important that she ended our chat so abruptly? My thoughts swirl, leaving me wondering if I've been lied to.

Once again.

"T, do you need me for anything specific right now, or can I continue setting up the Throwbot?"

"So far, I'm good. If this day continues the way it is," he pauses to knock on his desk, "I'll be able to hit the gym and still get home before midnight."

"Well, now you've jinxed it," I quip.

Before resuming testing on my new gadget, I open the main chat to see if

I can figure out what Mia's working on. Nothing there other than the usual updates from the guards in the field and remote surveillance teams in the building, doing their routine check-ins. A quick look at *Bruce* doesn't show any of our cases have escalated to critical levels.

My knee bobs frantically.

You know what? To hell with this bullshit.

*The kid's finally done being a Harv. About damn time, sonny boy.*

If she's hiding something — again — I'm going to find out and put a stop to it. That's not how we operate at Redleg. How can I expect our people to trust her with their lives in the field if I can't even trust her to give me a straight answer in a text?

"I'll be right back, T."

Without waiting for him to reply, I shuffle quickly to Mia's office. Her door is closed. I contemplate barging in and slamming it behind me so she knows how mad I am at her continued deceit, but calmer heads prevail.

With a deep breath, I extend my hand, preparing to knock. At precisely the same time, she opens the door and nearly plows right into me, stopping only a few inches short.

Holding her laptop close to her chest like a shield, she jumps and stumbles back a few steps. "Oh, motherplucking chicken biscuits!"

My palms shoot out in front of me. "Sorry. Easy. It's just me."

"You scared the life out of me." She exhales deeply, letting her head loll in relief. Once the color returns to her cheeks, her eyes lock on mine. "I was just coming to see you."

My ego approves of this... assuming it's the truth. And that's a big assumption where Mia is concerned.

She waves me in. "Come over here. Close the door."

I like where this is going. Maybe she's thought of a way to, uh, you know... start earning me with *a little hey-hey*, as Frank and Dean would say.

After shutting the door, I turn around to find her opening her laptop and pulling a chair beside her. She motions for me to join her behind the desk.

Oh, damn. It's work related.

"Tomer said he wasn't aware of any urgent developments in our caseload." I let the implied accusation hang in the air while rounding her desk.

"That's what I was coming to talk to you about." Her face pinches. "It's not *exactly* a Redleg case, and I don't know what to do about it yet, but I

know I need your help.”

My heartbeat speeds up, excitement coursing through me. “Is it a CIA case?”

Her throat bobs when I take the seat beside her. “No, it’s not CIA. I’m not doing shit for them anymore. Fuck ’em and let ’em eat beans.”

I snicker but quickly grow serious when I see what she’s got open on her screen. “Who the hell is Violet Holt?”

A Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office report is displayed on her screen, but I don’t recognize the name of the person who filed the report or the missing young woman. Looks like she vanished after last being seen at a dance club on Friday night.

Mia toggles over to another screen, bringing up a driver’s license photo and points at the screen. “*This* is Violet Holt. According to social media, she goes by Lettie.”

I level her with a side-long glare. “Very funny. But who is she?”

Mia fills her mouth with air, puffing her cheeks and sealing her lips. She shakes her head repeatedly, then closes her eyes as if she’s hiding from me. “I can’t tell you that.”

Her expression is almost comical, but her words tick me off.

My shoulders fall, and I utter a frustrated groan. “Why am I here if you won’t tell me what you know? Why are you looking at this if it’s not a Redleg case? What are you hiding this time?”

“Cal, listen. I know...” She trails off, her face softening. “Can I call you that?”

Well, shit. I didn’t flinch when she called me Cal this time.

“Klein.”

She’s hiding shit from me even as we speak. If she wants to call me by my given name, she’s going to have to earn that shit too. And she’s not starting off on the right foot.

Her posture collapses, and her face falls. “Right.” She takes a deep breath and tosses her gaze to the ceiling. “Okay, *Klein*, I realize that I have no right to ask you to put your faith in me. But I’m begging you to try to trust me on this. My heart is in the right place.”

I spare a quick glance at the door, contemplating leaving. But something keeps me rooted to the seat. An electric current shoots between us when our eyes lock. Heat fills my chest, but it’s no longer from anger.

Only desire.

A carnal fucking need that can only be satisfied by claiming her body. By throwing her on the ground or my bed or against a freaking wall and slamming my cock inside her until she comes apart, shattering around me.

I stifle a groan, hoping to hide the way she affects me.

How can I still want her the way I do? It makes no damn sense.

Ignoring her request to trust her — because fuck no — I gesture toward the screen in a sweeping motion. “Mia, what is it you expect me to do about this?”

She puts her hand on my forearm, giving it the slightest squeeze, and whispers, “We need to save her.”

“We aren’t public service officers or vigilantes.”

Her grip on my forearm tightens. “I promise I’ll tell you why she’s special. But not here. I don’t want to...” Despondently, she trails off and shakes her head. “I’ll feel better if we don’t talk about who she is here. At Redleg. Okay?”

Not sure why the idea of seeing her outside of work excites me. Probably because of my desire to screw her brains out at the first possible opportunity.

I toss my hands in an *I give up* gesture. “Sure. Fine. What can you tell me now?”

“We need to find this girl, Klein. But it’s going to be dangerous. I think I can locate her with a little time, but I don’t have the physical skills to extract her.” She clears her throat. “If she’s been taken by who I suspect, then she’s in for a lifetime of suffering. More pain and torture than anyone deserves, and that’s if she survives it. No one should be hurt like that.” Her lips form a perfect *O* shape, and she forces out a slow exhale before adding, “But especially not her.”

She worries her lower lip. I can’t resist grazing my thumb over it, freeing it from her teeth. Her breath hitches as her gaze tracks the movement of my hand falling from her mouth.

Somehow, I force myself to continue the conversation, regardless of my dick’s desire to take charge of this interaction. “I don’t want anyone to hurt unnecessarily. But what’s so important about this girl?”

“I promise I will tell you. Soon. For now, I need your help.”

“The cops can’t help?”

Her beautiful green eyes roll. “It’ll take them too long. And that’s if they find her at all. Every hour she’s gone makes it more likely she’ll *never* be found alive. In fact, I need to start digging up more information on the case. I

don't have enough to save her yet. But I will. And once I find her, we need to be ready to go."

I'm going to regret this.

"Fine. I'll help. But if I'm going to put my ass on the line for someone I don't know who isn't a Redleg client, then I deserve to know why. When are you going to give me the full story?"

Her face brightens, and she nods eagerly. "Tonight. I'll tell you tonight. Can you come over after work?"

I force a tight swallow, my head swimming at the possibility of the two of us alone again. "To your place?"

"Yes." She breathes the word, conveying a blend of hopefulness and heat with her tone.

That earnest expression she wears flays me wide open. Every line on her face is painted with a genuine vulnerability that's so unexpected it nearly takes my breath away. From the soft set of her lips to the tiny tug of the skin by her eyes and the lift of her brows. Every last bit of her seems earnest, vulnerable, and uneasy all at once.

For the first time, I'm seeing a glimpse of the real her.

The real Mia.

The one I thought I was getting to know that night at the Sassy Parrot.

And I want more.

But I'm not ashamed to say I'm scared of trusting her again. Terrified of it. What if this is another scheme?

"We could meet somewhere in public."

With a cutting shake of her head, her spine stiffens and her shoulders square. "No. Not in public. Not safe."

"Why not here? This is a secure location," I hedge, trying to spare my heart from the inevitable downfall that'll come if I spend another night with her.

And if I go to her house, I won't be able to resist her. I jacked off in the bathroom, for fuck's sake. Safe to say, I can't trust my dick to be alone with her.

"This woman is... uh... she's important to someone here. At Redleg."

My body shifts forward, tension spiking through every cell. "Then why aren't we telling them? Who is it? Big Al will mobilize a team immediately. If it were —"

"Shh!" After hushing me, she pinches my lips with her thumb and

forefinger.

My eyes shoot wide, and I shake my head, freeing myself of her little crab hands. “Mia, what the hell?”

“Let me explain. *Please.*”

I’m unable to stifle my frustrated groan. First at the feel of her skin pressed against my lips and also at this clusterfuck.

If Violet Holt is important to one of us at Redleg, then she’s important to all of us.

Period. We take care of our own.

She leans close to whisper, holding my glare with a fierce one of her own. “We can’t tell people here yet. It’s complicated, but I will explain tonight. Just give me a few hours. First things first, we need to help her.”

I shake my head, not giving a shit about the so-called complications. “Fuck that. Tell me who it is.”

“No. Please, Cal.” She grabs my hands, pulsing around them. “I’m begging you to trust me. We don’t have time to waste on discussing this. Please believe that I have my reasons.” Her voice grows softer, her words faltering. “I always have reasons for what I do.”

Like treating me like an op.

Forcing my jaw to relax, I concede for now. “Fine. If she’s Redleg family, then I’ll stop delaying us. But you *will* tell me tonight.”

She licks her lips, a relieved smile skirting up her face. “Thank you. I promise I *will* earn your trust. Starting right now.”

Her gaze falls to our hands, still joined.

Looking back at me, she adds, “And I will earn you too.”



## CHAPTER 15

**THE GUTTER IS CLOSED RIGHT  
NOW**

MIA

Reluctantly, Cal agrees to listen to my theory, despite not knowing why she matters so much to Redleg.

After taking a deep breath, I get right to the point. “I think she’s been taken by Lenkov’s trafficking ring.”

His eyes spring wide, his mouth goes slack, and he flings his arms to both sides.

“What? The damn Russians? How could you possibly know that from a single police report?”

I shift into business mode, eager to recap my initial findings. “The sheriff’s report included a witness statement from a woman who reported interacting with a group of girls in the bathroom, one of whom matched Lettie’s description. A little while later, the witness gets a drink at the bar and sees the same girl sitting there — presumably Lettie Holt — but Lettie’s no longer with her friends. Instead, two men had *attached* themselves to Lettie, and she appeared uncomfortable. The witness and her friends discussed whether to intervene or alert the bartender. Ultimately, they didn’t because the next time they looked over, Lettie was smiling.”

“Still not seeing how this gets us to Russians and trafficking.”

I hold up my finger to shush him. “Patience, my young Padawan. I’m getting there. So the witness saw Lettie leaving with the two men around eleven fifteen. It rang alarm bells for her because Lettie could barely stand, yet she’d appeared sober not too long before. There hadn’t been enough time to become that inebriated. The witness followed them to the front of the club and saw a beige Honda pull up. She turned around to get her friends, but when they returned, Lettie and the men had already driven off.”

“This witness paid an *awful* lot of attention to the girl who may or may not be Lettie.”

“I have my suspicion about why.”

“Are you sharing it or guarding it like more of your secret treasure?” he quips.

Giggling at his jab, I shrug and explain, “Lettie is quite beautiful, and I imagine she draws the eye everywhere she goes. Men *and* women are likely always aware of her. She’s a stunner.”

His lips bunch over to one side, and he curves a brow. “And yet there’s only *one* witness to her drunken decline and shaky exit?”

“Other witnesses remember seeing her that night, but only the one woman noticed anything suspicious.”

“But this witness didn’t report it on her own, right? She was found by law enforcement and then responded to their questioning?”

Cal’s not just a pretty face.

“From what I saw, yes.”

“She’s a gem. If she would have reported it right away, the cops could have started the search that night.” He shakes his head and clicks his tongue. “Okay, fine. It does seem suspicious, but why the mafia or trafficking? It could be an isolated kidnapping by sexual predators.”

“Call it a gut feeling. Maybe I’m too tainted by my past, but —”

His hand shoots up to cut me off, and his face softens. “Your past? You don’t mean you were... trafficked?”

“Oh, no, no, no. Not at all. I meant my past *working* on trafficking cases. You know I worked with Shep on that military intelligence task force on trafficking, right?”

He nods, relief causing his posture to stoop.

I met Shep when we were assigned to a joint agency task force. It started with an anti-terrorism focus, but it shifted to trafficking when we fell down a rabbit hole. The group we initially thought was recruiting and training terrorists was abducting women and children worldwide. Selling them like cattle. The CIA wanted to pull me from the task force since that’s not our typical purview, but I begged them to let me see it through.

I’ve never regretted that decision.

“So on that task force, I waded through mountains of cases that were eerily similar to this. There are many ways traffickers lure away their victims — one of which is a quick roofie grab in a bar. It’s the least time-consuming way to restock their coffers with fresh *product*. Girl at a bar alone, a few guys circle, then she’s observed rapidly becoming so intoxicated she nearly needs to be carried out. It doesn’t usually raise eyebrows because drunk people are assisted out of bars and clubs every night.”

“And why the Russians?”

“Certain *activity* I’m privy to regarding Lenkov points to a spike in his acquisition efforts of the human female product variety. And with a little more digging, I’d bet money this area, in particular, is a hotbed of activity.”

He crosses his arms at his chest and eyes me down. “You’re still tracking Lenkov. Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

My lips purse as I *try* to hold back a snappy retort. Key word: *try*.

“I drink, and I know things, Cal. It’s who I am.”

As you can tell, I failed at holding back the snark. But I tried.

*And it’s the thought that counts, kids.*

Despite wanting to be angry at me, a slight grin slips from his mask at my dated *Game of Thrones* reference.

Aw, he’s so cute. Like a little puppy you want to scratch behind the ears and let lick your face.

*Be still my clit.*

He rubs his strong hand through his hair. The veins leading to his knuckles capture my attention, making my mouth water.

Why the hell are thick veins so sexy? Is there such a thing as a vein kink? If so, I’ve got it. And not in a phlebotomist way. I don’t want to jab a needle in them, but I do want to see those hands roam over my entire body, veins and muscles bulging and popping.

“Mia?”

Blinking and giving my head a sobering shake, I search my mind for what we were talking about. Was it veins? I feel like it was veins.

No. That can’t be right.

I have no freaking clue what he asked. Unless it was something about how he could use those hands to show me the heavens above, I’m at a loss.

“What did you say?” I ask.

A knowing grin makes a seductive appearance on his lickable face, but he pauses to let me suffer, refusing to answer my question.

*Cocky hot jerk face.*

“I’m sorry. I was distracted. Did you ask something?”

He arches a single brow and lets his smile spread wider. “Distracted, huh? Like before? Weren’t you going to tell me what had you distracted?”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I consider all the flirty banter we could have. But we must focus on Lettie. The clock is ticking for her.

“As much as I want to drag your innocent mind into the gutter where all my thoughts of you have taken up residence, now is not the time.”

Wow. My voice is unseasonably warm for this time of year.

He schools his features, simmering that teasing glow he wears so well. “Let’s solve this case, then you can continue corrupting my innocent, non-

gutter-dwelling mind.” When his smile attempts to reemerge, he clears his throat. “What I asked while you were lounging in the gutter was, why don’t we just turn over whatever you have that points to Lenkov to law enforcement? If you’ve done all the legwork to speed up the response, won’t they take it from there?”

“Great question. I’m glad you asked.”

After a roll of his eyes, he flips his wrist to encourage me to continue.

“Aside from this being a very high priority for someone at Redleg,” I pause and widen my eyes at him, “which I will be explaining tonight, I don’t trust them.”

“You don’t trust the sheriff’s office?”

I offer a hesitant nod. “Not so much the sheriff’s office, but the people they’d turn the case over to.”

He rubs the nape of his neck like the thought makes him uncomfortable. “Explain.”

Forcing an exhale, I go out on a limb, hoping to lay the foundation to earn his trust. Eventually. “If they suspect it’s trafficking-related, they’ll turn it over to the regional task force.”

“That should be a good thing. You’ve got FBI, DHS, and a ton of other agencies on those, right? That means more resources to help find her.”

Deep breath. Here it comes.

“Not if they’re compromised.”

Klein’s entire demeanor shifts, concern and anger spiking behind his hazel eyes. “Mia, knowing what little I know about you, I don’t think you’re the type of person who makes an accusation like that without proof.”

My heart pumps a little harder at the sliver of faith in my character he’s showing. Then again, it could be a back-handed compliment given our brief but tumultuous past.

“I have strong suspicions, based on compelling yet circumstantial evidence.”

He tugs his lower lip into his mouth, sucking and nibbling at it. What I wouldn’t give to replace that lower lip with my clit.

*No. Bad Mia. Stop that.*

Focus on the case.

“I’m not going to ask about this evidence because it’s probably not relevant to this case.”

Although it’s a statement, the way he inclines his head and lifts his brows

shows he's seeking my confirmation.

"Yes. That's correct. We can circle back to that after we save her. And any other girls we can in the process."

I'd rather not revisit that bag of bones in my closet, but I'll do it.

For him.

"Fine. Let's assume it's Lenkov or a similar organization. What's our play? Locate and extricate, right?"

I nod eagerly, excitement filling my chest with the beginning rush of adrenaline.

A low groan rumbles from his chest, but I already see the yes written in the lines of his handsome face.

"Who else can we bring in on this? I can't fight the Russian mafia and bust up a human trafficking ring single-handedly. But thanks for stroking my ego by thinking I could."

*Don't say it, Mia. Don't say it.*

"After we solve this, there are other things I'd like to stroke."

Whoops. I said it. I blame him for setting me up so expertly.

Gasping in shock at the words I let slip out, I cup my mouth and face my computer again. "Sorry. Forget I said that. Filter malfunctioned."

He mumbles something unintelligible.

"Anyhow," I redirect. "Let's see. I need some time to find her, and you want a team. Can you run interference with Tomer this afternoon so I can dig in without him getting suspicious?"

He nods, then rests his palm on his forehead like he's got a headache.

"As for a team, it needs to be people you trust to be discreet and who won't run to Big Al. We can't make this an official Redleg case since no client contracted our services, nor did law enforcement request our help."

"And we can't let our impacted *mystery* coworker know we're running an op regarding Lettie Holt. So we need to sneak around and go behind everyone's back."

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds bad," I quip.

His disapproving glare makes my nipples harden. It's similar to how he looked at me when he told me he wanted to punish me.

Perfect. Now I'm wondering how quickly we can assemble a team, find the girl, and bust her out so I can get on my knees and beg Klein to forgive me.

"Can we bring in Shep?" he asks. "Or is he the one..." He lets his words

trail off, enticing me to finish his sentence.

“We can bring in Shep. He’s not the one, and he’ll trust me to tell him the rest of the story when the time is right.”

I can’t hide Lettie’s identity from Klein indefinitely. But I won’t tell him here. What if we’re interrupted, or heaven forbid, someone listens in? Our individual offices aren’t monitored, but *people* are a variable I can’t risk with this news or Lettie’s life. Given Cal’s inclination to have large reactions, he could flip out and draw unwanted attention.

But also... I need to do it somewhere besides here so it’s harder for him to run to the source and rat me out right after I reveal who she is.

Until I can convince Klein to trust me, his knowing this information is a big fat liability. He could use it against me, putting my job at risk. It’s safest for me to get him to my place tonight. In a relaxed and controlled environment, I’ll come clean with him about everything.

Everything.

Then maybe he won’t use his knowledge of what I’ve been up to against me.

He could do it so easily. It’s his chance to get rid of me.

But I’m going to have to trust him.

I’m going to earn him with my complete and total transparency.

*In a safe and calculated way, of course.*

For the next few minutes, we list a handful of people we feel we can trust to follow our lead without jeopardizing the mission or flapping their traps.

“And you’re sure we can’t loop in Boss?” he asks, the conflicting emotions worrying his features.

“Klein, I’m sorry, but I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Why? He’d support the op. Redleg is everything to Big Al.”

“I’d rather ask for forgiveness than permission in this case. He’ll either forbid us from proceeding or demand to know the whole story before promptly tipping off law enforcement. And then we lose our chance to grab her before she’s moved or worse.” I tuck my chin and add, “Besides, if the task force is compromised, as I suspect, then they’ll make sure we *never* find her. If they know Redleg is involved, she’s as good as dead. We need to stay under the radar in every way possible.”

“I guess you’re right. I don’t like hiding this from Boss, though. It’s going to be dangerous. It’s a lot easier to take these types of risks when Big Al is backing us and using his contacts in law enforcement. Plus, Redleg’s



attorneys are top-notch if we do get fucked. Going it alone is risky — not just physically but for any legal consequences.”

“I get that, but let’s remember that the goal is to get in and get out without ringing alarms. It’s not a battle. It’s an extraction. Anyone who tries to stop you guys from rescuing her should be subdued and not killed. These people don’t want to involve the police anyhow — even if a low-level trafficker ends up in a ditch somewhere. If we don’t kill their people, then they shouldn’t come after us. Not for one girl.”

“True,” he concedes.

“Plus, Klein, come on. You guys are former special ops. Hostage retrieval isn’t anything new for you, right?” He nods, and I continue. “You’ll be ghosts, exactly as you were trained to be. So there’ll never be a reason to concern Big Al with this. We won’t need his forgiveness nor his backing.” I pause to brush my hands together, pantomiming washing them clean. “Just a small group of guys — get in, get Lettie, and get out.”

And once she’s safe, we’ll figure out the rest of this mess.

“Fine. Let’s talk about who we can get for the op.”

He respects my veto power without questioning why I veto certain individuals, and we ultimately agree on a few guys he thinks are trustworthy.

Once we’re done, he claps his hands one time and heads to the door, pausing with his fingers hovering over the knob. “I’ll distract Tomer while you get to work, and I’ll reach out to the guys between other tasks.”

“By the time you come over at seven, I should have enough intel for us to work out an extraction plan.”

Lingering, he stares at me with a tight-lipped smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. He’s rocking slightly, like he’s unsure whether he wants to go or stay.

I hope to hell he isn’t considering busting me right now for even suggesting we do something this asinine behind Big Al’s back.

Injecting sincerity into my tone, I hold his stare and say, “Thank you. For trusting me on this and for helping.”

If he ran down the hall to Boss, I’d be out on my ass immediately. Not just for spying on my own team, but for orchestrating a covert mission. Especially one that pits us against the Russian mafia.

Redleg has gone against them before — a different arm of Lenkov’s operation — but that was to save Kri and Valerie. Those two were already part of the Redleg family.

Lettie has a place here too, even if I’m the only one who knows why.

For now.

Despite this being reckless and dangerous, I believe in my heart it's the right thing to do.

If we don't intervene, Lettie's a goner, but only after she's been used up and begging for death.

Waiting to *learn more* or talk through this shit isn't an option. And we can't trust the authorities with her life.

Unfortunately, I don't see any other way.

"Don't make me regret trusting you." His glare turns to ice. "Again."

He leaves before I can respond, and my entire body slumps. An unsteady gush of air tears from my lungs, and relief tangles with a jolt of excitement.

We *will* save Violet and as many other girls as we can.

When I made the decision to leave the company and come to Redleg, I knew I'd be able to make a difference for deserving people who couldn't be helped by others.

I just never expected it to happen so soon.

## CHAPTER 16

# **THE BITTER REALITY**

KLEIN

My hand freezes, gripping my condo's front door handle as the opening notes of "Sweet Caroline" emit from the back pocket of my jeans.

No, I don't have the ability to play Neil Diamond songs from my butt. Wouldn't that be cool, though? I know some people who talk out of their asses, but I've never met one who could play the greats from the back door.

It's my phone, blaring my sister's ring tone.

"Thanks for returning my call, Caroline."

I didn't think she would get back to me before I had to leave to go to Mia's, but thankfully, she did. Barely.

After work, I dropped by my place to get clean clothes to bring to my mother's house later. Because no matter what happens after we find and hopefully save Violet Holt, I'm not staying at Mia's house tonight.

I'm not.

I won't.

Not a chance.

Nope.

Stepping away from the door, I return to the living room and plop onto the couch.

Sounding frazzled, she starts in with a rushed apology. "Sorry I missed you earlier. I had dinner on the stove boiling over and a sperm goblin trying to crawl up my leg while the other was waking up from her nap, screaming her lungs out like she was auditioning to be the lead singer of a death metal band."

I snort laugh. "Sperm goblin?"

"You do know how babies are made, right?" she teases.

"Of course I do, you silly goose. You made me watch the movie *Storks* the last time I visited you in Atlanta."

"Well, I was just doing my part to contribute to your education."

I check the clock, realizing I can no longer delay the inevitable. As much as I'd love to kick back and shoot the shit with my sister, I'm running late. And I can't focus on an extraction op with this horrible decision hanging over my head. It wouldn't be wise to be distracted when we go out to save the

woman of unknown origin.

Still can't believe I'm trusting Mia. I'm a glutton for punishment. Perhaps if I had more blood in my brain instead of in my dick, I could have made a better decision.

But alas, I did not.

Even my momentary post-nut clarity didn't give me the wisdom to walk away from that redheaded she-devil.

"Listen, Caroline, I don't have much time to talk, but we can't drag out this decision any further."

She retorts with a *psh* sound. "Well, if that's not the pot and the kettle. You're the one who's been dragging this out."

"I know. I know. That's not what I meant." I press my eyes closed and grit my teeth to the point of pain. "I don't want to make this decision. No matter what we do, it's going to hurt her."

And me.

But I'm the least of my concerns.

"We're *preventing* her from getting hurt by doing this. Back when she was diagnosed, she said it was up to us to decide when the time was right to turn over her care to the professionals. She knows it's coming."

I scoff, bitterness coating my tone. "Sure, she knows when she's lucid, but those moments are fleeting."

I've slept over each night since her incident. *And man*, she's deteriorated more than I realized. I've been fooling myself into thinking it was safe for her to be home alone.

She's so much worse at night. The doctors call it sundowning.

It's scary and heartbreaking.

During the day when I'm not there, Gloria sits with her for hours on end. She's a damn saint. They do crafts, cook together, and take short walks around the neighborhood.

When she heard about Ma's wandering incident, she felt so bad for not being there. Despite it not being her fault, I suspect the extra time she's spending is easing her guilt. But we can't go on like this for long. I won't take advantage of her compassion.

I knew Ma was getting worse. Only, since I was breezing in and out, I didn't realize how quickly the disease was progressing.

Until now.

For the last few years, she's been losing words, having trouble

remembering dates, mixing up names, and forgetting conversations we just had. She started asking more and more questions about things she should have known.

But now? I see changes daily.

In the middle of a sentence, she's gone completely. Just shuts down like a plug was pulled. Then she pops back a few moments later, disoriented but otherwise okay.

Here one moment and gone the next.

This morning, she asked about my tattoos, lifting up the sleeve of my shirt like she was seeing them for the first time. And I've had most of them for almost a decade. A few years ago, when I got the angel wings over my heart for Dad, she made me take her to the tattoo studio so she could thank the artist who drew it. She brought him a pie.

And today? She had no memory of any of it.

Caroline breaks me from my looming spiral. "That's why it's time to act. It'll be less traumatic to put her in a home now while she can still remember the reasons behind the move. She'll have time to get comfortable there before she slips further into the end stage. She knows we aren't abandoning her and that it's for her own good."

My heart plummets, leaving my chest a hollow cavern.

"That's the thing, sis. We *are* abandoning her if we do this. She'd never ship us off like that." My palm aches from my tight grip on my phone. "I won't put her in a home."

My sister's frustrated sigh makes the phone line crackle. "Cal, let's look at the options. To avoid putting her in a facility, we have three options, right? She moves in with me up here, moves into your tiny condo with you, or you move in with her. The first is out because I have three kids, a husband, and a demanding full-time job. You know I adore our mother with my whole heart, but I don't have the bandwidth to care for her the way she needs. I'm already spread too thin. She'd barely be any safer here than living on her own."

"I know you can't do it, given your situation. That's why *I'll* take care of her."

"That's not much better, and you know it. Let's say you sell your condo, which I know you'll do. You still can't care for her twenty-four hours a day. Last time I checked, you're one man, and she can't be left alone. Especially at the rate she's declining. What about when you're at work? I know she has days when she *seems* fine other than some memory issues, and you're

clinging to those, but it's getting worse. And fast."

She pauses, allowing her words to sink in.

I hate this. Make it stop.

"You know we can't afford to have a full-time caregiver come to the house. Thirty dollars an hour was the cheapest I could find. Do that math for a minute and see if you don't want to vomit."

"Oh, I've already done the math, and yes, it makes me sick to my stomach."

Fifteen hundred dollars a week for the fifty hours of care I'd need — and that's if I don't work late or need to go in on a day off.

Fifteen damn hundred dollars.

Not per month. *Every damn week.*

Caroline continues, "By using the proceeds from the sale of your condo to fund daily care, you'd still run out of cash in about six months. Maybe a few more months if we factor in Dad's pension. I can only chip in so much. Then what will we do?"

*This is why I've been avoiding it. Because there are no good solutions.*

All the good intentions in the world can't fix this. Wanting to care for my mother isn't enough.

"Cal, even if we could afford in-home care or you took her to an adult daycare center while you were at work, you'd still be sacrificing so much of your life. All your nonwork hours would be spent caring for her. Every minute. No overnight protection gigs for overtime. No going out with friends. Nothing. And that includes booty calls or dating. She doesn't want you to sacrifice that much. And let's be honest." She pauses for some type of dramatic effect. "Your poor right hand would be so damn chapped from all the self-loving."

I groan, barely holding off a laugh.

Every last one of Caroline's points are valid — except the chapped hand part because of a little invention called lotion.

My mother is the most giving, selfless, and compassionate person. She'd never want me to give up everything for her.

And yet, I can't seem to make myself give up on her.

Squeezing the bridge of my nose, I try to stave off the beginning of a tension headache that's barreling toward me.

Serious again, Caroline continues, "You deserve happiness and a life of your own. This disease will take her from us one day, but it could be months,



years, or a decade. We just don't know. If we knew it was imminent, then I get how you'd sacrifice that much — especially since you're always putting others above yourself. But what if this isn't a quick... *ending*?" Her voice quakes. "If you're taking care of her day in and day out, you're never going to date. You'll never get married or have kids. All the things you've wanted and deserve. And if you do have kids one day, it'll be when you're old and crusty. You won't enjoy your little sperm goblins if you've got an aching back and bad knees."

I chuckle softly at her attempt to lift the vibe, but her words hit the bullseye with the precision of a sharpshooter.

How could I date knowing I need to rush home to her? What if I wanted to bring a woman home? How can I devote myself to a family of my own when the woman I've loved all my life is suffering in a haze of darkness?

Caroline's tone grows more compassionate, warmth coating her words. "I love you so much, Cal. You've already sacrificed so much for others. For your country. For your friends at Redleg. For your clients. You've put your life on the line for most of your adult life. Dad was so proud of you before he —"

Her sobs choke off her words, and it gives me a chance to interrupt her monologue. "I'm not doing this to make anyone proud. This isn't for me. It's for her. She deserves to live out her days, lucid or not, cared for by the people who love her the most. I will figure out a way to afford it. Or I'll work from home. I don't know yet. But I'll request a vacation from work for next week so I can get everything handled."

I'm grasping at straws.

When Caroline speaks again, her tone is determined and resolute. "I talked to her about this the other day."

A rock lodges in my throat. "What do you mean?" I ask in a clipped tone.

"Promise you won't get mad."

"I'm already mad. What did you do?"

"She called me and was extremely clearheaded. Hell, she initiated a *video* call; that's how lucid she was. She needed to talk to me. About you."

"About me? Why?"

"She's worried about you, and she wanted to make sure I was going to do what was necessary when the time came."

My hand starts to tremble, so I make a fist to stop it. "What's that supposed to mean? What's necessary?"

“She knows you’ve been sleeping over lately and assumes it’s because she’s gotten worse. She says she can feel everything slipping away. She’s still her on the inside, but it’s like she’s in a haze most of the time. During our video call, her thoughts were crisp and clear. For those few moments, she was her. Like she used to be.” She sobs, crying more now. “And she knew it had to be said before the fog returned.”

I put the phone on speaker and set it on the coffee table in front of me, then lean forward to brace my head with my hands.

Digging my fingertips into my scalp, I wish for the millionth time I could stop this from happening.

But I can’t stop it. I can’t stop time.

“What *had to be said*, Caroline?”

“She sent me a letter a few weeks after she was diagnosed. On our call, she asked if I still had it.”

“What letter?”

“She didn’t want to tell you back then because she knew you’d freak out. After explaining her decision to me, she sent me the letter outlining her wishes so you’d have it. Written by her own hand. And if you refuse to follow her requests, I’m supposed to make it happen somehow. Not sure how. Titty twisters, maybe?”

Her joke doesn’t register because of how frantically my heart pounds. My pulse strums all over like a thousand tiny hammers pounding my body.

“What does the letter say?”

“When the time comes that she is no longer able to live on her own safely or care for herself, she wants us to sell the house, keep half of the funds to split between us for our inheritance, and take the rest to pay for a live-in dementia facility. That, plus her retirement savings and Dad’s survivor benefits, should be enough to cover a few years of care.”

My body stiffens as I lurch from my seat. “Sell the house? No fucking way! There is no way she’d want to do that.”

“It’s true. Why would I lie?”

Caroline’s a good person. She was raised by the same people as me, marinating in love and honesty all her life.

But I don’t *want* to believe her. Even if she has the letter written by our mother.

“I know you wouldn’t lie,” I concede. “But the house? I can’t. I won’t.”

“It’s going to hurt; I won’t deny that. She’s ready to go whenever we

decide. She won't fight us. She doesn't want you to give up your life and the chance for a family. She *detested* the idea of you sacrificing more than you already have." Caroline pauses, then adds, "She said the thought of you having to change her diapers and bathe her was more than she could bear. Although it makes her sad to sell the house, she's accepted that now is the time."

*No, no, no, no.*

I wrap my arms around my midsection as violent emotions batter me from all sides. "I can't do it. I can't put her in one of those places. I know they aren't all bad, but the thought of her alone there... it's too much. And sell the house too? I can't."

"You won't do it alone. I'll come down in a few weeks. I've already talked to Grant, and he's taking a week off work to watch the kids. You and I will get the house on the market, handle all the banking shit, and then we'll scour the town to find the best place for her. And if we can't find one near Clearwater that's good enough, we'll move her to Atlanta. Surely there's a facility here where they'll love and care for her properly. And I'd be here to check in on her regularly. We can do this. It'll suck ass, but we'll do it together. This is what she needs from us."

I want to give Ma what she wants, but I refuse to let her make this decision because of guilt over my sacrifices. That's my choice to make. I'll decide what I'm willing to give up for her. If that means sacrificing my chance at love, so be it.

Even if I want a wife to cherish and a family of my own, I can't have that at the expense of my mother facing the rest of her days, months, or years surrounded by strangers, confused and scared.

Mia's face appears unprompted in my mind, and I blink to clear my vision. This isn't the time for thoughts of her.

Caroline's sigh sounds pained, like she's humming. Shit. This isn't going to be good. What else is she going to pile on?

"She knows what happened. I told her."

"What?"

I hope she's not talking about what I think she's talking about.

"She could have died, Cal. She was over a mile from home, wandering on a busy street. That could have ended way worse than it did. We got lucky."

"I'm aware of how serious it was. After all, I'm the one who raced out of work to find her." My voice is terse with the anguish and fury blending like a

mosaic inside me.

“I know. And meanwhile, I was here, unable to help and bouncing off the walls. You’re not the only one who loves her and doesn’t want to see her suffer.”

Memories of the panic I felt while racing through town that day bombard my senses, jarring and agonizing.

If something happens to her because I’m too weak to do the hard thing, I’ll never forgive myself.

There’s no choice left to be made.

All that’s left for me to do is surrender.

So I do.

“I’ll talk to her this week, sis. I promise.”

I can’t pretend this away or avoid it any longer. There’s simply no more time on the clock; the buzzer has sounded. No cures. No more treatments to explore. There’s no bargain I can strike to save her. There’s no deity I can pray to who can make this go away.

Nothing will stop the disease from abducting her consciousness and destroying her before our eyes, one painful moment at a time. One forgotten word, followed by another, until there are none left.

Until nothing of my mother remains except the shell of her body, familiar and foreign to our eyes all at once.

“I know it sucks, Cal. But this is the right thing. We’ll all be more relaxed, knowing she’s safe. When she’s lucid, she won’t need to worry about the sacrifices you’re making for her or be embarrassed at all the care she needs from you. She’ll have her dignity, and you won’t have to remember her daily suffering. You can remember her the way she was.”

“Yeah,” I mumble, still too raw to look at the bright side.

There is no bright side here.

Only darkness and fog. The same haze that swallows my mother every day.

“Remember when we didn’t spend all our time talking and worrying about our parents? I’ve forgotten what it’s like to call my brother because I miss him and want to know what’s happening in his life.”

A morose chuckle slips free from me. “Did we ever do that? I can’t remember. First, it was Dad’s health, then right into this.”

“I’m proud of you, big guy. I know this isn’t what you wanted, but it’s for the best in the long run.”

I drag my palm over my face and sigh. “So when are you coming to Florida to help me find a place?”

A few minutes later, we say our goodbyes, having made an action plan.

I lose track of time as my thoughts race and pile in my mind until I can no longer hold my head up, so I rest it in my hands.

We have to sell the house.

While I had my head in the sand, my mother and sister devised a plan behind my back. It hurts, but I get it. She’s right; I would have freaked out and tried to sway her decision.

While everything about this situation guts me, the thought of selling the house lances my chest sharper than the rest.

That house is more than a floor, a roof, and four walls. It holds memories of our entire life. It’s the backdrop for my parents’ lives. And their love story.

Ma lingered by the front window of that house when Dad ran late coming home from work. She planted flowers in the garden and grew tomatoes in the backyard. She read in the reading nook, cuddled under a blanket. She rushed home to throw dinner together in that kitchen while listening to us talk about our day. She cooked all our holiday meals and baked pies in there too.

She helped us with our homework and science projects at the dining room table. She taught Caroline how to do cartwheels in the backyard. Taught me how to dance in the kitchen. In the living room, she threw a surprise party when I got home from my last deployment.

My father hung all the framed photos around the house, rehanging them every time Ma had the whim. He picked out the furniture with her and moved it wherever she decided it should be. He built the desk sitting in the corner of the den and that little fixture where we put the mail. He stained the wooden shelves that still hang on the walls. He installed all the light fixtures and replaced the bulbs. Repainted the walls when she changed her mind, then did it again six months later because he’d do anything to make her happy.

That house is where he came home to her after every single shift. He danced with her in the kitchen, crooning along with the Rat Pack over the top of her head. When she was depressed or stressed, he cheered her up by playing Tom Jones and Barry Manilow on the stereo that’s in the corner of the living room to this very day. They sat in their matching recliners at night after we went to bed, which she insisted they push together so she could hold his hand.

He slept with her in that bed every night until the day he died.

*That house* is all that's left of their marriage.  
And when her mind goes, it's all we'll have left of her.  
Of both of them.  
Of our family.

It may seem silly, but I've been clinging to the idea that our family home would be there to provide me with comfort when everything else has slipped from my grasp.

But it won't.

The chime of my cell phone ringing slowly tugs me from my mournfulness.

After clearing my throat of the thick emotions, I answer with a faux cheerfulness. "Hey, Shep. I take it you got my message."

"Yeah, what's up? It sounded serious."

"It is. I need you for an op. Off the books. Might be dangerous. You can't tell anyone except Kri, and I can't explain why we're involved."

He groans, and for a few seconds, I worry he's going to turn me down.

But he doesn't.

Because we're family. And you never turn your back on family.

"When and where?"

## CHAPTER 17

**BATHROOM SELFIES? GROSS**



MIA

I'm detoxing, determined to resist my pimp and that sweet dopamine only she can give me. So far, getting clean is exhausting and nauseating.

Do *not* recommend.

I don't know what's going to happen tonight, and it's beyond horrifying. Going into situations unprepared? No thanks.

But I'm going to do it. My inner pimp is caged in the dungeon of my soul. I bound, gagged, and threatened her with dismemberment if she tries to escape.

I will *not* try to manage the situation with Cal tonight.

For once, I'll let whatever happens simply happen.

No clue where Klein's mind is. He barely showed any emotion the rest of the afternoon at the office. I've never seen him so reserved. It was unsettling, to say the least, making me wonder if I fried his hard drive.

Granted, I haven't known him for very long, but he's not hard to read.

Except today.

When I check the time *again*, another wave of disappointment catches in my throat. He's already a half hour late. He should have been here by seven.

*Maybe you should check his location*, my pimp suggests.

No.

*Back. To. Your. Cell.*

The new leaf I've turned over remains face-up, basking in the sun. How can I expect Cal to trust me if I don't prove myself to be trustworthy?

I can't.

So I'll just wait. If it gets much later, I'll send a text to make sure he's okay.

That's what normal people do.

After another glance at the clock, my duplicitous eyes flick to my Redleg laptop on the coffee table, then travel to the other side of the room, where my personal laptop sits. With a few clicks, I could pull up his GPS location. All the Redleg vehicles are tagged, as is his company phone. With three more clicks of the mouse, I could access the phone's camera and microphone.

And we're not discussing what I could do with his personal cell because I've selectively forgotten I tampered with it.

But I'm not doing any of that.

I'm ready to graciously accept your praise for the honorable restraint I'm showing.

Kidding. I already know I deserve nothing resembling an *attagirl*.

After five more minutes of pacing through my house and obsessing over how shitty it feels to cleanse myself of my intel addiction, I conclude he's punishing me already.

And not in the sexy way I want him too, wherein he jams his fat cock so far down my throat my eyes water and I nearly pass out from lack of oxygen.

Throwing on some music to distract me, I take a few purifying yoga-style breaths and let my hips sway to the beat. Dancing by myself is a fine substitution for getting the info I desperately seek. Ask anyone. Four out of five dentists recommend it.

And one out of one Mias recommend chugging wine.

Next thing I know, I'm tossing back a crisp, cool glass of Moscato, gulping it like I'm afraid it'll evaporate if I slow my pace.

I let the warmth spread through my body as it journeys down my throat to my belly and wait for the relaxation to kick in, destroying the compulsion to be a creeping creeper.

*Earn him. Prove it.*

Being a good girl is harder than a bjology. I'd much rather do that, but it won't ease my conscience.

A dark thought hits me as I refill my glass. What if something happened to his mother?

My feet propel me to my laptop before I register the movement.

But I stop myself before lifting the lid.

*Nice try, pimp. Almost got me.*

An alert sounds on my phone, and my heart accelerates, springing relief and titillation throughout my body.

Someone is approaching my house.

I pause the music and swipe the alert notification to see who it is.

My stomach twists, butterflies taking flight at the sight of him. Handsome as ever. Hair slightly disheveled, shirt pulled tight across his pecs, and that layer cake ass testing the stretch capacity of the back of his jeans. I switch the view to the opposite camera and am rewarded with a better look.

*Good lord, the ass on that man.* It's equally mouthwatering as the small raspberry lemon cake in my fridge.

I switch the music to the playlist I made for him and hit play.

On my way to greet him, I check my reflection in the entryway mirror and give my long red hair a tousle, fluffing it at the root. A quick shimmy of my shoulders and pinch of my cheeks, and I'm ready.

He rings the doorbell before I get there, and I force myself to wait for three excruciatingly long seconds in the foyer before answering. Don't want to seem too eager despite everything inside me telling me to jump into his arms, wrap my legs around his waist, and beg him to fuck me raw.

Three, two, one, go.

Giving the girls a hoist, I open the door, and a genuine smile overtakes my face. Mouth parted, his gaze immediately lowers, sweeping down my body from head to toe and back again. It leaves a pleasant shiver running over my skin.

Moving to the side, I motion for him to enter. "Thanks for coming."

As he passes, his only reply is a low-pitched grumble. A frown threatens to tug my mouth downward while I lock up behind him.

His scent wraps around me, and I rest my head on the door to steady myself before I can turn around and face him.

Never have I been this attracted to a man. Or a woman. Not even that one time in college.

*Oh, stop. Don't act like you've never considered it.*

Shaking off my thoughts, I remember my manners. "Do you want something to drink?"

He glances around the room, his eyes moving to the kitchen, but he doesn't answer. Just keeps his mouth sealed tightly and holds his balled-up hands by his sides.

My spirits crash and burn as realization dawns. He wasn't looking forward to seeing me the way I was him.

Refusing to let his rejection sting too long, I scamper to the kitchen while rattling off a drink menu. "I'm drinking wine. I'll pour you a glass. Red or sweet white? I have beer too."

By the time I've refilled my glass, I face him and wait expectantly.

He shakes his head subtly. "Mia, this isn't a date, and I'm not in the mood for bullshit. This is about an op."

Ouch.

"I know." I raise my chin. "I'm just being hospitable. I have water and tea as well."

“Fine. I’ll take a water.”

Carrying the beverages, I meet him on the couch. He’s seated on the far end, and I’m tempted to sit right beside him. But he’s clearly uncomfortable here. I shouldn’t push my luck. If I’m going to save Lettie, I need his help.

“Thank you,” he presses through tight lips after I pass him the cup.

“You’re welcome.”

I’m about to update him on the case when I’m momentarily distracted by the sight of him holding the cup with those hands, bulgy veins and all. My tongue twitches as moisture pools heavily in my mouth.

This is becoming an obsession. Maybe I was a phlebotomist in a past life. Or a vampire.

“I got Shep, Jonesy, Junior, and Aaron on board for the op. I gave them the barest of information and swore them to secrecy. They’re waiting on my call.” He sweeps his palms along the front of his pants, and my hands twitch with a need to trace the same path.

“Great,” I manage to choke out.

“Okay, Mia. Cut the shit. You ready to tell me who the girl is or give me an update about what you found after I left your office this afternoon?”

He’s so tense, and I could swear that he’s hiding something else behind his irritation. Sadness, maybe? But why?

“Mia,” he prods when I don’t answer soon enough.

“Right. Let’s start with what I found.”

I pull up a series of still shots and videos I saved on my laptop, preparing to explain their significance and how they point to three potential targets.

“Courtesy heads-up. You’ll probably find me irresistible after I go over this. It’s impressive what I’ve accomplished in only a few hours.” I waggle my brows, trying to make him smile or lighten up. “Like toe-curlingly so.”

He rolls his eyes and huffs in annoyance, but there’s finally a touch of playfulness threatening to break free. “I’ll do my best to resist you.”

“Okay, consider yourself warned. I won’t be held responsible if you’re hard as granite by the time I’m done.”

His cheeks puff with air around sealed lips. Shaking his head, he makes a show of refusing to respond to my flirting.

The naughty side of me wonders if he’d be able to bite his tongue and hold out on me if I gave him this update while straddling his lap.

Shaking off my incessant need to ogle him, I dive in. “Like I told you earlier, the police report I pulled included a witness statement.”

“Yep. The girl who *wanted* to help and knew something was wrong but had a convenient excuse to never get involved. What a peach.”

I agree with that sentiment. Women simply *must* look out for each other. It’s scary as hell out there for young girls. Older ones too.

“Any-who-be-doo-bee. Since I didn’t have her photo or any info about her identity, I did some fancy footwork to access a copy of the report without her name redacted. Once I had her name — Kimberly Mills — I went to work.”

He nods, no sign of alarm at what I’ve revealed so far.

Odd.

Although I didn’t expect him to go totally bonkers over me sticking my nose into law enforcement databases without authorization, I did expect a comment. Some snark. A sassy retort. A roll of his eyes. An admonishing look with a huff of disgust.

*Something.*

But nope. It barely registered a reaction.

Gives me hope that when I get to the end of my story, he won’t want to have me arrested.

I’d love to have my wrists in cuffs in front of Klein, but not because I’m being hauled to jail. A cheeky grin takes over my face at the mere thought of it.

“If your expression is anything to go by, you found something helpful.”

Oh shit. Forgot what I was doing for a second.

Nodding, I respond, “Extremely helpful. In fact, explicitly so.” I toss him an innuendo-filled wink to throw it back at our text conversation from earlier today.

His eyes narrow at me, and his face draws tight. But I can’t tell whether it’s frustration or arousal.

“And?”

“Well, we have three suspects.”

“Wait. What? How?”

“Instagram, my dear Watson. Social media is both a gateway for criminals to prey on their victims and their surest path to demise.”

His handsome features soften just enough to reveal the tiniest grin. “Pictures?”

“Even better. Pictures and a few reels.”

He sets the water on the coffee table and leans forward. “Show me.”

To ensure he can fully see my screen, I scoot over and bring myself smack dab beside him. The heat of his body reaches toward mine, beckoning me.

“So this is our witness, Kimberly.” I point to the twenty-two-year-old blond whose entire life is on Instagram for anyone to see. “She’s the one who saw the victim — Lettie Holt — stagger into the Honda, leaving the Stumbling Sea Turtle dance club.”

“This pic was taken Friday night?”

“Correct.” I point to the date on the bottom of the screen. “Selfie after selfie. Her and her friends. Bathroom selfie. Bar selfie. Dance floor selfie. Doing shots selfie. Another bathroom selfie.”

“Why do people do that?” he asks, nose wrinkled. “No one enjoys seeing the inside of a bathroom. And look at them, all preening like show ponies, the three of them.” He makes a tsking sound, drawing a giggle from me.

“I don’t know why they do it. Stop distracting me. Bathroom selfies aren’t important. *Bar* selfies are, in this case.” I stop advancing through the pictures, landing on the *big* one. “Unfortunately, I didn’t find Lettie Holt or the perps on Kimberly’s Instagram —”

He cuts me off. “Well, then why are —”

“Psh, psss, shh,” I shush him overdramatically. “Kimberly’s account led me to her friends, Adelya and Melissa, who she tagged in several of the photos. And Melissa posted this selfie at the bar. It’s the money shot, if you will.”

Cal’s cheeks grow rosy. Innocent, sweet man. The mere reference to a cum shot has him blushing like a twelve-year-old.

“Is that...” He lets his unfinished question hang in the air while squinting to study the photo.

“Yep. That’s our girl.”

Lettie sits at the bar about five feet behind the selfie trio with two men close beside her. Too close.

But you can’t see their faces in this shot.

“You said there was video too? A reel?”

I scroll past a few more pictures on her feed and click on the reel. “So I downloaded this video from her page and imported it into my analysis program to enhance it. From there, I ran checks against other videos and pictures on social media and got a ton of good shit.”

“You did all this today?”

Is that a hint of pride in his tone?

My shoulders roll back, and I cock my head to one side. “What? Like it’s hard?” I joke, channeling Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*.

He must get the reference because that spark of a grin morphs into a wide smile, accompanied by a deep chuckle that makes my nipples stiffen to peaks.

Then I remember his Netflix history was brimming with rom-coms. Of course he got the reference.

“What did your program find?”

“In the first reel taken from the dance floor, we see a bachelorette party in the background. See there.” I point at the group of women, all wearing matching bridesmaid attire, complete with penis headpieces. Keeping it classy.

“And then?”

“Although our trio of selfie show ponies didn’t get us an image of the guys who took Lettie, I suspected these ladies might.”

His head bobs in time with the next song on the playlist — Dean Martin’s “Sway” — but he’s laser-focused on the case. “That’s a leap. Why them and not all the other people in the club? For that matter, why not simply hack into the club’s security footage?”

“It’s adorable how you doubt my methods. Bachelorette parties are documented ad nauseam, which is stupid as hell if you ask me. But for some daft reason, when you get that many drunk women together, the phones snap pics left and right. They even take pictures with the male strippers. Baffling. Not sure why they’d want photographic evidence, but whatever. We all have our quirks.”

“And what about the bar footage?”

“I’m surprised you would suggest hacking the security system of a private business.”

He rears back like he’s shocked that I’d suggest he’s a boy scout do-gooder when he clearly is.

“Anyway, Cal, you’re not going to believe this, but... *gasp*... the surveillance system was not functioning that night. *Nothing* was recorded.” I put my hand to my chest, feigning shock and disappointment. “I know. I know. I almost didn’t believe it myself.”

“What? The entire night?”

“The mafia will do anything to protect the ones who feed them girls at the

rate these guys are. Including paying off a club owner or employee to disable the cameras when they're about to make a grab. For all we know, she wasn't the only one they took that night."

"Holy shit."

"This is big business, Klein. The stream of girls coming into the ring is as important to these fuckers as cash flow is for a bank."

The silent shake of his head telegraphs his feelings on the matter, as does the tight set of his jaw.

Moving us along, I explain how I reviewed a series of bachelorette party-related hashtags and looked for Facebook check-ins at the bar and nearby restaurants in the vicinity, then scanned other social media sites similarly.

And that's how I found them.

Thanks to hashtag *one dick chick*.

"This particular group of ladies, clad in all the finest penis-themed attire, started at Chili's Bar and Grill before hitting up an all-male revue. They ended by dancing the night away at the Stumbling Sea Turtle."

"And they were recording everything?"

"Luckily for us and Lettie, they documented everything for posterity or potential blackmail material. Jury is still out on which. But thank goodness they did. I'm about to show you the moment she was abducted."

On the screen, I advance the video clip to the time stamp I noted earlier and zoom in. "And there they are. Two chivalrous fuckers helping Lettie off the stool and leading her toward the door. No one stops them. No one even looks twice."

Cal points at a different part of the screen. "And there's our witness, inching toward the door behind them. So she didn't lie about seeing her leave."

Too bad Kimberly or her friends didn't intervene. That moment right there could have saved that poor girl.

My gut twists at the sight of Lettie's foot slipping before she leaves the corner of the frame.

"Time stamp for the video matches the approximate time she recalled seeing them shove her into a car. So everything she said tracks. These are the two men who took her. I doubt they still have her, but I'd bet anything they know where she is."

Cal pensively studies the video, pausing every few seconds to rewind and replay. "Her legs are like Jell-O. Something tells me alcohol isn't the cause."



“Correct. And here’s how we know she’s been drugged.”

A sour taste invades my mouth when I show him the picture I found on the Facebook page of another clubgoer.

“In the background of this selfie, you can see the dude’s hand covering Lettie’s drink while his partner distracts her.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Yeah. So we have the timeline, the method and proof of the abduction, and pictures to help us identify the unsubs. No offense to the sheriff’s office or the task force, but it’ll take them days or weeks to get this far.”

He nods in agreement, his movements growing more animated. My heart prickles with velvety tendrils of hope.

Maybe, just maybe, he’s seeing me — the real me.

This is working. I’m bringing him over to my side. The side fighting for women who have fallen prey to some of the sickest people on earth.

I only hope it’s enough for him to forgive me when I confess how much intel I unearthed to find out about Lettie. He knows I went digging, but not the extent.

Klein’s fist repeatedly punches into his thigh until I feel the tension radiating from him like electricity. “Did you ID the guys yet? Tell me you know who they are, Mia. I’m ready to go. *Tonight.*”

Ah, *there’s* the reaction I was expecting. There’s the Cal who doesn’t stifle his emotions. No longer forcing calm, he’s dropped his mask to give me another glimpse at the man inside.

His agitation grows, and I place my hand over his to still him. Our eyes meet as I send him a silent message of understanding.

I know how he feels.

The anger. The disgust. The need to act.

Month after month on the task force, we uncovered mountains of evidence, much like this. I only found what I did today this fast because I’ve done it a thousand times before.

And watching footage of a girl stumbling and hanging over the man who’s about to destroy her life never gets easier.

In fact, it gets worse.

Every time we busted one trafficking ring, two more would pop up in its place. For each douchebag *lover boy* we got off the streets, stopping him from abducting girls, there was another ready to fill the disgusting void of tricking girls into sexual servitude.

Sadly, there's no shortage of people willing to pay top dollar for a girl they can treat like a sex slave, carving board, or punching bag. Or all of the above.

It's usually all that or worse.

And unfortunately, even when we gift-wrapped these monsters for prosecuting, the charges didn't always stick.

The evidence was tainted. There were loopholes. There was always an excuse. We knew without a doubt what they were doing, and half the time or more, they got away with it.

At some point, I realized why, and it's enraged me ever since. That's what sent me running from the CIA and led me to Redleg.

The high I felt all afternoon while chasing the evidence of poor Lettie's abduction wanes, and the crash is inevitable. It always comes, hitting me harder each time, socking me in the gut until the wind is knocked from me.

Years ago, when I started my *creative research*, I felt remorse for breaking laws and invading privacy. Even when I was on the task force and hacking with the backing of the US Government, it still felt wrong on some level.

But once I began seeing people saved because of what I'd done, that guilt evaporated like it was sucked out with a vacuum.

*Poof.*

Even when I was no longer on the task force, I used my free time to find more girls, feeding the evidence to law enforcement contacts. I even learned how to make it look like everything had been obtained legally so it could be admissible in court.

Each girl who was saved emboldened me. It made me feel invincible and helped scrub the stain off my soul over what happened to my sister.

Between working legitimate CIA business during the day and hunting down traffickers at night, I fed the beast until it consumed me. It was like the damn plant from *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

Yet I kept feeding it. Eagerly and without guilt.

I convinced myself the white hat I wore could remain untarnished and smudge-free since I was doing it for the right reasons. With that hat on, I never felt guilty for anything I did in the name of gathering intel.

Never. Not once.

Until Cal.

For the last several weeks, I've been beating myself up over him. Not that

my hat was exactly white when I dug into his background along with the rest of Redleg. It was gray.

But right now? The uneasiness coursing through my veins isn't because of him and my gray hat hacking.

Instead, my current anguish is because no matter how hard I fight, I'll never stop these crimes. No one will ever be able to eradicate this horror from the world or even the country. Hell, we can't stop it in our small towns.

We're fighting a losing battle with the deck stacked against us, forever chasing our tails.

I *can't* save all these girls.

But maybe I can save Violet.

Cal shakes off my hand, stands abruptly, and begins pacing. "Turn off the music, Mia. We can't disrespect the Rat Pack with this disgusting topic."

After I turn off the music, I attempt to calm him. "Cal, we'll find them. We're so close."

His eyes widen, and his lip shifts into a soft pout. He's an adorable puppy dog. "But you don't have them yet?"

I shake my head, finally admitting to needing more time. "That's the thing. None of the pictures I found gave me a clear enough shot to run through the internet facial recognition that I can do here. Not with any degree of clarity. Even when I enhanced the lighting, it was still a less-than-ideal scenario and hard to match. It came back with over three thousand potential hits on the first guy, eight thousand on the next."

He rejoins me on the couch. His proximity immediately erases some of my morose thoughts.

"Then how do you have three suspects?"

"Let's call it outside the box thinking," I hedge, shoulders raised and chin lowered to shield my neck.

"Don't try to look innocent, Mia. I know you're not even close to being a good girl."

*Easy, lady bits. That was not a challenge to show him just how good of a girl you can be.*

"Well, if I'm a bad girl, at least I'm good at it."

He sucks in a deep inhale, then mutters, "Oh, I know you are. Unfortunately."

I can't resist what happens next any more than a cat can resist a freshly opened cardboard box.

“So you don’t need a reminder?”

Looking away, he sucks both his lips into his mouth.

For two whole seconds, I bite my tongue.

*You’re impressed by my restraint, aren’t you? Same here.*

When I free my tongue, I shoot my shot. “I’d be happy to remind you how good I am at being bad.” Like it has a mind of its own, my hand glides over his quad.

“Mia,” he rasps. “Not now.” With that terse decree, he swats my hand away.

A whimper of disappointment threatens to escape my lips, but I choke it down. “Later, then?”

He glares at me, silently communicating his rejection.

My ego doesn’t like that answer. Neither do my nipples or my clit.

Speaking of those errant body parts, why do they pulse when you think about them? Is that just me, or does it happen to everyone?

Are yours twitching right now because I asked that question? I bet they are.

*Focus, Mia. The girl.*

“Now isn’t the time,” I offer in a steady tone, aiming to sound like I’m the one tabling our insane chemistry.

I’m nothing if not delusional.

It’s my form of self-care, and I’ll thank you to stop judging me for it. I don’t judge you for buying smutty books or maxing out your credit cards at Barnes & Noble, do I?

“Cal, before I tell you this next bit, I’d like you to reserve judgment regarding my methods for obtaining this information. Can you do that?”

Instead of agreeing, he sits there blinking rapidly and judging me. Blatantly as fuck.

“Whatever. Judge me. What else is new?”

In my periphery, he smiles, and my clit pulses three times like it’s giving him a round of applause.

After a deep breath, I rattle off what I found with more of my totally-legit-and-not-at-all-shady research. “Right, so I ran a program pillaging pertinent state and national missing persons registries. It scrubbed the data and cataloged it for me to identify patterns and similar cases. I used criteria like victim age, gender, hair color, last known location, and shit that would align with Lettie’s situation. Then I separated them down to the county level,

then city.”

His face pinches tight, but he doesn't object yet, so I keep on keeping on.

“While that was running, I *may* have taken a quick peek inside a back door of the local FBI branch server — which, by the way, was carelessly left open. While there, I searched for files pertaining to trafficking in the region so I could see where they are with these cases, who the suspects are, and which agents are assigned.”

I pause and raise my brows at him. “You following so far?”

He nods slowly, giving very little away, which isn't a good sign where Cal is concerned. If he's suppressing his emotions again, he's likely unhappy or calculating something.

If he wigs out on me for *this*, just wait until he learns who Lettie is and how I found out about her.

I'm so fucked.

Toggling from the photo evidence on the screen, I bring up the preliminary results of my data dig. “With the initial analysis complete, which I finished about an hour ago, I found a handful of similar cases, which led to a few suspects.”

“These cases are all unsolved.”

“And all assigned to the same FBI branch. All painfully similar to Lettie's case. More than likely, these girls are also being trafficked by the same ring.”

“We can come back to the FBI branch — which I'm assuming is where you think the corruption is — but how did these cases help you find the suspects? Were they named in the FBI files?”

“No, that's part of how I know they're dirty. They should have these guys by now. I did a series of social media searches, similar to the ones I did for the night Lettie was taken, but for a handful of these open cases — all of them occurred this year and in the surrounding four counties. I was looking for the guys who took Lettie, hoping for a better photo that we could use to identify them.” My chest swells with pride. “And I found them, Cal. It's a three-man team, not two.”

I pull up the three images side by side and let my shoulders sag in relief.

“Son of a bitch, Mia.”

His harsh tone grates my insides, making my chest sting.

Nothing left to do at this point other than finish my explanation.

“I don't have a positive ID on these guys yet. I need to run the new photos through Tomer's program at the office to find them on traffic cams,

satellite imagery, and all the shit that requires mega processing speed. What I could do from home — comparing these images to existing internet images — hasn't helped get an ID."

That alone is suspicious, but I can't deal with that yet.

Klein's slack-jawed, and his eyes are glazed over.

"Once Tomer is out of the office, I only need a half hour, tops. I have another tweak to make to the program, but once it's done, I should be able to find these guys in a matter of minutes. Then you and the team can go in and do your thing."

Folding my hands in my lap, I suck in a deep breath to refill my lungs while I await his scorn.

*Nothing.*

"Any questions?"

"Mia, holy shit. *How* could yo —"

His words cut off when I pierce him with my sharpest glare.

Is that a look of admonishment reflecting at me? Is he ashamed to be associated with me? Angry?

But doesn't he see *why* I did this? Doesn't that matter to him?

Not in all cases — but in this case specifically — the ends justify the means.

The need to defend my actions bubbles up unbidden until I can no longer restrain it. "If you were about to ask how I could do such a thing, I shouldn't have to explain that to you. And if you won't help because I got my hands dirty, then I'll find someone who *will*, because nothing — and I mean nothing — will stop me from saving these girls from being sold like cattle, raped, and abused until they're no longer valuable to their captors. *Nothing.* Speaking of cattle, did you know that sometimes they physically brand them with a hot iron? That's the kind of evil we're dealing with here. If you don't understand why I bypassed proper channels in the interest of saving time *and these girls*, then I really don't care what you think of me, and you're not the man I thought you were."

The more I speak, the more emotional I become, my voice quivering and my volume spiking. "I've seen firsthand what these sick fucks are capable of, and I can't rest on my laurels and let it happen to another girl. So *sorry* if my methods disgust you, but —"

His warm palm encircles my wrist, the shock of his touch silencing my impassioned rant. "Shh, it's okay."

When I look at him through eyes coated with a sheen of tears, he's not looking at me with judgment or disgust like I thought he was.

It's warmer.

Kinder.

And... *loving*.

With a buttery-soft voice and his puppy-dog expression, he asks, "Mia, why are you defending yourself like I've accused you of a crime? Did you think I'd be mad about what you've found or how you found it?"

*Huh?*

Blinking rapidly, I try to stave off the waterworks. "Aren't you?"

"No. Why would I be?"

I shake my head, trying to process my thoughts, but it's hard with the feel of his skin on mine and the emotions still swirling from my opening argument in the case of *The People versus Mia*.

"Because I broke the law. Hacked law enforcement servers. Crept in the back door to the fucking FBI to get this information."

"And?"

What is happening right now?

Moisture pools in my eyes until I can no longer see. "Don't you have some type of objection to that? Your moral code or Redleg policy or something?"

"Mia, we try to stay above the law at Redleg. But when it was necessary, we've broken laws for the safety of our clients. Especially for Redleg family. I can understand why you might not know that. Big Al's not going to broadcast it or put it in the freaking policy manual. There aren't files documenting all the shady shit we've done." He licks his lips and swallows. "Hell, *I've* done my fair share of messed up shit. Not proud of it, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

His long fingers pulse around my wrist, then he drops it to hold my hand. "I'm not looking at you like this because I'm disappointed in you or on some moral high ground."

"You're not?" I squeak the words.

"No, I'm looking at you this way because I think you're the most intelligent person I've ever met. I'm in awe of your brilliance and can't believe I get to work with you. And I unequivocally believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that Big Al was right to choose you over me."

I try again to blink away the tears, but one escapes. He wipes the lone

drop of moisture off my cheek.

“Really? You aren’t mad at me? You’ll still help?”

My mind is so freaking frazzled right now that I’m not quite sure if he’s still on board with the plan. The words seem to indicate so. But I’m a freaking mess of emotions and convoluted thoughts, and for all I know, I made up his response in my mind.

While I wait for confirmation, my heart skips a beat.

*Tell me, Cal. Are you with me?*

But he doesn’t answer.

Not with words.

Before I take another breath, he’s on me, mouth to mouth and chest to chest.

And everything else melts away.



## CHAPTER 18

**WHAT DID THE COCK SAY TO  
THE FACE?**

KLEIN

As if the skintight gray yoga pants weren't arousing enough.  
As if the warmth radiating from her sumptuous thighs beside mine wasn't enough.

As if inhaling her dick-hardening beachy scent wasn't enough.

And as if being alone with her wasn't tempting enough.

*All of that* already brought me to the edge of sanity and eroded all but my last shred of resistance.

But then she has the audacity to make it worse by giving me a glimpse of her utter brilliance and showing me the passion she has to fight for people she's never met. How the hell am I supposed to resist her now?

Although I'm still furious at her for using me, I'm blinded by my unrelenting infatuation with her, especially by the altruistic side I'm seeing for the first time.

Confusion mars her gorgeous face as she stares at me, utterly baffled that I'm not angry with her for the dirty digging she did. But I couldn't care less about how she discovered what she did.

In fact, the only thing I care about at this moment is pressing against her and claiming her mouth.

"Really? You aren't mad at me? You'll still help?"

I can't think enough to speak. Thoughts and words are overrated anyhow.

Lunging for her, I grab her nape with one hand and the curve of her shoulder with the other, slamming my lips against hers. When our bodies collide, I ease her down on the couch and land on top of her.

Her shocked gasp is quickly replaced with a breathy moan as our mouths fuse together and our bodies align. Her taste, her soft curves molding to my frame, and the passionate way her tongue delves between my lips quickly overload my senses until I'm simply running on raw instinct.

I've *never* craved anyone the way I crave this vixen. Even if it hurts later — and it probably will — I can't resist her for another damn minute.

Through the fog of arousal, a prickle of fear sneaks in. Am I being too forceful? Too presumptuous? I didn't get her consent before attacking her.

I break the kiss, gasping for air, and let my mouth fall to the side, where I place soft, teasing kisses under her ear. "Is this okay?"

“Oh my god, Cal.” She breathes the words, soft and raspy. “Hell yes, it’s okay. It’s more than okay. Can’t you tell?”

“I’m so fucking spun up right now that I can’t think straight.”

“I want you. I want this.”

I join our lips once more, tangling my tongue with hers. With her explicit permission given, my hands eagerly roam her body.

My hips drive my cock forward, seeking the friction it demands. Spreading her supple thighs, she welcomes me home and thrusts herself against my erection.

*Fucking hell.*

I’d almost forgotten how good it felt to press against this woman and how fast she entices me with her every sinful move.

If our writhing bodies and groping hands are anything to go by, her desperation rivals my own. The craving I’ve had for her for weeks eases with each swipe of her devouring tongue against mine.

Steadily, she undulates her hips in time with mine while her hands roam over my body, burning my skin. When she slips them under my waistband, she digs her fingertips into my ass and draws a growl from deep inside my chest.

I don’t recall her being *this* desperate last time. Her whimpers are pained and frantic, mirroring the ache I feel to be inside her. It’s like she wants me more than I want her, but that’s not possible since I’m seconds from detonating with desire.

I want to do everything to this woman.

*Everything.*

She’s had my emotions shooting up, down, and everywhere in between since she blew into my life like a cat-five hurricane. Day after day, she’s brought a myriad of confusing feelings out of me to the point I can’t sort through them all.

Lust. Passion. Anger. Hatred. Jealousy. Angst. Betrayal. Desire.

I’ve felt them all and dozens more.

Her grip on my ass tightens, pulling me flush against her and rendering me a garbled mush of sensory overload. Thoughts evaporate, and all I can do is *feel*.

I feel the cushion of her soft body holding me close and her heels resting on my hamstrings, denying my retreat. Her velvety tongue, sweetened with a hint of wine, duels with mine, while her pillow-soft lips fuse to mine.

Her sounds. Her smells.

Everything about her calls to me, beckoning me to touch her, taste her, conquer and claim her.

Her very presence begs for me.

Snaking my hand between us, I cup her pussy, pleased to discover that the thin fabric of her pants does nothing to conceal her damp warmth. “Jesus, Mia. You’re soaked, aren’t you?”

Her answer comes out somewhere between a whimper and a moan. “Mmm, yes.” Another moan, another gasp. “Want you. So bad. Wet all day.”

I continue raining kisses along her neck while my hand explores her sweet spot. She clutches my head between her hands, alternating rough and gentle strokes of my hair.

When I mash the palm of my hand against her clit and mimic thrusting my fingers into her opening, her grip on my head gets tighter. Her yoga pants stop me from entering her, but the material is flexible enough to allow me to tease her.

“Touch me, Cal,” she mewls. “I need to feel you.”

I *really* like the sound of her begging me.

A fucking lot.

Now that my initial insanity has waned and some thoughts are getting through the fog of arousal, I’m tempted to mess with her.

After the shitty fucking afternoon I had, I need this escape. This moment to be someone else. To think about nothing but having her at my mercy.

The way I taunted her in the office today plays in the back of my mind. Especially the look on her face when I told her I wanted to punish her. It was as if she wanted that too.

But I still have no freaking idea how to do that. Although if this morning was anything to go by, my body probably knows what to do.

Maybe I can tap into the monster who was scratching under the surface earlier today and make her beg for my cock.

And then I’ll tell her no.

Punishment starts now.

I make no attempt to slip my hand inside her pants as she asked. Instead, I lessen the pressure of my palm against her clit while dragging my tongue up her neck toward her ear.

“If you want me to touch your pretty pussy, you’ve got to do better than that.”

Her breathing accelerates in time with the upward pulses of her hips, like she's trying to chase the friction I'm denying her.

"You want me to beg?" she asks.

"I want you to do a lot of fucking things. But we can start with begging."

A flicker of doubt comes to life in my chest. This is new to me, taunting a woman. Teasing her. Denying her what she wants.

But it feels right with *this* woman.

"I still need to earn you, don't I?" Her sultry tone tells me she's not objecting in the slightest, so I double down.

Pulling my hand from between her legs, I grip her chin and hover my lips an inch away. My eyes burn into hers. "You obviously care about others, but what you did to me was self-serving. That leaves me confused and unconvinced about us. So I need something... more from you."

A breathy keening sound escapes her. "More?"

Her eyes flit from my eyes to my mouth repeatedly as she lifts her chin a fraction of an inch like she's offering her lips to me.

But I deny her, holding her in place and moving my mouth closer. At the last second, I sneak the tip of my tongue out, lapping across the outside of her lips from the bottom to the top in a quick, teasing lick.

She shudders.

Eyes locked now, we grind against each other in a seductive dance. Not too hard or too fast. Just enough to heighten our desires. I'm holding back some because if I slam myself against her — or inside her — the way I want to, she'll enjoy it too much.

"Yes. I want more from you, tiger. You need to be punished. You haven't earned my fingers fucking your wet pussy yet. You haven't earned my tongue on your clit or my cock in your tight hole. Have you?"

I have no idea what's come over me. Someone call a priest.

But whatever demon has possessed me is making me harder than I've ever been.

Mia's response will tell me whether I've gone too far. She's either going to cuss me out or beg. And I know which one I want.

"You're right. I haven't."

A frisson of relief wars with excitement deep inside me. "Haven't what? Be specific."

Her voice quavers. "I haven't earned you yet."

"Do you want me to punish you?"

A lump forms in my throat as I wait for her confirmation. Her consent.  
*Consent to fucking punish her.*

Is this really happening? I'm terrified I'm going to wake up in a cold sweat and this will all have been a fever dream.

Without even a sliver of uncertainty, she boldly answers, "Yes. I want you to punish me."

*Fuck yes.*

I loosen my grip on her chin, letting my hand fall down her chest to cup one full breast. "How should I punish you, Mia?"

"Any way you want to."

As a reward, I pluck her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. "Mmm. That's a good answer."

I take her lips in a scorching kiss, allowing some of my anger and frustration to leach into her mouth. When I draw back, I keep hold of her lower lip between my teeth, giving her a harsh tug before releasing it.

"Your mouth got you in trouble before. Lying about who you were and what you wanted. Isn't that right?"

While I wait for her response, my hips drive forward, pausing to hold my throbbing cock against her center.

She tilts her pelvis, rubbing herself against me. "Yes. And I'm so damn sorry for lying to you." Her tone seems replete with sincerity.

"Tonight, you're going to use that mouth for something else. Do you understand?"

I pause, giving her a chance to object. Even though I'm channeling some sadistic bastard, I'm still me. I won't do anything without her consent.

She pulses faster against me, and I can't hold back a groan at the delicious sensation.

"Yes." She slides her open hands to my chest, giving me a slight shove. "Lay back. Let me start earning you."

"Oh no, Mia. Not like that." My voice grows harsher, rougher. "I want you on your knees. In front of the wall. Hands behind your back."

She gasps, gulping in such a large whoosh of air that she nearly chokes. Once the shock fizzles, her expression is molten lava. The rims of green around her inky pupils grow thin, and she bats her lashes at me while offering an eager nod of agreement.

*Welp, no turning back now.*

I shift my weight off her. As soon as she's free, she scampers from the

couch to the living room wall like someone lit a fire under her ass.

*Wanton little tiger.*

Working my way to her, I notice the open laptop on the coffee table, and guilt steals some of the excitement.

The missing girl. She needs our help.

We should be working the case and not fucking around. *Dammit.*

Mia notices my slowing pace and sagging posture. “Cal, there’s nothing we can do to help her until Tomer leaves the office so I can run the program.”

I check my watch, realizing it’s unlikely that he’s done yet. Even on a slow day, he doesn’t leave his desk before ten. And then he’s still in the building, utilizing the Redleg gym. We’ve got ninety minutes to kill. Probably more.

When I glance at Mia, she leans against the wall and melts to her knees. She holds my stare the entire time, pink lips parted and that delectable tongue peeking out.

Guilt recedes at the sight of her on her knees, offering herself to me like a sacrifice. She locks her arms behind her back, and when she tilts her chin up and lets her jaw fall slack, I nearly come on the spot.

The pull to her is so strong it leaves me short of breath, like she’s gripping me by the lungs.

Stalking closer, I let the anticipation build for us both. No hurry to my movements.

Although I want to rush, to whip my cock out and come down her throat, I’m going to savor every second.

This is all new for me. Our dynamic is intoxicating and confusing. It’s not quite taboo or forbidden, but it’s not innocent or pure either.

In a way, she’s giving me a chance to be someone else in these heated moments. To escape my reality and temporarily erase everything wrong in my life. To focus strictly on pleasure.

Our bodies.

Our connection.

Whoever this beast is who’s taken over my body, he’s also freeing me, giving life to a piece of myself I never knew existed. A piece that’s selfish and primal. Raw and needy.

My feet still, planting me mere inches in front of her. Arousal dances across her expression, and the blush of her cheeks is so pronounced it obscures her adorable freckles.



Desperate to feel her touch, I palm the side of her cheek and run my thumb over her lower lip.

I'm going to destroy these lips.

I need to warn her to make sure she's on board because this monster is *not* the man she went to bed with a few weeks ago.

"Mia, the things I want to do to your mouth would make a Marine blush."

"Do them. Do all the things," she agrees before I can elaborate.

A morbid grin slips up my face at her exuberance. "Be careful, Mia. Tonight, I won't be the same man I was the last time I was inside you."

"Good. I don't deserve him."

I chuckle darkly. "No, you don't. I'm going to treat you like the bad girl you've been. Use you for my pleasure, not yours." I gulp as my hand goes to my fly, a slight tremble in my fingers. "If you don't want that, you need to tell me now."

Instead of answering, she opens her mouth, closes her eyes, and tilts her chin further.

*Message received.*

Shucking my pants and boxers quickly, I free my aching cock and grip it roughly in my fist. "Open your eyes," I order. "You're going to watch me do this to you."

She obeys instantly, her vision locking on my cock where it hovers inches from her face.

"Tongue out."

Once she complies, I smack my cock against both sides of her mouth. One cheek, then the other. Not hard enough to hurt her, but enough to get her attention.

No fucking clue why I'm doing this.

All I know is I want to punish her. Humiliate her. And it feels good.

So I do it again. Harder this time.

*Smack. Smack.*

Holy shit. I was *wrong* when I said it felt good. This is better than good. It's fucking amazing.

Not just the sensation of the head of my cock grazing past her luscious lips and wet tongue with each swat, but the power it gives me.

She's letting me do this. Hell, she asked for it.

*Begged.*

This is so fucked up.

I'm not even sure if slapping someone with your dick is *a thing*. I'm not big on porn, but I might need to check later to see if I just embarrassed myself.

But the glint in her eye, the upturned corner of her mouth, and the way her thighs are pressing together tell me she's into it.

That makes it even hotter.

Mia chases my cock with her mouth, like she wants more than the little tastes I'm allowing her. But since this is a punishment, I deny her by firmly gripping the top of her head with my free hand so she can't move.

"Did I tell you to move your head? Hold still."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes, her tone contrite.

My dick twitches, a zing of pleasure shooting through it with her apology.

Reveling in this baffling rush of power, I give her a few more smacks on each side of her mouth. Her cheeks. Her chin. I have to stifle my groans and force myself not to stroke my shaft.

Panting now, I ask, "You want my cock inside that greedy, wet mouth?"

"Yes."

"Say please."

She complies with zero hesitation. "Please."

"Please what? Beg for it," I taunt while rubbing the thick head across her chin in an up-and-down motion. Precum smears over her skin.

It's clear she wants to dip her head and taste me, but she can't since I'm still holding her firmly in place. The craving is visible in every line and smooth plane of her heart-shaped face.

No matter how badly she wants it, she can't have my cock until I say so.

"Please, put your dick in my mouth. Choke me with it. Treat me like a dirty slut. Use me. Punish me for lying."

*Fuck*. I'm going to come with the first lick. I've *never* been this turned on.

My arousal is evident in my guttural tone when I command, "Deep breath. Open wide, tiger."

She does instantly.

Letting go of the crown of her head, I brace myself against the wall. "That's a good girl." Unable to resist another second longer, I feed her my cock with my other hand.

As soon as my swollen head is past her full pink lips, I shed any lingering gentleness and thrust into the back of her throat.

*Punishingly.*

Exactly as she deserves.

She gags on my brutal first stroke. It gives me an unsettling sense of satisfaction, mixed with traces of worry. Why does it feel good to make her suffer? Have I always been this depraved?

Inner conflict or not, I'm too turned on to stop. My hips propel my cock in and out for three punishing strokes before I give her a chance to refill her lungs.

Despite her watering eyes, she doesn't ask me to stop. Instead, once she's caught her breath, she opens wider and teases the tip of my cock with her lying tongue.

I slink one hand around to the nape of her neck and wind the soft, curly strands of her red hair around my wrist. With a tight grip at the roots, I yank down and back, opening her throat.

She gasps but keeps her mouth open for my cock, which I keep poised at her entrance. A smile toys at the edges of her lips.

"Is this what you wanted? For me to fuck all the lies out of your mouth?" I snarl, the menacing tone foreign to my ears.

I loosen my hold on her hair enough for her to nod her response before impaling her mouth again.

"Suck harder," I demand. I'm rewarded with unwavering obedience. "Yes. That's it. *Fuck.*"

Cheeks hollowed, she licks, sucks, and gags, with drool seeping from both sides of her mouth.

It's unequivocally the most erotic image I've ever seen. And the sounds she makes will never leave me.

Fiery tendrils of guilt threaten to detonate in my chest over my rough treatment of her, but the slip and slide of her tongue along the underside of my cock washes them away. And with each of her pleasure-filled moans, she reminds me of how she begged for this.

Once she secures my cock with her *exquisite* suction, I place both my hands flush against the wall at shoulder height.

And I fuck her mouth.

My hips flex fervently, driving my rock-hard dick brutally into her mouth while I whisper despicable things. "Suck me off, you naughty girl. Make me come with your dirty mouth." I'll regret every word later, but every word uttered brings me closer to nirvana.

Instead of cowering away from my hurtful words or merciless treatment, she leans forward, sucking me harder and bringing my length deeper into her throat.

I groan and growl as my hips thrash and jerk until I'm more monster than man. "Fuck yes, tiger. Take my cock. Just like that. You look like you were born to be on your knees for me."

She chokes and gags on the next stroke, and her head bumps into the wall when she rears back to gasp for air.

*Shit.* I hurt her.

She doesn't stop or make an effort to push me off. Just keeps sucking, licking like her life depends on it.

But the guilt from the repulsive way I'm treating her overtakes me until it's too powerful to ignore.

This feels wrong, even if she is reveling in it. I'm not going to be able to finish like this.

*This isn't me.*

I take a step back, pulling myself from her mouth. Dropping my hands from the wall, I cradle her head with the tenderness I should have shown her this whole time. I rub and massage the spot that bumped into the wall, then lower to the base where I was pulling her hair. The simple gesture is the only apology I can offer until my breath steadies and my mind clears.

Her tear-soaked eyes flit up at me in confusion. "I'm not hurt. Why did you stop?"

My stomach twists into a knot. I caress her hair, hoping she's not hurt badly. "This isn't me, Mia. I can't do this to you."

I offer my hand, and she grasps it, eyeing me cautiously.

"Get off your knees. You're not a... *slut*. Please forgive me for calling you that."

A jagged blade lances my chest at the sound of that disgusting word leaving my lips.

I can't believe I fucking said that.

A full-body cringe rolls through me, and I press my eyes closed as shame and revulsion wage a war in my soul.

I tug her hand upward, but instead of using it for leverage to stand, she plays an UNO reverse card and pulls me toward her. When my eyes spring open, she's shooting me an icy glare.

"No," she seethes.

My neck jerks back, and my brows knit. “What?”

“No, I don’t want to get up. I want you to finish.” Without any trace of shame, she admits, “I want to be your dirty slut. I *want* to be anything you need me to be.”

“But Mia, I-I...”

I don’t know what to say, and I damn sure don’t know how to feel. I’m flooded with a confusing desire to punish her, but what if I lose myself in the process? I’m so damn out of control. How can I look at myself in the mirror after this?

How is she even looking at me now with anything short of disdain?

Dropping my hand, she reaches around my lower body to squeeze my ass. Hard. “Please, Cal. Please use my body,” she begs, her anger replaced with desperation. “I need you to punish me. Absolve me of my sins.”

She tugs again, and the force of her movement causes me to shuffle a few steps until my still-hard dick hovers in front of her sinful mouth.

“Your sins? Mia, I’m only a man. I can’t —”

“A man I hurt. A good man who didn’t deserve the horrible way I treated him.” Her voice grows dark, matching her hardened gaze and curled lip. “Now fuck my face until you come down my throat. I *need* you to use me like I used you. We need to even the score. I lied, seduced you, and hurt you. Now it’s your turn to do it to me.”

Gritting my teeth, I attempt in vain to stave off the ire her words incite. Having studied me like a damn textbook, she knew exactly what those words would do to me — provoke and manipulate me.

And now we’ve come full circle.

That’s exactly why she deserves to be punished.

I firmly grab the back of her head and jerk her face forward. With my other hand, I grab my cock and bend it up toward my waist. “Open wide and fill that manipulative mouth with my balls.”

A wicked smile crests her lips before she complies, licking her lips, opening wide, and shimmying her head from side to side to work my sac deep into her mouth.

Stroking my cock, I groan at the delicious sensation of her warmth surrounding my heavy balls, so full and tight. When they draw up with an overwhelming urge to come, I step away, gently pulling them from her mouth.

I don’t want to finish like that. I’m not done with her throat.

My breath comes fast and raspy, and I grit out, "Take your tits out. I want to watch them heaving when you gasp for breath."

She whips her shirt over her head, then reaches behind her to unclasp her bra. Once those voluptuous breasts are free, they rise and fall with her shallow breaths, just the way I remembered from our drunken night together.

Capturing the silky plump mounds in my hands, I roughly grope them, loving the feel of their weight in my palms. Her nipples are already stiffened with her arousal, which goes a long way to easing the remaining traces of guilt. Flicking and teasing the pebbled buds, I give her a taste of the pleasure I could give her if she were a good girl.

But she's not.

Not yet.

So I halt my movements, drawing a frustrated groan from her sultry lips. Before my hand returns to my cock, I smack her nipples with both hands. She shudders visibly, gasping and driving her thighs together.

"Does my little slut like that?"

"Yes," she admits, head down and submissive.

"Does it make you wet? Make you achy with need? Is that why you're pressing your thighs together?"

"Mm-hmm," she whimpers.

"Should I let you come when I do?"

Her eyes widen, and her mouth falls open in shock as she blinks up at me. I can see the indecision streaking across her face. She thinks it's a trick. Like I want her to admit what she wants so that I can deny her.

I bend at the waist and squeeze her nipples again, harder this time, and then smack them. Just like before, she mewls in ecstasy.

She's seconds away from begging me. I can practically see the words forming on the tip of her tongue.

And that's what I want more than anything.

"Answer me. Do you want me to make you come when I spill myself down your throat? Slip my fingers in your panties and flick your clit?"

She nods eagerly. "Yes. Please make me come, Cal. Please."

My lip curls. Taking both of her cheeks in my hands, I lean forward and place a gentle kiss on her lips.

When I pull away, I offer only one word.

"No."

## CHAPTER 19

**NO FUCK FOR YOU**



MIA

**A**sk, and you shall receive.  
I wanted to be punished. Treated like filth. Denied my pleasure while he takes his own.

And he's delivering.

Like Fed-motherfucking-Ex.

He lets my disappointment hang heavy in the air for a solid five seconds before continuing my punishment. "Open that mouth and throat."

So fucking sexy when he talks like a bad boy. I'm so wet there might be a puddle when I finally get off my knees.

After filling my lungs with a deep breath, I do as he orders and brace myself for what's about to come.

Him.

Down my throat, hopefully.

I can't resist squeezing my thighs together again and pulsing my hips, attempting to ease the need between my legs with the briefest hint of pressure.

He slides his thick cock back into my mouth roughly, thrusting himself good and deep.

Ecstasy. That's what this is.

*Everything* about this encounter is hot as hell. His anger. The domination. The degrading comments. Being at his mercy. Bringing him gratification. Having to earn him, desperate for his praise.

And most of all... I *love* his cock.

His is the reason penises were invented.

"You're such a dirty girl for enjoying the way I'm wrecking your mouth. You're taking me so deep. *Fuck*. I bet you can't wait until I paint your throat with my cum."

A heavy weight evaporates from my shoulders, making me lighter with each stroke. With every degrading word he uses, he cleanses my soul, giving me a cathartic release.

It doesn't make sense. Shouldn't it be the opposite?

It's illogical, but each time I gag and choke on him, I somehow feel lighter.

“You’re dying to taste my release, aren’t you, my thirsty girl?”

The dirty talk might be my undoing.

Given his breakdown a few minutes ago, he’s not used to indulging in this type of dominant behavior.

But you’d never know it, because he’s nailing it.

*I’m ruined.*

When my satisfied moan slips free, I worry he might stop, simply to deny me any enjoyment. Honestly, stopping right now is the only way he can make me suffer.

I *need* to feel his liquid heat pulsing down my throat — I’m rabid for it.

If he denies me his cum, I’ll cry. Real tears. Not the ones in my eyes now from gagging and gasping for air.

“Play with your tits,” he demands between grunts.

My lashes flicker to blink away the haze of moisture. The expression he wears threatens to break my heart.

Not because he’s angry or frenzied. It’s the glimpses of anguish shining through the pleasure, hidden right under the surface.

The conflict raging inside him is clear as crystal. Even if I didn’t have a lifetime of reading people to draw upon, I’d still recognize that look.

I *know* he likes doing this to me. Punishing me and degrading me. Using my body. Bossing me around.

He’s as ravenous for it as I am for his release and his praise.

But he hates himself for loving it. He thinks it’s wrong.

Such a pure heart, and I’m eagerly corrupting it. I’ll just add that to the guilt I already have and let him punish it out of me.

Dutifully, I cup my breasts, toying with the stiff peaks. I moan at the tantalizing sensation he’s allowing me, grateful for the smallest reprieve while he steadily drives his length in and out of my mouth, one delicious stroke at a time.

He must feel the vibrations from my moan along the underside of his throbbing shaft because his answering grunt is music to my ears.

“Mmm, Mia. *Fuck*, that feels so damn good. You’re doing so good, baby. Keep humming if you want a reward.”

His sexy pants and groans heighten my arousal, so I pluck and tweak my nipples harder. Each wave of bliss I give him ratchets up my own.

My indulgent cries spring free. He thrusts faster when the vibrations in my mouth intensify.

*Yes, baby. Come in my mouth. Come for your dirty slut.*

“Touch yourself,” he orders suddenly. “Reach one hand into your panties like you wanted me to do and play with your greedy pussy. You can’t have my hands on you yet, but you’re sucking me so good you can have yours.”

*Going, going, gone. Sold to the hussy on her knees.*

I waste no time following his orders, sucking in a deep breath around his girth when my fingers come into contact with the tender pearl, so engorged with arousal. I’m so soaked I don’t need to slip a finger inside to gather moisture. My slickness is already coating every inch of my pussy inside and out.

He barks out another command, husky and sexy as hell. “Other hand on my cock.”

Eagerly, I do his bidding. Wrapping my fingers around the girthy base of his cock adds to the intoxicating sensations overwhelming my senses.

My orgasm threatens to bloom deep inside me. I hope he lets me come.

He pulls out of my mouth and growls, “Beg for my cum, tiger. Beg for it.”

“Please. Come for me,” I mewl through panting breaths. “Please fill me with it.”

With an animalistic snarl, he shoves himself in my mouth. “Fuck yes. Keep playing with yourself like a good girl, and you’ll get my cum down your filthy throat.”

The deep timbre of his voice would be enough to send me to the edge on its own, let alone the luxurious feel of his cock gliding past my lips and my fingers playing my clit.

With me positioned the way he instructed, he places one hand on the wall like earlier, and the other hand cups my head. I feel a sharp prick of pain on my scalp when he pulls my hair, but it makes me suck him harder and spurs my fingertips to dance faster across my clit.

He viciously fucks my face, my mouth, my throat — all of it. Each forward thrust of his hips moves in concert with the brutal way he drives my head closer to him. I sputter and choke on that delicious cock, occasionally struggling to breathe through my nose.

And it’s beautiful.

Sweet release.

Bright lights sparkle behind my eyelids like a prism as my hips jerk and tingles skate across my body. My climax slams into me, and I moan and

whimper while he thrashes himself into me.

Without warning, he holds my head forward, pressing my face flush against his pelvis and holding himself all the way in the back of my windpipe.

His grunts signal his release, and then I feel the warm jets of his cum filling me, soothing the sting. I gulp greedily, swallowing every last drop. He's so deep inside me, I can't even taste it.

Finally, he releases his hold on me. I collapse against the wall with my mouth hanging open, gasping for breath.

He kneels in front of me, his breath as shaky and harsh as mine. Once our eyes meet, his face conveys his concern. His brows are drawn together, and there's a slight tremble to his chin that's probably *not* an aftershock.

Oh, this sweet man. He's *afraid* he's hurt me.

But the truth is that he just gave me the most fulfilling and satisfying sexual encounter of my life.

And we didn't have sex. Hell, he didn't even touch my lower body.

Before I can tell him, he cradles my cheeks in his large palms, wipes away my tears with the pads of his thumbs, and brings me in for a tender kiss. His lips coax mine open, and I willingly comply until I lose myself in the glorious feel of his mouth on mine.

I'll never tire of the adoring way he holds my cheeks and claims my mouth. There's a gentleness to his lips mixed with the commanding grip of his hands. When our lips pull apart, he gazes at me with quiet reverence. Kissing this man is a powerful experience.

And right now, he's so tender with me only seconds after destroying me in the best way.

I need to be careful not to get too addicted to this feeling. *To him.*

Yet something tells me it might be too late.

When he draws away, he asks, "Are you okay? I didn't go too far, did I? Did I hurt you?"

An earnest smile crests my lips. "I'm wonderful. That was the hottest moment of my life."

His eyes fall to the floor as wrinkles sully his forehead. A heavy sigh frees itself from his chest, and his hands fall from my face, landing on the tops of his thighs.

*Oh, sweet, complicated man.*

Part of me wants to make a joke to break the tension, but even my inner

smart-ass is too sleepy with sexual gratification to speak.

I inch forward, compelled by a pressing need to soothe and reassure him.

Like he held my face, I caress the stubbly planes of his cheeks between my palms and capture his gaze. Letting the sincerity of my emotions coat my words and play across my features, I tell him, “I mean it, Cal. That was amazing for me. Was it for you?”

The regret radiating off him is palpable. “I’ve never... I mean... I shouldn’t...” Trailing off, he closes his eyes and seems to search for the words.

*Oh no, no, no.*

Did I push him too hard? Perhaps I was wrong, and he didn’t want to treat me like that. Does he think I forced him?

“I’ve never done anything like that. I don’t want to like it. It feels,” the sadness in his tone guts me to my core, “wrong.”

Shaking his head, he looks away, like he’s ashamed to let me see this side of him. Or ashamed of what he did.

Unable to resist, I crawl onto his lap, straddling his strong thighs and bringing his softening cock into contact with the embarrassingly wet crotch of my yoga pants. As I wrap my arms around him, he rests his forehead on my shoulder, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

He allows himself to soak up my touch, encircling me in his arms and pulling me close. My naked breasts press against the fabric of his shirt. Too bad he didn’t take it off earlier so I could feel him skin to skin.

I’m clothed only on the bottom, and he’s clothed only on top. We should really get our shit together and just be clothed or naked together.

Shaking off my thoughts, I hug him back, because this man needs it. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen someone who needs a hug more than him.

All the weight on his shoulders and no one to relieve it.

Until me.

If he’ll let me.

When it seems safe to talk, I ask, “I know you said it feels wrong to like it, but you did like it, didn’t you?”

I’d like to say his climax doesn’t lie, but I could be wrong. What do I know?

Sure, I’ve had some adventurous lovers in the past who liked to take charge, and I just went with the flow. But I’m certainly no expert in this type of thing — power dynamics in relationships, punishments, and so forth. It’s

all new to me too.

But I know people. And I know *this* man.

It doesn't matter how long ago we met. I know him in my soul.

He refuses to answer, so I shift myself and incline my head for a better view of his face. The man gazing at me isn't the same man who called me his little slut.

"It's okay to admit it. I won't judge you for whatever answer you give me."

He narrows his eyes at me, studying me like he's searching for deceit. Like he thinks I'm going to trick him.

And that's on me.

But he won't find anything untrue here. Not anymore. I'm done lying to this man.

"I promise, Cal. Whatever you say is fine. Did you like it? Controlling me like that?"

"I shouldn't like it."

"That's *not* what I asked."

"You really liked being treated like that?" he asks, continuing to dodge my question.

"I loved it. In fact, I'd happily let you do it again." His face pinches, so I add, "I mean, if you want to. I like you the other way too. The way we were that first night. Both sides of you are..." I gulp, then lay it out there, hoping my honesty will prove to him how much I want him. "Both sides of you are perfect to me."

"But I just," he gestures to the wall behind us, "degraded you. Treated you like you only existed to please me. That's not how a man should act. Not a good man."

My knees start hurting from this position, but I ignore it. The pain swirling behind his hazel eyes is far more severe than my little ache.

"You're the type of man who wants to please the woman he's with, aren't you?"

I already know the answer, but I need to lead him to the conclusion he's too selfless to arrive at on his own.

He nods. "Always."

"What if you were with a woman who wanted to be treated that way? Shouldn't that matter too?"

For the first time, a spark of hope blossoms on his face, softening the

harsh wrinkles on his forehead. I lean forward and place a kiss over his brows, trying to force him to relax before he needs Botox.

“Cal, it’s okay to like what we did. I loved it. Does that make you think less of me?”

Maybe it does, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“No,” he answers unequivocally, easing that slip of fear in me.

“So if you ever want to dominate me like that again, I volunteer as tribute.”

His eyes twinkle, and his face softens at my words.

I smile, relieved and happy to see my words sinking in. “But if you don’t ever want to do anything like that again, that’s fine too. I’m serious when I say that I find both sides of you utterly intoxicating.”

He gathers some of his confidence, gripping me tighter around my waist and bringing his mouth to hover over mine.

“You want me to admit I liked it?”

“Only if it’s true.”

The corner of his mouth quirks. “*Fine*. I really liked invading your sassy mouth like that.” The words leave his lips on a sultry breath, the air dancing over my skin. “I liked watching your eyes water.”

Holy fucking shit. The switch has flipped, and all traces of his trepidation have been replaced with renewed confidence.

*Nipples, we are a go for hardening.*

He kisses me, just a brush of his lips against mine.

My clit is already aching again, and my breath comes fast and shallow.

“I liked making you gag. I liked saying filthy things to you. I liked having you at my mercy and how you gave yourself to me.”

An honest-to-goodness whimper leaves me.

His cock hardens, twitching and pulsating against me in the most seductive way. Unable to resist, I flex my hips and graze my core over him.

“What else did you like?”

“I *loved* it when you begged me. With your eyes, with your keening sounds, and with your sexy mouth. I want to hear you beg me over and over again. Beg me to touch you. Beg me to fuck you. Beg me to let you come.”

“Right now?” I breathe the words, a slight rumble deep in my throat resembling a...

“Yes, tiger. Purr for me.”

Oh, *that’s* what that sound was. I’m fucking purring for this man.

This sweet, filthy, sexy, confusing man.

No wonder he's calling me tiger. But he can call me Joe Buck for all I fucking care, as long as he lets me touch his perfect cock again.

He rakes his lips over the fevered skin of my neck, biting gently at the curve where my neck meets my shoulder. The pain mingles with pleasure like a heady cocktail, and I bear down on his now *fully* hard cock.

Craving his praise, I let that deep purr he requested rise to the surface. He must approve, because he tightens his grip on my hips and yanks me roughly over the thick ridge of his dick.

Oh, I want that inside me so flipping badly.

He drifts his lips along the curve of my neck to my jaw. "So sexy, tiger."

"Will you fuck me, Cal? Please? I want you inside me." I lower my volume and rest my mouth under his ear. "Please. Fuck me with that thick cock. Rip me open and fill me like only you can."

Done teasing my neck, he meets my gaze with one of his brows raised in a challenge. "Have you let anyone else inside you since me?"

How could I? He ruined me for all other men.

But I'm not mature enough to resist goading. Just a tad. The last time I ticked him off, it ended very well for the both of us. And I learn from my past actions. Gold star student at the school of hard knocks.

My cheek twitches as I stave off a grin. "That's none of your business."

His eyes darkening, he grabs another fistful of my red locks at my nape.

Fuck, he likes pulling my hair.

Why on earth is *everything* he does so damn hot? I bet he could spit on me, and I'd roll over, opening both my legs and mouth while begging him like Oliver motherfucking Twist. *Please, sir, I want some more.*

His stern voice yanks me from my mental gymnastics. "Answer me. Be honest. Did you let anyone else inside that tight pussy?"

He practically seethes the words.

"Would you be jealous if I did?" I taunt.

With a brusque shake of his head, the column of his throat works down a rough swallow, capturing my attention. The bob of his Adam's apple accentuates the cords in his neck.

I think I shed a tear down my leg. Am I panting? Drooling down my chin?

This jealousy thing *isn't* an act. He absolutely abhors the idea of someone else having me. Knowing that makes my nipples painfully hard. I'm afraid



they might chip clean off my boobs if there's a stiff breeze.

With a barely contained fury, he confesses, "The thought of another man having your body fills me with an irrational rage. If anyone touches you besides me, I'm not sure I can control myself. And I'm not sure I'd want to."

As hot as it is to watch him grow increasingly unhinged, I take pity on him. It's been a big day for him, after all. "You can relax, stud. I've been saving it for you."

He lowers his chin, looking at me from under his brows. A hint of distrust remains on his face.

Rightly so. Earned that shit.

I move in close to whisper across his lips. "If you want my pussy, then it's yours."

*Or any other hole* is what I think but don't say. He's not ready for that conversation, and I don't know if I can talk him off another ledge tonight.

Knowing him, he's never taken a woman in her ass before, and he'd have all kinds of guilty Puritan thoughts about it.

*My sweet, innocent, sexy, corruptible baby.*

Loosening his bruising grip on me, he pulls back and flashes those puppy dog eyes at me. "What are you doing to me?"

I study his face, letting my gaze sweep over his tanned forehead, his sparkling hazel eyes, the stubble on his chin, and those swollen lips.

"I mean it, Mia. I don't even recognize myself. These thoughts. The things I'm saying and feeling." He shakes his head, his expression blurring between despair and confusion.

I pat his hair, smoothing out the disheveled look, then join our lips for a chaste kiss.

"Tiger, you're bringing out something from inside me I don't understand." With a hushed breath across my lips, he repeats his question. "What are you doing to me?"

"I don't know, but whatever it is, it's happening to me too."

It's true. I'm not myself.

If any other man had called me a dirty slut, I'd have bitten his dick off. Even if I called myself that first.

Maybe it's the guilt at how I mistreated him, or maybe it's just something inside me speaking to something inside him.

But whatever it is, I need more.

Our lips converge again, the heat of his desire searing me like a brand.

I'm seconds away from dragging him off the floor and into my bedroom when my phone screeches out the perimeter alarm.

Fuck me.

Actually, no fuck for me.

## CHAPTER 20

# ODD MAN OUT

KLEIN

I've never lost a boner so fast in my life.

But the shrieking alarm tone, coupled with the look of sheer panic on Mia's face, is all it takes for my dick to shrivel like a raisin.

"What's wrong?"

She shoots to her feet, grabs her shirt, and throws it on while rushing to her phone. "Perimeter alarm."

The two-word answer has me standing in a flash and stuffing my junk behind my zipper in two seconds flat. "Who?"

If her suddenly rigid posture is anything to go by, she's not expecting any more house guests tonight.

By the time I stride up beside her, ready to fight or flee or both, her face has shifted into a mask of confusion with an adorably pinched freckled nose and puckered lips.

I peek at the phone screen in her hand. "Is that Tomer?"

The big, blond funless fuck is stomping up the walkway toward the front door.

My hands ball at my sides involuntarily so hard that my joints burn. The sight of him — here in Mia's space — unleashes irrational anger that's quickly becoming all too familiar. My newly acquired green jealousy monster reminds me of the Hulk, since I'll certainly smash anyone who comes after Mia.

Why does Tomer think it's okay to show up here uninvited? Why does he know where she lives? Has he been here before?

"I have no clue what he's doing here," she mutters, answering my unspoken question.

He bangs on the door a few seconds later. And I do mean *bangs*. The mirror hanging beside the door goes askew from the force.

It's probably for the best he didn't use the doorbell, or his finger would have gone right through the button.

She pads toward the door. "I'll get it."

Shaking off my confusion, I draw her back by the arm, locking her feet in place.

"Excuse me?" she huffs, tugging herself from my grasp.

“Put a damn bra on before you get the door. In fact, go fix yourself up, and I’ll let him in.”

Her hands dart to her hair and face as a look of bewilderment scampers over her features.

Grinning at how damn cute she is, I explain, “Tiger, your hair is a mess, and there’s mascara running down your face. He’s going to think I beat the shit out of you.”

She cups her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide with shock.

Before she runs off, she rises to her tiptoes, rests her hands on my shoulders, and places a soft kiss on my cheek. “Thank you.”

I choke back the emotions that her simple gesture evokes. My heart constricts, and my stomach does a cartwheel as she retreats to her bedroom. Hearts sparkle in my eyes like I’m a twitter-pated fool.

*Easy, pal. Don’t let this dame make a Harvey out of ya.*

The loud thumping at the door is accompanied by the angry bellow of our coworker. “Mia, it’s Tomer. Open up. Now. I know you’re in there.”

Out of habit, I check the peephole before opening the door. He barges in past me without a greeting or any reaction to seeing me here.

“Where is she?”

After locking the door, I double-time it to the living room to stop him from trashing the place in whatever freaking angry rage he’s in. I’ve never — *never* — seen him this emotional.

Not in battle.

Not in any of the dozens of life-or-death situations we’ve been in since leaving the military for Redleg.

Not even when we’ve teased him mercilessly.

Never.

He’s not an emotional man.

Except for now.

“Mia!” he bellows, voice booming and dripping in manic energy.

I dive in front of him with my palms facing out, shushing him. “Shh. Easy.”

Only then does his gaze meet mine, seemingly noticing me for the first time.

“She’ll be right out. Calm the hell down, T. What’s wrong?”

The need to protect her from whatever is going on with him is even stronger than the fiery jealousy I felt about him, Shep, or any other man

having her.

What the hell has this woman done to me? I no longer recognize myself.

He bows his head in an arc and pulls a swell of air into his lungs, like he's forcing himself to relax. "Sorry, Klein. What are you doing here?"

Tipping my head, I eye him skeptically from under my brows. "Do you *really* want to know?"

He immediately rolls his eyes. "She's the one from the bar, isn't she? With the shot?"

"Finally remembered that, did you?"

"I've had other shit on my mind."

Some of the tension in the room fizzles as his posture sags.

He takes slow, deliberate breaths. "Shit, man, I'm sorry. I'm just... where is she?"

"Sit down, T. She'll be right out. I'm sure she heard you. The entire neighborhood heard you."

I direct him to the sofa, closing the lid of Mia's laptop in the process, hoping to fuck he's still too upset to have noticed the movement. There wasn't a covert way for me to do it, but I can't let him see what's on there without having to loop him into the entire operation. And Mia made it explicitly clear that he can't know about this one.

I wanted to press her for a reason but didn't, figuring that when she told me who Violet was, it would make sense why Tomer wasn't allowed to be privy to the rescue op.

Before I have time to step away from the big, angry one, Mia bounds into the room. My heart does a damn jig at the sight of her.

Her face is cleaned of her ruined makeup, with her skin sparkling and rosy from her fresh scrubbing. On the top of her head, her crimson hair rests in a loose bun, and curly locks swoop down both sides of her face.

She's breathtaking.

And thankfully, her gorgeous nipples are hidden from Tomer's gaze.

*Mine.*

She was in the other room for less than two minutes, but with her back by my side, it's like a part of me has returned. I can breathe once more.

After flashing a warm grin at me, she glances over at our guest and places her fists on her hips. "What's the problem, T-man? Are you stalking me? I don't remember telling you where I lived."

He casts her a harsh look of condemnation. "Hypocrite."

She shrugs and rolls her eyes, totally unbothered by his dig. “Fair point. What’s up? You seem tense.”

He bolts abruptly from the couch, squares his shoulders, and flexes his fingers out stiffly at his sides. “What the *fuck* do you want with Lettie?”

*Oh shit.*

Involuntarily, I shift closer to Mia, putting myself between them.

Her rosy face blanches. “How do you know h —”

“Doesn’t matter how I know her. It only matters that I do. Answer. The. Question.”

Instead of complying with his demand to answer, she fires back a question of her own. “When you say you *know* her, does that mean you *know* her know her, or you know who she is?” Mia raises her brows and tucks her chin.

Tomer’s silent for a beat before he finally grits out, “Both.”

Well, I guess we’ve figured out who at Redleg Violet Holt is important to.

Creeping closer to him, Mia clarifies in an even tone, “As in, you’ve met her or interacted with her in some way?”

Tomer shifts on his feet. “Yes.”

My head spins, sending unsteadiness throughout me.

She prods him further, “And you also know who —”

He snaps out, “I already answered you. Yes, I fucking know about that too. I know everything about her.”

Well, that makes two of them and zero of me.

It’s like we haven’t left the office. Both of them knowing shit that I don’t.

Tomer tips his forehead in my direction. “Does he know?”

Lips pressed together, Mia slowly shakes her head. “Not yet. I was planning on telling him tonight, but we were, uh, discussing something else first.”

Memories pepper my mind of us *discussing* what I liked calling her and how I loved watching her mascara-soaked tears roll down her face as she swallowed every last bit of my release.

“Do you know she’s missing?” I ask, interjecting myself into this conversation because I’m sick and tired of being the odd man out.

He nods, clenching his jaw fiercely enough for it to click audibly. “That’s why I’m here.”

Moving closer to Mia’s side, I ask him, “How did you know that Mia was



looking into this?”

“The laptop?” Mia asks him.

Tomer jerks his head in a sharp nod.

Facing me, Mia hitches a thumb at Tomer. “I gave him my personal laptop when I started at Redleg, giving him full access. He kept it for a few days before returning it. And I assume that’s how he knew who I was tracking. He’s likely been monitoring me ever since. Right, T?”

Tomer nods again, refusing to elaborate.

“Wait. Why did you give him your laptop?”

A sigh tears from her lungs. “Because he needed to know what I was up to. He didn’t trust me.” She wags her index finger toward her laptop on the coffee table. “That laptop is an electronic version of *me*. I figured if I gave it to him, that’d be one way I could earn his trust. No secrets.”

The fuck?

*Keep it calm, pal. Don’t be a cad and make this about you.*

“You didn’t give *me* your laptop despite knowing about my lack of trust in you.”

Her jaw wobbles from side to side as her eyes sweep the room. “It was... different with you. The reasons you didn’t trust me weren’t the same.”

Tomer grits out an angered plea. “Can we move on, please? You guys can settle your shit later. Focus on Lettie.”

“Tomer’s right,” Mia placates. “We need to prioritize, and her life is on the line.”

She returns her gaze to Tomer, and the two of them have a silent conversation. Suddenly, she claps her hands and announces, “Let’s move. We need to get to Redleg. I’ll tell you what I found on the way. The clock is ticking for her.”

Less than a minute later, we pile into Tomer’s SUV. As soon as we get in — Mia in the back seat, Tomer behind the wheel, and me riding shotgun — Mia excitedly yelps, “Wait! No. Klein, you need to drive.”

Tomer gets out and tosses me the keys. “Good idea.”

I’m confused about why I need to drive until he gets into the back with her to view her laptop. Without hesitation, she launches into an animated overview of everything she told me. With her open device resting on her thighs, she talks him through the various images and everything she unearthed today.

Bottling the irrational jealousy at how close they’re sitting, I drive us to

Redleg.

Mia's laptop screen illuminates her face, and I can't stop myself from sneaking glimpses of her in the rearview. She's like a beacon of light, and I'm the damn mosquito drawn to her. Let's just hope she's done being a bug zapper.

Once she's brought Tomer up to speed, it dawns on me that the secret is out about Lettie.

Which means...

"Since Tomer already knows about Lettie and the op, can we call Boss and loop him in?" I ask, sparing a quick glance in the mirror.

"No!" they shout in unison, so loudly that I involuntarily cower from the sound.

Irritation spikes, making my blood boil. I'm fed up with being left in the dark over this shit show.

"Why the hell not? And when are you going to tell me exactly who she is? I feel like I'm not really a part of this team, and I have to be honest, it's pissing me the hell off."

They don't answer me, but I catch sight of them doing more of that silent back and forth bullshit.

A few seconds later, I pull onto Redleg property and throw it in park. Before I unlock the doors, I spin around to face them.

Mia gulps when I meet her eyes. She knows I'm done being left in the dark.

"Who is she?" I demand.

Tomer gives her a nod, and she passes me the laptop.

I assume the answers to all my questions will be on the screen.

But nope.

The document answers only *one* question.

And that question is now replaced by a shit ton more.

## CHAPTER 21

# MUSTARD AND MISSION PREP

MIA

Tonight, we're bringing Violet Holt home.

Less than forty-five minutes after arriving at Redleg, we're frantically preparing for the mission. My nerve endings tingle with adrenaline that's *itching* to be unleashed. It's been a while since I've had a front-row seat to a rescue op.

Once we ran the images of her abductors through the newly improved program, we got three hits that led us to locations where we believe the men are tonight.

Tomer immediately began formulating the extraction plan, and Klein called the guys in to prep for the op.

Shep was the first to arrive, with Kri and their foster daughter, Valerie Franco, at his side. Apparently, Shep isn't inclined to leave them alone at night, which is smart. Lenkov remains free and could come after Val or Kri out of revenge. Until Kri is at full strength, it's safer this way. Plus, Shep will be less distracted if he knows they're safe with me at Redleg Headquarters.

The team members chosen for the op — Shep, Jonesy, Junior, Aaron, and, of course, Klein — are gathering here at HQ. The moment the last three guys arrive, it'll be mission go.

"I'm gonna kill Yuri," Shep seethes from over my shoulder as he paces around the lair. "Oh, I'll make it brutal too. That dirty fucking Russian. No-good, potato water drinking, yellow-belly, backstabbing, traitorous weasel."

Ever since I showed Shep the photos of our kidnappers, the litany of filth flying out of his mouth has been quite impressive. He's a varietal smörgåsbord of profanity.

"*Il babbo*, you need to chill before you give yourself a heart attack. I don't see an AED around here," Valerie teases him without shifting her focus from her phone screen.

Funny kid.

Kri chuckles and reassuringly clasps Shep's hand. The gesture is sweet and loving, making me long for a connection like that. Naturally, my eyes sweep the room and land on Klein, who's still in a state of shock over what we showed him in the parking lot.

"I'm going to wrap his dick in barbed wire, cut it off, and shove it down

his fucking throat,” Shep fumes.

“Yikes.” Val holds her phone to her ear and pretends to make a call. “Hello, DCF. Yes, I’d like to request a less homicidal parental unit if it’s not too much trouble.” She pauses and huffs. “Yes, I can hold.”

After reaching into his pocket, Shep throws something at her from across the room. It falls to the floor, but she scoops it up and grins maniacally. “Snickers. Yes! Score.”

“Hey, no fair,” Kri whines, her lower lip juttied.

Shep tosses another snack-size chocolate bar at her. Kri catches it and giggles to herself, adding a shoulder shimmy. He grins at his girls for a beat before resuming his profanity-fueled trip around the room.

He’s raging because he recognizes one of the perps who abducted Lettie. The taller of the two men — Yevdokim Ivanovich — works for an old friend of ours.

And I use the word *friend* sarcastically.

Yuri Zaytsev. Local strip club owner with extensive ties to the criminal world and the Russian Mafia — Lenkov in particular. Yuri has a long, sordid history with the Lenkov crime family. He also has a long history with Shep and me.

Lenkov has been on my radar for more than a decade, which means Yuri has been too. I’d give anything to take these sickos down.

And by *take them down*, I’m game for anything from prison to disembowelment, or perhaps taking them skydiving without a parachute.

Redleg’s recent run-in with Lenkov’s people to save Kri and Valerie is part of what drew me here.

What does all this have to do with Shep’s profane *ode to Russia*?

Great question. I’m glad you asked.

Yev, the dirtbag who kidnapped Lettie, is Yuri’s right-hand man. He’s the guard who pats Shep down each time he goes to Yuri’s strip club for intel. If Yuri’s man is involved in the trafficking ring, then Yuri is too. On the off chance he isn’t, he knows it’s happening and hasn’t stopped it.

Why would Yuri’s involvement piss off Shep *this* much?

Another fantastic question.

Because when Shep and I served on the task force years ago, Yuri was an intel source. We went to bat for him because he swore he’d changed — seen the light and all that shit. He got a nice deal out of it.

Apparently, he played us.

Unlike my friend, I'm not reciting the *ABCs of Swearing* because I've been stewing in this shit for years.

Instead of mollifying Shep, I force a yawn to help contain my nerves. Cal catches my eye and shoots me a toe-curling wink.

I wish I were cuddled on his lap or spooning with him in bed instead of sitting with the team at Redleg this late at night. No offense to the team, but I'd prefer some more nakey-nakey time with him. He was but mere moments from frosting my lady cake.

Ever since we got to Redleg, he's been reserved and contemplative.

Alarmingly so.

It's beginning to feel like he's stressing over more than the news of who Lettie is. Is he spiraling with regrets about what happened between us? More of that pesky self-recrimination?

Or worse, did the revelation about Lettie remind him of why he shouldn't trust me? Why he should... *hate* me?

I'll add it to the ever-growing list of *shit I don't know and don't have the time to figure out*.

Before I have time to fixate, Kri pipes in with a question. "How did you ID and locate the tangos that fast? You said you found out about the abduction this afternoon, right?"

Klein perks up at this, rejoining the conversation. "Because Mia's a badass."

Kri bats her lashes at me in jest. "That's why she's my girl crush."

"And that's why I told Big Al to hire her," Shep boasts.

"Oh, stop," I coo while sarcastically flexing my fingers toward me in a *keep going* gesture. "You're embarrassing me. Please, stop."

"Mia did the heavy lifting on this one." Tomer spins his chair around, putting his back to his workstation. "The enhancements she made to my face rec software are worth their weight in fucking gold." To me, he adds, "I could kiss you right now."

A low rumble comes from across the room.

Cal.

Tomer scoots away from me. "But I won't."

I blow an air kiss at Klein.

"That's a new development," Kri muses, puckering her lips and letting her line of sight volley between Cal and me. "Can't say I didn't see it coming, though."

Ignoring her, I focus on the panty wrecker who's shooting a homicidal glare at Tomer.

*Damn.* That man wears jealousy like a perfectly tailored suit.

It's arousing as hell to be the only one who's made him go from cinnamon sugar to habanero five-alarm spice. Almost as if my mere presence flipped some kind of alpha-activation switch. Or a better metaphor would be that I've modified his operating system to restore a baser model with caveman tendencies.

Kri catches my gaze and tilts her head at me. "Back to the case. How did you get a picture to run through the software?"

I regale the group with my heroic tale of social media stalking, hashtag onedickchick, and bathroom selfies while only including minor references to the FBI hack.

"So where did you find them?" Kri asks me.

"Two of them are at a bar, and the third is at Yuri's strip club."

Shep growls.

Because I'm a shithead, I toss, "Kri, we should calm Shep down. Surely you know what eases his... *tension.*"

A tight-lipped chortle shakes Kri's chest, but she doesn't answer.

"That's not an all-ages topic." Shep faces Kri, bending to get in her face. "Isn't that right, baby girl?" He kisses her.

Val pantomimes gagging herself, and laughter carries around the room.

Except for Tomer.

He's back at his desk, dragging his fingers over his scalp and bouncing his knee.

Jonesy's voice booms, signaling his entrance. "Hey, hey, hey. Is this a private party, or can anyone come?"

Aaron and Junior trail behind, offering chin tips and shoulder pats as they pass by the others.

Junior ruffles Val's dark brown hair on his way past her. Instead of sassing him as I would expect, she beams at him, doe-eyes twinkling. That's odd.

Then it hits me.

*Oh my friggin' goodness.* The fifteen-year-old sweetheart has a crush on the twenty-six-year-old former soldier. She's been shot in the chest by Cupid's stupid arrow.

Junior is one of Val's bodyguards. When she's at home, she doesn't need



a guard since she lives with two former special ops soldiers, but she does need protection at school. Until Lenkov is behind bars where he belongs, she's not safe from his retribution. And since she's one of the youngest billionaires in the country, she'll never be free from threats.

I bet Junior makes her feel safe, which she deserves after such a traumatic life. Although he's one of the smaller Redleg guys, he's strong and projects confidence. It's that military swagger. I see why she'd be attracted to him.

But I only have heart eyes and coochie flutters for Cal.

As I scan the room, Kri and I trade glances. She's clearly suppressing a grin. Discreetly, she darts her line of sight from Val to Junior, then back to me. She adds a waggle of her brows to convey she sees it too.

It goes without saying there's no chance of anything happening with them, given the age difference and Junior's noble character, but it is a little sweet.

Recognizing that we're about to get down to business, Shep ushers Val from the office and sits her at a cubicle nearby with her iPad to keep her company.

Such a good dad already. Although it's a temporary foster placement, I hope they make it permanent.

Jonesy's gaze falls on me, his eyes widening when he recognizes me from that night at the Sassy Parrot. "Holy shit. *You're* the new hire?"

He's been out in the field these last few weeks. We've yet to be properly introduced.

"Nice to see you again," I offer, masking my face to hide my embarrassment.

Another gush of realization hits him, and his head kicks back as if he was shot with a puff from an air cannon. Immediately, he diverts his attention to Klein and tosses his thumb over his shoulder at me. Jonesy whispers something to Cal, whose only reaction is to flip him the bird.

With all the operatives here, Tomer closes the door, thus inadvertently saving us from the awkwardness of Jonesy's revelation.

Tomer stands in front of the group, flanked by the wall of monitors. "Okay, team. Quick briefing. Time isn't on our side."

Tomer spares me a glance. I nod to encourage him to take the lead. I could take this. After all, I'm the one who found out the majority of the intel. But this is his team. They trust him.

And I'm secretly hoping he'll reveal something about his relationship

with Lettie while he briefs the team.

The little devil inside me who thirsts for intel starts twerking her ass. I guess she's proud of me.

Tomer clears his throat. "A twenty-five-year-old female was drugged and abducted on Friday night at approximately 23:15 from the Stumbling Sea Turtle dance club here in Clearwater. Her name is Violet Anastasia Holt. Goes by Lettie."

A crinkle of unease invades his tone, and he takes a deep breath.

When he speaks again, his voice is emotionless. "Based on evidence Mia uncovered, we believe she's been taken for trafficking. It's unclear how long it'll be until she's moved out of the area to be sold." He coughs into his fist and shakes his head. In a plot twist that no one saw coming, he's so overtaken by emotion that his hands tremble and his eyes narrow to slits.

*Holy fuck cakes.*

His anguish over Lettie palpates my chest, breaking my heart for him.

As I scan the room, I'm met with similar expressions of disbelief and empathy.

To allow him a chance to damper his emotions, I take over. "Our mission objective is to locate and extricate her from her captors. We've identified three men who have been abducting women for more than a year out of the surrounding eight counties in the western Florida corridor — as far north as Citrus County, all the way down to Charlotte County. Tonight, you'll find and subdue these three men. After you get the victim's whereabouts out of them, you'll immediately redirect there for a *non-lethal* extraction."

Pausing, I hold their eye contact, aiming to convey that we don't want them taking any lives tonight.

Unless absolutely necessary.

Once they've gotten the message, I continue, "From HQ, Tomer and I will flesh out what we can about the secondary location while you're en route, but we don't know what you'll be walking into. Regardless of what happens, we need to get her out tonight."

Aaron scratches the stubble on his chin, then waves his hand to get my attention. "Is she a Redleg client?"

"No, not officially," Tomer interjects in a clipped tone. "This isn't a Redleg op. If you aren't on board, there's the door."

Some of them raise their brows, but no one leaves.

After striding to the grease board at the side of the room, I gesture toward

the four photos taped there. “This is the asset you’ll be rescuing — Lettie Holt. And these are your tangos for the first leg of the mission.” I point at two of the photos. “Tango one and two abducted Lettie from the club. Tango three has abducted other girls in partnership with them, so it’s safe to assume any one of them will have the intel we need to find Lettie. As for how you get that intel from them, I think you know how that should go.”

Next, I point to each of the three pictures of the traffickers, giving the team their names and basic information, then open it up for questions.

“Rules of engagement?” Aaron asks.

Tomer snaps, “These guys are predators and traffickers. Make it painful but don’t get caught.”

Junior lifts his hand like he’s in school.

Suppressing my amusement, I wave my open palm toward him. “Yes?”

“Ma’am, do we know which trafficking ring?”

*Ma’am? Bleh.*

Before I answer, Jonesy piles on, “In other words, whose shit list are we about to put ourselves on besides Big Al’s?”

“We believe it’s the Russians — likely Lenkov’s organization. We know Yuri Zaytsev is involved to some degree since his bouncer slash bodyguard, Yevdokim Ivanovich, is one of the men who took Lettie.” I point at Yev’s picture taped to the board. “It’s likely Yuri is in bed with Lenkov again. Considering the damage Redleg did to Lenkov’s bottom line when his operation was disrupted at Franco Financial, he may be attempting to recoup his losses with increased trafficking. Activity on the dark web points to a spike in auctions and listings for available *escorts*, which I attribute to Lenkov’s people.”

Groans and curses fill the room. Glad to see I’m not the only one repulsed by all this.

Shep scrubs his palm over his short-cropped blond hair. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve increased their gun and drug activities too. Fuck. I wish we could’ve taken down the entire organization when we had the chance.”

I fail at suppressing my eye roll. “Shep, face it. You never had a chance. Our entire alphabet soup task force barely poked holes in their business. Getting rid of them permanently is a fantasy. Nikolai’s well protected, with far too many politicians in his pocket.”

Tomer claps his hands, making me flinch. “Back to the plan.”

All heads whip in his direction, spines stiffening like they’ve been called

to attention. While I've never seen Tomer in command of a risky op, I suspect this isn't his typical behavior.

"We identified two primary destinations for the first leg of the op. We'll be breaking you into two teams. Alpha team — Jonesy, Klein, and Junior — will take the two perps we spotted entering this bar earlier tonight." He jerks his head toward the screen behind him. "The bar is called *Wet your Whistle*."

Jonesy chuckles at the name. Tomer's eyes become virtual flame throwers, spewing fire at Jonesy, who silences his laugh immediately.

*Oof.*

The one formerly known as bland is extra spicy tonight.

Klein catches my attention. "Mia, is that one of the bars where they've abducted girls before?"

"Yes." I instantly recognized the location from my earlier search of unsolved cases under investigation by the local FBI branch.

It's chapping my cheeks that I haven't had time to figure out which shit stain at the bureau is holding up those cases. If I had some time in their system, I could identify the common denominator. Someone over there is dirty. All the signs point to it.

It's just like before.

But I don't have time, and there isn't enough cake on the planet to make me less stabby about that. See again: *shit I don't know* list.

Shep inhales sharply through his nose, pinching his jaw tight. "In that case, perhaps we'll save another woman from becoming a victim tonight."

Keeping us on task, Tomer barks out more orders. "Bravo team — Shep and Aaron — will go to Yuri's club to subdue and break Yev."

Shep cracks his knuckles and springs from foot to foot, energy pulsing through him. For the first time since the briefing started, a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. He's looking forward to roughing up Yev.

*Aw. Justified violence. How sweet.*

Jonesy teases him with an elbow to the ribs. "We'll be sure to have a stomach pump handy for when you're done with Yuri."

Yuri always insists on getting Shep piss drunk before he reveals any intel. I can't squash the memory of how inebriated Shep was after a meet-up with Yuri back when we were on the task force.

Let's just say Shep's an exceedingly happy drunk. He told everyone he loved them — even the hot dog vendor we passed on the street on the way to the parking garage.

The old man was so touched he gave him a free hot dog. But it was loaded, and Shep doesn't eat mustard, so he wiped it off with his bare hand. The disgusting yellow blob landed on his shoe, and he dared everyone in the vicinity to lick it off. He offered a guy in the parking garage elevator fifty bucks to do it.

Three minutes later, Shep's pockets were fifty bucks lighter.

A snort laugh escapes me when I recall how he hoisted his big leg onto the elevator railing, and the equally drunk man dove in tongue-first.

My unexplained outburst catches everyone's attention, and I'm met with confused faces.

"Sorry. The idea of Yuri getting Shep drunk triggered an old memory. A hilarious and disgusting one."

"Fuck," Shep groans, tossing his head back, eyes rolling to the ceiling. "Nooo. Not the hot dog again." His exasperated tone renews my hysterics.

"Yes, the hot dog," I choke out between cackles.

Shep's angry facade breaks, and he joins me. His deep guffaws draw a similar reaction from the rest of the team, despite having no clue why they're laughing. It's an unwritten law of the universe that when someone in your presence doubles over in hysterics, the hilarity spreads like a contagion. And we need a quick tension break before the op.

Everyone laughs.

Except Tomer.

And *this* is why they tease him.

But maybe it's his concern for Lettie that's responsible for his current mood, rather than an aversion to fun.

"Focus, guys. We have a mission," he admonishes everyone.

"Shh." Shep flaps his hands, palms downward the way a kindergarten teacher would shush the class. "Chuck has a point."

"*Hey! Stop that.*" I point my finger at Shep, ready to tear him a new one. Klein wraps his warm palm around my arm, gently holding me back.

Baffled by my abrupt one-eighty, Shep's eyes bulge comically, and his jaw bobbles from side to side.

Getting us back on track, Aaron asks, "Klein said this was a hush-hush op, and you told us the girl isn't a client. Since Boss isn't here, can I assume he's in the dark?"

I respond coolly, "Correct. And it stays that way until Lettie is safe. We're asking for forgiveness this time, not permission."

“Why?” Junior blurts out, not raising his hand this time.

“It’s complicated and irrelevant,” Tomer asserts, irritation overtaking his tone.

Junior shares another concerned look with the team. Kri fidgets in her chair, hand rubbing her right thigh.

Visibly calmer, Tomer adds, “We need to find her tonight. At all costs.”

Shep’s blue peepers widen, and he drops his chin to his chest. “All costs? On an op that Boss hasn’t authorized? And when it goes sideways, we’re on our own without Redleg’s attorneys or Big Al’s influence with law enforcement. This doesn’t feel right. Are you guys fucking for real?”

I nibble at my lip, contemplating how to handle this setback. The tight set of Tomer’s jaw and his clenching fists reveal his short fuse. Shep challenging him might flip his kill switch. If Shep bails, we’ll lose the other guys. He’s the linchpin.

Maybe we should tell them who she is.

Before I have the chance to act on the thought, Tomer bustles up to Shep and bows out his chest.

Rushing to intervene, I leap between them, facing Shep. “Listen, my guy, trust us on this one. It’ll all make sense in the end. Help us save her tonight and deal with the rest later.”

Jaw ticking, my old friend stares me down while contemplating my plea. Klein moves over, protectively flanking me. I’ll reflect on how hot that is later.

Silently, Shep glances at Kri, then toward the closed door, where Valerie sits on the other side. “I don’t know, Ghost. I have a family to consider now. Choosing to put my ass on the line for a random person isn’t as easy as it was before.”

Taking one last swing at it, I add a challenge, hoping to stoke his competitive nature. “If you guys do this right, there’s no need to worry about having Redleg’s official backing. Are you a team of badass operators or not?”

Shep fills his lungs with a deep inhale, then forcefully hisses it out through his teeth. Eyes trained on mine, he shakes his head minutely.

Dammit. He’s about to shut down the op. And I get it. He stands to lose more than most of us.

Frantically, I begin calculating a backup plan. Tomer and Klein could find the tangos one at a time while I hold down HQ. But I don’t like those odds.

Klein halts my mental gymnastics when he rests his palm on Shep's chest in a soothing gesture and squares his shoulders with him. "Bud, trust me on this. This girl is Redleg family. I have similar concerns about my own loved ones. I get why you're being cautious. I am too. But this girl matters."

The metaphorical light bulb floating over me flickers on.

My sweet Klein is worried about his mother. *That's* why he's been so quiet this evening. It's not regret over what happened between us.

Shep rescinds a step and grits out, "Son of a bitch. Redleg family?"

Kri appears beside her man and takes his hand. "It's fine, babe. You guys have this. Just a simple extraction, and you'll have the element of surprise. You won't even have to pull a weapon. This is a cakewalk."

*Must everything remind me of cake? Cal's ass. Kri's turn of phrase. Actual cake.*

Shep pulls her close and kisses her forehead, then tips his non-existent hat at Tomer in silent agreement to proceed with the mission.

*Praise be to Betty Crocker. That was a close one.*

Kri's gaze casts downward. "I only wish I could help."

*Oh look.* There's the opening I can stick my ass through.

"Well," I drawl, dragging the word out. "There *is* something you could do to help."

A grin lights up her face. "Name it."

## CHAPTER 22



**SOMETHING TO REMEMBER ME**

KLEIN

Mia shifts her body an inch closer to me, then slinks back a step so she's *almost* behind me.

What insanity is this woman about to suggest that's making her shy away from Shep?

The protective alpha she's brought to life in me responds instantly, and I puff up and plant my feet.

Shep's brow furrows when he notices our body positioning, but he doesn't say anything. He simply crosses his arms over his broad chest and shifts on his feet.

"Here's what I was thinking," Mia begins, upbeat and cheery, with a hint of comical whimsy in her tone. "The team going to Wet your Whistle needs eyes and ears inside. We can't have them weaponing up *after* they get the tangos out of the club, and they can't go in wearing body armor and balaclavas or brandishing long guns. Right?"

"Mia," Shep warns, his tone growing icy.

In response, she takes a much more pronounced step behind me, curls herself into my back, and peeks out to face Shep.

A few of the guys chuckle, and my tiger snickers along with them. She's not serious, but she sort of is.

Suddenly, she blurts out the plan we all saw coming. "We should wire up Kri, then send her into the bar. She'll scope it out, locate the tangos, and lure them outside, where the team is waiting in full gear. Jump 'em, drug 'em, and drag 'em out. Then I'll wipe any surveillance footage from the area. Bam. Done. Easy as coloring by numbers."

As soon as she's done, she retreats behind me, resembling a meerkat dropping into her hole.

"Yes," Kri and Tomer respond in unison.

A split second later, Shep bellows, "No fucking way."

The couple faces off, Kri raising her chin at him. Shep's needed someone who can go toe to toe with him since I've known him, and Kri's perfect for the job.

She meets his dark glare without cowering. "Shep, I can do this. It's not dangerous, relatively speaking. I've been up against far worse than these two

fuckers since the accident.”

“But —”

Kri cuts him off, casting a finger in front of his face. “But nothing. We don’t have time to have a pissing match. If I do this, it’s safer for the entire team. Let my dick be bigger this once. I’ll be fine.”

“But I won’t be there to protect you.”

Kri’s body sags, her head lolls backward, and she rolls her shoulders like she’s slinking out of a smelly coat. “Oh, spare me the caveman crap. The team will have my six. And I can handle myself. I’ll carry a weapon if you’ll relax.”

Shep looks to Tomer and Mia, expression questioning. “Do we know if this bar has a metal detector or bag check at the door?”

“They don’t,” Mia answers immediately.

A sense of pride fills my chest. Answering without delay means she already thought of that. If I didn’t already know she was a speedy little genius, I would now.

Shep blows out another hissing breath — literally having a hissy fit — and nods, reluctantly agreeing. Kri raises on her tiptoes and plants a kiss on him.

He cups her cheeks. “If anything happens to you, I’ll tan your hide.”

My eyes shoot wide, but I school my expression. I’m *sure* he’s kidding. Right?

“Promises, promises,” she taunts him.

*Oh boy. Maybe he’s not kidding.*

I wonder if I could ask him about...

Tomer cuts off my musings. “Okay, gear up, guys. Everyone on full comms with chest cams. Mia and I will monitor from here and feed you real-time intel. I want wheels spinning in five minutes.”

For the hundredth time tonight, a nagging sensation coils in my gut. At first, I thought it was the typical nerves over the upcoming op. Then I rationalized it away as wondering about Tomer and Lettie.

Jonesy, Aaron, and Junior file out of the lair to head to the armory room. I know I should follow, but this distraught feeling isn’t relenting. My feet drag.

Dread and powerlessness have teamed up with paranoia and planted a bomb in my gut.

Then realization hits me like a brick to the skull.

*I’m worried about my mother.*

Duh.

Usually, I'm better at separating home worries from work stress. But with her condition progressing at the rate it has been lately, it tracks that my focus heading into an op is sketchy.

*Fan-flipping-tastic.*

I stepped out to call Gloria earlier. She had to go home for a while but would return to ensure Ma gets to sleep safely.

“Go, Klein. Clock's ticking,” Tomer snaps at me, causing irritation to blend in with the uneasy bomb already taking root in my midsection.

My feet drag me toward the door as I pull out my phone, quickly swiping to check the interior camera feeds at Ma's house.

Mia's soft voice tears my gaze off the screen. “Cal, I'll walk you out.”

Nodding slowly, I glance through the images until I find my mother. She's peacefully reclined on the couch with a book on her chest. Must have fallen asleep while reading. Along with puzzles, she's been reading a lot lately in hopes of it keeping her mind sharp. A quick check of her vitals on the other app shows a steady heart and respiration rate.

The tension melts off my shoulders at knowing she's safe and well.

For now.

But what if something happens to me on this op? Or what if she needs me and I can't get to her?

Pulling in a deep inhale, I slip my phone into my back pocket and trail Mia out the door. We pass Kri and Shep, who speak quietly to Valerie in the cubicle.

Mia grabs my wrist and pulls me into her office.

“I need to gear up,” I protest half-heartedly.

Once we're in her office, she closes the door and presses me against it. Her mouth seals to mine a second later.

In an instant, she whisks me away to paradise. A place where there are no worries. No fears. No dread.

Only us.

I'm not a son, a caregiver, or even an operator.

I'm just a man.

A man obsessed with this feisty ginger goddess.

Her scent assaults me when her lips glide passionately against mine. I enjoyed taking charge of her earlier tonight — and if you tell anyone I loved it, I'll deny it — but I like it when she takes what she wants too. The way she

did that first night, leading me into the alley and yanking me toward her.

With my back to the wall, my hands find their way around her waist and pull her lower body closer to mine. She eagerly obliges, all but plastering us together.

Her mouth is insistent and demanding. She tastes decadent. Kissing her is like savoring the perfect pie filling.

I'd never tell her that, though, because I hear how ridiculous it sounds. But I fucking love pie. And I love kissing Mia.

My sense of duty clears the fog. Unfortunately, this isn't the time for infinity kissing, no matter how much I wish it were.

Right when I'm about to break the kiss, she moans into my mouth, surging my dick to life for the umpteenth time today. My flaccid-to-erect ratio is so freaking far out of whack.

I indulge for a few precious seconds longer, reveling in our connection. No clue how she does it, but she soothes my soul while stoking the fire inside me.

Reluctantly, I break away from her supple lips and push her back with my palm softly nudging her shoulder.

She holds my stare as our shaky breaths fill the air. I know I need to move. It's mission time.

But my feet are rooted in place, and my hands refuse to leave her body.

A powerful feeling rings deep in my bones, but I can't quite decipher it. All I know is I crave it more every second I'm with her.

"Be careful out there." Her voice is an airy whisper.

"Don't worry, tiger. I'll be fine."

She wipes my lips with her thumb, presumably cleaning off her lipstick. I return the favor, making sure she's presentable.

A memory flashes behind my eyes, startling me. It's of my dad wiping my mother's mouth this same way after kissing her.

Rivulets of warmth spiral in my chest.

I'm no stranger to kissing a woman wearing lipstick, and I've wiped their lips clean like this before.

But it's never brought forth that memory of my parents.

*Focus, pal. It's mission time.*

Her hands return to my shoulders, and she cups the back of my neck. "I know you're equipped to handle this, but you seem distracted tonight."

She's right. I'm unsettled.

This is my first op since my mom wandered off, and I won't be able to check on her until morning since this op will likely be an all-nighter.

"You're right," I admit, worrying at my lip as an idea takes shape.

Her hand travels down my arm to my hand, and she pulses around it. "How can I help with that?"

Can I trust Mia enough to ask this of her?

Do I roll the dice and hope Ma stays asleep all night? Or have a backup plan?

With my mom's safety at stake, there's only one choice.

I could ask Tomer, but he's too emotionally invested in Lettie, and his bandwidth is already at capacity.

And yes, I realize how insane those words sound when strung together. *Tomer is too emotional.*

Hell has frozen over, pigs are flying, and a blue moon has risen.

My heart leaps into my throat. "There's one way you can help me tonight."

I can't believe I'm about to confess this to Mia, of all people. No one at Redleg knows about my mother. I could have told them. They'd have understood. But I've been in denial, plain and simple.

I've avoided facing Ma's condition. Talking about it with anyone other than Caroline makes it all too real.

But my Redleg family needs me tonight, and they deserve my full attention.

Mia rests her palms over my pecs, and the heat of her touch seeps through my shirt, reaching toward my heart.

"Is this the kind of favor that might help me earn you?"

I nod, holding her gaze while struggling to escape the overwhelming pull to get lost in her emerald eyes.

"Even if it wasn't, I'd still say yes."

Removing my phone from my pocket, I place it in her hand. "This is my personal cell. There's an app on it that monitors the most important person in my life."

The corners of her mouth droop. "Your mother, right?"

I swallow. *Of course* she knows.

Should I be angry at the invasion of my privacy or accept it as who she is and move on to the task at hand?

Time isn't on my side, so I stuff my emotions in the corner. I'll unpack

them after the op.

“Yeah. She has...” I pause and swallow again, struggling to force it out. Saying the words out loud will be like sandpaper abrading my throat.

“You don’t have to say it, Cal. I already know.” A sorrow-filled smile tugs at her cheeks. “Show me the app. I’ll keep watch over her, and if something goes wrong, I’ll send help.”

The pointed tip of my tongue drags along the backs of my lips as I stifle a groan. Not only does she know how important Ma is to me, but she’s aware of her condition.

What the fuck else does she know?

She puts her palm on my cheek, and even though I’m mad at the invasion of my privacy, I don’t shy from her touch. I lean into it, soaking in the warmth of her skin on mine. “You can be mad at me later. But I was worried about you. Now show me what you need me to know so you can save Lettie without worrying about your mother. Tomer’s going to bust down the door any minute.”

Unable to resist, I slam our mouths together. A mix of passion and anger seeps into the kiss.

“Damn you,” I curse without anger as I withdraw, letting the slightest grin prick at my gruff expression.

“We can talk about it later, okay?”

I agree with a curt nod. My lips find their way to hers again like they can’t bear to be apart from them.

*Damn, her mouth is addictive.* Have I ever kissed a woman this much?

After I’ve shown her how to use the app, I kiss her again — because I’m powerless to resist — then turn to go. But I halt my progress, wanting one more thing from her.

Something to ground me.

Something to make me desperate to return to her.

If I focus on Mia, then I won’t worry about my mother.

“I need one more thing.” There’s a huskiness to my tone that she responds to immediately, like she did at her place.

Her green eyes flash, and she bows her head slightly, enticing me to make my request.

“Before I go, do something that’ll take my mind off that.” I gesture to the phone that’s always tracking my mother. “Mia, I want you to leave me needy as hell for you. Give me something to focus on. I need to be frantic to get

back to you.”

Her gaze falls, and she continues nibbling on her lip. I tug it free with my thumb, then suck the plump rosy pillow into my mouth.

When I pull away, she laces our fingers together. I watch with rapt attention as she leads our joined hands between us, sneaking them under the waistband of her yoga pants.

Her breath catches when I make contact with the tender flesh of her pussy. “Put your finger inside me.”

Our eyes stay locked while I eagerly sink my middle finger deep into her core, finding her soaked with arousal.

“Ah,” she sighs, then slams her lips into a tight seal.

“Are you always this wet?”

“Only around you.”

I swirl my finger around, massaging her walls and loving how her face washes over with the beginning stirs of pleasure. I wish we had time for more of this.

“Take it out,” she orders, voice pitched high like it pains her.

After I reluctantly comply, she encircles my wrist and leads our hands toward my face.

She pauses the movement once my finger hovers right in front of my mouth. “Taste me.”

*Fuuuck.*

I don’t hesitate, shoving my finger deep into my mouth, licking and sucking it clean. The salty taste of her essence fires up my taste buds, sparking the memory of how I tongue fucked her to climax that first night we spent together. When I set her on the kitchen counter, spread her wide, bent her knees, and pushed them to her chest. Dancing across my mind is the vibrant image of how I held her there and lapped at her sweet spot until she quivered and shook around me while screaming my name. When she was at my mercy, and her taste consumed me.

The same way it does now.

When I pull my finger out of my mouth, it makes a popping sound. “Fucking delicious. Just like I remember.”

“Now you know what’s waiting for you when you get back.”



## CHAPTER 23

# UP SHIT'S CREEK (NOT THE SHOW)

MIA

I need a cold shower. Or a warm shower with my vibrator. Either will do right now.

But there's no time for that. *Curses!*

We're mission go with bravo team en route to Yuri's strip joint on one screen and alpha team driving to Wet Your Whistle on the other.

Val moved into our office to be closer to the action. She sits comfortably in the corner with her headphones on and an iPad in her lap.

"Tomer, you feel like telling me why Lettie has you this keyed up?"

"Nope," he bites out without taking his hand off the mouse.

Didn't think he'd be forthcoming, but I *hoped* I could feed my need for information by being upfront for a change.

I tried to do the right thing. And what did it get me?

Big fat nothing.

The failure makes me consider reverting to the old Mia and planting a bug on him. Not like a roach. The other kind of bug. The CIA type.

But I'm a good girl now. I'm earning Klein, a man I'm hopelessly drawn to beyond all semblance of logic.

A man who has the taste of my arousal on his tongue as he rides shotgun in a Redleg SUV down Interstate 275.

Thanks to that thought, I press my thighs together hard enough to crack a walnut. Or a watermelon.

A quick aside... did you see the viral video of that bodybuilder who was busting open watermelons with his thighs? Of course, he did it shirtless while making fuck-me eyes at the camera and talking dirty to the melon.

*That's it, baby. Open for me.*

*I can feel you quivering for Daddy.*

*I'm going to crack you open and feel your wetness all over me.*

*Don't you want to open up for me, sweet girl?*

*And my personal favorite...*

*Shatter for me. I want to feel you explode.*

I wonder if Cal can bust a watermelon. While I don't know if he has the quads for it, he has the ass for it. The tricky part would be finding a watermelon narrow enough to slide between those cheeks.

The sound of Val's laughter in the corner shakes me from my rambling, horny thoughts.

"Whatcha watching?" I ask her.

"22 *Jump Street*." She punctuates her answer with an adorable giggle.

I love that friggin' movie. "What part are you at?"

She taps the iPad to pause it and removes her headphones. "Captain just found out that Schmidt slept with his daughter."

"Are they still at the school banquet or the Jump Street office?" Tomer asks, surprising both of us.

The bland man continues to surprise me.

Val answers, "They're at the school thing, and Ice Cube is going beast mode at the buffet line." She sucks in a breath, her cheeks and mouth quivering with restrained hysterics. "He's knocking over the trays." Laughing harder, she struggles to choke out the rest. "He just threw the turkey on the floor."

The urge to spew quotes from the film at her is strong, but Shep and Kri probably wouldn't appreciate all the profanity around their foster kid. All the lines around that part of the movie burst at the seams with the F-word.

Then again, they're letting her watch it. She's almost sixteen.

*And oh my gosh, did you see that? I thought F-word instead of fuck. That's a hoot, considering how many times I've flung it at you so far.*

"Best part of the movie," I mutter as I return my focus to my screen to see if anything is happening with the teams.

Nope.

Tomer stops obsessively watching the teams creep closer to their destinations, glancing at the other PC where we're running an ongoing facial rec search for any Lettie sightings. There's been no sign of her. Not on a single camera since she disappeared in the back of that fucking Honda.

He pauses his frantic clicking to lean close to me, then whisper sings, "*Schmidt fucked the captain's daughter. Schmidt fucked the captain's daughter.*" His normally monotone delivery is replaced by a singsong tone that sounds almost exactly like Channing Tatum's line from the scene where he skips around the glass office after finding out that his partner committed the cardinal sin.

I join him, singing along for another round while Valerie laughs her ass off in the corner.

He gulps, growing serious again. "Thanks for laughing with me. I needed

that.”

When we return to our individual tasks, a thought smacks me clear upside the head. Speaking of people sleeping with women they shouldn't be... Could Tomer be sleeping with Lettie?

No.

But maybe?

An alert on my cell phone halts my forward progress down that path. As I slide my chair over to see the screen, my pulse thrums wildly in my neck.

A notification from my home security system reads: *Monitoring System Offline*.

I swipe my thumb across the screen to open the app. And sure enough, the entire system is offline. The camera feeds, perimeter motion detectors, along with door and window sensors — all inoperable.

Although this could *theoretically* be a tiny network hiccup or power surge, it's improbable. Shit like that doesn't often happen when your system has two fail-safe backups.

I access the history log to see what happened right before it went offline. Nothing unusual. All the sensors, signals, and feeds were operational. No warnings or errors.

And then it went down.

I need to run diagnostics on the system on my laptop to see what caused the shutdown. Unfortunately, whatever's happening at my house must wait.

It's go time.

“Shep and Aaron are on scene at Yuri's strip club,” Tomer announces.

The chair in the corner squeaks, and Valerie approaches us a second later.

“He'll be fine, Val,” I reassure her. “Shep and Yuri go way back. He's not likely to be in danger other than alcohol poisoning.”

“Oh I know. I was there the night he got home after seeing Yuri the last time.”

With one ear on the conversation between Shep and Aaron as they approach the club, I ask her, “How was he that night?”

I can already imagine the answer, but I want to see how she describes that level of intoxication.

“He jumped on Lionheart's back, pretending to be a cowboy riding a bull.”

If I had water in my mouth, I would have spit it out.

“I miss all the good shit,” Tomer mutters from beside me, a smile

plucking at his lips.

“Don’t worry, Val. He’s not drinking tonight,” I tell her, hoping to ease her mind.

Tomer groans. “Glad there’s two of us on the con. Our timing couldn’t be shittier. Bravo is in the strip club, and alpha team just dropped Kri off at the Whistle. They’re pulling around the corner to park at the restaurant behind the bar.”

I tap him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, bud. We’ve got this.”

He nibbles on his thumbnail. “I wish we could have staggered these to avoid running them simultaneously, but I won’t risk her any longer than we already have.”

“Well, that’s why you have me. I’ve got bravo, and you have alpha.”

Before it gets too hectic, I check Klein’s phone to ensure his mom is okay. Still asleep, and all is well. House is secure too.

Wish I could say the same for mine. A quick check of my phone shows the security system remains offline.

Someone could be in there right now. Setting a trap. Rifling through my shit.

Rolling out my shoulders, I focus on the screen in front of me and settle to watch the show.

When Shep and Aaron are told to wait at the bar for Yuri, Val squeezes my shoulder from behind, where she’s hovering nervously.

It’s endearing that my friend Shep has not one, but two people in his life who love him the way Kri and Val seem to.

And it makes me a little jealous.

*I have no one.*

When I was in college, something horrible happened to my little sister that changed the trajectory of my entire life. Our family hasn’t been the same since that tragic day. And it’s all my fault.

All because I let my guard down and trusted someone I shouldn’t have.

My sister paid the price for my carelessness.

And I’ve been alone ever since.

When I was recruited to join the CIA, leaving my family behind didn’t feel like a sacrifice. It was an escape. I was eager to run away so I didn’t have to witness all the suffering.

My compulsion to unearth intel about everyone around me was born from the ashes of that heinous crime.

If I'd known his past, I would have never gotten involved with him. And my sister's innocence wouldn't have been taken in such a brutal way.

The memories of finding her are burned into my consciousness — the pools of blood around her limp body, the deep gashes and welts on her skin, and the tattered clothing.

No matter how many girls I save from brutality, I'll never be able to reverse what happened to her.

Never.

Moisture pools, stinging my tear ducts, but I blink it away. This isn't the time for an emotional revelation.

*Focus, Mia. Keep it together.*

"Here we go," Tomer mutters.

Shaking my head, I exhale the heavy emotions and focus on the screen.

Kri circles the inside of the bar, squaring her torso with as many patrons as possible to get us a usable view through her hidden chest cam. We could run those still shots through face rec if necessary.

On the other team, Shep addresses me through the comms by pretending to converse with Aaron. "Where's Pete? I hope we get to see him tonight so we can catch up." He pauses, then adds, "I'd like to fill him in on things at home and tell him the latest with my sister."

While they were en route, we agreed on code words so he could communicate with us without anyone around him knowing.

Pete is the code name for Yev, the man who abducted Lettie. Home refers to the other mission. Sister refers to Kri. That gave us all a laugh, and there were more than a few jokes about him sleeping with his sister. Several from Kri herself.

I click on my microphone to give him a quick update.

For the next twenty minutes, not much happens. Shep and Aaron wait at the bar for Yev or Yuri to make an appearance. Meanwhile, Kri continues searching the packed bar for the tangos.

Val loses interest and returns to the movie, which is for the best.

"Jackpot," Tomer says, pumping his fist.

My heart thrums excitedly as I wheel my chair closer to Tomer's workstation. "Talk to me, Goose."

"She found them. There." He points at the pair of queef cookies. They're a few spots down the bar from Kri.

She's positioned her body so her cam keeps them in view. "I love this

song,” she says to the man beside her, but she’s actually seeking permission to proceed from Tomer.

Tomer studies his other screen, looking for any signs of trouble in front or behind the bar. With nothing of note, he gives her the go-ahead to continue the mission. “Copy, Kri. Charlie Mike.”

With a ginger ale in her hand, she slides off the bar stool and saunters over to the tangos. My pulse shoots through the roof.

She can handle herself, but she’s not yet at full strength. And those men are dangerous.

“Kri has located the tangos and is on approach,” I tell Shep and Aaron via their comms.

Since Yuri is making them wait, I might as well keep them informed.

I’m expecting a confirmation answer, but instead, Shep replies, “Pete’s here. Let’s go see him.”

I curse under my breath, hating that my attention will be split. The nosy bitch inside me who’s always clamoring for intel does *not* approve.

But I trust Tomer to run alpha team’s mission.

On my primary screen, the man who drugged Lettie waves Shep and Aaron toward Yuri’s office. Disgust unfurls in my chest, putting a sour taste in my mouth.

How many girls have they harmed? How many lives ruined?

Tomer and I put our headsets on since we can’t effectively listen to both conversations at once. Plus, Kri’s microphone has a lot of background noise that’s hard to tune out.

I focus all my attention on bravo team. Shep walks down the hallway, trailing behind *Pete*, a.k.a. Yev.

Assuming Yev follows the typical routine, he’ll take him into Yuri’s office, then search them for weapons and wires. Normally, Shep leaves his weapons and comms in the car, but tonight is not a normal night.

The second Shep and Aaron enter Yuri’s office with the door closed, they fly into action. With swift movements, Shep catches the guard by surprise and quickly takes him down to his knees with a boot to one kneecap. As the big guy falls to the ground, Shep follows it with a forceful knee to the underside of his chin. Too stunned to fight, he’s instantly subdued, flat on his stomach. Shep wraps his bicep around his neck, pulling his head off the ground and cutting off his airflow.

He places his KA-BAR blade to his throat with his free hand and rests his



knee on the shitbag's spine. "Don't make a sound, or I'll slit your throat like the pig you are," Shep seethes.

Aaron moves to the other side of the downed guard, expeditiously binding his wrists and ankles with thick zip ties. Other than that, he didn't have to lift a finger. With the brute secured, Aaron shifts position to guard the door, facing the scene on the ground and giving us the perfect view.

"Command, are we clear to proceed?" Aaron calls out.

"Roger. Charlie Mike," I respond in a clipped tone.

Since Yuri loves his grand entrances, he's not in there; it's only the three of them so far. And because he's paranoid, he doesn't have surveillance in his office. He's too scared it would be used against him. In this case, it serves us well.

Shep snarls at the guard, low and menacing, "Listen up, fucker. We know you've been working with your friends to drug and abduct girls. If you want to live to see daylight, tell me where you took the girl you grabbed from the Turtle club on Friday night."

"*Ya tvoy rot yibal,*" he spits, cursing out Shep in his native Russian tongue.

He jabs the knife deeper into his flesh, drawing blood from the tip of the blade. Yev hisses in pain.

Shep nods at Aaron, who throws a hard punch into his bulbous nose.

"Again," Shep orders, and again, Aaron hits him.

While the guard curses and spits blood onto the floor, Aaron returns to the door, having only been away from his post for a few seconds.

"Talk. The girl from Friday. Where?"

"If I tell you, I'm dead."

"Well, aren't you up shit's creek without a paddle. Because if you don't tell us, you're still dead. And sooner."

"You'll kill me with less pain than them."

"I wouldn't count on that." Shep presses the blade into the man's cheek, slicing the tender flesh and spilling his blood onto Yuri's rug. Probably not the first time someone has bled there, and it won't be the last.

"Yuri will have you killed for this. Disrespecting his business."

"Only if he lives, and it's not looking too good for him either." Shep digs the knife deeper, fury pulsing rapidly through the bulging veins visible on his arms, neck, and temples.

It makes sense that Shep's barely restraining his anger. We've seen

firsthand how this shit destroys lives. We rescued hundreds of girls from deplorable conditions. On one particular case, we intercepted five shipping containers as they arrived from overseas. They were packed with women and children. Some didn't survive the journey. The smell will haunt me until I die.

Shep tightens his grip around Yev's throat. "The girl from Friday. We only want her. Tell us where she is, and you can live. We'll leave right now, and all you'll have is this little souvenir from our time together. Hopefully, it's made you ugly enough that you can't lure away any more girls for a while."

Aaron's getting antsy, pacing by the door. Yuri's bound to show up soon to find out what's happening, or he'll send another guard. If they hurry and get the intel from this fucker, they can slip out before things get worse. Yuri can wait. Finding Lettie's location is the primary mission. We can feed everything else we've uncovered to the authorities and let them go after the other players.

Once we identify the sewer-sucking slimeball in the FBI who's been *Harvey Weinsteining* the investigation, everything else will fall into place.

Yes. I made that shit nozzle rapist into a verb.

"Come on. Come on," I mumble, my knee bouncing frantically under the desk.

"Just the one girl?" Yev sputters out through the blood raining over his lips.

"We only came for the girl."

A fact.

Doesn't mean we won't save as many girls as we can on the way out.

"And you don't tell who sent you there?"

Shep's response is low and gruff. "Fine. Just the one girl, and we won't rat you out. Where is she?"

"A house. In Safety Harbor. Brown with yellow shutters."

"We need the name of the street, asshole," Shep demands.

The expression that passes over Yev's face can only be described as indigestion. He's the poster child for a Pepto Bismol commercial. "Street is hard to say for me."

Shep grumbles under his breath.

"Is... uh... Witchel-coosie," Yev attempts, then shakes his head. "No. Not right."

“Spit it out, fucker,” Aaron fumes, his frustration with the Russian wearing as thin as Shep’s.

“With-a-cooshie,” he attempts again.

“What the hell kind of street name is that?” I tap Tomer’s shoulder with the back of my hand. “Street named with a cooshie? Coozie maybe? Near Safety Harbor. Ring any bells?”

Tomer’s frown lightens a bit. “Ask him if it’s Withlacoochee. It’s a high crime area.”

My boisterous laugh springs free, and I cup my mouth to save the team’s ears on the comms.

“Shep. Ask him if it’s,” I look at Tomer, and he repeats the name, “Withlacoochee Street.”

The guard nods eagerly, agreeing with Shep’s pronunciation. The street was named after the Seminole’s word for little big water.

My hands fly across the keyboard as he talks, finding the house and pulling it up on satellite imagery. “Found it, Shep. Exfil immediately.”

Before Shep and Aaron leave, Shep clicks him in the skull with the butt of his knife and shoves him into a closet so he’s not found right away when Yuri comes into the office.

Good night, dick wagon. I wish you the life that you deserve.

## CHAPTER 24

# DEAL OR NO DEAL

KLEIN

“**A**nd that’s how it’s done, boys,” Kri quips as she climbs into the van, dusting imaginary lint off her shoulders.

She deserves her gloating moment for flawlessly executing her mission.

Kri flirted with the tangos for less than ten minutes. It was so believable I worried about Shep’s position in her life. She was *that* convincing. Throughout the conversation, she fed us the code words we needed to ensure we were in position at precisely the right time.

When she did her walk-through upon arrival, she found an unattended back door at the end of the hallway past the restrooms.

That’s where we grabbed the guys. She led them out with the promise of smoking a joint with them and hinted she was down for some other *fun* too. She cooked up this story about catching her boyfriend cheating on her and how she was itching to get even with him.

Either they saw her as an easy mark for their operation or wanted to take turns with her. The thought sickens me despite knowing she wasn’t in danger with us at her six.

As she led them out the door, we pounced, knocking them out with chloroform, then tossing them in the back of the van, where they were hogtied and gagged.

Kri was downright giddy while she restrained them, which makes sense, considering she was tied up in the back of a van at the hands of Lenkov’s men a few short weeks ago.

Jonesy smoothly exits the parking lot, driving us to a remote location a few minutes away. Once there, we’ll wake them and get the location out of them. How much blood is shed in the process is up to them. With any luck, we’ll be on our way to extract Violet within the hour.

Tomer’s calm voice crackles in through our comms. “Nice job, alpha team. We’ve wiped the cameras from the rear of the bar and nearby restaurant. So there won’t be any trace of you left behind.”

“The other team?” Jonesy asks.

“Bravo’s mission was also a success. We have a potential location, and we’re working on an extraction plan. Proceed with your mission to ensure the

locations match. I don't want to risk it being a setup."

"Shep's good?" Kri asks him.

Tomer responds, "A little bit of blood on him, but it's not his own."

"He got to kick ass? Lucky." Kri's cheeks pinch with her grin. "Is Val okay too?"

"She's fine. Good taste in movies."

My head cricks to one side, but I let the comment go, focusing on my own loved one.

I fish out my Redleg phone and send Mia a text to check on my mother. She replies a few seconds later with a thumbs-up. A whoosh of air expels from my chest with relief.

I've been on countless ops, and aside from the missions on my first deployment, I've never been this fearful. Not to say I was cool with the idea of dying, but in the past, I knew my family would be fine without me. Eventually.

But now? I abhor the thought of leaving my mother alone.

I slip the phone away and focus on the mission, surprisingly returning into operator mode in a flash. Knowing Mia is watching over Ma soothes my worries.

Tomer informs us of how the other team got the info from Yuri's guard and left him unconscious, bound, and in a closet. They're hoping it buys them enough time to get to Lettie before he alerts his comrades that we're on the way. Then again, if he sounds an alarm, the other traffickers will know he talked, which won't end well for him.

Hopefully, fear keeps him quiet.

We drive to a wooded area off the beaten path with minimal vehicular traffic. No structures around, meaning no surveillance cameras.

Ready to act, we all jump out as soon as Jonesy pulls the SUV to a stop.

We roll the soon-to-be informants out of the van, letting them fall to the dirt with a thud. There's something satisfying about that.

I suppose Mia isn't the only one who brings out the sadistic side of me.

Can't wait until the mission is over so we can finish what we started before Tomer interrupted us at her house tonight.

But I'm glad he did. We need to get Lettie out before they harm her any further.

Mia's voice rings out in my ear. "Alpha team, listen up. I've got the con. Tomer decided to gear up and is en route to the location to assist Shep and

Aaron with the extraction. He didn't want to wait."

"Son of a bitch," Kri swears. "What's going on with him to make him leave his post in the middle of a mission?"

Nobody likes taking a piss when the breeze changes direction mid-flow.

"Mia can handle it. Don't worry," I reassure her. My gaze locks on Jonesy. "Should we leave these guys here and join the other team?"

Unaware I was addressing him, Mia answers, "You've got five minutes to get the intel out of them. We're risking the shitbag they left at the strip club tipping them off. Hell, Yuri might sound the alarm himself once he finds his dickshit bouncer in the closet. If you can't confirm Lettie's location in five minutes, knock them out and bring them with you. Don't dump them until we have the package."

Jonesy nods, concurring with her plan. "Wilco." Turning to Junior and me, he orders, "Wake them up."

The men are on their sides in the dirt, hands still bound behind their backs. Waving smelling salt in front of their noses, we rouse them quickly. A string of expletives in Russian and English come spewing out as they take in the grim scene they've found themselves in.

*That's right, boys. Time for a taste of your own medicine.*

Kri stands between them, bending at the waist to get closer to their faces. "Sorry, boys. I bet you're usually on the other side of this situation. But tonight, you're going to tell us where we can find the girl you nabbed on Friday night at the Stumbling Sea Turtle." She checks her watch. "And you have a little over four minutes before we kill you if you don't talk."

The one on the right calls her something in Russian that doesn't bear repeating. But the other man seems deep in thought and far less angry.

Makes me wonder if he's more of the brains of the operation — even-tempered and plotting. He evaluates us, his studious gaze sweeping around our semi-circle. We didn't bother hiding our faces because these guys don't call the cops.

When this is all done, there's a chance they might seek retribution, but that's only if they don't end up in jail or dead. Should that happen, we have proof of them drugging and abducting women all around the area for months. Blackmail is a beautiful thing.

"Who's talking first?" Kri says, hands on her hips, staring them down like the little badass she is.

The one on the right continues to fling insults at her, but the other



maintains his calculated facade.

Kri tips her chin at Junior, who's positioned behind the angry one. He pulls a garrote from his pocket, wraps the wire around his neck, and yanks. The man gasps and chokes as his airway is restricted. Once his face shifts from dark red to purple, Junior relents. The man collapses onto his side.

While he sucks wind, I kneel in front of the other man, who hasn't wavered from his stoic assessment of the situation.

"Two minutes, team," Mia announces in our ears.

"You want to talk to us, don't you?" I ask him.

His cunning eyes crawl from mine to his partner, who's still sputtering for air. "We make deal," he offers quietly, his Russian accent thick. "You kill him, and I take you to your girl. Then you help me get out."

I knew he was calculating something.

"Why should I believe you?"

A war wages on his face for a few long seconds. "I give you more girls. More than one house. I want no more this life. Help me, and I help you." More insistently, he begs, "Please. I want one girl to come with me. I tell you which one. I love her." Again he pleads, "Please save her."

"Say yes, Klein," Mia orders. "Take the deal. He's telling the truth."

"Fuck us over, and we'll make your death painful," Jonesy warns him from over my shoulder. He nods at Junior, then cuts his glare toward the thorny shitbag beside us. "Knock him out."

"Here comes the ether bunny," Junior jokes as he silences the other tango with a hit of chloroform.

I'm not sure if Jonesy isn't planning on killing him or if he wants to wait until later. It's smart since we don't have time to deal with a body. We'd probably need to stage it to look like the Mafia murdered him. That shit takes time. Plus, none of us like taking lives if we can avoid it. We did enough of that in the service.

Jonesy silences my wondering when he says, "I'm not killing anyone for a random girl on an op we're hiding from Big Al. Fuck that. We'll take them with us and see how this shit plays out."

The accusatory glare he cuts at me screams that he wants me to tell him everything I know.

Pulling myself to a stand, I clap him on the shoulder. "Fair. But it's not my story to tell. Let's get the girl and deal with the rest later."

Sixty seconds later, the informant — who goes by Savin — is bound in

the back of the van but allowed to remain conscious. His partner is out cold beside him.

I'm in the front seat, and Jonesy is behind the wheel, driving us to the location in Safety Harbor — the same as Yev told Shep. All we can do is hope Lettie's still there.

Junior and Kri are sitting across from the men on the floor of the van, both holding their loaded Sigs in front of them in an implied threat.

Savin speaks up a few minutes into the drive. "I told you to kill him. That was deal."

Kri scoffs. "Why do you care if he lives or dies if you're getting your girl and leaving?"

I twist in my seat to watch the interaction.

Savin's dirty brown eyes are hollow, and with a tongue sharp enough to cut glass, he grates out, "He. Hurt. Her. My Tasha."

"You've hurt lots of girls." Well-trained in dealing with manipulative combatants, Kri remains aloof, unbothered by his fury and anguish. "What makes you any better than him?"

"I do it because I must. He does because he likes it. The money. The power. Brags about being first to break new girls." He spits on the floor in the direction of the unconscious pig.

Kri's voice remains eerily calm, considering the topic of conversation. "And you don't break in the girls? You don't enjoy it?"

"Never. I never hurt. I get them. Turn them over. And I leave."

Kri shakes her head condescendingly. "You know what's going to happen to the girls you turn over, though. You're not innocent, Savin."

His anger dissolves into a haunted sorrow, and tears well in his eyes. "The Bratva took me when I was boy. Took my sister too. Katia." He snuffles, his broken English getting harder to follow through his sobs. "They say she not be sold if I cooperate. But if I stop bringing girls, she suffer. They make it hurt. That's why I did these awful things. I don't want to."

This is hard to listen to, so I tilt my head to the side and blink to clear the haze of disgust from my vision. Every story I hear about how these organizations operate is worse than the last.

Kri continues her interrogation, steadfastly assessing him and deciding whether he's worth helping. Just because we told him we'd help him doesn't mean we have to comply. There's no honor code between us and despicable traffickers. Fuck that.

“But now you no longer care about your sister? If you escape with the other girl, then what makes you think they won’t sell or kill your sister?”

“R-r-right now, Katia is the pakhan’s favorite. She have good life.”

“Why?” I ask, confused at his convoluted story.

“She’s pregnant with the pakhan’s baby.”

*That’ll do it, all right.* If the head of the Bratva has chosen his sister, she’s safe. For now.

Mia’s voice yanks me from my shock. “Klein, ask him if Lenkov is the pakhan. I want confirmation.”

I clear my throat, catching his attention. “Savin, who is the pakhan? What’s his name?”

He looks at his lap, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. “I tell you after you get my Tasha safe with me.”

Kri finally breaks her stare, trading glances with us for nonverbal agreement. She’s met with nods from everyone but Jonesy since he’s behind the wheel.

“I believe him,” Mia chimes in. “Besides, he gave up the location already, which was a leap of faith for him. I say we honor the deal. Once he gets his girl, we’ll get the name of the pakhan out of him.”

If he’s bullshitting us, he’s damn good at it. It’s not easy to fool a CIA analyst and multiple highly trained military operatives.

Kri stares at the tango dead-on, letting venom coat her words. “Congratulations. You might get to live after all. But if you fuck us over when we get there, I’ll personally kill your girl right in front of you.”

Damn, Kri.

She wouldn’t, but he doesn’t know that.

“Heads up, alpha team,” Mia interjects. “Tomer has connected with bravo team, and they’re preparing to breach the house. I need you there *now*. I’m not sure how much longer they can hold Tomer back.”

Everyone in the van — except the tangos — wrinkles their noses and furrows their brows in utter confusion.

*What the hell?*

First, Tomer abandons HQ to race into the field, and now he’s bum-rushing a fucking trafficking house without backup?

This is madness.

Jonesy floors it. “We’ll be there in six minutes.”

Deep breath.

None of us are headed to the big casino in the sky tonight. We've got this shit.

Let's rock and roll.

## CHAPTER 25

**NIPS AND HIPS DON'T LIE**

MIA

This mission — albeit unusual in its origin — is exactly why I came to Redleg.

And being at the helm is exciting as hell. Don't believe me? Feel these nipples. Like Shakira's hips, these nips don't lie.

When Tomer flew out of here with his hair on fire, I assumed it was because his mission was to burn down the world. It very well may be. Time will tell.

Since it wasn't the time for levity, I bit my tongue to avoid laughing at the shocked faces of the team when I told them Tomer was rushing to Lettie's suspected location. They were more confused than a mosquito in a mannequin factory. Even through the chest cam feeds, spotting the disbelief and confusion was easy.

Ironically, they've teased him for years for being the *no-fun fuck*, and here he is, baffling all of us with his complicated, intriguing layers.

Tomer Stillman is an enigma.

Oddly enough, I'm content to let the mystery play out. *Shocking, I know.* The compulsion to find an explanation for his connection to her is barely there. I'm curious, but also enjoying trying to puzzle it out. It's like a brain teaser.

As for the mission, he was bound and determined to be there when they saved Lettie. Once we had the potential destination from bravo team, his entire demeanor shifted. He wasn't Tomer anymore. I don't know who he was.

I promised I'd handle it from here and reassured him I was ready. The indecision warred on his face for about three seconds. Then he was gone.

No matter what, I'll prove that trusting me was the right decision.

"What's the interior look like on the west end, T? How many tangos?" I ask him over the comms.

Tomer is the only one not rigged with a chest cam since he torpedoed out of here.

"We've got three males in the living room. And one, two, three, four females. Two males on the couch, and one standing to the side. One on the couch appears to have a female between his legs," Tomer grits out. "She's on

her knees.”

Knowing what’s probably happening in there, Tomer curses under his breath, but I hear the colorful language Lima Charlie — loud and clear.

Shep comes onto the line. “Five females in the east bedroom. All on the floor. Based on how they’re positioned, I’m guessing they’re sleeping, drugged, restrained, or... dead.”

I can see what Shep’s witnessing via his chest cam footage, and I concur. Unfortunately.

Not sure if they have mattresses or if they’re being forced to rest on the cold, hard floors. Not sure if a mattress makes what happens in that place any better.

“Let’s hope they’re sleeping,” I offer in a feeble attempt to keep my disgust in check.

The guys are using mobile radar devices that they press against the exterior of the structure to detect heat signatures inside. There’s a screen attached to the device, allowing them to see the feed from the field.

Although I’m eager to see what’s inside the house, I’m also terrified. It’s never pretty when you bust up these types of places. The first locations these girls are taken to are typically the worst. Constant abuse to keep them quiet and break them. Repeated raping, gang bangs, and other acts to humiliate and debase them. The girls may be bound, drugged, and used again and again. Their captors withhold food, water, and sometimes light until they no longer feel human. They become sleep deprived. Any time they’re left alone for more than a few minutes, they collapse and hope for a death that never comes.

Disgusting.

That’s what Lettie Holt is probably experiencing, along with all the other girls in that fucking place.

While pacing two steps in each direction in front of my desk, I scan monitor after monitor.

I’ve got the 911 incoming call feed on one screen, all the chest cams split between two other screens, and real-time satellite imagery on another. I’m hoping I’ll be able to spot any incoming trouble with enough time to get the guys out of there. I’d like to have more camera footage in the neighborhood, though, so I’m searching for doorbell cams that are saved to the cloud real time.

If Tomer had stayed behind, I could have focused more on that task. But



he flipped the fuck out, leaving me busier than a one-legged cat in a sandbox. Especially with both teams still running independently. Now I'm not optimistic that I'll find anything else to help in time.

On the extremely dull *bright* side, if Violet is still in that house, then I should have some questions answered about his relationship with her when they see each other.

"So far, I count five females in the east bedroom, four in the living room. Total of nine vics. We've got three tangos in the living room. Is that all?" I ask after a few more seconds have passed without another update from the team.

No clue what Tomer's radar scanner is picking up. I hate that he isn't wearing a chest cam. Especially with his state of mind in question.

As Shep moves his radar device along the east exterior of the residence, nothing else stands out to me other than the five girls in that one room on his end. "Nothing here, but I'm hitting some interior walls that the radar is struggling to get through."

I refer to the schematic of the house, hoping they haven't done any room modifications since plans were filed with the county. "There is another interior bedroom or large closet, from what I can tell. Off the east hallway."

If it's only three tangos, this should be a piece of cake. Even if alpha team doesn't get there in time. I could green light them for infil. Hell, Shep can take out three guys on his own.

But we have more walls to scan before deciding.

"According to the schematic, there's a kitchen that you should be able to scan via the rear of the property. Could be more hostiles in there. Who can check?"

"I'm working my way there," Shep announces. "Scanning for cameras before I jump the fence."

Like he did in the front and side of the house, Shep uses his RF detector to scan for radio frequencies that would indicate the house is under surveillance. "No signals detected. I'm advancing to the rear."

*Heh. That's what he said.*

"Copy, Shep. Alpha team is four minutes out."

"I'm not waiting four more minutes," Tomer snaps.

I grind my teeth, then grit out, "Hold for infil. Charlie Mike recon efforts only. We have no reason to rush this. No alarms or cause for panic. Hold steady. Backup is coming."

Ignoring me, Tomer comes on the line with an update. “Shades are drawn. The window has a strange lock on the outside that needs a key, but I think I can pick it open and get inside.”

“Hold for the other team, Tomer. We have time.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know how long until the tangos come into this room for a girl or two, and my patience is officially spent. I’m not losing our fucking entry point. We have the tactical advantage but might not if we wait.”

“Tomer, if you get me shot, Kri’s going to kick your ass,” Shep teases, but there’s a genuine warning in his tone.

One person emotionally compromised on a mission can fuck with the entire team.

“Aaron, anything on your end?” I call for an update.

We positioned him to stealthily guard the perimeter to let us know if anyone heads this way.

“All clear on the east side. Moving to the west side of the property.”

“Copy.”

Jonesy breaks in via the other comm channel. “We’re in the neighborhood if you want to patch us in with the other team.”

“Copy.” I sync up the channels. “Both teams should be on the comms now. Alpha lead, confirm.”

“Copy,” Jonesy answers.

“Bravo lead, confirm.”

“Copy,” Shep replies in a whisper, getting closer to the kitchen window around the back.

“Be advised, alpha team is in the neighborhood. ETA two minutes.”

“Shep, is the kitchen clear?” I ask him, not wanting to believe what I see through his cam feed.

“Negative. Three more tangos. And two more females. One female on her knees in the corner. The other is lying on the table with a tango on top of her.” His voice is low with a grumble of disgust filling every word.

“That’s it. I’m going in,” Tomer cuts in, leaving no room for arguing.

*Oh, ring-a-ding-dick.*

I wish Shep hadn’t broadcast what he saw. When I saw it on his cam, I knew it would propel Tomer over the edge.

“Mask up, alpha team,” Jonesy instructs them as they get closer.

Bravo team is already wearing their full gear since they’re doing ninja-style recon.

Although they didn't hide their identities earlier, it's safer to do so during the extraction since the plan is to leave the traffickers manning the house alive. The fewer people aware of our involvement, the better. We don't want a body count that'll leave the mafia targeting us. This is a rescue only. We're not trying to start a war.

At least, not until Big Al is on board and we've got the authorities ready.

"Listen for alarms, guys," Tomer orders. "I disabled the lock. Once I open the window, I'll peek inside to get a visual of the room. Popping open the window in three, two, one."

I hold my breath. It's too late to stop him. He's determined and as pigheaded as anyone I've ever known. And I've known a mega fuck ton of pig heads.

Couldn't flick a booger at the CIA without hitting at least five of them.

"Silent here," Shep answers.

"Nothing on my end either," I add. "Aaron, you still good?"

"Copy. All clear."

"Scanning interior before entry," Tomer informs us in a voice so low it's hard to discern his words.

"Fuck. Tomer, be silent as a mouse," I whisper for some strange reason. "Shep, watch the kitchen tangos for movement toward the bedroom when Tomer enters through the window."

"Wilco."

"Aaron, double-time it to the northwest window to watch Tomer's six."

"Roger."

I wish I could fucking see what Tomer sees.

"Bravo team on scene. Parking three houses down," Jonesy cuts in.

"Kri, you stay in the van with the one you knocked out," I advise her. "I need you to keep watch for incoming tangos."

"Copy," she replies in a clipped tone. She probably dislikes being benched, but she's not back to work yet. Plus, I need eyes on that side of the road, especially having pulled Aaron. And we damn sure aren't leaving the unconscious one alone in the car.

Junior comes over comms. "I've got Savin with me to identify the girl he needs us to remove."

"Fuck that. We're taking them all," Klein decrees. "We've got three vehicles on scene. We can get them all out."

My heart thumps louder. My sweet little hero.

“Anyone object to that?” I ask. “Speak now or get fucked.”

No one objects because they all have hero complexes. And the girls inside are lucky they do. This team has likely saved countless others in the past, and they’ll continue to do so in the future.

And I’ll be helping them every step of the way.

Pride fills me at the thought of all the good I’ll be a part of here.

Junior announces he’s returning the informant to the van since we no longer need him on the scene. If his girl is in there, we’ll get her out with the others.

Tomer whispers an update to the group. “I can confirm the northwest interior bedroom door is closed, and no tangos in here. I’m infilling through the window.”

A collective hush falls over the team, the comms going eerily silent as we listen to what happens once he’s inside.

I keep an eye on Aaron’s chest cam feed. When he gets to the window, the soles of Tomer’s boots are all I see.

“T, should I follow?” he asks.

“Hold,” Tomer whispers.

Now on the scene, alpha team surrounds the property with weapons drawn. I direct them to potential infil points.

“Okay. I’m in,” Tomer announces softly. “Any movement from the kitchen, Shep?”

“Negative.”

Everyone remains silent, listening to Tomer try to rouse the girls in a hushed timbre.

A few seconds later, he gives us an update. “No sign of Lettie. I’ve got pulses on the three girls. They’re alive. One is groggy but waking. The other two are out cold.”

Well, that complicates the exfil.

“Can you lift them?” I ask. “Pass them to Aaron out the window?”

“Not yet. We get Lettie first.”

I bite my tongue, drawing blood. I want to tell him no, but I won’t do it.

Not that it would matter.

Tomer is a one-man Lettie Holt retrieval system tonight. He’s wearing blinders to block out everything else.

“Shep, move to the east side to prepare for infil through that bedroom window. We can assume if they haven’t heard Tomer by now, they aren’t

going to. Entering through the windows on each side is our best bet, and then you guys will meet in the middle, where the hostiles are concentrated.”

*What am I missing? Think, think, think.*

Is there any other way I can get them all inside without flash bangs and bullets ringing out?

Stealth is our best bet to avoid a bloodbath. But I’d prefer a third entry point. I’m not happy with only two. Sending someone kicking in the front door might draw too much attention. The last thing we need is a nosy neighbor calling the police. And if possible, I’d like to avoid traumatizing the girls inside any further.

“Shep, hold on. Is there a viable entry point along the back of the residence that doesn’t dump you into the kitchen or living room?”

He answers me immediately, “Other than the kitchen, there’s only a small bathroom window. I won’t fit.”

“Junior,” I order, making a snap decision.

He’s our smallest guy — hence the name.

“On my way.”

“Shep, divert to the east side of the house. Find an access window.”

“Copy.”

“Jonesy, follow Shep.”

“Roger.”

“Klein, move to Tomer’s location on the northwest side near the front of the structure. You and Aaron need to help him move those girls out when the time comes.”

I sure as fuck hope they wake up by then. Five on the other side might be out too.

Shit dammit.

*Shammit. Ha.*

*Not now, Mia. Focus.*

“We could sure use Lionheart right about now,” Klein mutters, his breath choppy as he runs to his position.

Good point. Leo could probably carry two girls out at a time.

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Jonesy asks.

“There are more girls inside that need your big, strong arms. Don’t get your panties in a twist,” I toss back.

“We have our infil window. This one is also locked from the outside,” Shep answers. “Give me a second to pick the lock.”

Makes sense, considering if it were locked from the inside, the girls could escape. Guess they didn't expect anyone to find them.

But they took the wrong fucking girl.

"Entering via the northwest window behind Tomer," Klein says.

"Perimeter check, Kri?" I call out.

"Clear," she confirms.

Junior slips into the bathroom. "I'm in. It's empty. In position and waiting for your call, command."

Klein and Aaron join Tomer in the west bedroom and await the same.

I hate leaving the front and back doors unguarded, but we don't have enough guys. Hopefully, with us coming in from all sides within the residence, no one will have time to escape. And if they do, so be it. As long as they don't take any girls with them.

Especially Lettie.

My greedy eyes take in the views from all the body cams, and my heart bounds like it's on a trampoline.

When Shep and Jonesy enter the east bedroom, there's a girl huddled in the corner of the room. Thankfully, this one is awake. The other four are all knocked out.

Or maybe they're playing dead. I wouldn't blame them.

"Hi there. It's okay. Stay calm," Shep whispers. Through the chest cam, I see his hands raised in front of him. "We're here to help you. See. Look at my face."

He must be raising his mask to show her his face, likely aiming to keep her calm.

"What's your name?" Shep asks.

"Sa-Sara," she replies meekly.

Poor kid can't be more than fifteen and is in her bra and underwear.

"She's just a baby," Jonesy mutters.

"Sara, my name is Shepherd. Do you have any clothes you can put on? I want to get you out of here right now. We need to stay very quiet."

He's so sweet, trying to comfort her and protect her innocence.

But it's already been taken from her, along with her clothes.

She shakes her head, tears welling over. "They took them all."

"Okay. That's fine. Let's pretend it's a swimsuit. Can I pick you up? I want to lower you out the window."

She shivers and wraps her arms tighter around her drawn knees, clearly

not trusting the situation.

“Shep, before you get her out of there, have her confirm tangos,” I instruct him.

“Sara, listen to me. Can you tell me how many men are in here? We counted six guys. Does that sound right to you?”

She nods, remaining silent.

“Do they have guns? Knives? What kind of weapons?”

“Yes,” she answers. “Both.”

“Any bombs or explosives? Did they warn you about any traps to stop you from escaping?”

“They never leave us alone in the house, and the windows don’t open from the inside. We can’t escape.”

“Okay. Good news, Sara. You’re escaping tonight. My friends and I were in the military. We’re good fighters. And we’ll get you and all the other girls out safely. I promise. You can trust me.”

His voice is calm and soothing. This must be hard for him, especially with Valerie being around this girl’s age. It’s probably triggering memories of our past work on the task force, much like it’s doing for me.

“Okay.” There’s a twinge of hope in her voice.

Jonesy lowers himself to her level, folding his large frame to appear less intimidating. “Sara, what kind of guns do they have?”

“I-I-I don’t know.”

“Big ones? Small ones?”

“Small ones.”

“That’s good. You’re doing great.”

“Ask her for a count of the girls,” I instruct them. “Does she know any names?”

Shep asks her, but she doesn’t.

I have dozens of questions for this girl. Intel from the inside is invaluable. But I bite my tongue when she continues her explanation.

“They bring in new girls all the time. I’ve been here for about three weeks, I think. Girls leave a lot too. And they don’t like us to talk to each other.”

“Okay. That’s fine. You ready to leave? There’s a white van outside, down the street on your left. My friend Kristen is there. Run to her as soon as you get out. Don’t look back.”

She nods eagerly this time, eyes widening with nervous excitement.

Shep gets her to her feet and leads her to the window, carefully lowering her out. Fortunately, it's not a long drop since the house is one story. But it is elevated, resting on concrete block footing, with a crawl space under the house. Otherwise, she wouldn't need help getting out at all.

"Kri, you've got one girl on the way to you. Her name is Sara," Shep says, an air of relief in his tone.

One girl saved is worth it.

But we're not leaving a single one behind tonight.

As soon as Sara makes it to Kri, I take a deep breath, preparing to green-light the op.

After assigning tangos to each of the guys, I prepare to cut the power to the house.

"Counting down. Go on three, two, one. Go."



## CHAPTER 26

**WHO THE HELL IS JAMES?**

KLEIN

For our side of the infil, Tomer's on point, and I'm in the rear. Being the least experienced, Aaron's sandwiched between us. In full tactical gear, we have our night vision goggles on and weapons drawn. It's like being in the Rangers again, but it's more meaningful this time.

There's something special about knowing I'm putting my life on the line for people who will immediately benefit. These missions were always sweeter when a rescue was the goal.

Just going in and killing an HVT or decimating a cell of combatants wasn't ever satisfying.

This matters.

This has instant value.

I haven't studied the structure layout like I'd prefer, but Mia did a good job of describing it to us. And with the lights out, we'll be on equal footing with the enemy.

As Mia counts us down, a steely calm settles over me. I'm not sure if the sound of her voice causes it or it's my training, but whatever the cause, I'm grateful.

The second she cuts the power, we advance swiftly out of the bedroom. Our steps are silent, like we're padding through the hall on a bed of clouds.

A wave of adrenaline hits me, sharpening my senses.

Startled screams from the girls reverberate around the house, perhaps due to the power outage. The tangos bark out orders. But they're already too late.

On our rapid advance down the hallway, we meet eyes with Shep and Jonesy on approach from the east side of the house. We have a clear view of each other with the living room and entrance to the kitchen between us. Jonesy dives into a side room off their hallway. That must be the other bedroom we couldn't see.

The stench in this place is revolting. I hate the idea of anyone being forced to stay here. Probably hasn't been cleaned in years, and all the atrocities that happen under this roof have me questioning my ability to let these fuckers live when we leave tonight.

"Weapons!" a tango yells.

A female voice shrieks in fear.

“Shut up, bitch!” another bellows, followed by the sound of a smack against flesh.

“Did Yetski forget to pay the power bill?” a third man whines, completely unfazed.

*Idiot.*

Tomer and Shep exchange hand signals. Our team will move to the living room to subdue those three, and the others will hit the kitchen. Junior comes in from the bathroom near the kitchen.

In a flash, we split up, each tackling a tango.

The man facing me grabs his gun, but since his eyes haven't adjusted to the blackout, I swat it away and seize his wrists, wrenching them painfully. A quick knee to his groin is followed by a kick to his lower leg, sweeping it out from under him. I'm on his back a second later, one knee pressing on his spine.

Once his wrists are secured in thick zip ties, I pull out some rope to secure his legs to his bound wrists. He's fighting me, as you'd expect, but Aaron is there to assist a second later, having already secured his guy.

He got lucky since he took out the tango whose dick was out. Literally.

I work expeditiously, stripping him of his cell phone and weapons. He had a pocketknife in his pants. I locate the gun I swatted away and tuck it into my waistband. Last thing we need is for someone to get hurt because a frightened girl grabbed a gun. Fear makes people irrational. And these girls were already terrified before we got here.

The team calls out statuses.

“One tango secure in kitchen,” Shep calls.

“Another secure in living room,” I announce next.

“Two tangos from kitchen secure,” Jonesy sounds off.

“Two more secure in living room,” Tomer answers for Aaron and himself.

“That's all six,” Junior calls, standing between the kitchen and living room, monitoring both our groups.

“Weapons and cell phones secure?” Mia asks.

Everyone responds in the affirmative.

“You two, do a sweep,” Tomer orders, pointing Aaron to the east side and Shep to the west side of the house.

At least he didn't use their names in front of the tangos.

“Shh,” I tell the girls gathered in the corners of the living room, most of

them huddled together. “Stay calm. We’re here to rescue you. You’re safe now. We’re the good guys.”

Mia provides an update from the con. “No calls to the cops. Nothing on sat imagery. No alarms coming through that I can detect. Someone, do a scan for silent alarms.”

“On it,” Jonesy answers, then quickly walks around the room with his signal detector out, checking for radio frequencies that would imply panic alarms were tripped.

“Lettie!” Tomer wails, panic and desperation coating his voice as he whips his head around to study the faces of the girls behind us.

“Team, are all tangos subdued? Can I restore power?” Mia asks.

“East side clear of tangos,” Shep answers.

“West side clear. Only more girls,” Aaron adds.

Not seeing her in the living room, Tomer bolts toward the kitchen. “Lettie, are you in here?”

“Turn the lights on,” I instruct Mia, assuming Violet will be more apt to come forward if she can see us.

“Copy,” Mia responds.

The power flickers on three seconds later.

Attempting to calm the traumatized women, I lift my mask and meet their terrified eyes while keeping my face hidden from the tangos. None of the girls resemble Lettie.

*Dammit.*

With the mask pulled off my face temporarily, a putrid stench invades my nose, making my stomach wretch. This place is more revolting than it was in the dark, and the smell is horrific.

A few seconds later, Tomer races from the kitchen toward the east hallway, his big steps eating up the space in seconds. His panicked voice bellows, “Lettie! Lettie Holt! Violet!”

Shep trails behind him, hollering for her too.

The sounds of doors banging echo from that side of the house. She must not be one of the five from that room either.

He’s frantic to find her. The longer he searches, the more anguish braids itself into his tone.

“Lettie! It’s me, sugar. Answer me!” Tomer’s desperate wails echo from the east side of the house.

Aside from Tomer and Shep searching for Lettie, everything starts

happening at breakneck speed.

Our team begins corralling the conscious girls, bringing them to the living room. I attempt to keep them calm while watching the tangos.

The men we subdued yell out curses now that they realize we're here to fuck up their entire operation and that no one on their side was able to fight back.

Done checking for alarm signals, Jonesy makes his rounds, snapping pictures of all the traffickers.

We used to do that in the service too. Proof of capture and for facial recognition. It might come in handy here too.

"Taking photos to send to you," he tells Mia.

Junior returns to the room with two frightened girls at his side. "Go sit with the others," he urges them softly.

They run to join the others, now gathering in the far corner of the living room opposite their hogtied captors.

"Violet!" Tomer yells, racing back into the living room, his head on a swivel as he studies the faces of the victims.

"James?" a meek voice calls out from the west side of the house.

"Lettie," he cries out in relief, frantically scanning the living room and removing his mask.

And there she is.

Violet *Lettie* Anastasia Holt.

Wearing a ripped, oversized T-shirt that comes down to the top of her thighs. There's a bruise on her cheek, and her blond hair is a knotted mess.

But she's alive.

No clue where she was hiding, but as she emerges from the hallway, she keeps her arms wrapped around herself protectively. Her eyes timidly search the scene.

When she sees Tomer, he's already zooming toward her. She takes one step in his direction, closing the remaining distance between them.

Their embrace is something straight out of a Hollywood movie. They slam into each other, bodies merging with an intensity that makes my breath stutter and my stomach pitch.

"I got you, sugar bear," he murmurs over and over into her hair. "I got you."

"James, oh my god. I didn't think I'd ever see you again," she whispers. "How did you find me?"

Cymbal crash.

James?

Surely, she jests.

That is *not* his name.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t find you sooner, sugar bear. So damn sorry. I tried to find you faster. Before they... I swear to you, I tried...” His voice cracks, trailing off when she cups her palm against his cheek.

He reaches for her hand and kisses her knuckles before leaning his forehead against hers.

My chest grows tight, and I have to avert my gaze. Their emotions are too powerful, and they’re warring with the adrenaline still pumping through my veins.

I choke out the words I feared we’d never be able to say, “We have her. Package secure.”

Mia’s response is instant. “Exfil. *Now*. Get everyone the fuck out. Tracking two SUVs and a pickup truck via traffic light cams outside the neighborhood. They’re speeding in your direction, having run two red lights so far. I don’t know their destination, but let’s assume they’re coming to stop you. Exfil Stat.”

Kri cuts through the comms. “Van is already in the driveway, team, and I’m moving the Charger now. Load the girls.”

“I know you aren’t driving, baby girl,” Shep goads, while hustling everyone out the front door.

Due to the lingering muscle control issues with the right side of her body from her traumatic brain injury, Kri’s not cleared to drive.

“Punish me later. Just get the fuck out of there,” she snaps.

Punishment? Again with the innuendo.

Is it possible that Shep and Kri have a similar bedroom dynamic to Mia and —

I blink, clearing my mind. This is *not* the time.

We need to leave.

*Now*.

It’s the fastest withdrawal ever, considering we’ve got seven operatives and sixteen victims — two of whom are unconscious — leaving in three vehicles. Plus, the two guys we popped earlier at the bar with an assist from Kri.

The girls who didn’t wake on their own amid the chaos were roused with

smelling salt. I'm exceedingly concerned about the two we couldn't get to regain consciousness. Jonesy carried one over his shoulder, and Junior and Aaron hauled out the other.

Shep and Aaron are in the SUV they arrived in, along with six rescued girls. The van alpha team drove here is at capacity with eleven of us packed inside. With Lettie wrapped around him like a pretzel, Tomer slid into the van with us rather than returning to the Dodge Charger he took to the scene. Instead, Junior's driving it with five victims with him.

We left the six traffickers tied on the floor of the disgusting house. It took every ounce of my restraint to refrain from setting it ablaze. If Lettie had let him go, Tomer would have unleashed hell on those monsters. When he tried, she jumped into his arms and begged him to get her out of there. Once they were in the van, she wouldn't let him leave to go back.

It's for the best.

We'll deal with the sick fucks later or let law enforcement get them off the streets.

Savin has one of the girls tucked close to him, smoothing her hair and rocking her against his chest.

He was telling the truth about his Tasha. His love.

When I got in the van, he begged me to free his hands so he could hold her, and his plea was so earnest and desperate I couldn't tell him no.

I'm way too much of a romantic to deny a request like that. Especially when I saw how she glued herself to him, tears coating her puffy red face, battered like Lettie's.

She clings to him, gripping him like a lifeline while he softly comforts her, cooing in her ear.

*"Vso horosho, moya lyubov."*

Everything is okay, my love.

*"Ya zdes."*

I'm here.

Over and over, he repeats the soothing words as she sobs against his chest.

My windpipe tightens, and my tongue feels heavy, so I shy away from the overwhelming scene.

Unfortunately, no place I look is safe from powerful emotions. From the terrified and devastated faces of the other girls to Tomer and Lettie.

She's on his lap, curled in a similar position to Savin and Tasha.



Tomer's eyes are closed, and his chin rests on the crown of her head. He runs one palm along her spine, and the other arm serves as a seat belt, locking her body against his.

An entire Ranger battalion couldn't break them apart.

"You're safe, sugar bear. It's going to be fine," he soothes her with feather-soft words.

Tomer is *sooo* fucked.

He doesn't merely know who she is. He *knows* her... in the biblical sense.

Kri and I have a silent conversation. No doubt she's equally shocked. Not only at Tomer's reassuring, smooth voice — nothing like his typical monotone drawl — but also at the realization that he's unquestionably in a romantic relationship with her.

Nothing about that is brotherly or friendly.

You don't hold someone that close unless there's intimacy there — even in this situation.

As the night progressed, my suspicions grew. But seeing it is a whole other ball of wax.

"I was so scared," Lettie whispers, sobbing into his chest.

When he opens his eyes, tears obscure his blue-green irises.

"I got you. You're safe now. No one will ever hurt you again. I swear to you."

"How did you find me? Who are these people?"

Instead of answering her rambling questions, he silences her with a kiss.

I look away to avoid intruding on their private moment.

Apparently, Tomer's kept more than just his name a secret from her. Especially since she doesn't know he's capable of coming in with a tactical team to stage a rescue.

Turns out, he's not as boring as we thought. Dare I say he's the most interesting man among us? Someone get that man a Dos Equis.

The mood is so heavy that I won't be able to lock all this shit up until I get out of this van. Some of my peers can buckle down their emotions in these situations, and while I learned to compartmentalize, it takes me a few minutes. I need space or a distraction. Then muscle memory takes over, allowing my mind to withdraw from whatever shit I saw.

Mia's voice helps me find my center.

Over the comms, she instructs us to drop off the rescued girls at the emergency room. We slide the two who are unconscious into wheelchairs and

ask the other girls to push them in for us, thus allowing us to disappear. We don't want to have our fingerprints on this any more than we already do.

Violet refuses to leave Tomer's side to go to the hospital, which suits him fine. He wasn't willing to let her go on her own, and if he were there with her, it would spell trouble for Redleg.

Tasha and Savin stay in the van too. I guess that means they're coming to headquarters with us, along with the other trafficker, Davidov. He's awake, but we put a gag in his mouth and a bag over his ugly mug to spare the girls. They've been through enough and don't need his intimidating glares.

Mia's steady and calm words sail through the comms. "I've wiped the video footage from the hospital with our vehicles making the drop at the ER and replaced it with a loop from earlier in the evening. Hopefully, the cops don't track the victims back to us, and since none of the girls know who we are — except the ones with you — we should be good. For now."

"Big Al will run interference for us with law enforcement if needed," Tomer says. "We did them a big favor tonight. I doubt they'll spend too much time searching for who the rescuers are."

"Who's Big Al?" Violet asks Tomer.

I gulp.

"I'll explain everything later. Just relax, sugar bear," he tells her, evading the question expertly.

My head lolls, resting against the side of the van. The adrenaline flees my body, tremors racking my muscles as it does.

When we pull up to Redleg HQ a few minutes later, Mia is waiting in the lobby for us, with Valerie by her side.

Todd, the D-squad guard at the entrance, waves us over to the desk, trying to get us to sign-in our guests — Lettie, Savin, Tasha, and the other shitbag whose name isn't worth remembering.

With a guttural snarl, Tomer blows Todd off. Knowing his place, the guard sits back down with his palms out apologetically.

It's good to be the king.

Drawn to Mia like a magnet, I glide straight to her, barely strong enough to resist kissing her.

"Miss me, tiger?" I taunt with a smirk.

Nibbling at her lip, she bats her lashes at me. "And if I didn't?"

"I guess I'd have to work harder next time. Leave you with my taste on your lips instead of the other way around."

She sucks in a sharp gasp and sweeps her gaze around the room to make sure no one is watching.

They aren't.

And I wouldn't give a damn if they were.

Tomer carries Lettie toward the gym. I'd bet he's getting her clothes from his locker.

Junior, Aaron, and Jonesy take Savin, Tasha, and fuck face Davidov to holding rooms down the hall. Shep and Kri are a few feet away from the guard's desk and focused entirely on reuniting with Val.

Mia shuffles closer to me, removing all but an inch between us. "Did it work?"

"Did what work?"

"The little gift I left on your tongue before you left."

"It did."

She hovers her lips a centimeter from mine and simpers, "Good."

With a sassy wink, she spins on her heel and sashays her sweet ass toward the elevator.

This woman will be the death of me.

We hold the elevator for the rest of the team. Tomer and Lettie file in first. As I suspected, she's wearing a pair of his baggy sweatpants. The other guys enter next, having secured the Russians. We need to discuss what to do with them when we get upstairs. Shep, Kri, and Val are the last to enter.

When we exit the elevator on the top floor a few moments later, Mia and I trail behind the team. She holds out my phone, passing it to me. "I kept an eye on her the whole time. Her friend came over and put her to bed, and she's been asleep ever since. She's perfectly fine."

My Adam's apple bobs with my forced swallow.

I trusted Mia with the most important person to me, and she came through. Even when she had a million other things to do and was running the con *on her own* for a huge rescue mission.

She didn't let me down.

Suddenly, I don't want to punish her.

I want to reward her.

## CHAPTER 27

**YOU SEE, WHAT HAD  
HAPPENED WAS**

MIA

“Come to my place tonight when we’re done here, or invite me to yours,” he whispers as we amble out of the armory after everyone drops off their weapons.

My pulse quickens.

I’m dying to scream *fuck yes* from the top of my lungs.

Yet his suggestion reminds me of the shit show that might be waiting at my house. In all the chaos, I’ve had zero time to check on my house to see what’s wrong.

He must assume my delay means I don’t want to spend the night with him, because he adds a deal sweetener. “I promise I’ll make it worth it.”

“Oh, I’m already on board, but we might have a problem to deal with first.”

His head rolls lazily, and he stamps one foot, impersonating an angry toddler.

*Sexy pouty baby.*

“What now?” he whines.

The sight of a buff grown-ass man with a mahogany five o’clock shadow and tattoos, who’s decked out in tactical gear and pouting like a child is freaking hilarious.

A laugh escapes me. One of my loud ones.

Since we’re lagging a few steps behind the others, a few heads snap around to glare at us.

Yeah, that’s our bad. Happy hysterics isn’t quite the vibe.

If Lettie wasn’t with us, I’m sure the others would be cutting up and joking. After a risky op, the tension has to go somewhere. In my experience working with team guys, Rangers, and Deltas, I’ve learned they compartmentalize well. Everything they witnessed tonight is already tucked safely into a box they’ll never open again. Until next time.

“We can talk about it later,” I tell Cal, then change topics. “First, what the hell’s bells is up with Tomer and Violet? From what I saw on the chest cams, he’s *definitely* entangled with her. And that complicates everything.”

Klein rolls his shoulders out, then drags his palm over his face. “Yeah. That was really something. He was so freaked. Did you see the way he ran

from room to room?”

“He didn’t have a chest cam, but I heard it through his comms and saw it on some of the other guys’ cams. Utter panic. And when they slammed together. *Oof*. Thank goodness we found her.”

“If we hadn’t, or she was visibly hurt, I’m not sure how far off the handle he’d have flown. I’ve never... *never* seen him like that before. I didn’t even know he had emotions beyond irritation.”

I swat his chest with the back of my hand, but it hits his chest plate and ends up hurting me instead of him. “Stop it. He’s not a robot.”

Cal rears his head at my exasperated retort, watching me skeptically. “What is the deal with you two?”

Jealousy hardens his tone, making my clit pulse.

While explaining my concern regarding Tomer, I flap my hand around to dull the ache. “We’re friends is all. Don’t get sand in your vagina.”

He chuckles at my bizarre phrase. I have no idea where that came from, but I’ve long abandoned trying to filter myself when I’m in a comfortable environment. And here, at Redleg, and with Cal specifically, I’m cozy as fuck.

“Friends, huh? You sure?”

Now there’s trepidation laced in his words in lieu of jealousy.

As we approach my office, I dart in and pull him behind me. But I don’t close the door, because we have a lot of ground to cover with the team before Cal and I can play tag with our privates. Being alone with him is far too tempting.

“Listen to me, please. You don’t have anything to worry about with Tomer. He’s like a brother to me. That’s all. I *see* him. And I happen to think that everyone here has been unfairly harsh where he’s concerned. I feel protective of him. All the jabs are wearing on him, and I can’t stand when people in my circle are hurt. But *you* are the one I want.”

I hope Cal can see the sincerity in my expression and hear it in my voice.

I mean every word.

He studies my face, letting his gaze trail down to my lips, then lower. As he takes me in, evaluating me, my heart beats faster, and butterflies swirl around my insides.

We’re silent for a beat until his eyes journey back to mine.

“Mia, I don’t know what’s happening between us. Maybe something. Maybe nothing.”

He pauses, and my stomach threatens to riot.

*Nothing?*

Impossible.

But I wait him out, preparing to hear whatever he says next. Good or bad, I need to know where his head is in all of this.

Or where his heart is, more accurately.

“But regardless, I can’t *stand* the thought of you with someone else. It’s irrational, and it freaks me the hell out. I’ve never —” He presses his lips together, unable to finish his sentence.

All I can do is reassure him. Or try to.

“Well, that’s ideal, seeing that I’m not *with* anyone else. Since we met, you’re the only man I can imagine being with. I only want you.” My volume softens. “I’ll do anything to prove it to you if you’ll let me.”

As his gaze warms, one side of my mouth quirks.

He nods a few times, then shocks me by asking, “Can I kiss you?”

“Please,” I beg without hesitation. “I will never object to you putting your mouth anywhere on my body.”

His hazel eyes hypnotize me as he cups my cheek, sneaking his fingers around the back of my head to pull me close and join our lips.

It’s a possessive move, screaming ownership.

A claiming.

One I freely accept.

My sense of feminism instantly evaporates at the idea of belonging to this man.

Sparks dance over my skin as he works his lips against mine. A moan escapes from deep inside me when our tongues meet, tentative and soft at first.

This isn’t the same as the other kisses we’ve shared.

It’s not frantic and sloppy like that first night.

And it’s not punishing or dominating like most of the kisses from earlier at my house. We aren’t fighting for control.

This kiss is something more... more powerful than those.

Meaningful.

Honest.

But it’s over too soon.

He withdraws from the kiss, leaving both of us panting wildly, and then he rests his forehead on mine. “Let’s go finish this op so I can get you home.



If I don't get inside you tonight, I'm not sure I'll survive until sunrise."

"I couldn't agree more."

Pressing my lips to his once more, I give him a gentle peck, lingering there for a few seconds before I retreat.

Inhaling sharply, he shakes his head a few times, probably clearing the lust.

Before we leave my office, he hits me with a ruminative stare. It's like he's weighing the moment, considering his words earnestly. "My mom is... important to me. Going on risky ops," he pauses, his eyes sweeping over the ceiling, "isn't as easy as it used to be. So thanks for watching out for her."

"Of course," I respond with a solemn nod as my airway tightens, making it hard to say anything else.

Part of me wants to swear I'll always look out for her when he can't. To tell him I'll do everything I can to help him. Ease his burden and become his rock.

Because that's what I *want* to be for him.

But that's crazy. We're just starting down... whatever this path is together. It's far too soon for promises I probably won't be able to keep. It's just my guilt, confusing me and muddling my feelings.

When we enter Tomer's office a few minutes later, everything is tense. Fists are clenched. Hardened stares are being cast around the room. And unease jitters around the team.

Then I come face to face with the reason for the vibe shift.

*Well, overbake my cake. We're fucked.*

Cal enters a few steps behind me. I'm blocking his view of problems one and two in the center of the room.

"What's with the long faces? Once again, Redleg saved the day." He's cheery and effervescent like he was the night we met. The poor dolt.

His feet stutter to a stop beside me. "Oh *shiiit*," he drawls, his posture sagging.

Big Al stands in the corner of the room, arms folded across his chest and steam billowing from his ears.

And I'm not sure it's metaphorical steam. It seems so real.

His thick beard doesn't cover the flush of his skin or the hard cast of his jaw.

Lionheart stands beside him, imposing as a redwood.

"Hi, Boss. Working late tonight?" Cal offers once the silence becomes

smothering.

“I didn’t want to be. I was having a fantastic fucking evening until I checked to ensure all was well at *my* company. Only to find that the armory had multiple badge swipes. That seemed odd, considering none of our cases were above a yellow threat level. So I poked around to see what could *possibly* warrant full tactical gear for this many people.” He steps forward, meeting eyes with the men, one by one. “And boy oh boy, was I surprised to see what was being broadcast here to this room.”

Tomer shifts Lettie behind him, one arm protectively guarding her.

That’s crazy. Big Al would never harm her.

Noticing the way Tomer guards her, Boss’s tone and face soften. “Get the girl out of here, T. Put her in a spare office and get your ass back. I don’t want to scare her. She’s obviously had it rough.”

He has no idea.

Lettie grips Tomer tighter. *Poor girl.*

Meanwhile, I’m kicking myself for not wiping the record of the armory badge swipes, let alone realizing that Boss could have a bird’s-eye view of everything happening in the control room.

Tomer levels a perturbed glare at me.

I promptly toss it right back because that would have been useful information for him to share with me.

Plus, we began the op together. He could have just as easily wiped the records or disabled Boss’s view.

But he didn’t.

And seeing him and Lettie together with my own eyes, the reason why is perfectly clear.

He was compromised by his emotions. Distracted to the point of making mistakes.

*Emotions.* The things that everyone swears he doesn’t have.

Although it’s not the time to deal with it, the way everyone treats him makes me irrationally angry.

Boss points his chin toward the door while holding Tomer’s line of sight. “Go.”

“All due respect, Boss, but she stays with me.” He shakes his head. “Sorry. But I’m not doing this tonight. I only came back in to drop off our gear and get my laptop. I won’t upset her any worse than she already is.” He gulps and swoops his gaze to her. “I’m taking her home.”

No one speaks while he picks up his things.

On his way out, he pauses and grazes my forearm. “Can you make sure everything gets handled before you leave? Lead a debrief?”

“Yes. Go on.” I glance at Lettie. “Take care, sweetie.”

“Thank you,” she quavers.

“We got it, T,” Klein adds, tapping his shoulder.

“Come on, sugar,” he whispers to Lettie as he tugs her toward the door. She follows wordlessly, and her fingers wrap around his bicep so firmly that I suspect he’ll have bruises tomorrow.

Big Al’s eyes bulge out of their sockets, not used to being disobeyed like that. When he realizes that no one is stopping T, he barks out, “Tomer, what the hell do —”

“Let him go, Boss.” Klein steps toward him with his palm extended. “Trust me on this. He needs to be there for her now.”

Boss cuts a side-eye at Leo. They both vibrate with restrained anger.

I don’t blame them.

Some of Big Al’s most trusted team members went behind his back to take part in a high-risk op. And Leo, his second in command, had no idea either. I bet he called him to the office, assuming he’d know what was happening.

But we kept it from him too. For good reason.

This isn’t the time to unpack everything. We have too much to do — debrief on the actual mission, get our stories straight, and figure out what to do with the shitbags and the girl downstairs.

Fists on his hips and jaw slack, Boss watches Tomer and Lettie leave.

Once they’re gone, he moves to the center of our group. “Who’s talking first? And give it to me straight. Don’t piss in my pocket and tell me it’s raining.”

All eyes are downcast, and none of us are eager to speak. Since this whole thing was my doing, I step forward and raise my chin, refusing to cower. “I’ll explain.”

“Please do,” Boss says with a faux cheeriness and a wave of his wrist.

“Earlier today, I came across a missing persons report for that young lady.” I take a quick breath, then continue so he doesn’t ask me who she is or why I was monitoring police reports.

I don’t have a good answer for that.

“I did some investigating and uncovered evidence that she’d been

drugged and abducted by a trafficking ring.”

Leo curses under his breath. Boss flicks his wrist again, encouraging me to continue.

“I suspect it’s Lenkov’s ring, but the men downstairs can likely confirm that. We know Yuri is involved too because one of his guards was the one who kidnapped Violet.”

Boss glances at Shep at the mention of Yuri, and then he pinches the bridge of his nose.

When he stops grumbling unintelligibly, Boss glares at me. “You were behind this, huh?” He shakes his head, something resembling disgust radiating from him. “Why didn’t you come to me? Is that how they do it where you come from? Just run rogue ops to bust up trafficking rings? Like it’s no big deal?”

I appreciate him not saying the CIA. Not everyone here knows that’s where I worked. Most of them think it was the state department, the typical cover the CIA uses. Safer for everyone that way.

“At first, I only planned to do a little investigation, but it quickly got complicated.” My answering tone is flat and unaffected. All business. “We knew we had to get her tonight. Before she was moved.”

He pulls out his phone and shakes it at me. “This isn’t a paperweight.”

I let my posture droop, shame filling me. “We thought you’d eighty-six the mission or force us to turn it over to law enforcement.”

“You’re damn right I would have. Why the hell didn’t *you* stop this?”

When I look up, he’s shifted his focus from me to Shep, pointing a finger in his face.

I can’t let Shep or any of them take the fall for this.

“I asked them not to tell you, Leo, or Sawyer,” I interject. “All of them. I swore them to secrecy to protect our ability to carry out the rescue.”

“Someone, make this make sense. It’s late. I was on a d —” He pauses, eating his words. “Instead of enjoying my evening, I’m here at midnight, waiting for someone to explain why there are battered Russians in the holding rooms. I’d also like to know if the police chief is about to blow up my phone if that’s not too much trouble.”

“They won’t know it was us,” I offer unhelpfully. “I took care of it.”

He lifts his big hands to scrub his face, then sighs gruffly into his palms.

Once he’s done groaning, he fixes a withering glare on Klein. “I never expected this from you. Shep? Maybe. He’s not fond of authority. Kri? Why

the fuck are you and Val even here?” He sweeps his finger between Jonesy, Junior, and Aaron. “And you guys? I don’t fucking know where to begin with you.” He points at Cal, making my heart clench painfully. “But you? Never would have guessed you’d do something like this. Is it because of her?” He flings his thumb in my direction. “From whatever your past is with her?”

“No, Boss,” Cal answers, resolute and calm. “We have our reasons, and they have more to do with the girl than anything else.”

“Reasons. Reasons. Everyone has their reasons, but no one has told them to me yet. Is she even a Redleg client? Or party to a client?”

“No, sir.”

“So this is because of Tomer’s relationship with her, then?” Shaking his head, he paces while murmuring to himself.

*Do I lie or tell the truth?*

It’d be sooo easy to tell him she’s Redleg family because of Tomer. Then we could move on to the debrief.

But I don’t want to lie anymore.

I’ve had it up to my tits with trying to remember the stories I’ve told. Even if the lies were justifiable and for a good cause, keeping track of them is an exercise in insanity. And my padded room is calling.

I’m exhausted.

I’m a hairsbreadth from blurting out the truth when Cal steps up. “Sir, she’s Redleg family. Tomer is involved with her, and we worked together to rescue her immediately. We decided to hide it from you and Lionheart for two reasons. One, we didn’t know if you’d allow us to get involved to the extent we felt necessary. And two, Mia believes that law enforcement is compromised regarding the trafficking in the area. Reporting it to the authorities could have ruined our only chance to get Lettie before she was sold or worse. Explaining all that to you and getting buy-in would have taken time we didn’t have. We had one shot, and we took it. We saved her and fifteen other girls tonight.”

Big Al’s face blanches over, the rosiness of his anger dissipating rapidly. He glances at Leo before facing Klein again. His eyes narrow to slits. “Did you just fucking call me *sir*?”

Muted chuckles echo around the room.

I exhale a nervous breath as relief takes root and threatens to blossom.

Something tells me that if Big Al can joke, then he’s not about to fire us. Well, not all of us.

I wouldn't be surprised if he escorts me from the building tonight with a box of my belongings. It was a risk I accepted because getting Lettie was worth it.

He plops into an empty chair and props his chin on his palm. "Start at the beginning. I'm not here to put socks on centipedes. Let's debrief and get the fuck out of here."

"Yes, si —" I begin but immediately cut myself when he shoots me an icy glare. "Yes, Boss."

The group settles, some taking the few available chairs and others leaning against the walls. Klein slips into Tomer's usual seat. He shoots me a wink, which I translate as saying: *You had my back earlier, and now I've got yours.*

No one's ever supported me like that.

If he doesn't cut that shit out, I won't only fall in love with him; I'll faceplant into it.

## CHAPTER 28

# CAKE VS. PIE



KLEIN

Five minutes ago, we arrived at Mia's house, finding it surprisingly untouched, despite her fears about the security outage. The system has since been restored and appears to be working properly.

After finishing the debrief at Redleg, Big Al ordered Aaron and Jonesy to transport Savin and Tasha, along with Davidov, to a nearby motel. Someone from the C-squad is coming to guard them tonight so the others can get some rack time. We'll figure out what to do with them tomorrow or the next day. In the meantime, they're safely out of the way.

Leo drove us to Mia's place since we rode with Tomer over to Redleg before the op.

He was silent the entire drive, but I knew he was itching to pelt us with questions or lecture the shit out of us.

Sure, he's irritated with us for not looping him into the plan, but I can't deal with that tonight. He'll get over it. At the end of the day, he'd have done the same thing with family on the line.

Once he drove off, Mia told me about her system going offline earlier, downplaying everything so I wouldn't call Lionheart back.

Together, we entered cautiously, with our weapons drawn. We searched but found nothing indicating anyone had been here. No forced entry. Nothing moved or out of place. Not even a bad vibe.

Considering our exhaustion level and that the system is operational again, we decide it's safe to crash here. Checking into the system malfunction is a problem for tomorrow.

Tonight, we need to unwind and rest.

After checking on my mom via the app and grabbing clean clothes from my SUV, I kick off my boots in the foyer. Mia wordlessly leads me by the hand into the bathroom. She tugs my shirt, untucking it and pulling it over my head. Her hands immediately go to my waistband to work my fly open.

For a few moments, I can only watch her take care of me. Then I snap out of my daze and help her out of her clothes. While we wait for the water to warm, she presses her back to my front. I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her neck, delicately kissing the pulse point.

We're still silent as she steers me into the shower.

The water cascades over us, and we simply hold each other. That's all. No making out or groping. Only compassionate touch and togetherness. Instinctively, we know our souls' batteries need to recharge.

We haven't spoken since we decided it was safe to stay here tonight. The strain of the day and the emotion of the rescue have caught up to us.

After a few minutes under the spray, she lovingly washes my hair. My chest tightens the more she dotes on me.

I can't remember anyone taking care of me like this before.

Because no one ever has.

Once we're both clean, we quietly dry off and get ready for bed. She tosses on a tank top and an adorable pair of sleep shorts with little cherries covering them. I opt to sleep in my boxers.

We hit the sheets and wrap ourselves around each other. As much as I want to bury my cock inside her, we need this more right now.

"Good night, beautiful," I whisper while trailing my thumb on the freckled skin of her shoulder.

"Night, Cal. Thanks for staying with me." She yawns. "If you should wake up with an erection, give me a nudge so I can take care of it."

I grin sleepily. "Deal."

Her breathing evens out after a few minutes, and I join her in dreamland.



I WAKE IN THE NIGHT, disoriented and alone. A glance at Mia's side of the bed shows me nothing but an empty pillow. I notice a light shining from the other room, so I get out of bed to see what my tiger is up to.

She's in the kitchen.

When my feet hit the tile, I'm met with the delicious sight of her heart-shaped ass. She's bent over, rummaging in the fridge. I take a moment to enjoy the view.

Mia pops up and turns, shocked to see me. Her eyes bulge, and her mouth parts so she resembles a kid who's been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. "Oh! Hi. Did I wake you?"

"I don't think so. I just woke up, and you weren't there."

She glances at the plate she's holding, then at me. "Sometimes I have trouble sleeping. Want some cake?"

With the comical smile of a madwoman on her face, she jabs the plate in my direction. It looks to be a giant slice of raspberry lemon cake.

I can't suppress the involuntary cringe it invokes in me.

"What's that face for?" She tips her head to the side, eyeing me suspiciously. "Do you not like cake?"

Craning my neck, pursing my lips, and wrinkling my nose, I wordlessly communicate my disdain for the subpar dessert.

She gasps, setting the cake plate on the kitchen counter, and takes three large steps toward me. Her eyes are wild and huge, and her chin is lowered. "Shut up!"

I chuckle. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to use words; your face says it all. And it's saying the wrong damn thing. Who doesn't like cake? What kind of maniac are you?" She takes a step backward, hand to her chest. "Are you a serial killer?"

Feigning offense, I suppress my laugh and replace it with an exaggerated sigh. "It's not that I don't like cake, Mia. It's simply that cake is the lowest item on the dessert hierarchy scale. It barely registers as food. It's that low."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I point my finger to the ceiling, halting her rebuttal. "Correction. It's not the lowest. I forgot about gelatin. So cake is the second lowest."

"You take it back!" She pokes me in the chest and stomps her foot. "Take it back right this instant."

I scrunch my lips at the corner of my mouth and shrug. "I didn't invent the hierarchy, Mia. It's been written since the dawn of time."

Her shocked expression morphs into something naughty, and I can see the wheels turning like she's plotting something.

Revenge probably.

This feels good. Messing with her this way.

For so long, I've been angry and bitter, especially where Mia is concerned. I'd forgotten how much fun we had together that first night.

Perhaps it wasn't all fake. Maybe some of that magic was real.

She grabs me by the wrist and drags me into her bedroom, flicking the light on as we pass the switch.

My dick likes where this is going, and it perks up.

Unfortunately, she doesn't toss me on the bed and have her way with me. Instead, she parks me in front of a floor-length mirror and turns me sideways.

She grabs my chin and twists my face toward the mirror.

With me positioned to her liking, she stalks around to stand behind me. “Look at this!” She opens her arms wide, spearing her hands like knives that frame my ass between them.

“What? My ass?”

“Yes! *This ass.*” She flails her arms around and moves them pointedly in front of my rump like she’s directing traffic toward my butt.

“What about it?” I squint as I study my profile. “Looks like a nice ass to me. It took a lot of squats and lunges to get it.”

Louder now, she exclaims, “I’m pretty sure this is the type of ass that inspired the phrase *caked up*. And I refuse to believe you don’t eat cake three times a day.” My shoulders shake with laughter while she rants on, getting more outlandish as she goes. “This physique requires daily cake injections to stay in this shape.”

I huff jokingly, “I can’t abide by fat-shaming, Mia.”

To tease her, I bob up and down a little, letting my ass bounce in a tiny twerk for her viewing pleasure.

She giggles, shaking her head. “Fat? No. Unless you mean phat with the ph. It’s perfection. I stay up late at night dreaming about your cake. The scriptures foretold of this sweet, fluffy, heavenly cake. Mmm. Fuck, I love your cake.”

My cheeks burn at this bizarre flattery. “Stop, Mia.”

This is quite possibly the strangest compliment anyone has ever been given. In the middle of the night, no less.

But she’s not done.

“Betty Crocker herself couldn’t bake a cake like this.” She grabs my ass cheeks and squeezes. Hard. “This is a dumpy for the ages. You have to let me frost it.”

Her squeezing turns to soft caresses, drawing a tempered groan from me.

My dick, which was already half-hard, stiffens more, thanks to her hands on my body.

Our eyes meet in the mirror. Her breathing grows louder, raspier.

Without warning, I spin and grab her around the waist, pulling her flush against my front. Her hands fall to my chest, and her lips open enough for her pink tongue to peek out, tempting me to have a taste.

“Okay, I get it. You like my ass. Point made. But I still don’t enjoy cake. I’m not a six-year-old at a birthday party.”

“Well, what do you like? What dessert do you think is better than cake?”

Are we talking about dessert? Because that was loaded with innuendo.

Pressed close together, we greedily soak up the moment and each other. I study the smattering of freckles dotting her cheeks and nose. The flush on her skin and the sparkle in her green eyes, so expressive they tell stories of their own. The pillowy, full lips, slick from the innocent swipes of her tongue. The curve of her nose and how it turns up at the end. The barely there wrinkles at her temples. The laugh lines surrounding her mouth, pronounced since she's smiling. And the more she laughs — that addicting, captivating, boisterous, atrocious excuse for a laugh — the more those lines will deepen.

She should be laughing all the time.

I want to be the one that makes her smile and laugh and all the other fucking enchanting things she does when she's happy.

"No answer for me?" she asks, and I have to rewind the last few seconds in my mind to see what she asked.

Ah, yes. She asked about my favorite dessert.

"Pie."

She licks her lips again, and I can't keep my hands off her face any longer, so I cup her cheek and let my thumb linger at the corner of her mouth.

"Pie?" she asks.

"Pie," I restate as I bring my lips closer. "I love pie." The words are a whisper, and although I'm answering honestly about my sweet tooth, I'm also talking about something else entirely.

Her gaze flits from my eyes to my mouth, and her voice grows breathier. "Any type of pie? Or one pie in particular?"

She drags her palms over my pecs and up my shoulders, then wraps them around my nape. Her touch electrifies me.

"Mmm. All pie is enjoyable." I place a kiss along her jaw. "Cream pies. Cherry pies." A kiss on her pulse point and another under her ear. "Apple. Crumb. Lattice." Three more kisses, moving from one side of her neck to the other. "Meringue. So many delicious options." I draw my tongue along the points of her collarbone. "And I like some pies more than others." I bring my lips to the other side of her chin. "But even bad pies are better than cake."

With my face hovering in front of hers, I catch her gaze, noting the hooded look in her eyes. All that heat matching my own.

I loosen my hold on her cheek and tuck a loose red lock behind her ear, then bring my mouth in close. Instead of kissing her like we both want, I turn at the last second, moving toward her ear instead.

She exhales sharply, a sultry pout. “Had an-any good pie recently?”

With the tip of my tongue, I lick the outer shell of her ear, making her visibly shudder.

“One stands out above the rest,” I confess.

Her panting breaths make her reply choppy. “Oh? What, uh, flavor?”

“It was a ginger cream pie,” I tease, fully embracing the silliness of this foreplay.

“Sounds terrible.” She dips her hands down my back, resting them on my ass. “Cake sounds better to me.”

I run my mouth along her skin, moving from under her ear to her jawline and to the slope of her silky neck again, mercilessly teasing her. “Oh no. It’s delectable. I can still taste it on my lips.”

She simpers seductively as I draw in a patch of her flesh with a gentle suck. Leaving one hand on my ass, she lifts the other to cup my nape and presses my mouth harder into the base of her throat. I tease her neck, licking and nibbling from one side to the other.

What started as teasing her has turned into torture for me. Unable to keep myself from kissing her any longer, I slant my lips over hers. A groan pulses from deep inside my chest when she opens for me, beckoning my tongue to delve into her mouth.

While our lips work together in a passionate dance, I snake my hand under the waistband of her sleep shorts, making a beeline for her sweet spot.

She sucks in a quick breath, breaking the kiss when my fingertips graze her tender flesh, already slick with desire.

I deepen the kiss as my fingertips probe along her slit before nudging inside her entrance. Swirling two fingers around her walls, I let her wetness soak my skin, like in her office before the mission.

Her hips rock slowly in rhythm with my pulsing fingers as she begins to fuck herself on my hand.

“You like that, tiger? Having my fingers filling your soaking wet pussy?”

“Mm-hmm,” she mewls, flexing her hips faster.

I crick my fingers, curving them to draw out a moan from her.

Before I get her off using my hand, I intend to prove how good her *pie* can be. Now that my fingers are soaked with her liquid desire, I remove them from her body and bring them to her mouth. “Taste how sweet your pie is.”

Her face dances with a cocktail of shock, laughter, and lust, but she complies, wrapping her ruby lips around my fingers and sucking them deep

into her mouth.

My dick weeps at the memory of how she wrapped those very same lips around my cock.

Her eyes flutter closed as she swirls her tongue along my fingers, then works them deeper into her mouth.

“Delicious, isn’t it?”

She nods, keeping her hand wrapped around my wrist so I don’t pull my fingers back too soon.

“I’m not sure if you’re being a good girl or a dirty girl. Sucking your arousal off my fingers seems like something a dirty girl would do, but I told you to do it, and you obeyed instantly like a good girl.”

She opens around my digits just enough to answer me. “Maybe I’m both.”

Returning to her task, she licks every last drop of her wetness off my fingers, making me achingly jealous for a taste of my own. It’s been far too long since she guided my fingers between her legs and into my mouth.

I withdraw my fingers abruptly, drawing a whine of protest from her. Before she can object, I thrust my tongue inside her mouth to get a taste for myself. It’s not as strong as when I get it from the source, but it’s enough to make me hard as stone.

“Mmm, I need more. Can I have more?”

“You can have anything you want,” she rasps while running her hand through my hair, scraping her nails along my scalp. “Anything.”

“On the bed. Now.”

She shuffles backward without hesitation. *Such a good girl.*

Once the backs of her knees hit the bed, she flops down and quickly scoots toward the center of the mattress. I prowl after her like the animal I’m becoming, crawling up the length of her body.

When I pass her knees, she lets her thighs fall to the sides, practically handwriting an invitation to where I want to be the most.

Bringing my hands up, I dig my fingertips into the soft flesh of her thighs, hidden underneath the thin fabric of her shorts. I wrap my hands around the inside of her legs and spread them wider, exposing her fully to me. Before I strip her bare, I want to have a little more fun teasing her.

I’m desperate to make her beg.

Yet again, the creature inside me has been awakened and demands I take what I crave from her. My internal version of Mr. Hyde has me saying filthy

things to her and calling her a dirty girl. Might as well make her beg and see if it compares to the heat of last night's punishment blow job.

With her thighs pressed open, I dive in and rub my face all over the fabric. I breathe her in, inhaling her tangy scent and holding it deep in my lungs.

Fuck, she smells delicious.

Zeroing in on her seam, I drag the point of my nose up and down along her center. When I get to the top, I wriggle my nose in deeper, aiming for her clit. I know I hit the target once she moans and bucks her hips.

The sound goes straight to my cock, making it throb with need.

She grabs a handful of my hair, tugging it gently at first, then harder and rougher while she bucks up again, dragging her core across my face.

I open my mouth and exhale a wave of hot air over the fabric covering her needy pussy.

She whimpers, "I need to feel you." She lets go of me to tug down her bottoms.

I shake my head, grabbing her wrists to halt her progress. Instead, I move our joined hands to the interior of her spread thighs so she's inadvertently helping me keep her at my mercy.

"Please, Cal. Take them off me."

Ignoring her desperate pleas, I clamp down on her tenderly, nipping and tugging at her clit through the material of her shorts.

She begs again, louder this time. "Please, Cal. Touch me."

I meet her gaze over the rise and fall of her breasts. "Not yet."

She harrumphs, flopping her head flat against the bed with a thump. Her annoyance only makes me want to tease her more.

I had no idea how hot it could be to be an asshole in the bedroom.

Unfortunately, I don't have any other words to describe this behavior. I'm sure there are some terms for this, but it's the complete opposite of how I've ever been before. And of how I was our first night.

But she's totally into it.

Despite the begging, she likes being at my mercy. It's written all over her beautiful face. It's there in the glimmer in her eyes, the nibble of her lip, and the flutter of her lashes.

For the next several minutes, I tease her through the paper-thin fabric, running my nose and mouth along the damp apex of her thighs.

"You want more?" I ask before digging my chin into her folds, hitting her



clit.

Her mewls and breathy pants drive me mad with desire, so I wiggle my chin back and forth. Anything to keep those heavenly sounds falling from her lips.

“Yes. I want more, Cal.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you.”

“To do what? Tell me what you need, Mia.”

“I want you to strip me naked and bury your face in my pussy.”

A wicked grin tugs at the edges of my mouth. “You only want my face in your pussy? That’s all?”

“No.”

“What else do you want me to do to it?”

“Eat it. Lick it. Taste it. Suck it. And then fuck it with your thick cock.”

She rattles off a list like I asked her what I could do around the house. Holy shit, she gave me a *honey-do list*. Or maybe it’s a *horny-do list*.

Raising to my knees and releasing my grip on her hands and thighs, I quickly remove those cute sleep shorts. As the fabric rolls off her legs, the seductive way her creamy flesh is exposed to me, inch by inch, has me seriously questioning my ability to delay sinking my cock inside her.

“Take your top off. I want you completely naked.”

Once she’s beautifully nude before me, she shimmies down the bed while I do the same. Her eagerness to line up my face with her pussy is somehow adorable and sexy.

I return my hands to her supple ivory thighs and hoist them over my shoulders.

Lingering an inch from her pussy, I blow across her tender flesh. I wonder how long I can stay here before she begs again or shoves my head forward.

Let’s see.

At an achingly slow pace, I drift closer and pull in a deep inhale through my nose. “Mmm. So damn good. I love your pie, baby.”

She grins at my silly pun. “You’re so cheesy. The worst lines ever.”

“And yet here you are.”

Her smile fades, heat quickly replacing it. “Here I am.”

Holding her gaze, I repeat inhaling her scent and exhaling warmth all over her exposed pussy a few more times.

Her breathing gets ragged until she's begging me with every inch of her beautiful face. Her eyes. Her pouty lips. Her furrowed brow. Her flush cheeks.

But I want the words because I'm a greedy asshole now that I know how good this feels with her.

It wouldn't be the same with anyone else.

Only her.

This mischievous woman who's haunted my dreams for weeks. Who's made me crave her until it hurt. The woman who got me so fucking hard I had to rush off to the restroom at work to fuck my fist.

The woman I know better than to trust with my heart, even if I can't seem to stop myself from giving it to her.

Licking my lips, I move forward again, but right before I make contact, I twist my neck to kiss her inner thigh.

She groans in frustration and pounds a fist into the mattress.

"What's the matter, tiger?" I taunt.

"Stop torturing me," she simpers. "Please, Cal."

I arch a brow. "I thought you liked it when I punished you."

"I can't take anymore. *Please.*"

"Remind me of what you wanted. Something about shoving my face into this sweet pussy." I blow across her flesh again.

"Yes, please."

"Beg for me again, tiger. Let me feel your desperation and neediness."

She doesn't hesitate. "Please, Cal. I'll do anything you want if you just lick my pussy. I need it so badly." She cups her breasts and flicks her nipples. "I want you so desperately I'm aching. I *need* you. Please make me come. I'll be your good girl. Please." Her voice grows shakier. "You can have anything you want. My mouth. My pussy. My hands. My ass. Anything. Fuck me any way you want. Be as rough or gentle as you want. Just fucking make me come."

Someone in the imaginary swing band behind the Rat Pack in the back of my mind dropped a cymbal, causing it to crash to the ground. The era-appropriate version of a record scratch.

*Her ass?*

Gulp.

I'll have to circle back to that once I have blood in my brain instead of my dick.

“You can fuck my tits. Spit on me. Choke me with my own hair. I don’t care as long as you make me come.”

She keeps on rattling off all the things she’ll let me do to her — some of which I’ve never heard of before — so I quickly crawl up her body to shut her up with a kiss.

She sighs into my mouth, cradling my cheeks between her soft hands.

I break the kiss so I can get back to what she begged for. She earned it with that X-rated monologue.

“Shh,” I whisper and pull away. “That’s good enough. You have excellent begging skills.”

Her cheeks rise with her wide smile. “You’re going to make me come now?”

I don’t answer other than to slink down her body and bury my face in her slick pussy, nuzzling into her sensitive flesh.

“Mmm,” I moan appreciatively as her wetness dampens the skin around my mouth.

She whines when I pull away.

“Get back to the list of things you wanted me to do to your pussy.”

A questioning look sweeps across her features.

“Remind me what you needed. One task at a time. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do.”

Moving my slightly parted lips over her pussy, I wait for her to direct me.

She raises on her elbows for a better view, and her thighs fall open wider.

“Anything?” she asks. “What kind of punishment is that?”

“I’m done punishing you. Now you get a reward. You’ve done everything I asked of you, so it’s only fair I return the favor. Right?”

She nods as a honeyed smile lights up her face. “Are you sure? Anything I ask?”

Why do I have a feeling I’m going to regret this?

“Anything, tiger.”

Her expression darkens, the eagerness replaced with a wicked glint in her eyes. “Flatten your tongue and lick your way up to my clit. Slowly.”

## CHAPTER 29

**THAT'S NOT WHERE YOU  
SHOULD KEEP THE HOPE  
DIAMOND**

MIA

Lifting my hips, I match the rhythm of the pulsating suction he's delivering to my clit. "Yes, yes, yes. Oh my god. Keep sucking my clit. Just like that."

He's following my every instruction to a *T*, pleasuring me as if it's his only purpose in life. But only after teasing me for what felt like hours.

I don't know what happened to the sweet man who passionately ravaged me that first night while only whispering praise and asking if everything he was doing was okay and good for me.

I enjoyed myself immensely with *that* Klein.

But this Klein?

Straight from my spiciest fantasies.

In a few short minutes, he's already got me barreling full speed toward a climax. But I don't want to come yet, so I change it up. "Use the tip of your tongue. Flick right under my clit. Fast as you can."

He complies, and my legs start shaking, shudders of pleasure running all through me. Son of a bitch, I'm so close.

"Hold me down. Don't let me thrust my hips," I demand.

If I buck up, I'll come too fast. And considering how long he edged me, I want double the time with him between my thighs.

He said he wanted to *reward* me.

Not sure I earned one, but I'm not an idiot. I'll eagerly accept his gifts, one lick at a time.

His strong hands press me deep into the mattress the way I asked. And it causes another wave of arousal to skate across my body. Instead of keeping my orgasm at bay, it brings me closer. *Dammit*.

"Stop, stop," I yelp, reaching out to push his face away.

He looks at me with those damn puppy dog hazel eyes, mouth glistening with my slickness. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

*Oh, sweet angel man.*

"No," I answer with a deep exhale. "I don't want to come yet. And I was getting very, very close."

He licks his lips, seemingly relishing my taste. "Are we rationing your orgasms tonight?" His pink tongue darts out to lap at my quivering pussy.

“No, but if I only get one chance to have you do my bidding, I’m making it count.” A high-pitched squeal escapes me in response to the attention he gives my clit, but I manage to force out the rest of my explanation. “And there’s something else I want you to do yet.”

He pauses his oral assault, placing a peck against my pink flesh. “Who said you only get one chance?” A worried look passes across his features, his brows bunching and his eyes narrowing. “Is tonight a one-time thing for you?”

“Oh no, babe.” I shake my head and sit up. “That’s not what I meant.”

He leans his cheek on the inside of my right thigh and gazes at me. “What did you mean?”

“Um, I guess I assumed you’d want to be back in control after this.”

He nods as a grin replaces his frown. “Oh, I see.” He bites his lower lip. “So you *do* want more than tonight?”

He’s got that innocence from the first night again, a hint of nervousness replacing the cockiness. Is it possible he’s the same man who tortured me over my clothes for ages and choked me with his dick?

He’s fascinating, with all his pieces, edges, and angles — soft, hard, angry, sweet, naïve. And my favorite, naughty.

He’s a diamond with dozens of facets reflecting light in all directions.

I lean forward, bringing my palm to cup his cheek, feeling the roughness of his stubble. “Yes, I want more than tonight with you. I know we didn’t have the best start, but I’d like to see where this goes.”

“Me too,” he admits, nuzzling deeper into my palm.

*Oh, I could eat him up.*

“I’m not only saying that because your face is an inch from my pussy and you have the tongue of a god.”

That celestial tongue swipes along my seam while he holds my stare. Somehow, he’s smirking while giving me oral.

*That’s talent, folks.*

Enjoying the view, I remain in a seated position. At this angle, I can watch him work, and I can hold his head, moving it any way I want.

Wrapping my fingers delicately on the back of his head, I guide his movements slowly at first. “Is this okay?”

He nods his consent, the shaking motion against my core sending flutters of euphoria throughout my body. My hips begin subtly thrusting in concert with the downward strokes of his face against my pussy.

*Damn, this is hot.*

It would be even hotter if he didn't have those boxers on so I could feast my eyes on that delicious cake behind him.

I'm two seconds from stopping him when he glares at me. "Don't you dare stop until you come all over my face, Mia. You can have as many orgasms as you want tonight."

In the words of the great George Takei, *oh myyy*.

My breath and pulse both quicken.

He returns his attention to my clit, and I grind harder against his face. It feels so damn good I stop directing his movements — not that I really needed to initially. Cal knows *exactly* what he's doing down there, expertly swiping through my sensitive flesh, sucking my clit, and ravaging my pussy like it's his last meal.

"Oh, Cal. Fuck. I'm gonna come." My volume and pitch increase to match the intensity of his movements until wave after wave of bliss overwhelms me and my orgasm rocks me to my core.

His appreciative moans vibrate across my wet flesh, heightening the sensations. My toes curl, and my legs stiffen as he sucks and licks me higher.

He senses the moment I need him to pull back, letting me ride it out with gradually slower movements until coming to a stop.

He's so freaking attentive. Must be his military training. Or it could be a bodyguard thing. He's mastered the art of studying subtle signs and responding to them effortlessly.

And I'm reaping all the benefits. *Cue evil laugh.*

Wow. I think orgasm hysteria is setting in.

By the time I've caught my breath and consciousness returns, he's still down there. Making no effort to drop his bottoms to continue the action. This is the part where the guy usually rolls on a condom and prepares to drive inside my quivering core.

It's what he did that first night.

But he's not now.

Instead, he's simply resting his cheek on my lower belly and running his palms all over my hips, stomach, and thighs.

Worshiping me with his touch.

For the first time in my life, I understand how people fall in love.

It's moments like these. I wonder how many moments it takes. Dozens? Hundreds?



One?

Maybe it's already happening. I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, one foot slipping as the rocky surface below cracks and gives way. I'll be plummeting down the jagged crag any second.

Hell, who am I kidding? I started losing my footing around him that first night when he opened his heart, showing me the honorable man he is on the inside.

It scared me, which is probably why I doubled down on my goals and kept the focus squarely on him. Then when I saw him again, I hardened my shell to keep him at bay. I was harsher than I had to be. Instead of apologizing like I wanted to, I pushed him farther away.

All to stop him from seeing the real me.

The one I've kept hidden for fifteen years.

He sighs, his breath tickling my lower belly.

Stroking his hair, I smile sleepily. "What are you doing down there?"

"Watching you."

"Creeper," I tease.

But then... isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?

"If it's creepy to watch you come down from an orgasm high, then I guess I'm one of those old-fashioned dolls with the eyeballs that follow you as you move around the room."

The climax rush battling with how damn lovable he is makes it physically impossible to hold back my giggles.

"I could watch you all night and day," he adds before his face pinches tight. "Wait. That sounded horrible. I'm not a stalker. I mean, silently watching someone for hours is acceptable in movies or those dark romance books my sister reads, but in real life, it's restraining order material."

Full-on laughing, I reach for him. "Get up here, my sexy stalker."

He moves up my body, stopping to kiss my hips on the way, one and then the other. As he passes my breasts, he pauses over them. His mouth parts, and his tongue pokes out like it's straining for my nipples. His vision trails across every freckle and mark.

"Mia?"

I twirl my fingers through his soft brown hair. "What?"

"Baby, I want to motorboat the hell out of your breasts. Are we at the motorboat stage yet? At what point is that acceptable?"

His face shifts to pained longing when my boobs start jiggling with my

unrestrained laughter. He stares at me, wearing those adorable puppy dog eyes.

I'm powerless to resist him.

Feigning annoyance, I wave my hands across my chest. "I was going to say a proper date was needed first, but go ahead. I owe you one trip around the lake in your motorboat after that orgasm."

"And I was going to say you don't owe me anything, but I *need* to do this, so I happily accept your offer."

He pounces, diving into my cleavage and wobbling his head back and forth while blowing raspberries. All the while, my already boisterous laugh kicks up a few decibels, mingling with his own guffaws.

How long has it been since I've laughed like this?

When he stops, having thoroughly ravished my cleavage in the most adorable Cal way ever, he finishes climbing up me and captures my lips, cutting off our laughter.

He tastes like me, and it's erotic as hell.

The mood shifts again. The fervent way he devours my mouth quickly diverts us from playful and frisky to lust-filled passion.

The way we effortlessly oscillate between flirty, funny, and lustful gives me an unmatched high. It's the same effervescence I saw in him the night we met. A spark and a glimpse of light that draws me toward him.

I'm enraptured.

I ease my hands under the waistband of his boxers and rub his ass. "Take these off, stud."

He pulls away and stands to remove them. I nibble my lip while he works them over his tapered hips, exposing the deep V of his defined abs. He's got more of those drool-worthy bulging veins caressing his hips, heading to his cock.

Definitely have a vein kink.

Then again, maybe it's just a Klein kink.

My thirsty gaze drinks in the expanse of his chest and all the ink adorning him like art. My vision lands on the angel wings over his heart and how they bleed into the shoulder and upper arm sleeve — blacks, blues, and reds all coming together as if they were born from his skin.

As his cock springs free, memories of him pressing me against the wall and slamming into my mouth careen into my consciousness.

Before that encounter, I'd never have guessed I'd enjoy being used and

degraded. Hell, I surrendered my airway to his whims, literally putting my life in his hands. I knew having a bossy lover was hot, but I'd never experienced anything to that level.

The experience with Cal was purifying and cathartic.

It's been agony living with all my guilt from hurting him, especially the more I got to know him. So I did want him to cleanse me with a punishment.

But that wasn't the *only* part that felt good.

*Pleasing* him is what sent me over the edge. Letting him direct me and giving up my need for control in return was rapturous. The pleasure I got from ceding my body to him in the most primal of ways was unsurpassed. Somehow, I instinctively knew he needed it. It was a gift only I could provide, and I did so eagerly.

Just thinking about it makes my mouth water and my heart race.

It also doesn't hurt that he's naked and returning to the bed after fishing a condom from his wallet.

He flashes me a knowing wink, catching me lusting over his body. My gaze lingers on his cock. "All yours, gorgeous." He checks his watch. "For a little while longer. We need to get back to sleep. We have a long day tomorrow." His face grows serious, something passing behind his eyes. "And I have a stop to make on the way to work in the morning."

"What time is it?"

"Almost four."

My jaw falls. "Fuck."

"Yes, ma'am. That's exactly what's about to happen."

Unable to keep my hands off him, I cup his balls while he suits up, drawing a hiss from him. He grabs my cheeks with both hands and joins our lips, kissing me hard and deep. After guiding me to my back, he covers me with his hard body.

*Mmm.* I forgot how euphoric it is to lie with him. I adore the feel of his weight against me, pinning me to the bed, and his strength and firm muscles under smooth, warm skin.

It's better than the finest cake.

At the thought, I drift my hands to his ass and squeeze.

It draws a muted laugh from him. "You hungry for some cake, tiger?" He runs kisses along my chin and toward my ear as his cock slides over my needy, wet center.

"Well, you enjoyed my pie. It's only fair you let me indulge in your dump

cake.”

We must be slaphappy from lack of sleep.

He chuckles quietly, his scruff tickling my neck. “Speaking of eating your pie. When I was doing that, you said you wanted me to do something else. What was it?”

A nervous giggle erupts from me, and my cheeks warm. “Ah-ha-ha. It’s nothing. Forget it.”

His hazel eyes bore into me. “I’m physically incapable of forgetting it. That look on your face has me far too intrigued.”

Not sure why I’m suddenly embarrassed. Probably because the heated passion from earlier has faded, having made room for silly, sweet, sexy times. But he’s gone from a puppy to a bloodhound, determined to sniff out my secret desires.

Here goes nothing.

“Well, I have something I wanted you to, uh, use.”

His head cocks to the side as worry flashes across his features.

I clarify, “On me. I want you to use it on me.”

“What is it? Where? How?”

With how he’s been so multifaceted sexually, maybe he’s already going to be into this. Some men are all about it, but a few can’t stand the idea.

“It’s, um, a plug. For me.” I point toward my bedside table. “It’s over there.”

It takes a few seconds, but his lips slowly curl at the corners, sending relief spiraling through me.

It’s my one true kink. Double penetration is heaven on earth.

But when he speaks, he’s not as excited about it as I’d hoped. “A butt plug?” His voice trembles with a nervous quiver, and his ears glow red.

My teeth clamp down on my lower lip. “Yeah. Is that okay?”

His eyes widen, and his mouth moves frantically but wordlessly as if he’s been cast in the lead role in a silent film.

*Oh great dangling donkey dicks.*

I damaged the good boy by asking him to shove a plug up my ass.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine. Just thought —”

He puts his finger to my lips, halting my nervous backpedaling. “Shh.”

A muffled harrumph tries to sneak out around his finger. He shakes his head, bending down to silence me with his lips.

He kisses me harder, clearly trying to shut me up. When he pulls back, he

eagerly asks, “Can I get it from the drawer?”

Oh, would you look at him. This puppy is already housebroken. Respecting my privacy like a gentleman only mere seconds after I asked him to violate my ass.

He’s perfect. What the hell is he doing with me?

“Yes. It’s in a purple velvet bag. Lube is in there too.”

Aren’t I helpful?

Swiftly, he retrieves the bag of goodies from the drawer. Once he’s between my legs, he studies the plug carefully.

“Fancy.” He seems to grow more comfortable with it the longer he studies it. “I assume it’s not a real diamond,” he jokes.

More of that giddiness surrounds us like a joyful hug.

Although I know he’s kidding, I quip, “A diamond that size is worth more than I’ll make my entire life. I’m not okay with shoving something as valuable as the Hope Diamond in my ass.”

We laugh until he pulls out the lube. “Confession time. I’ve never done butt stuff before. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised.”

*Oops. That was my outside voice.*

“Should I be insulted by that remark? Part of me wonders why you’d think that.” He sounds a touch offended, and that pains my heart. I don’t want to ever hurt him again. Even involuntarily, with a flippant comment.

I take the shiny metal plug and lube from him. “No offense intended, stud. It’s a little clear I’m corrupting you. But it’s hot being the first to do this with you.”

He grimaces but watches me lube the plug liberally. “Okay.” He doesn’t sound convinced by my explanation.

“I’m serious, Cal. It’s sexy to teach you this. Don’t be butt-hurt.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish a hole would swallow me.

Cal busts out laughing, killing the mood.

And that’s totally on me.

Not that we’ve been especially serious all night, save for a few moments of scorching heat. But I’m enjoying every moment. If you can’t laugh with your lover, then should you even be in bed with them? Sex should be fun.

And this is the most fun I’ve had with a man... ever.

After all the angst and tension between us these last few weeks, it’s refreshing to know we’re comfortable and genuinely enjoy each other’s

company.

When the hysterics dry up, I heave a sigh. “Do you still want to do this now that I’ve killed the mood?”

He shakes his head, making my heart sink. “The mood isn’t killed. At least not for me.”

“It’s not?”

“I like being with you this way. Laughing. Relaxed. Comfortable.” He raises one shoulder. “But also excited and eager to try something new.”

“Me too.”

“Besides, I’m still hard as granite.”

A glance down his body proves he’s most definitely happy to be here.

“Maybe you should check to see if I’m still wet.”

His brows dance as he drags his fingers along my seam, sinking two fingers into my pussy. “Oh yeah. Still soaked for me.”

His voice is huskier, and he’s smoldering at me again. Sexy Cal has entered the chat.

My pulse jumps. “Where were we?”

Leaning forward, he runs his mouth along the fevered skin of my neck. “Be a good girl and show me how you put that jeweled plug in your sexy ass.” The warmth of his breath makes my core clench.

He leans back, giving me space to work. Rolling to my side, I lift one leg like a shell. He stares at me with an expression so hot it leaves a trail of electricity in its wake.

“I need to kiss it again,” he mutters, almost to himself.

Diving in, he licks my pussy, spearing my entrance with the pointed tip of his tongue for a few pulses before traveling up to my clit. He rolls and swirls his tongue around it before sucking it firmly.

My head falls onto the pillow. “Fucking hell, Cal. So good at that.”

He stops suddenly, leaving me craving more. “Go ahead now.” He tips his chin at the plug.

I swirl the lubed tip around my opening, and my breath hitches. He observes intently, one hand on his cock and the other gripping my thigh to hold me open.

As I slowly work the plug in, his focus intensifies. I don’t need to see what’s happening between my legs, so I keep my eyes on him.

Based on how he’s stroking his cock, he might be willing to take my ass one day.

Once it's in and the jeweled base is snug against my skin, a slight moan escapes me. "I'm ready for you to get inside me."

He growls his response. "Yes, ma'am."

Keeping me on my side, he rises to his knees and holds one of my legs up, straddling my thigh on the bed. We're positioned so he'll have a view of my ass and pussy while he enters me.

"You want to watch your cock fill me with that plug in there, don't you?"

He nods rapidly and starts to nudge inside my pussy. "That is so fucking hot, Mia. You look like royalty. A queen adorned with jewels." He darts his gaze to mine, eyes darkening. "You are the sexiest woman I've ever seen."

I whimper as he sinks in farther, filling me so delicately. It's hard to believe this is the same man who was so rough with me when I was on my knees.

Once he's fully seated inside my body, his gaze burns my skin. He lets my leg fall and shifts me so I'm flat on my back. He leans forward to cover my body with his. Cupping my cheek tenderly, he joins our lips.

But the kiss is a sharp contrast to the way his hand sensuously holds my face. His mouth takes mine with a forcefulness, demanding and controlling.

A whole new man is inside me.

His tongue demands entrance with greedy licks and thrusts. The ferocious way he devours my mouth has me pulsing around his cock, which surprisingly remains locked in place. I don't know how he's resisting thrusting his hips. If I were on top, I'd be slamming myself on top of him frantically by now.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I ask him once he pulls back to catch his breath.

He nibbles my lower lip, tugging it toward him. "I forgot how good it feels to have you wrapped around my cock. And what can I say? Turns out, I enjoy teasing you."

"Is this more punishment?" I ask coyly with one brow quirked.

His tone is so gritty when he replies that I could use it to sand a rough piece of wood. "You *are* a bad girl. Corrupting me. You should be punished, don't you think?"

My breasts heave into his chest with my deep breaths, and the hard planes of his pectorals tease my stiff nipples. "If you have a problem with me, you should take it out on my pussy."

A sadistic grin creeps up his face as he withdraws from my body, leaving

only the tip inside me. “Be careful what you ask for, baby.”

He slams in with so much force that I slide up the bed. He pounds into me furiously, punishing my pussy like I told him to.

My hands raise to brace myself against the headboard as he sets the frenzied pace, bottoming out with each stroke.

“Shit, Cal. Yes. Oh my god. Yes.”

He keeps on fucking me, teeth bared and grunting wildly. Dropping one hand from the headboard, I grope his ass. The way it flexes in my grip is nearly enough to make me come on the spot.

And when you add the erotic sounds he makes to the tight fit of his cock and the plug filling me and narrowing my slick channel, I nearly come undone.

“I feel that fucking plug,” he husks out.

“Good?” I ask, a little unsure based on his tone.

“Amazing. So much better than good. I’m bumping against it on every stroke, and I could swear it’s making you tighter.”

He slows his pace to change positions. Still between my legs, he spreads his knees wider and slides them closer to my ass. He pulls my hand off him and the other from the headboard, pressing them flat on the mattress above my head and lacing our fingers together.

He’s holding me down. I’m at his mercy.

But I’ve never felt more free.

“Forgot. How. Good. You. Are,” I praise him in a staccato rhythm, matching his powerful thrusts while bucking my hips to meet his.

“And I forgot how good you are at taking my cock. Your pussy has been haunting my dreams since the night we met.”

We’re so close this way, with nothing separating us, not even air. Our lips collide, moving against each other with a passionate intensity. It’s so fucking good.

*The kiss.*

*Him pressed flat against me.*

*His hard length plunging inside me.*

*The scruff of his stubble rubbing against my cheek.*

*The breathy pants and pleasure-filled groans.*

He keeps our bodies close, grinding fiercely into my clit with every delicious swirl of his hips. Tingles blossom low in my belly with the beginning stirs of my orgasm. But unlike when he went down on me, I don’t



stave off my climax. I welcome it, gripping it with the same intensity that my inner walls do his cock.

“That’s it, tiger. Come for me,” he encourages, talking me through it and driving me higher. “Give it to me, Mia. That’s my girl.”

*His girl.*

I wish that were true.

The peak of my orgasm slams into me, making me cry out. My arms cling to him tightly, like I’m afraid he’ll float away. Blinding lights flood my vision, and euphoria shoots through every cell in my body. A litany of unintelligible words falls from my tongue while I spasm around him.

As good as it was that first night with him, tonight is on a whole other level. It’s probably due to the closeness I feel to him and the longing that’s built up for weeks. But it’s also the way my heart calls to his.

When my climax finally wanes, he slows his pace and lifts his head to stare at me. His eyes rake over my face with a poetic beauty I can’t quite explain. My reaction to how he studies me is visceral, and it sends a bevy of flutters throughout my stomach and chest.

He’s looking *through* me, not at me.

His gaze penetrates me so acutely I fear he’ll see everything I’ve kept hidden for years. Every secret, past hurt, and lie. Every burst of hope that’s been dashed from me.

He sees them all like my eyes are merely windows.

I slam them closed to try to hide from him. But all the regret for my life choices comes rushing to the surface once the darkness in my field of vision bleeds into the inky black of my soul.

Burning unchecked is the regret for the lies I’ve told. Adding to the fire is the regret over the years I’ve lost as penance for my sins. But scorching me worse is the regret for the pain I’ve caused — not only Cal but my family. My baby sister especially.

If he knew everything I’ve done, he wouldn’t want me.

No one could ever want me. No one ever has.

The tragedy of that thought cuts me deeper than all the rest. Because for the first time in my life, I’ve found someone who I want to know me. The real me.

But if he did, he would leave.

How can I reveal the real me if doing so would drive him away?

It’s a situation I can’t win. There’s no way I’ll survive this.

Survive him.

Through the anguish, I force myself to open my eyes and am relieved he's no longer watching me. The respite of being away from his perceptive stare causes tears to overflow until I'm unable to dam the tide.

They stream freely.

Because I don't *want* to hide from him.

With his face buried in my neck, he worships the erogenous curve of my throat with his talented mouth. His hips thrust in long, smooth strokes as he chases his own orgasm. He holds himself deep inside me and finally succumbs to his release.

When he draws back to kiss me, he freezes in response to my tearful expression.

"Baby, are you okay?"

So I do what I do best.

Lie.

## CHAPTER 30

# PEEPING TOM

KLEIN

“Yeah. I’m great.”

Using the pads of my thumbs, I wipe her tears. “Then why are you crying?”

“Doesn’t everyone cry during the best sex of their life?”

I level her with a skeptical glare. It was amazing for me — probably the best I’ve ever had. But what are the chances it was for her too?

She’s obviously more sexually adventurous than I am, so she’s probably had lovers who...

*No.* I stop the train of thought in its tracks.

The thought of her with any other man awakens the Hulk inside me.

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” I attempt to play off her BS with a light-hearted reply and a gentle kiss. “Seriously, Mia. Why are you crying?”

“Just some feelings.”

“Ew,” I tease, wrinkling my nose and cringing to get a smile out of her.

I hate seeing a woman cry. Especially *this* woman.

Fortunately, her face softens some at my joke.

“Any feelings you’d like to discuss?”

She shakes her head and offers a tight-lipped grin. It’s forced, burning a hole in my chest.

Is she regretting doing this with me? Did I do something wrong?

She taps my shoulder and tips her chin toward the bathroom. “I should get cleaned up.”

Nodding, I remove myself from her body and hope to hell that’s not the last time I get the honor of being inside her.

Something is... *off*.

Standing, I grab a tissue from the bedside table and deal with the condom while my thoughts take me careening down dark paths.

The bleakest one ends with her having used me. Again.

What if this entire day and everything we shared were all another manipulation? Just to get me on her side to save Lettie, help her smooth Boss’s feathers, and bring in team members willing to go on the op? Is she sad because she’s about to break me again? Already regretting the death blow she’s about to deal?

She emerges a few seconds later, wrapped in a silky thigh-length bathrobe. Emerald green. The color of her eyes.

*Damn.* Her beauty nearly blinds me.

She strolls to where I sit on the edge of the bed and kisses me. It's brief and tender.

Hope blossoms back to life from somewhere inside me.

"I'm sorry I got emotional. That was amazing."

Like they have minds of their own, my hands grip her around her waist and drag her onto my lap. She welcomes the contact, straddling me and running her hands through my hair until they rest at the nape of my neck.

We sit there for a few seconds in silence, touching and merely breathing each other in.

Some peace returns to me as each second passes.

"You sure you're okay?"

This time her smile seems more genuine. "This was such a long day. We've been up, down, and all over the place emotionally."

"You can say that again."

"I'm glad you're here with me." Her throat bobs with a tight swallow. "Thanks for giving me a second chance."

Her words catch me off guard, and my neck rears back. She pivoted from talking about an exhausting and draining day to the status of our... relationship. *Is that what this is?*

All my words have vanished.

So I just kiss her again, hoping her admission is a sign of better things to come. Maybe one day, I'll stop expecting her to hurt me.

She shuffles off me, climbs into bed, and pulls back the covers beside her like she's cleared a space for me.

"I'll be right back."

After using the restroom, I wash up and return to bed. With a quick check of my phone, I confirm that my mother is still sleeping soundly. I set the alarm for eight, calculating the whole three hours of sleep I'll get tonight.

But I'd sacrifice an entire month of sleep to be with Mia again.

And when I take her in my arms a few seconds later, sleep finds me almost instantly.

The ear-piercing wail of my alarm wakes us ten minutes later. At least, that's what it feels like.

"No. Make it stop," Mia whines, curling tighter against me.

The first thing I do after dismissing the alarm is check on my mother via the app. All good.

Years of getting up and moving despite wanting to stay in bed has trained my body for these moments.

But leaving Mia's arms makes this morning *infinitely* more difficult than any other morning I've had to reluctantly rise and shine.

"Thanks for not escaping on me this time," I tease her and kiss her forehead.

With her eyes fastened shut, she flips me off.

Chuckling, I hesitantly slip out from under her upper body and hold my head in my hands on the edge of the bed. When I toss a look at her, she's out cold, her heavy breaths sending a loose tendril of hair in a flutter with each exhale.

She'd never make it as a Ranger.

After a quick shower, I tug on clean boxers and brush my teeth. When I return to the bedroom, Mia's still out.

And so is her breast.

Her robe has fallen open, exposing her silky skin and rosy nipple. My dick stiffens as I stare at her like the stalker we joked about me being when we were intimate in the wee hours of the morning.

And speaking of... the more time I spend with her, the more I feel inferior to her, sexually speaking.

I didn't expect her to pull out a butt plug, that's for damn sure. Just like I didn't expect her to beg me to fuck her throat until she gagged.

Makes me wonder if I'll be enough for her. I've never been insecure about my bedroom prowess before, but she's got me so damn off-kilter.

Grabbing my phone, I check the app again to ensure Ma is still sleeping. Seeing all is well, I decide to play out a little fantasy. We can be a few minutes late for work today. Boss said he wasn't planning on coming in until ten.

Sneaking under the covers, I move between her legs and spread her open gently.

A momentary sense of panic fills me. She can't consent in her sleep. But then I remember how bold and daring she's been since I've known her, and that fear dissipates.

She's clearly open to getting freaky with me. If she's not into it, she can always stop me when she wakes up.

But I bet she'll be *very* into it.

The first few swipes of my tongue against her petal-soft flesh are gentle and teasing. She doesn't flinch, so I go in more aggressively. Her taste explodes on my tongue as I explore and feast on her.

She rouses, throwing off the blanket and reaching down to stroke my hair. "Holy shit, Cal. Good morning to you too."

I pull away from her clit only long enough to say, "I told you I love your fucking pie."

Her sleepy smile punches me straight in the heart. I need to be careful before I fall for her. Something tells me she won't be there to catch me if I do.

After a few minutes of driving her wild, I insert my finger and crick it upward while swirling my tongue around her clit like a cyclone. Screaming my name and a litany of profanity, she squeezes the fuck out of my head with her supple thighs. She could kill me right now, and I'd die a happy man.

Once her bliss recedes, her eyes flutter, and she stretches her arms out to the sides.

"I can't return the favor at the moment, because I'm garbage if I don't get eight hours of sleep. And when I don't get enough sleep, then I need intravenous caffeine to compensate. However, I can lay here while you fuck me."

She cups her mouth like she's physically restraining herself from rambling.

Squeezing her ass, I curl behind her and pull her close. "That's okay. No return favor needed, tiger."

"I can't believe I said all that. Proof of my inability to function on this little sleep."

"Sorry for keeping you awake all night."

She pulses her arms tightly around mine as if she's afraid to let me go. "Don't you dare apologize. The lack of sleep is a small price to pay for that amazing night. Even if my brain is the equivalent of a colander right now."

"Your beautiful mind will be perfectly hole-free again after I get you some coffee. Want anything else?"

Moving to get up, I kiss her once more before pulling away.

Reluctantly as fucking hell.

I swear I could stay wrapped around her all day and night.

She yawns and rubs her face. "Wait. Are you going to make coffee?"



“Yeah. Assuming that’s okay with you. You don’t mind me poking around your kitchen, do you?”

“It would be a bit hypocritical of me to be willing to let you poke around every hole in my body but not my kitchen, don’t you think?”

A deep chuckle rocks my chest. And then another one of those cymbals crashes in my mind.

*Every hole?*

With the plug again or with my cock?

Shaking it off, I get to work on breakfast. As I move through the kitchen, finding everything I need to make coffee, toast, and scrambled eggs, I think about last night. About Mia. About Tomer and Lettie. How mad Boss was until we calmed him down. About whatever happened to take Mia’s security system offline.

All of it runs through my mind at a speed faster than my ability to process it.

But the spunky redhead who’s jumping into the shower scares me more than anything else. Despite already showering, I’m tempted to join her in there, but I use the time to organize my thoughts, sorting them into buckets so I can tackle them one at a time before the growing swirl of worry overtakes me.

All my thoughts return to Mia, so I start processing there.

It scares me how right it feels to be with her. Whether we’re bantering, laughing, fighting, or fucking. It’s a perfection I’ve never experienced.

Trusting her is risky. The more time we spend together, the worse the fall could be.

But my gut tells me she’s worth the risk.

It might seem silly, but the way she watched over my mother last night — even if just via my phone — meant something to me.

I don’t trust anyone with my mother.

Yet the expression on Mia’s face when she told me she knew about Ma’s condition was pure. It was comforting, and for the first time, I felt like someone had my back where Ma was concerned.

I don’t take that lightly.

The only question I have is how she knew about Ma’s condition. I can take a few guesses. The answer *should* matter. And I probably should confront her about it, demand to know.

Part of me doesn’t want to know the answer. The other part doesn’t care.

As Shep told me, Mia's past isn't the same as mine. She's been conditioned to seek out information as a means of self-defense.

I'll need to accept that if I give it a go with her.

And if I can't make peace with that side of her, then this won't work.

Just like she needs to accept my job and family obligations. Something Jenna never could.

After Mia gets out of the shower, she throws on a knee-length gray skirt and wispy blouse in the same emerald green that makes my balls ache. She joins me at the table, her expression sparkling while she surveys the meager breakfast spread.

"This is so sweet of you, Cal. Thank you."

Shrugging, I play off her thanks. I don't do this kind of shit for appreciation. I do it because it's how I was raised. To always take care of the ones you love.

*Well, shit. Don't read into that.*

I'm not in love with Mia.

"I thought you'd join me in the shower. I left the door open for you," she says between sips of coffee, her hungry eyes devouring me.

"I considered it. But if I did, we wouldn't make it to work, and sadly, we're going to be busy today."

She winks at me. "I owe you some relief today. Hopefully we have some downtime," she pauses and lowers her voice, "*so I can go down.*"

Sexy minx.

"At work?" I pretend to be shocked, chin wagging low and eyes wide as saucers. "How dare you be so brazen, you harlot. Some might say that's a bit naughty."

"Oh, I'm sure you can think of a way to punish me for my transgressions."

The animal inside me claws to be let loose.

"Woman, I'm about ten seconds from skipping the food and eating you for breakfast instead."

"Right on the table? In front of the eggs?" She mock gasps.

I lean in close, buying some time to think of a snappy comeback. But her damn phone beeps from the other room, ending our flirty banter.

*Damn.*

She rolls her eyes, takes a big swig of coffee to finish it, and then rushes off to get her phone.

As I bring the dishes into the kitchen to clean them, she calls me from the bedroom. “Cal!”

My spine stiffens at the concern I hear in her voice. “Yeah?”

When I reach the doorway, she’s standing over the open bedside table drawer and rifling through it frantically.

Is she searching for the butt plug? I didn’t take it.

“Did you take my tablet?” Dropping to her knees, she lifts the comforter and looks under the bed, then crawls on her knees to peek behind the nightstand.

“No. Your Redleg tablet?”

“No, my personal one.”

“Where did you last see it?” I join her in her search, moving to the other side of the bed to scan the floor and dresser, but she’s rather tidy; nothing stands out to me.

“It was in the drawer. Did you see it when you got my plug out last night?”

“I don’t recall seeing it.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” She stops searching and runs her hands through her hair, tugging at the roots. “This isn’t good, Cal.”

Something doesn’t make sense. She came in here to check the phone and now is looking for her tablet. What did I miss?

“What was the alert on your phone, Mia?”

“An unrelated message,” she huffs.

I take a few steps in her direction and squeeze her arms soothingly. “What prompted the search?”

“After I checked the text, I noticed the drawer open and peeked inside. That’s when I saw it was missing.” She stamps her feet, balling her hands into fists. “Dammit. I should have spent more time searching the house when we got home last night. I can’t believe I didn’t check for it. What the hell was I thinking?”

“We were tired. It was a long ass day.” I attempt to ease her guilt, but mine spikes. Once nothing looked amiss, I didn’t search the house the way I should have.

She shrugs out of my hold and continues searching.

“Let’s retrace your steps,” I suggest. “Where did you last see it?”

She yells, “It was fucking here, and now it’s not. I wouldn’t take it out without returning it.”

“Okay. Easy, babe. Let’s think. Does it have a tracker on it? Find my device feature?”

“I turn that shit off so people can’t find me.”

“Smart, but not helpful in this case.” Dragging my hand over my face, I shake my head and try to think.

“Is there something on there that you can’t risk getting into the wrong hands?”

She glares at me. “Not the fucking point!”

Okay. She’s upset. Gonna give her a pass on that one.

Her face pops up suddenly, like a dog who heard their owner pull in the driveway. “I need my signal scanner.”

“Why?”

“Someone was in here last night. While my system was offline. Maybe taking the tablet was only part of it.”

“Oh shit. I have a scanner in the SUV. I’ll be right back.”

My feet carry me out the door before I can blink.

When I return to the house, she’s pacing around the room with a scanner of her own, checking under lamps, turning over vases, and more or less trashing her place.

I turn on my scanner and move through the house, catching a few beeps here and there. A power line leading to an outlet. A cell phone signal coming from our phones.

And then I find one.

Video and audio transmissions.

From the vent above her bed.

“Got one. Son of a bitch,” I force out through gritted teeth.

Someone watched us making love last night.

And worse. Someone broke in here, intending to spy on my Mia.

Someone was in here while we were rescuing Lettie.

I grab a chair, climb up, pry open the vent with my pocketknife, and remove the device. When my feet hit the carpet, I face her. She’s holding a matching device.

“I found one too.”

## CHAPTER 31

**THERE'S ALWAYS TIME FOR  
CAKE**

MIA

Well, smack my ass and call me Sarah Michelle Geller. I'm fucked.  
And someone watched me *get fucked* last night.  
This is less than ideal.

The frantic pounding of my heart partially drowns out Cal's rambling, but some of it cuts through.

Freezing in front of me, he thrusts his hands to the side. "What are you waiting for? Pack a bag."

Shaking my head, I lock my sights on him. "Wait. What?"

"You're coming to stay with me until we figure out what's happening."

My hands fall to my hips, and my jaw pops open reflexively. Unfazed by my stupefied expression, Cal invades my bubble and taps my mouth closed with his fingertips, pressing against the underside of my chin. "Don't argue. Just pack."

"Cal, I-I-I don't think that's necessary. I've got my SIG, and I know how to use it. I'll run diagnostics on my security system today. I'll be fine. I don't need you guarding me. I'm not helpless."

"Mia, someone hacked into your system yesterday. Yours, which is probably more secure than Redleg's design. They fucking disabled it like it was nothing and then broke into your house. They stole your tablet with who knows what saved on it and planted two bugs. In your bedroom. You are *not* staying here alone."

He hustles into my closet while I stand there dumbstruck and contemplating a retort.

A quip. A snark.

Something funny, perhaps.

But nothing comes to mind or mouth.

When he returns, he shoves an empty duffel bag in my arms. "Pack the fucking bag. We're leaving in three."

My pussy just clenched.

*Bad pussy. Bad girl.*

After stomping to the bathroom under horny protest, I silently toss items into my bag. Of course, I have a *go bag* packed for emergencies, but I don't

consider this an emergency.

It's a minor situation. A blip on the radar. One I didn't see coming. And I have no clue who's behind it or what they want.

I'm totally *fine* with not knowing stuff. No sweat. All part of my charm. *Easygoing, come what may Mia*. That's me.

Cal sticks his head in the bathroom. "I'm going to check the SUV for trackers and bugs. Lock the door behind me. We'll leave your car here, okay?"

"Oh, you're asking me now?" I snap, suddenly irked by his caveman tendencies.

Then again, maybe I'm bothered by how hot I find this protective thing, which erodes every sense of feminism in my body.

He stops his retreat, bracing himself on the bedroom doorframe with his palms. "Mia, listen." He sighs audibly, and his gaze flicks to the ceiling before landing on me. "I don't mean to be controlling or a dick, and I know you're more competent than most." He pauses, nibbling on his lip and shaking his head. "But I *cannot* handle constantly worrying about another person I care for. I can't do it right now."

He takes two steps in my direction, the tension on his face melting. He rests his palm on my cheek. "Please, do this for me. This is what I do. Let me take care of you."

The skin under my right eye bunches and twitches as I tamp down the emotion. I lean my cheek into his hand to soak up his touch.

His plea is ardent, and his words flay me. I can't imagine what he goes through with his mother day after day. Or how painful it must be. Adding to his plate would be unfair. He doesn't need to take this burden on too.

"I don't want to add to your stress, Cal. I can take care —"

"Stop right there. Listen, *please*." He brings his forehead to mine, both hands cupping my cheeks. "I'm not telling you to do this. I'm asking you. No, fuck that. I'm begging you. *Please*. Trust me to handle this."

He kisses me, soft and pleading. When he withdraws, tears obscure my view of his face.

I've never had anyone want to take care of me. Never wanted it. Never needed it. But Cal seems... *desperate* to surround me in a cocoon of safety. And I won't deny him that.

"Okay. I'll stay with you."

He exhales, and his breath dances over me before he kisses me again. I



can taste his apprehension in every tug of my lips and swipe of his tongue.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

He lets his hands trail down my arms slowly until he locks one around my wrist and tugs me toward the foyer. “Lock it behind me. I’ll be right back.”

After I close and lock the door, I rest against the hard metal, focusing on taking calming breaths.

So much is happening so fast. My life has been thrown into overdrive, and it’s careening out of control.

Leaving the CIA, coming to Redleg, a new town, new house, new friends, new... *lover*. Everything with Violet and Tomer, pissing off my new boss, and now this? Someone was inside my house last night.

But apparently, I’ll be staying with Cal until we figure out what is happening.

With my bag packed, I have nothing to do but wait.

Except one thing.

Dashing to the kitchen, I pull out the piece of raspberry lemon cake I didn’t eat last night and shovel in the heavenly goodness at a record speed.

Am I hungry? No. I just had breakfast.

Do I have a craving for something sweet? Again, no. The large amount of creamer I poured into my coffee took care of that.

But do I want comforty goodness to ease my frazzled nerves?

Yes. Yes, I fucking do.

And if having an emotional support dessert is wrong, then I don’t want to be right.

The French Revolutioneers really should have eaten the cake when Marie Antoinette offered it. They’d have felt much better. Who can be unhappy while eating cake?

The alert on my phone signals Cal’s approach to my front door, so I meet him there.

“Ready?” He tosses a look over his shoulder to make sure no one has snuck up behind him.

“Yes.” I hoist my bag off the floor and follow him out.

After we lock up, he tucks me close against his side, one big strong arm surrounding me. It’s a little overkill, considering my training, but I won’t ever object to him touching me. As we hoof it down my sidewalk, his head swivels so much I wonder if he’s about to vomit pea soup.

He stalks around the car again, checking under it with his scanner and a

mirror.

I jiggle the handle of the locked door. “It’s fine, Cal. We’re good.”

*And then he fucking shushes me.*

Instead of aggravating me, it makes me wet. Because I’m obviously sick in the head.

Heaven help me.

This man taking orders from me last night with his head between my legs was ecstasy, but when he’s bossy, I swear I nearly melt into a puddle.

I should have packed panty liners.

Once we’re safely in the SUV, he starts the ignition and finally locks his eyes on me. One side of his face quirks into one of his trademark combustible grins. The same one that caused my panties to evaporate from my body that first night.

“What you got there?” He lifts his hand to my mouth, wiping the corners. “That for me?”

Frosting.

“Busted. I was stress-eating cake while you were checking the SUV.”

“Come here,” he orders softly, cricking his finger at me. The one coated in buttercream icing.

When I move in close, he drags the frosted finger across the seam of my lips, then dives in to swipe at it with his tongue.

With his lips on mine, all my worries evaporate.

All too soon, he ends the kiss. “Pie is better.”

And then the fucker winks at me and drives us out of my neighborhood.

“Cal?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“Where are we going?”

We’re not driving toward Redleg or his place.

“Gotta check on my mother. We’re short on time; otherwise, I’d drop you off at Redleg first. So you’re coming with me.”

My heart stops, falls to the ground, and then shoots up to my chest before Sparta-kicking its way out of my ribcage.

“Your mother?”

“Yes, tiger. I figure it’ll take a few days to make sure your house is secure, given all the work ahead of us at Redleg. If you’re going to be by my side for a few days, you’ll meet her eventually. You already know about her uh... condition. So no sense hiding her from you.”

I've never met a mom before.

Well, wait. That's dumb.

Of course I've met women who are, in fact, mothers. But I've never met the mother of someone I've been involved with.

Hell, I haven't been truly *involved* with a man since college. And that ended horribly.

"Relax, tiger," he says, not taking his eyes off the road.

"I'm relaxed," I squeak, immediately fooling him with outward nonchalance.

"Mia, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure." Another totally chill squeak.

"Can you stop holding your breath?"

*Whoosh.*

Oh my freaking shitsickles. I just let go of a breath I didn't know I was holding. I'm a fucking romance novel cliché.

Once my pulse returns to a level that won't require a hospital visit, thanks to Cal's helpful suggestion to breathe, I realize he's talking to me.

"Something you need to know about my mother."

"Yes?"

*Mia's responses — now with 75 percent less squeak.*

"She might be fine, rational and lucid." He sighs deeply. "Or she might think I'm still in the Army. She might ask about my ex-girlfriend, Jenna. She might think my dad is alive. You never really know what you'll get."

Instinctively, I reach out to comfort him with a soothing stroke of his forearm.

*Wow. His arms.*

I can't resist squeezing those corded muscles. But given his serious tone and the topic, I force myself to stop thinking about sex with this man. My attraction to him is quickly becoming so much more than physical.

"That must be awful, Cal. I'm so sorry your family is going through that. I can't imagine what it's like for you. And her."

"I didn't ask how you know about her condition, but I don't fucking care. I'm tired of keeping it to myself."

"Why didn't you tell anyone? Big Al? Tomer? Shep? I'm sure they'd understand and support you."

He presses his lips together firmly and shakes his head subtly. "I'm sure they would."

“Then why have you been dealing with it on your own? It’s a heavy load to carry without help.”

After scanning the mirrors for the hundredth time in the last sixty seconds, probably checking for tails, he answers, “I didn’t want to admit it. To myself. To others. I realize how stupid it sounds, but I hoped by not talking about it that it wouldn’t be real.”

My chin quivers as I fight the urge to cry.

His voice is thicker and clogged with emotions when he adds, “I don’t want it to be real.”

“Oh, Cal.”

I want to kiss him. I want to hug him. I want to access the hard drive of his mind and erase all the horrors he’s seen. I want to implant a device inside his mother’s brain to stop her from losing her memories. Losing any more of herself.

But I can’t do that. No one can.

All I can do is be here for him.

With him. Beside him.

Suddenly, the fear I felt at meeting his mother isn’t as strong. It’s quickly eclipsed by my desire to be a source of strength for him.

## CHAPTER 32

**COME FLY WITH ME**

KLEIN

“Ma, it’s me.”

“I’m in here,” she calls from her bedroom.

I motion to the kitchen table. “Mia, you can have a seat here. This probably won’t take too long. I only need to make sure she’s eaten and taken her meds.”

She holds up her laptop, giving it a tiny wiggle. “I’ll be fine. Take all the time you need.”

“Try not to hack the refrigerator while you’re here.”

She squares her shoulders and clears her throat demurely. “If it’d please the court, I’ll begin my rebuttal by saying *how rude*. And I’ll continue by advising you that the fridge is an older model, so it has no hackable signals.” She crosses her arms at her chest. “However, the coffee maker is vulnerable. But I’ll be good since you’re already under stress given the whole, you know, someone watched us bang last night thing.”

A few thoughts hit me at once, flying out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“First, we have to hack into Sawyer’s coffee machine to dick with him.”

She grins. “We really do. Especially after the door sign thing for Tomer. He doesn’t deserve that.”

Ignoring the irrational flare of jealousy over her defending Tomer, I continue, “And second, why is it hot that someone saw me make you come three times last night and again this morning?”

Maybe I’m more of a freak than I give myself credit for.

Her expression morphs to shock, her eyes bugging and a smile tickling at the edges of her mouth. “Cal, my gosh. Now who’s the naughty one?”

“You’re corrupting me.” After glancing over my shoulder to make sure Ma isn’t coming, I bend close to Mia’s ear. “Does it bother you that someone saw you screaming my name? And how I had you shaking, quivering, and begging for more?”

“I’ve created a monster.”

I swirl my tongue on the tender spot under her ear, reveling in the way she shudders at my touch.

Afraid I’m about to be caught by my mother like a freaking teenager, I

put a few inches between us. “Does it bother you?”

“It probably should, but it doesn’t. At least not until we know who was watching. But...” She trails her fingertips along my forearms. “It’s sort of hot that someone out there knows my man can satisfy me that thoroughly.”

I sure as hell did. And after the long, tiring day we had yesterday, no less, I still had her shaking in pleasure repeatedly. I bet the chairman of the board himself couldn’t pull off such a feat.

The way she looks at me makes me feel like Superman. If she keeps building me up, my head won’t fit in the door at work.

“Wait. Did you just say your man?”

My voice remains steady, but my pulse skyrockets.

Her pale cheeks turn ruddy. “Well, unless you banish me from your bed, I won’t be entertaining other suitors.”

A frog jumps into my voice box.

Obviously, I don’t want her to be with anyone else. But the thought of sending her away makes me woozy.

Then again, is she asking for a commitment?

Trusting her is dangerous. And committing takes trust.

When I don’t answer soon enough, her lashes flutter to hide her eyes, and she sucks in an unsteady breath. “Sorry. I guess it’s too soon for that. And you probably don’t want to —”

“Shh, Mia. That’s not it.”

Her face perks up but is still laced with uncertainty.

“You caught me by surprise.”

“Take some time to think about it. I know I still have work to do to prove myself and earn your trust. But I will. I promise.”

“Calvin!” my mother calls. “Are you here?”

“Coming, Ma.”

“Go,” Mia says, tipping her chin toward the hallway.

“We’ll talk more about it later. To be continued.”

Her answering smile is a jolt to my heart.

“Be good,” I playfully warn her.

She scoffs. “That’s not how I roll. I’m a bad girl, remember?” Grinning, she takes a seat and opens her laptop.

My palm twitches with an unusual desire to spank her ass.

That’s new.

I bet she’d be into it too. But I haven’t the foggiest idea how to do it



safely. A few light smacks on the ass is one thing, but that's not quite what I want to do.

Based on past conversations, I know who I can ask about it.

But that'll have to wait until all this shit is cleared. Then I can worry about leveling up my freak skills.

My mother's brushing her hair at the vanity that my father built for her. When she sees me, a wide smile spreads across her age-weathered face.

How many more times will she greet me this way until she doesn't recognize me?

Shaking off the pitch-black thoughts, I bend to kiss her forehead. "Good morning, Ma. How are you doing today?"

"I'm good. My low back is a little stiff, but I'm fine. What brings you here so early?"

Does she not realize I've been sleeping here for two weeks?

It's best not to upset her by reminding her, so I simply offer, "I missed you."

And oh shit.

Last night being the exception, I've been staying here. How can I do that while guarding Mia? Add that to the list of things I need to figure out today.

She squeezes my hand before dropping it to grab a hair band. Like always, she ties it in a soft bun at the nape of her neck. I make her bed, then check the automated medication dispenser in the bathroom.

Thankfully, she took all of yesterday's meds without my intervention. The system is slick and sophisticated, so I shouldn't worry about it as much as I do. When it's time for another dose, the machine dispenses the pills into a little cup and emits a loud beeping sound until she removes it. If she's a half hour late for a dose, the app sends me a notification.

Checking the locked slot on the top of the dispenser, I study the insides. She has enough to last several more days before I need to get her refills. Studying the bathroom mirror, I count three new Post-it notes affixed to it that weren't there yesterday morning.

She's been writing herself notes to remember to do things for a few years. Lately, the notes have morphed into reminding her *how* to do things. This new one is a brutal punch to the gut.

Detailed on the four-by-four yellow note are five steps to brushing her teeth.

The woman I looked up to my whole life has been reduced to needing a

checklist for toothbrushing. I squint and breathe deeply to stave off the swell of emotions.

Before I leave the bathroom, I check her toothbrush and am relieved to find it wet. That's a good sign about her state of mind. Often, I can tell how bad her day will be by judging her morning routine.

"Ma, there's someone here I'd like you to meet."

She stands, pushing her stool under the vanity. "Oh? Who is it?"

"A friend from work."

*Who I'm falling in love with despite my inability to fully trust her.*

Seeming mostly lucid today, Ma asks, "A lady friend? I hope it's someone who'll help you get that dreadful Jenna out of your mind."

Yep. Lucid today.

Thank fuck.

I bite my lip to stop myself from audibly sighing with relief.

It's not that I'd be ashamed of her if she weren't quite herself in front of Mia. I wouldn't be. It's more so that I want Mia to meet my mother.

While she's still my mother.

Not sure why, but it's important that Mia knows the woman who shaped me into the man I am.

*Dammit.*

How has Mia implanted herself under my skin this fast?

She makes my head spin, my cock hard, and my heart come back to life.

And when I'm with her, I want *more*.

Not just more of her — although I do — but I also want more for myself. A balance in my life. To live for myself as fully as I live for everyone else.

She makes me wish for more moments where I can be selfish. More time to learn who I am. And more time to figure out what I'd do if I weren't always putting everyone else first.

For whatever reason, Mia makes that okay.

Standing with her hands on her hips, Mom tosses me a questioning look, reminding me that I didn't answer her question.

"Yes. She's a lady friend."

"Good. What's her name?"

"It's Mia. Come on, and I'll introduce you."

Mia stands with her hand extended when we enter the kitchen. "Hi, Mrs. Klein. My name is Mia. It's lovely to meet you."

Ma waves her off and moves in for a hug instead. "Hello, dear. Call me

Charlotte. Any friend of my son's gets a hug from me, not a handshake."

Mia's eyes widen as Ma wraps her in her arms. Slowly, her shock fades into a pure smile and she returns the embrace.

I should have probably warned her about the hugs. I wonder what Mia's deal is with her family. She doesn't talk about them. Are they huggers? Do they live nearby? Is she an only child?

There's a lot I don't know about her, and I plan to rectify that immediately.

Once my mother lets Mia go, she glances between us. "Do you have time for breakfast? I could make something."

No, she can't. Cooking has been banned since she nearly started a kitchen fire several months ago. I turn the gas to the stove off when I'm not here. All her meals are labeled in the fridge, three days' worth at a time. She only needs to throw them in the microwave.

Which also has a growing collection of sticky notes on it, including how to operate it.

"We already ate," I answer, declining her breakfast invite.

"Oh, poop," Ma pouts, then steps farther into the kitchen. "How about coffee, kids?"

Mia gives me an encouraging nod, which I read as her saying: *whatever you want is fine*.

Although I'd love a social visit, we have too much to do today at Redleg. "We'll need to pass this morning. We really need to get going soon. We solved a big case at work last night, and there's a lot of fallout to handle today."

She grabs her mug and pours a cup for herself. "Saving the world again, son?"

I roll my eyes. "Something like that."

"Don't let him downplay it," Mia interjects. "Last night, he and the team saved sixteen girls that had been kidnapped."

"That's my boy." Ma beams at me, making my cheeks warm. "His father was a different kind of hero."

"Firefighter, right?" Mia asks.

Ma sighs wistfully. "Twenty-five years."

I rack my brain to remember if I told Mia my father's profession or if she found that out on her own.

Not sure whether that matters, but it doesn't sit well. She knows

everything about me, and I know next to nothing about her.

“And what do you do at Redleg, Mia? Are you a guard too?”

“Oh, no ma’am. I work in the office on the intel team along with Cal.”

Confusion clouds my mother’s expression as her gaze sweeps to mine. “But I. The intel team? I thought... oh no.” Her face melts into a pool of sadness and something else. Fear, perhaps.

Posture sagging, she turns from us and staggers to the sink. With her hands braced on the edge of the counter, she keeps her back to us and hangs her head low.

Mia’s worried eyes catch on mine, slow-blinking and remorseful. “I’m sorry,” she mouths, barely above a whisper. “She didn’t know?”

“She knew.”

But she forgot.

Even on her good days, like today, little things slip through the sieve of her mind. Names. Dates. Details.

Sometimes, it’s better when she’s blissfully ignorant of her confusion.

In moments like this, however, she remembers she’s powerless to win the battle waging in her mind.

The same way I witness her slipping away, a little more each day, she sees it too.

I wonder if she asks herself the questions I do.

*How long until the person in the mirror doesn’t recognize me?*

Moving quickly to my mother’s side, I pull her close for a comforting embrace. I wish I could fix this for her.

Be her hero.

“I forgot again, didn’t I?” she murmurs into my chest. “I promise I’m trying, Cal. I don’t want to forget.”

Pain lances my chest, aiming right for my heart. Somehow, I manage to squash it and focus on soothing her.

“It’s okay, Ma. It’s like I told you before. Every time you forget something, I’ll remind you. I’ll keep track of important things for you. And the little things too. When you can’t make a rhubarb pie, I’ll show you. If you get lost, I’ll bring you home. I’ll be by your side to remind you of everything that matters. When you don’t know where to turn, just look for me.”

Moisture soaks into the front of my shirt from her tears, searing my skin like a hot branding iron.

Her pain is my own.

After a few long moments, she speaks quietly, like she's telling me a secret. "This is embarrassing in front of your girlfriend the first time I meet her." She tries to nudge me backward, but I hold her tighter. "It is the first time I've met her, right?"

My voice threatens to wobble. "Yeah, Ma. It is. And she's fine. Don't be embarrassed." I peek over my shoulder, but Mia's not there. "In fact, she gave us some privacy."

Her shoulders fall as she stops trying to save face.

And I hold her and rock her gently.

Like she did when I was a little boy and upset about something I no longer remember.

Life is peculiar, isn't it? One day, you're the vulnerable one, seeking your mother's comfort and protection. And the next, you're comforting her. Soon, the roles of parent and child blur, growing hazier, until they're ultimately reversed.

Is there anything more bittersweet than knowing the strong, vivacious parent you once thought was invincible will look at you as their only lifeline?

The cruel swing of the pendulum can't be stopped no matter how hard we try.

Or in my case, it can't be stopped no matter how deep we bury our heads in the sand.

After she's soaked up all the comfort from me that she can, she exhales a shaky breath, and I let her out of my hold.

"I talked to Caroline the other night," she starts, placing her palm on my chest. "Please, don't fight me on this. I've made my decision, and it's not the one you want."

"Mom, don't," I warn, but she shakes her head at me, a steely resolve set on her features.

"Not right now, but soon. Okay? She told me what I did, and I know I'm getting worse. I can feel everything slipping away."

"Mom, please. We don't have to talk about this now."

When she speaks again, her tone is clipped and severe. "You never want to talk about it. But I don't know how long I have, Calvin. I need to tell you this while I still can."

Nodding, I bite my tongue and let her continue.

She's right.

Her moments of lucidity are becoming less frequent.

Voice shaky, she pleads her case. “It may be just a job change I forget today. Tomorrow, it might be a memory from my childhood or even the day before. Or all of my mother’s recipes. But how long until it’s more?”

“I will move in here, okay? I can take care of you. I’ll work from home, and if I need to leave, I’ll arrange for someone to sit with you.”

“It’s too much. I won’t burden you like that. You heard the doctor. Soon, I won’t be able to dress myself. Bathe myself. Make it to the bathroom. It gets worse and worse until I’m gone. I can’t let you go through that.”

“I don’t mind, Ma. I want to. You’d do the same for me. I won’t turn my back on you. I’ll take care of you.”

“Calvin. No.”

Two words. Final.

And utterly devastating.

“What do you want me to do then, Ma? Tell me what to do.”

*I’ll do anything.*

A watery smile takes over her face, tears streaming down. “Live your life. Be happy. Get married. Have kids like you’ve always wanted. And when the time comes, you have to let me go.”

Heart shattered and soul defeated, all I can do is nod and try not to cry.

As if on cue, music begins playing. Softly at first, but then it increases in volume.

Startled and confused, my mother looks toward the table, where Mia’s laptop sits open. That’s where the music is coming from.

“Come Fly with Me” by Frank Sinatra. One of my Ma’s all-time favorites.

*Mia.*

When Ma’s posture stiffens to the point where I worry she thinks we have ghosts, I explain, “I think Mia’s playing that for us.”

Her shoulders shake with silent laughter, then she puts her hands up, inviting me to dance. “We can’t let the song go to waste.”

Although more somber than the last time we danced, I spin her slowly around the kitchen while I commit every last moment to memory.

“She has nice taste in music, Calvin. Might want to marry that one.”

## CHAPTER 33

**IT COMES AND GOES IN WAVES**



MIA

Cal's quiet on the ride to Redleg, and I let him have this time to collect himself. He needs it after what just happened.

Heck, who am I kidding? I need it too.

The oddest thing happened when he went to comfort her at the sink.

I wanted to give them privacy.

And then I did.

For the first time in years, my need for information was silenced by my compassion.

Nothing happening in that kitchen was about me, aside from my careless comment that tripped her up. Although I was curious to see how Cal handled it and get a peek into their dynamic, it wasn't my moment to have.

If he wants me to know, he'll tell me. The decision is his to make.

So after slinking from the kitchen, I quietly escaped to the front porch and sat on her wooden swing. With only my cell phone to occupy me, I wasn't the slightest bit tempted to listen in.

And I could have.

My laptop was there. A few swipes of my thumb across my phone screen, and I'd have been the fly on the wall. The creeping creeper.

But then I'd be no better than the asshole who broke into my place and put in cameras to capture my most intimate moments. And why would I do that to the man who's quickly becoming the most important person in my life and his loving mother? What kind of monster would do that?

Instead of violating their privacy, I found a song I figured would lighten the moment and played it for them.

I hope it helped ease their pain, even if only a bit.

It was the only comfort I could give them. A wordless way for me to support Cal.

I realize I seem like an entitled ass. I hear it myself in the echoes of my inner ramblings. What gives me the right to insert my nose uninvited into situations so often that *the one time* I don't do it, I end up patting myself on the back for my miraculous restraint?

I don't blame you for asking that question.

I wish I had a good answer. A morally justifiable one. Something to not

only explain my reasoning but also make my snooping perfectly acceptable.

But I don't have an answer like that.

The only thing I know is... I don't want to be that person anymore. I haven't wanted to be her for a long while, the truth be told.

Yet until now, I wasn't strong enough to fight the compulsion.

As I glance at the man in the driver's seat, I know why.

Cal's a hell of an incentive to do better.

To *be* better.

The heavy silence continues when we park and badge into Redleg. He greets the guard at the desk by name, and I offer a congenial nod.

After we enter the elevator, tension crackles between us like we're inside one of those glass plasma spheres with electrodes and filaments.

On the way to our shared workspace, he dives inside my office, tugging me behind him. He closes the door, and inside him, a switch flips.

Without warning, he backs me against the wall. One hand cups my chin, and the other wraps possessively around my waist.

Shocked, I part my lips to suck in a sudden inhale. He slams his mouth to mine, sending heat all over my body. His kiss is rough, just shy of brutal. For a split second, I'm frightened by his intensity.

As the surprise wanes, I melt into the moment, allowing him to possess and control me in any way he needs. Use me as a vessel to pass through the tumultuous sea of his emotions. What happened with his mom had to be triggering for him.

When he pulls away, our ragged breaths fill the small space. My eyes flutter open to lock on his stormy hazel irises, so fraught with worry.

With his face hovering an inch from mine, he rasps, "I'm so confused right now, Mia. Your silence since we left Mom's house has me worried. You don't have any questions. All of a sudden, you're giving me privacy, but you've given me none since we've met."

Confusion mars my mind. "I-I don't understand. You seemed like you needed some peace. I wanted you to have it."

His grip on my chin holds steady, keeping my face locked on his. Something hidden in the sharp lines of his expression screams that he doesn't believe me.

"Wanted me to have it? All you've ever wanted is information."

My chin quivers as I offer my only defense. "If you want me to know something, then you'll tell me. If you need to vent, I'm here. But I won't

invade your privacy anymore. If I have questions, I'll ask. No more snooping. I'm done."

What's happening with us right now? One second, he's kissing me like I'm the air he needs to breathe, and the next, he's fuming.

His expression softens, and his eyes turn pleading. "I *hate* doubting you after all we shared last night, but I can't help it. You know everything about me, and I know nothing about you. I ache for you down to my bones, but I keep waiting for the kill shot."

I force a swallow, and my sinuses sting with incoming tears. "Where is this coming from?"

"I'm protective of my family. Somehow you knew about her condition, what my dad did for a living, and her favorite fucking song. How did you find all that out, and what are you plotting to do with that information?"

"I'm sorry if it upset you that I played the song. I thought it would help."

"It did help. It was so fucking sweet, but it was another reminder..." He trails off and closes his eyes.

Tension coats his features. When he opens them again, it breaks my heart.

Tears threaten to spill. "Cal, I'm not plotting anything."

"I can't tell whether you're being genuine or calculated. I hate feeling this way about you. Maybe it's because I'm exhausted or worried about her. Perhaps it's more. I *want* to trust your motivations. I *want* to trust you, but —"

"But you don't," I finish for him.

"Right," he confesses in a whisper.

"Cal, trusting me will take time, but I have to believe you'll get there one day. Until then, this is a consequence of my own actions, and I'm prepared to face it. While I don't want it hanging over our heads forever, I can understand why you're not there yet. I'll be patient. For now, all I can do is swear to you that I have no ill intentions toward you, and especially toward your dear, sweet mother. *I promise.*"

His hold on me loosens. He kisses my forehead and pulls away, leaving my office in silence.

After standing there dumbstruck for a few seconds, I follow him. My feet move sluggishly, trudging me along three steps behind him, then four.

I can't fix this right now. I can't traverse this mountain between us. The one I put there.

Maybe I'll never be able to.

Too bad I already ate my emotional slice today. I could really use another comfort cake right about now.

In front of me, Klein disappears into the lair. He pops out again before I get to the doorway. "T's not here yet. Lights and his PC are off."

The perplexed look on Cal's face is wholly adorable. His big, wide eyes sparkle, and his plump lips make a perfect O shape. He's as mercurial as can be.

"No way. He's been here before me every day since I started," I muse while checking my watch. "It's after ten."

From the way people talk, and based on what I've seen in my few weeks here, Tomer's always the first one here and the last to leave.

"This is a first. I've never beat him to the office."

"He seemed preoccupied with Violet last night. She's probably a mess, so I guess it's not surprising that he wouldn't want to leave her alone."

Cal checks his phone, shaking his head. "He didn't text. I'll message him to make sure he's okay, but maybe it'll only be the two of us today."

Easing fully into our shared workspace, I set my purse and laptop down. "I'm going to get some coffee. Do you want some?"

"More coffee, Mia? Have you Freaky Friday'd with Sawyer?"

His teasing, so familiar and comfortable, loosens the tension between us like a coil unfurling.

"First, I love how you know that movie. Second, I'll be guzzling java all day after the long and *pleasurable* night I had."

There's smugness in his features, and he shrugs. "I guess each time you get another cup, I can pat my back for a job well done."

"As you should." I caress his shoulder on my way out, letting my fingertips linger.

His soft chuckle instantly improves my mood. Perhaps he released some of his angst. He'd been bottling it up for a while, so he must feel lighter with it out in the open.

At least it's clear where I stand with him. And to be frank, I'd have expected nothing less from such an honorable man. Always honest and never misleading. That's Cal in a nutshell.

In the break room, I run into Sue.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mason," I chirp.

"Ugh, speak for yourself," she grumbles, sidling up to the counter beside me with her coffee mug cupped in her hands, extended toward the pot.

Once I've poured mine, I fill hers too. "Rough night or rough morning?" She pulls the creamer out of the fridge. "Both."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Good manners dictate I don't respond with the real reason in this case. But I've never been good at lying."

My giggle bubbles its way free from my throat. "Something go wrong in the bedroom with Lionheart? Don't worry. It happens to lots of guys after a certain age."

The second the words leave me, I long to shove them back in.

Her cheeks take on a rouge hue, and she covers her mouth. "No, it's not that. We were having a lovely evening... in the bedroom. And then his phone rang." She widens her gaze, and her blue orbs hurl accusation at me.

My shoulders fall. "Oh shit."

"Yeah." She sighs. "After he left, I couldn't sleep. So I started painting, and the next thing I knew, it was after two. He burst through the door, dropped his keys on the floor when he saw me painting and got all riled up. Threw me over his shoulder and carried me off to bed." She leans forward and lowers her volume. "He gets a little aroused when I paint without pants on. For some reason, my thick thighs turn him on." She shrugs, and the blank look on her face makes me want to crack up.

Sue's so damn cute, quirks and all.

After sipping my coffee to see if I've achieved the perfect creamer-to-coffee ratio, I add another small pour. "So you were up late, I take it? And then tired this morning?"

"Mm-hmm. And I'm not sure if I should thank you for pulling him away last night or be pissed. On one hand, the orgasms were worth it. But on the other, I always get anxious when our routine changes, so I'm twitchy today. Maybe once I'm less sleepy, I'll decide if you owe me an apology or if I owe you a thank you."

"I can start with an apology." I square my shoulders with her, waiting for her gaze to land *near* my face. "I'm sorry for pulling him away unexpectedly and wrecking your routine. There was an urgent case. We had to act fast."

"Was it a success?" she asks in earnest. "Leo didn't want to talk about it, and I tend to trust his judgment on that kind of thing."

Trust.

A beautiful thing. Wish I had it.

"It was a huge success. No injuries on our end. Not a single bullet fired.

And we saved sixteen girls from a trafficking house.”

“Sixteen? Trafficking?” Her nose wrinkles like she smells something. “That’s awful. I can’t imagine what those girls are going through. Where are they? Back at their homes with their families?”

My stomach sours, and it’s not the acid from the strong coffee. “I don’t know. The team discreetly dropped them off at the hospital.”

She nods while staring off into the distance. “I’m glad you changed my routine. It was worth it. You’re forgiven. And thanks for the hot sex that followed.” She smashes her eyes closed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s Leo who deserves props for the sex.”

Her already rosy cheeks flare to cherry.

My obnoxious laugh makes its first appearance of the workday. I tap her forearm. “No worries. I had an equally satisfying night.”

“Ooh, this feels like girl talk.”

It’s a statement, but she made it a question. As if she doesn’t trust her read on the situation.

“It is,” I reassure her.

Her pretty blue eyes sparkle in the fluorescents of the break room. “Anyone I know? Someone here?”

“I’ll give you two guesses.”

Am I kissing and telling? Or shagging and wagging?

I don’t think Klein will mind. Leo picked up on it already. Tomer caught us together at my house, and Cal didn’t hide it from anyone else last night. He even held my hand when we left Redleg.

“Well, I’ve read a lot of romance novels, especially lately because I joined a book club with the Amos-holes. And so my money is on Klein or Tomer. I’m getting strong coworker trope vibes.” She taps her unpainted fingernails against her chin and studies my reaction, but I mask my face to add to the tension.

*Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.*

“Klein. It’s enemies to lovers, right? I saw how you two were that first day.”

Unable to contain my wide grin, I nod in agreement.

She pumps her fist. “Nailed it.”

We chat a few more minutes, both of us enjoying the coffee talk — not affiliated with the old SNL skit with Mike Myers that I watch on reruns.

When we get ready to part, she pauses and grips my arm.

“What?” I ask.

“Would you be able to find those girls? The ones the team rescued last night?”

Taken aback by the sudden topic redirect, I give it a beat before answering.

I suppose we have enough video footage for me to compare with missing persons reports and internet history. Likely some of them will file police reports too.

“Yes, I think I could. Easily. Why?”

“Maybe nothing. Maybe something. I’ll let you know.” She gives me a curt nod with her lips sealed, then turns to go.

No goodbye or further explanation.

As she disappears down the hallway, the pimp inside me stirs.

*Find out what she wants with the girls.*

Immediately, without hesitation, I smack a piece of metaphorical duct tape on her evil mouth.

Whatever Sue might be contemplating isn’t my concern right now.

And that’s okay.

It’s a tad sketchy, but I need to solve a million other things. Casting doubt on the world’s most innocent woman doesn’t crack the top hundred.

The compulsion to dig up details about everything around me wanes, and contentment swells. On the way to the lair, there’s a sway to my hips as a wave of peace comes over me.

Not a deluge or a cowabunga wave.

Just the kind that laps at your feet when you stand at the water’s edge.

The kind of wave that lets you test out the water’s temperature, helping you decide if it’s safe to swim in the ocean. Freezing cold? Uncomfortably warm? Or Goldilocks *just right*?

For now, the water is the perfect temperature, and I want to dive into the surf.

## CHAPTER 34



**THAT WAS MY FAVORITE PAIR**

KLEIN

“Tomer is taking the day off?” Mia squeaks.

One of my cheeks lifts in a half-grin. “That’s what he said.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“Far as I know, only once. Appendicitis. As you’d expect, he returned the day after surgery despite the doctor’s orders to convalesce for a week.”

“I’m shooketh, Cal.”

“Shooketh?” My head rears back playfully. “Have you recently been possessed by a thirteen-year-old?”

Ignoring me, she adds, “If we didn’t already know he was involved with Lettie, this would have confirmed it.”

I twist in my chair to face her, leaning my elbows on the armrest. “How do you see this playing out? At some point, we have to decide whether we tell you-know-who.”

Mia’s shoulders lift slowly with her deep intake of air. “Since I saw the police report, I’ve been telling myself we’d cross that bridge once she was safe.”

“Well, she is now.”

Mia’s elegant fingers stroke the column along the sides of her neck. The same place I buried my face last night when my orgasm overtook me.

She meets my eyes while nibbling on her lip. “What do you think about letting Tomer decide?”

I steeple my hands in front of my face as I consider it. “It’s a good idea. Clearly, he knows her better than we do.”

“That’s what I was thinking. He stands to be affected the most. With us, it’s only the guilt we’ll have for not revealing it sooner.”

“Exactly,” I confirm.

“So the question is, are we okay with letting Tomer handle it and dealing with the consequences whenever the truth comes out?”

My head hits my chair, and I stare at the ceiling. If only the answer were written on the drop tiles above me.

“I need time to decide. Last thing I want to do is rush this decision on two hours of sleep.”

“That’s fine by me. I’m in no hurry.”

“I’m trying to put myself in his shoes, but it’s hard. And we have to consider Lettie’s side of it too. If we assume she doesn’t know, is it our place to intervene? We saved her; shouldn’t that be enough?”

“If anything, perhaps saving her will buy our forgiveness,” she says meekly.

“Honestly, I don’t care about myself in this equation. I’m more concerned about how this will affect the three of them.”

When I finally drop my gaze from the ceiling, she wears the tenderest expression, but I can’t decipher it.

Finally, she speaks, giving me an inkling of what she’s thinking. “You’re a good man, Cal. The most selfless person I’ve ever known.”

I catch myself squirming. I’m not used to being praised this way. It’s strange.

Almost foreign.

Sensing my discomfort with her words, she adds, “I mean it. Listen to yourself. Concerned about what they feel instead of how it will impact you. Here I am, worrying how it will blow back on me, and you glaze by that fear without a second thought.” She bows her forehead and whispers, “I wish I could be like you, but I don’t know how.”

I cup her cheek in my palm, gently tilting her to look at me. “Mia, there’s nothing wrong with self-preservation and having defense mechanisms. Just don’t let them guide every decision you make.”

“Easier said than done,” she replies, her voice a mere brush of a feather.

She turns away from me, freeing her cheek from my grasp.

I contemplate how to respond, but all I can think about is how striking it is to see this side of her. Vulnerable. Honest.

Regret over my earlier treatment of her fills my chest, making it hard to breathe deeply.

She thinks I’m selfless, and I suppose I usually am. But in her office, I was a selfish ass. All I could focus on was how my distrust of her would wreck me all day. I was confused when she left the kitchen and expected she’d pelt me with questions or manipulate me into talking. But she didn’t. And then I started to wonder if maybe she used her laptop on the table to spy on us. My mind was a shit show after I left my mom’s. I had all these emotions and nowhere to put them. And I turned them on her. I didn’t give a shit about how my accusation would affect her.

Even if considering her side didn’t change what I said, at least I would

have made the decision from a better place.

I fill my lungs with a cleansing breath. “How about this?”

Casting her gaze on me, hope twinkles in her emerald eyes.

“My sister has been on my case about putting myself first more often, but I haven’t been able to do it. Maybe you can help me see why my own interests matter sometimes, and I can help you see why other people’s needs do too.”

With misty eyes, her face brightens into a radiant smile, making my heart swell. “Can I tell you a secret?”

I dip my head encouragingly, not trusting my voice.

“You’re already helping me.”

“Good.”

She weaves her fingers through mine, and I bring them up to kiss her knuckles.

“I should apologize.”

“For what?”

“I’m sorry for what I said in your office. That was uncalled for. I was upset about my mom, but it’s unfair to keep throwing that shit in your face.”

She presses her lips tight together and swallows. “We haven’t talked about why I did what I did. Not really. I should explain why I am this way. You deserve a chance to ask all your questions. We can’t leave all this unresolved.” She cants her head to the side and forces a swallow. “Doesn’t it feel unsettled?”

“Somewhat,” I agree. “We can talk about it more once everything calms down, okay? Things are nuts around here.”

“And at home for you,” she offers, reminding me of the woman I left under Gloria’s care less than an hour ago.

“Yours too. Let’s not forget we need to figure out who’s spying on you.”

She points her chin at her laptop, which is open on the table behind her. “I’m running a diagnostic program. I’m sure I’ll find something soon.”

“Until we have time to talk about it, I’ll try to stop questioning your motives at every turn.”

She squeezes my hand, agreeing without words.

We stare at each other for a few heavy seconds. Sexual tension crackles now that the angst-filled conversation has dried up.

Her heated gaze falls to my mouth. “Can I kiss you?”

The desperation to feel her lips on mine erodes my respect for workplace

decorum. Instead of answering right away, I pick up the desk phone. Peggy answers on the first ring.

“Morning, Peg. Is Boss in yet?”

“On the way. He called a few minutes ago, all fired up, with a laundry list of tasks. More than you can shake a stick at, I’ll tell you that much.” She grumbles under her breath. “I’m on item seven. Number eight was to make sure the intel team is in the conference room in forty-five minutes, along with Shep, Jonesy, Aaron, and Junior. He didn’t tell me the topic but sounded hot about it. So you might want to wear body armor unless you already know what it is, and I’m talking from the side of my mouth.”

“Oh, I know the topic, and body armor isn’t a bad idea. I’ll make sure Mia is with me. Tomer is out today, so we might need to get him to call in for the meeting.”

“Thanks. I’ll message him and the other guys now.”

“See you in forty-five.”

Once I hang up the receiver, Mia’s overpronounced pout draws a laugh from me. “Something wrong, gorgeous?”

She crosses her arms and forces a frown. “If a girl asks if she can kiss you, the response isn’t usually to call Peggy about a meeting with a man who probably wants us maimed.”

I dash to the door and peek out to survey the hallway. Seeing it’s clear, I close and lock the door before quickly returning.

Having observed my every move, she narrows her eyes at me with suspicion, but there’s a hint of excitement playing at the corners of her mouth.

When I return to my seat, I lock the wheels and pat my lap. “Get over here, tiger.”

Her pink tongue swipes at her plump lips. “You want me to sit on your lap?” Even as she asks, she’s already shifting her body to move in my direction.

“Don’t make me ask again,” I taunt, letting the implied threat heat my tone.

After glancing at the door, she complies eagerly with an impish glint in her eye. Her beachy scent reaches me just before she straddles my thighs and rests her palms on my shoulders. Her loose-fitting skirt slides up when she settles onto my lap.

Perfection.

Since the day she started at Redleg, I've wanted to see her thighs spread around me in this office. Or in my office. Hers. The break room. On top of the copy machine. Conference room table.

I've fantasized about having her on every surface in this entire building.

Gripping her hips, I pull her closer until her breasts meet my chest. She twists the ends of her hair, then rests it on one side of her neck, exposing the other to me. My tongue twitches for a taste, and blood rushes to my dick.

Drinking in the sight of her this close is electrifying, especially how the monitors' glow illuminates her features.

She's a vision. Every freckle on her face tells a story. All the gold flecks in her irises come together like beautiful art. I could stare at her for years without satisfying my covetous eyes.

"I believe you asked me for something a moment ago," I remind her of the request she made earlier.

Nibbling her lower lip like she's suddenly shy, she nods and fastens her green irises on me from under her thick lashes.

"Ask again. I suspect you'll like the answer."

She wraps her hands around the back of my neck, grazing her fingertips at the shorn edge of my hairline. "Can I kiss you?" Her pupils dilate. "*Please.*"

"No," I tease, one brow arched. "Because I'm going to kiss you."

Her beaming smile is the last thing I see before I close my eyes and dive into the kiss.

We work our lips in tandem, hungry meeting tender. She must feel me hardening because she pulses her hips, dragging her core over the ridge of my cock. Nothing frantic or forceful. Only a tiny pulse that she likely can't control.

My body reacts instinctually, sending another wave of blood flow to my dick and leaving me with an aching need to be inside her.

*Damn.* I only planned to make out with her, but if I don't get inside her, I'll be a miserable asshole for the rest of the day.

I deepen the kiss, angling her head to the side by tugging a fistful of her silky hair. She whimpers into my mouth. It's so hot that she gets turned on when I pull her hair. Not sure why I do it, but it's like my hand has a mind of its own.

As our tongues swirl and taste, she bears her pussy down harder against me, grinding my cock until I see stars.

I'm so fucking grateful she wore a skirt today.

Pulling at her hair gingerly, I break the kiss to run my tongue along the curve of her ivory neck. "You feel like corrupting me a bit more this morning?"

"That depends," she simpers in a breathy bedroom voice that has no place in an office.

"On what?" I draw a tiny patch of skin between my teeth, nibbling it delicately.

"Is it a punishment or a reward?"

Ceasing my worshipping of her neck, I draw her gaze to mine. "What if it's neither? What if we both just want to make each other feel good?"

Her lips, red and puffy from our vigorous kissing, press into a flat line. "Let me answer this way."

Instead of speaking, she reaches between us, unzips my pants, and works her hand in the small space of my open fly, then into my boxers. She boldly grabs my erection, wrapping her delicate fingers around the shaft and pumping me in firm, languid strokes.

Her touch draws a hiss from me. I shift back to give her more room, unbutton my pants, and tug the fly open. With one hand still stroking me, she uses the other to lower the waistband of my boxers and pull out my shaft. Her breathing accelerates, matching the increasing tempo of her tugs and strokes.

She curves a brow and holds my stare. "That answer your question?"

"Yeah." My head enthusiastically agrees, bobbing around like my neck is a wet noodle. "Yeah, it does. Cleared it right up." I follow my rambling with a raspy groan.

While she expertly pumps my cock, I dig my fingers into her supple thighs and run them toward her panties. I attempt to sneak one hand under the edge, but it's a tight fit, and I only get my first finger under the fabric.

As I graze my knuckle along her slit, she shudders from my touch.

I love affecting her with such a simple movement.

When I work my index finger through her wetness, her expression heats. I eagerly study her reactions like I'm cramming for a test. I want to memorize every aroused feature.

Her mouth parts when I make contact with her slick entrance, revealing a glimpse of that enticing tongue.

Unable to resist a taste, I pull her close with my free hand and capture her lips. She yields to me, encouraging me to take the lead.

And so I do.

I'm growing addicted to being in control of this vixen and how she cedes her body to me, trusting me to get her where she needs to go. It's a powerful force, making me feel like ten times the man I was before.

I dive my tongue between her lips like a possessed man. I can't get enough of my tiger.

After I plunge my finger inside her as deep as the tight fabric of her panties allows, she cries out into my mouth.

With my fingertip slick with her arousal, I draw back to find her clit, then swirl around it, flicking and teasing the sensitive pearl.

Mia's hips pulse wilder, driving her pussy into my touch while tightening her grip on my cock.

I'd love to spend hours teasing her and enjoying the way she fists my shaft, but we have a meeting in a few minutes. I can only escape reality for so long before someone comes knocking on the door.

"Mia, are you on birth control? Tested?"

Through racing breaths, she answers, "Yes to both."

"Good." I twist my hand and dig my fingertips into the gusset of her panties. "I hope you don't like these panties too much."

Grip tightening on the fabric, I rip them, instantly shredding a hole right up the middle. I'm a wild animal, too frantic to get inside her to spare the few seconds it would take to remove the damn things.

I'm ravenous for her.

Her shocked gasp is quickly replaced with a wicked grin. Instead of being mad at me for destroying her underwear, she's more desperate.

She quickly shimmies closer to me while keeping hold of my cock. Once my hand is out of the way, she aligns me with her entrance and sinks onto me.

"That was so fucking hot, Cal." She punctuates her sultry words with a moan as she finishes sliding her silky walls down my cock until I bottom out.

I stifle a groan. *Barely*. "You make me feel like an animal."

Once we start moving together, she latches her hands around my shoulders for better leverage.

While kissing me senseless, she pumps her hips, slowly at first, then faster and rougher. When she frees my lips a few seconds later, she presses her forehead to mine and locks me in her spellbinding gaze.

Frantically, she moves over me, squeezing my cock with her velvety



walls. I help her with deep upward thrusts and a guiding grip around her hips.

“I like making you wild for me,” she mewls and bites her lip.

“Shh, tiger. We have to be quiet.”

“I’m trying, but you feel so fucking good inside me bare.”

She’s right.

The slickness of her arousal coating my cock is like being bathed in the silkiest water. I feel every inch of her pussy soften to accommodate me on each stroke, then clench as I withdraw. Her body is trying to hold me in place.

Or, more accurately, her pussy knows my cock belongs there.

The squeaking of my chair, the slapping of skin, and the echo of our frenzied breaths compose the only song I want to hear. Manilow himself couldn’t write a melody this sweet.

I wish I could drag this out and make it last all day. When I’m inside her, I don’t care about anything else, and that’s dangerous.

We have a whole mess of clusters to unfuck today, but right now, I only care about chasing our pleasure. I refuse to stop until my release coats her walls, claiming her pussy as mine.

My primal thoughts come flying out of my mouth. “Mine,” I growl past her lips.

“Yes. Yours.” Her instant agreement soothes the monster inside me.

But not enough that I don’t want her to say it on repeat for days. I want to hear her scream it at the top of her lungs.

Not at work, though.

I slip one hand under her skirt, bringing it to rest on the crease of her ass.

The excitement of my exploration must excite her because her gyrating quickens.

I’m obsessed with making her feel good. Of satisfying her. It’s probably due to that pesky self-doubt that I’m not experienced enough for her.

Judging by her frenzied pace and insistent kisses, my worries may be unfounded.

Applying pressure over what remains of her panties, I use my flattened fingers to shift her vigorously back and forth, guiding her movements.

I let the pads of my fingertips explore the thin silk until I find her hole. The memory of how she slid that plug into her ass last night sails into my consciousness, making my balls draw up.

I don’t have lube, and an office quickie isn’t the right time for me to go

poking around down there, so I settle for allowing my fingers to press against her opening over the fabric.

Her moans tell me I'm doing something right, but I cut her off with a shush and a kiss.

Boss is already pissed at us. We shouldn't make it worse with complaints from people in the cubicles outside our office.

My hand digs into her ass, encouraging her to move faster. I'm rabid with a need to feel her quivering around my cock with no condom between us this time. Nothing to dull the sensation of her pussy fluttering and gripping me deep inside her.

"I think I'm gonna come," she keens against my lips.

Her erotic sounds and her body sliding against mine bring me to the brink, so I attempt to talk her over the edge so we can come together.

"That's my good girl. Come for me, tiger. Squeeze my cock with that silky pussy. Give it to me."

"Your dirty talk is so hot."

With her forehead on mine, she holds my stare until she shatters, euphoria eclipsing every inch of her face. Her volume spikes sharply as she loses herself to her orgasm.

"Shh," I warn half-heartedly.

The animal inside me wants everyone in the building to know what I'm doing to her. To warn them to steer clear because *she's mine*.

She forces her mouth shut, trapping in the honeyed cries of her climax. The sight of her unraveling from this angle, coupled with the tightening of her pussy as it strangles my dick, sends a violent wave of ecstasy through me, spiraling me to the peak.

"Fuck, Mia. Shit," I pant out while jets of my release fill her, making her slicker.

When our tremors finally ebb and our breaths steady, she kisses me sweetly.

"We did it," she whispers across my lips.

"Sex? Yes. That's what that was."

She swats my chest. "Not what I meant."

"What did you mean, tiger?"

"We made each other feel good. No reward. No punishment. Just pleasure. It was like the —"

She chokes off the rest of her sentence, but I know what she was going to

say. I was thinking it too.

“Like the first night,” I finish her sentence.

“Yeah. I shouldn’t bring that up. I’m sorry.”

I wipe the stray wisps of hair from her face. “It’s okay.”

The tight set of her jaw and roll of her eyes says she doesn’t believe me.

“I’m serious, Mia. I tried to not think of that night after everything went down. But the truth is, it’s burned into my mind the same way the feel of your skin is burned into my touch.”

“I’m sorry I tainted our memories.”

The truth of her words rings clear in her tone and expression.

“I know you are. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to give you my full trust yet. I’m trying. Be patient with me. Okay?”

She doesn’t answer with words, just repeated nods and a trembling chin.

“Good. Because I meant what I said.”

Her gaze flits to one side, eyes searching. “When you said what?”

“That you’re mine. Not just this perfect pussy that’s cradling my cock.” I fail to suppress my smirk, although I don’t try much. “But the whole person. All of you. Heart. Mind. Soul. Body. The entire Miriam Owens. Or whatever your real name is.”

“It’s Miriam Ella Bennett.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Bennett. My name is still the same.”

“Why did you tell me to call you Cal if everyone else calls you Klein?”

My heart pinches tight. “Honestly, I’m not sure. My family calls me Cal or the dreaded full name, but I’ve never let anyone else.”

“Not even past girlfriends?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll try not to let it go to my head.”

A ghost of a smile works across my face while I stare at her, my eyes greedily trying to look their fill.

One part of her lower lip gets stuck on her teeth as her grin widens and spreads. “I meant what I said too.”

I lower my chin, silently beckoning her to explain.

“When I said yes to being yours.”

Despite having just slowed, my heart rate shoots through the roof once more.

It ratchets another notch when she adds, “And I want you to have the *real* me. All of me.”

## CHAPTER 35

**WE MADE THE LIST**

KLEIN

“I am seriously beginning to question my authority around this place,” Boss grumbles as he takes his seat at the head of the table.

He places his new Redleg tablet and spiral-bound notebook in front of him.

Mia and I are on his left, and Leo is on his right, like one point of the Holy Trinity. Recently, Lionheart has been involved in more of Big Al’s activities. I wonder if he’s grooming him to take over one day or finally making him second in command.

At the end of the table are the other guys from the op, minus Kri. No one makes a sound while we await the impending ass-chewing.

After scribbling furiously in his notebook, Boss closes the cover and sets the pen next to it. From my vantage point, I see something written in black marker on the front, right under the Redleg Security logo.

He pushes it in front of me for a better view. “Here. Is that better?”

Mia snickers beside me, then attempts to disguise it as a cough.

My cheek twitches, and I try to suppress a smile. “I suppose all our names are in there.”

“Have you always been as sharp as a sack full of soup, or is this a new thing?” he barks out.

More laughs echo around the table, including my own.

Once the laughter dries up, the others lean closer, angling to see what’s written on the notebook. Boss indulges them, picking up the notebook and standing it on end, facing away from him.

In big, bold black print are four words.

*Big Al’s Shit List.*

He opens it to the first page, and sure enough, all our names are listed. At the top of the list, he printed *One Strike*.

Never one to miss an opportunity to lighten the mood, Shep objects, “Boss, you missed someone.”

Boss levels a glare at him. “Well, I’m not putting Lionheart on there. He was as shocked about the mutiny as I was.” He tips his head to the man seated at the right hand of the father. “Should I call Kri and tell her you’re throwing her under the bus, or will a text suffice?”

Shep crosses his arms and rolls his lips into a pout. "I meant Chuck."

Mia tenses beside me and snaps, "Stop calling him that."

Shep lifts his hands out in front of him. "Easy, Ghost. He's earned the moniker through years of being a buzzkill."

Lionheart's brows furrow, and he shifts forward with his elbows on the table. "Mia, soldiers do this sort of thing. Tomer knows we're playing."

"Does he, Leo?" She cuts her glare at him. "Have you ever asked him? Or bothered to get to know him?"

Leo's huge frame shrinks.

"All right. Enough," Boss interjects, then scribbles Tomer's name onto the list.

All faces whip toward him, except Mia's. She's returned to shooting murder eyes at Shep, clearly agitated by the Tomer hate. I do my best to muzzle the now familiar green monster, remembering her reassurances that he's not a threat to what she and I have.

My feelings for her grow stronger as the hours tick by. Part of me wonders if my Redleg brothers fell this hard and fast for their women. Sawyer certainly went ass over tits for Sammy more than a decade ago, and Shep was gaga for Kri from the night she stitched his neck when he was shot. My eyes fall to Leo, and I recall how protective he was of Sue on the Amos stalker job. I have my answer.

*When it's real, you just know.*

My heart stutters, and my windpipe swells. I sneak my hand under the table to find Mia's thigh. A second later, her smooth palm rests on it, instantly steadying my pulse.

"Is Tomer joining by phone?" Mia asks Boss.

His jaw clicks. "No. He wants the week off. Can you and Klein hold down the shop without him?"

A chorus of gasps and whispered words reverberate around the room.

"A whole week?" Jonesy sputters. "*Damn, man.* That girl must be something else. She's got him in a choke hold."

Leo strokes his beard. "Clearly."

Big Al's eyes shift between Mia and me. "Can you?"

"Yes, Boss. We'll be fine," I respond confidently. "Not a problem."

He nods, inhaling powerfully through his nose. "Okay, so let's get this over with." He scans my peers, ensuring everyone is paying attention. "First things first. I don't want to ever see an op like that carried out in secret a-

fucking-gain. Period. It will be instant termination for everyone involved. No questions asked. I don't give a flying fuck what the reasons are. It cannot and will not happen again."

He pauses, letting the words sink in.

"The liability you put on Redleg's shoulders isn't something you have the authority to do. What you did may have drastic consequences. Legally and financially. You could have ruined Redleg. Not to mention the target that's painted on our backs. What gives you the right to make that decision for *all* the people who work here and count on Redleg to put food on their table?"

*Shit.*

In my periphery, I take in Mia's free hand cupping her stomach like she took a strike to the gut.

I was so laser-focused on the op I didn't consider the risks to everyone else at Redleg. If something went wrong, I knew we'd be screwed, but I didn't consider the impact it could have had on the livelihood of everyone who counts on Redleg for a paycheck. They didn't agree to risk all of Redleg for one girl.

If they knew what Mia and I knew, I suspect they'd have made the same choice we did.

But as usual, Boss is right. We didn't have the right to decide for them.

The room is silent while his words penetrate our defensive exteriors. I search the faces of the team. Everyone seems appropriately rattled.

With a repentant tone, I begin my apology, "Boss, you're right. I can't speak for everyone here, but I'm deeply sorry for not coming to you first. I was so focused on saving her I didn't think about the larger consequences to Redleg. It won't ever happen again."

Mia clears her throat and squarely meets Boss's piercing gaze. "I know I'm new here, and I could use that as an excuse, but I won't. I knew it was risky, but I still chose to spearhead the rescue. My only defense was I was blinded by my past with Lenkov and a personal fight against human trafficking. Knowing Violet is Redleg family was the last straw. I'm very sorry. If you choose to keep me on the payroll, you can rest assured I'll never do anything this reckless again."

"Boss, for what it's worth, Mia and Klein told the team it wasn't Redleg-sanctioned," Shep chimes in, his voice devoid of his typical lightheartedness. "We were under the impression that if shit went sideways, we were on our own to deal with the consequences. It wasn't a Redleg op, as far as I was



concerned. We were willing to do it because we don't turn our back on family."

"That's the thing I don't get," Boss grits out, fist falling to the table. "I was chewing on it all night long. Why the fuck did my team think I wouldn't support an op to save Tomer's girl? Have I ever left family hanging out to dry?"

Guilt threatens to crush my chest like a hundred-pound medicine ball was tossed at me by the giant across the table.

Mia and I glance at each other from the corner of our eyes. Her throat bobs, and her jaw and lips press tight, as if she's physically holding her tongue.

When no one speaks — we already gave our flimsy excuse last night about asking for forgiveness with time not being on our side and distrust of the FBI in this case — Boss continues, "No sense bellyaching over this anymore. Just don't fucking do anything this asinine again."

Nods and mumbled agreements sweep around the table.

"Now let's unfuck this shit. We've got three people we need to figure out what to do with — two traffickers and a vic who wants to stay with one of them for some unfathomable reason." He shakes his head and widens his eyes, as baffled about it as the rest of us are. "We have another vic who Tomer won't let out of his sight. We don't trust potentially dirty law enforcement to prosecute this. And we've undoubtedly infuriated Lenkov by taking," he looks at me, brows raised, "how many girls out of his ring?"

"Sixteen," I answer.

"Sixteen girls out of his operation, along with two guys who bring in new vics. Then we have a third one still out there, right?"

Shep answers in a gritty tone. "The third is the one who works at Yuri's club as his personal guard. And that means we have to deal with Yuri too."

"Right. That reminds me." Boss smirks, but it's not a playful smirk. It's more like *I hate you fuckers and want to ring your necks*. "With you leaving that guy at the club, bloody and battered, there's no way he won't talk. At least to Yuri. And that will 100 percent confirm our team was behind the rescue op. So we need to put all personnel and clients on heightened alert. We must assume Lenkov will seek retribution. Redleg's already on his hit list, and this will piss him off to no end."

He scrubs his forehead forcefully, grinding his teeth. "Did I miss anything else we need to worry about?" His eyes probe the room.

I hate to bring this up, but since we're airing all the shit, here goes. "It's probably covered under our status as Lenkov's number one enemy, but the tangos we left alive at the trafficking house might be able to ID some of us. Mostly Tomer because he shucked his mask to search for Lettie. But they didn't hear our names."

"Jesus." A gruff rumble comes from Big Al. "Anything else?"

"I think that's it," Mia says.

Suddenly, I'm hit with the memory of why we left her place in a hurry this morning. "And someone disabled Mia's home security system last night while we were on the op, broke in, stole her personal tablet, and planted two surveillance bugs in her room."

"Fuck," Shep exclaims.

Mia swats my shoulder. "Cal!"

A bevy of curses and swears surround us. But I can't focus on them since my tiger's baring her claws.

My wrists roll out, facing my palms to the ceiling. "What?"

With her nostrils flared, she snaps her attention to Big Al. "It's probably not related, Boss. That's my issue. Not Redleg's problem."

"You don't know that, Mia. The timing is damn coincidental," I contend.

Her face waxes over, shock and irritation morphing into acceptance in a few short seconds. "Fine. Put it on the list, Boss. But I'll handle looking into it."

"Any Redleg business on that device?" he asks, voice free of judgment or condemnation.

He's snapped into *Boss Mode*, ready to handle shit. Our asses have been chewed, and he's moved on. The sign of a great leader. And a great man.

I suspect his concern for one of his employees trumps his exasperation over the mess we've caused.

"No, sir," she responds.

He presses his lips together in a hard line and curses under his breath at her use of the dreaded title. I hear the echo of every non-commissioned officer I had snapping at someone with the familiar *Don't call me sir. I work for a living, private.*

"Anyone else's home broken into last night? Or any other shit to add?"

With nothing added, we go through the list, considering options and figuring out the action plan for each item.

Boss decides all Redleg personnel involved in the mission should pair up

for extra protection. Aaron and Jonesy both live alone, so they decide to room together for the time being. Shep invites Junior to stay with him, given he already guards Val. Shep likes the idea of Kri and Val having more protection, anyhow. Especially since Kri's face was exposed during her portion of the op last night. Others at the bar might have seen the guys leave with her.

While I try to figure out what to do, Boss calls his assistant into the conference room. "Peg, I need you to send out an urgent message to all clerical and support staff to make sure they're utilizing their home security systems and to be on guard when in public. If they feel or see something off, I want them to call me and/or the police. If anyone asks why, let them know we're raising the risk level due to a confidential case."

"And the guards?" she asks.

"We'll handle notifying them," he responds instantly.

Peggy excuses herself, and Boss turns to me. "You and Mia need to notify all our guards about the heightened threat level once we're done here. I want them to check in with you guys every hour until further notice. Set up the app so you don't have to manage it manually."

"Yes, Boss. I'll have it alert us only if someone misses a check-in. Do you want it hourly at night too?" she asks.

Big Al sweeps his gaze to Leo, who's running his tongue over his teeth, deep in thought. "I'd suggest we lessen it to every three or four hours at night. Can we set up the app to prompt them to check in after five minutes if they haven't by then?"

Mia nods excitedly. "Yes. I can do that. I'll require an access code for them too. Don't want anyone in possession of their phone to simply check a box when the alert comes through."

Boss snaps and points at Mia. "That's good. I like that."

Continuing through the list, Boss tells her to contact Clearwater PD to report the break-in since she doesn't suspect anyone there is in bed with the Russians.

She and I are tasked with exploring the FBI leak, getting some actionable intel that could be admissible in court — in other words, obtained legally. Once we have something he can use, he'll make some calls to his friends at the justice department.

"And as for the traffickers and the girl. Hmm. Ideas?"

"What if we give the asshole trafficker, Davidov, back to Lenkov and let

him dole out his own punishment?” Shep offers.

Considering the suggestion, Big Al sucks in a deep breath, puffing his cheeks and slowly letting the air flutter out. “It’s easy; that’s for sure. If we send him back, they’ll assume he’s the leak.”

Jonesy speaks up for the first time. “I don’t like it. He knows too much about us at this point and about the other guy who gave us the location — Savin and his girl, Tasha. Anything Lenkov gets out of him before they kill him will paint a bigger target on our backs.”

“Can we turn him over to CPD for holding?” I suggest.

“Mia?” Boss asks, deferring to her since she’s the one with all the apprehension about law enforcement.

Her eyes taper to slits, and she drags her teeth across her bottom lip. “Can we get Lettie or Tasha to identify him as the solo kidnapper? Would that be enough to hold him without them involving the FBI?”

“Put a pin in that. I’ll let them sit at the motel another day while we handle this other shit.” Big Al taps his fingers across his tablet. “I’ll call the chief and find out at what point he’s required to notify the FBI when trafficking comes up in one of their investigations.”

“Speaking of the girls,” Leo draws out the words, letting them hang with a tense pause.

“We dropped them off at the emergency room last night,” I respond, wondering what he’s getting at.

Aaron jumps in. “Right, so I doubt we have time to put a pin in the law enforcement thing. The hospital is duty-bound to report something like that, so the girls have probably already started talking to the cops.”

“And to the feds. Dammit,” Mia fumes, her fist softly pounding on the table. “I want justice for those girls. But I’m not confident they’ll get it until we expose the rat.”

Boss cricks his neck to face me. “Check the web for media stories and monitor that for a few days. That many girls dropped at a hospital might make the news. Perhaps media pressure could hold the feds accountable for prosecution.”

“Should we tip them off?” Shep asks.

“Let’s wait on that,” Boss decides. “I want to see what else we find out about the investigation first.”

Mia scoffs, shaking her head. “Even if the media applies pressure, that only lasts until the next news cycle. The FBI might give the public some lip

service, but by the time it goes to trial, no one will remember. And there are a million ways a case can be botched after arrests are made.”

“Not to add on to the shit pile,” Jonesy interjects. “But an investigation already on the books might make protecting Savin a bigger challenge since some of those girls have likely already described him or mentioned the other guys from the abduction part of the ring.”

“They’re called *lover boys*,” Mia explains. “They’re the men who go out and find girls, flirting and pretending to be romantic interests, then abduct them.”

My mind whirls, but one thought breaks through clearer than the others. “Although I’m grateful for Savin’s help and sensitive to his complicated predicament with the Bratva having his sister, if we can’t save him, then so be it. We can’t fix all this shit. The courts will need to sort his situation out.”

My opinion is met with somber nods from the team.

After a few tense seconds, Boss asks, “What law enforcement jurisdiction is the hospital in? That’s who would have responded to a call from the hospital.”

On my laptop, I perform a quick search. “This is lucky. It’s CPD.”

Boss calls Peg on his cell phone. “Get the chief on the line for me ASAP. If he’s not available, get me Patterson.”

“Anything else critical before we break?” Boss asks the group.

“The reason I brought up the girls originally was because my angel recommended we look into some counseling and resources for them to help them get their lives back together. We have extended family with a vast philanthropic agency, a big part of which involves battered women, trafficked women, and the like. Can I contact them to see if they’d be willing to take this on? Now that we’ve saved these girls, maybe we can facilitate the next step. Rescue — check. Justice — we’re working on it. But what about recovery? Sue and I would like to take that on.”

“That’s why Sue asked if we could find the girls,” Mia whispers, her tone reflecting awe of Leo’s tenderhearted wife.

“Yes,” Boss decides without hesitation. “I like that. Not something we’re obligated to do, but if you have the contacts, by all means, use them.”

“Who’s the extended family?” Mia asks, eyes narrowed thoughtfully at Lionheart.

“The owners of Langley S&D — Hudson and Amber — have a foundation. Sue’s brother Nick is married into the family. We’re all at a lot of

functions together. Game nights and whatnot.” He leans forward. “Pro tip. Don’t play Monopoly with Cort Amos.”

Jonesy cackles. “I guarded that dude for a minute during that stalker op a few years ago. He’s a nut job. Kept feeling my biceps and trying to prove his were bigger.” His laughter grows louder. “Great guy, though. Tiny biceps. His wife Amber is as sweet as cotton candy.”

“Leo, can you get me their contact information by the end of the day? I’ll pay a visit to Tomer and his girl this evening. Aside from chewing his ass for not trusting me with this, I’d like to make sure she gets some help.”

Another wave of guilt socks me in the gut, making my breakfast threaten to revolt. I don’t want him to pin all this on Tomer.

But then again, maybe that’s where it belongs. He’s clearly known Lettie the longest.

Fuck. I’m so confused.

“Okay, all of you can fuck off to do your jobs.”

He stands, rapping his knuckles on the table. “And be careful out there.”

## CHAPTER 36

**YEAH, I GOT ISSUES**



MIA

With Big Al's decree that those involved in the rescue op avoid staying alone, Klein's idea that I sleep at his place isn't something I can object to any longer.

Not that I would.

My only concern is how his mom factors into it. I refuse to let him choose me over her. Or hell... I won't let him *consider* choosing between us.

When we left this morning, he waited until the neighbor arrived. Sweet lady. My twitch to run a check on her is only a level two on the Mia pimp scale.

Later, I'll ask Cal about his plan for where we'll stay. I suspect he's been sleeping there. That would explain why he had a change of clothes on him.

All things I've been wondering about but have resisted the compulsion to find out.

*Pats self on head.*

For now, I have two critical tasks to focus on. Finding out who is fucking with me and identifying the rat at the FBI.

Once Cal and I return to the office, he noticeably sniffs the air, making me do the same.

A naughty grin caresses his lips. "It smells like sex in here."

"Maybe I should work in my office so we can focus. We have a lot to do today," I offer half-heartedly.

Suddenly behind me, he grips my hips, then slides his palms along the swell of my upper thigh. "Good point. It might be hard to concentrate knowing that a mere foot away from me, your pussy is exposed by your shredded panties."

Instantly turned on by his proximity and hold on me, not to mention his dirty words, my breath hitches. "I removed them in the restroom before the meeting. No sense in wearing them anymore."

His hold on me tightens as he brings his face into the curve of my neck and inhales deeply. "Fuck, that's hot. You're such a dirty girl, traipsing around here without panties. Don't you have a spare pair in the bag you packed this morning?"

“Yeah, but I thought it would be more fun this way.”

“Such a naughty girl.”

He runs his hand over my naked ass and squeezes firmly, then threads it around my hip to tease me from the front. My eyes flutter closed, and I press my ass into his groin.

“Spread your legs for me,” he orders, and I comply instantly.

His deft fingers stroke through my tender flesh, finding my clit and pinching it. He drifts to my opening and pumps two fingers inside me.

I can’t believe we’re doing this in the office. *Again*. He’s right; I am a dirty girl. But he’s a bad boy.

My breath comes in raspy pants, and I’m unable to stifle a moan.

“Shh, be a good girl and stay quiet, or I’ll stop.”

“Okay.”

“You want me to make you come, Mia?”

“Yes, please.”

“Does a dirty girl like you deserve it?”

“Mmm, that’s up to you. I’m *your* dirty girl.”

In his reply, I hear the smirk he must be wearing. “You sure as hell are. Mine to punish. Mine to please.” He thrusts his fingers harder, punctuating each word.

“Yes, all yours.” My voice is something straight out of a nineties-era phone sex line.

He nibbles at my neck, just shy of a bite, and a low growl reverberates from the back of his throat. “If you want to come, better do it fast. We have a lot of work to do.”

“Very responsible of you, considering where your fingers are.”

His mouth vibrates around my neck with his laughter.

I cover his hands with mine, holding his left on my hip and the right between my legs. His thumb finds my clit, swirling around it while he pumps his long fingers into my soaking pussy. My grip on his hands tightens, and my back arches, thrusting my ass harder against his erect cock.

“I’m gonna come,” I whisper through choppy exhales, remembering his request to be quiet.

He slows his movements. “Not until you ask for permission.”

*Dirty sexy baby.*

“May I come?”

His fingers resume their assault, and a coil of ecstasy takes root at the

base of my stomach.

“Beg for it, tiger.”

“Please make me come, Cal. Please. *Please.*”

“Good girl,” he husks out. “Come for me. Now.”

“Oh god, yes.”

His thumb frantically works my clit as his fingers tap me deep inside. And I shatter, clenching and quivering around his fingers while my hips thrash wildly against his hand.

When he withdraws, the aftershocks continue rolling through me.

He pats my ass and pulls down my skirt. “Be a good girl and get some panties from your bag so we can get some work done.”

Once I catch my breath, I do as he asks, not bothering to go to the ladies’ room to put them on. What’s the point? My bag is in here, and he’s seen every inch of my body. Nothing to hide from him.

He watches my every move, dick protruding like a towel rack.

“Do you, uh, want me to take care of that for you?” I ask, raising my brows and pointing my chin at his groin.

“No, he’ll take care of himself. It’ll make the relief you give me later even sweeter.”

“Don’t say I didn’t offer.”

He blinks out of our stare when I approach him, angling for a kiss. He obliges, kissing me, light and chaste. I suspect he’s questioning his ability to keep his dick under control if he were to kiss me like he normally does.

“So after that, you think we can work together for the rest of the day?” I toss. “Maybe I should go into my office.”

He sucks in a hiss of air through his teeth and scrunches his cheeks. “Nah. With Tomer out, we need to work together to stay on top of the day-to-day shit, plus all the other crap.”

I pat my cheeks, feeling how flush they are, and blow out a harsh exhale. “Ugh, okay. Work. Yeah, sure. Thank you for that, by the way.”

He swats my ass harder this time when I turn to take my seat, drawing a girlie giggle from me.

Oy vey! The things this man does to me.

Sounding calm and collected, he asks, “Is there anything I can do to help with the app for the guards to do their hourly check-ins?”

Oh shit. That’s right.

“Will you get the message out about the heightened threat level and

inform them that we'll be getting them info for hourly check-ins in the next forty-five minutes or so?"

He kisses my forehead before taking his seat. "You got it, tiger."

A wispy exhale leaves me, and my heart flutters so much I'm fearful it's about to punch a hole through my chest.

How in the hell does such a simple gesture cause a reaction like that?

Is it that he offered to help? Is it the kiss? The damn adorable pet name? The afterglow from the orgasm? All the above?

Shaking it off with a few deep breaths, I go to work on the app modifications. After sending the message to the guards, Cal gets started on the daily tasks, reviewing cases and checking the chat for messages from the field. Boss put a hold on new cases for the time being, so at least we won't have any new client dossiers to distract us from the more important tasks.

After a half hour, I've got the app for the guards ready for rollout, so I push the update to their phones and tablets and follow it with an alert to request their first check-in.

Within a few seconds, replies come in, which is a relief since we didn't have time to test the modification. Fortunately, Redleg's primary field communication software has a great design, and Tomer maintains it well.

With that handled, I quickly become buried in my two priority tasks.

The diagnostic I ran on my security system is complete and revealed a few things needing attention. Unfortunately, the scan didn't tell me all that much about how the intruder got in, which is alarming.

Shaking it off, I launch a reset program that should *hopefully* repair the damage. We'll see if it works. If it doesn't, I'll need a whole sheet cake to soothe me.

While that runs, I resume my attempts to reaccess the West Florida FBI branch server.

But I hit roadblock after roadblock.

After an hour of failed attempts, I throw my hands in frustration and switch gears, pivoting to my other task to see what's up with my system.

Once again, I get nowhere.

The simple bugs were repaired, but I can't tell how they got in. So I don't know how to prevent another attack.

"Son of a bitch," I grumble to myself.

My shoulders collapse against the chair, and I stretch my arms to the sides.

“Mia,” Cal interrupts my bemoaning.

My hands fall into my lap. “Yeah?”

“Can you help me pull together the rest of the victim list? I’m not sure what I’m doing wrong. I can’t find these last two girls.”

“Sure. A little distraction from striking out over here would be nice.”

He pitches his head to the side, casting a doubtful glare at me. “Striking out? You? That doesn’t sound right.”

“Well, how it sounds is irrelevant since it’s exactly what’s happening.”

“Switch to the other thing. Get a win under your belt. I bet when you go back, you’ll crack it in minutes.”

My spine crumples in defeat. “I’ve already swapped tasks. And both have bested me. I can’t access the FBI server, and looking at my security system gave me nothing helpful.”

His face falls, shock taking root. “You don’t remember how you accessed the FBI server yesterday?”

“I thought I did, but it’s not working, and I don’t know why. The damn thing is airtight.” I wave my hands in front of me, gesturing toward the computer. “So I need to try a whole new approach, but I haven’t figured one out yet.”

“Considering how fast you got in yesterday, it doesn’t make sense that you’re having this much trouble today.”

I rest my cheek on the cool desk and pout. “Maybe I’m just tired.”

He leans over, stroking the hair away from my face and placing the sweetest kiss on my cheek. “I’ll go get you some coffee.”

My eyes flutter closed after I watch his cakey tush leave the office. I need to rest them for a second. Anything to stop the burning around the rims of my eyelids.

“Wake up, tiger,” Cal whispers, giving my shoulder a soft nudge.

“I thought you were getting coffee for me,” I whine.

“I did. I’ve been back for ten minutes. I let you sleep. But I need you now.”

“Another bjology?” I ask sleepily, wiping my face and flitting my eyes open.

His neck lengthens sharply, and his forehead creases. “Did you say *bjology*?”

“Yeah, like a blow job apology.”

“Makes sense. I’m a fan of the concept, but that’s not what I need you

for.” One of his brows raises to a point. “At least not now.”

He’s so cheeky. Speaking of which, I sit up and lightly smack my cheeks to wake myself up.

“Coffee.” He points at the mug. “It’s getting cold.”

After thanking him, I take a few sips and shake off the sleepy haze. *Fuck.* I’m exhausted.

“Okay, stud muffin. Show me where you’re stuck with this shit.”

Over the next few minutes, we work out his issue and ID the last two girls. Shifting my attention off my failed attempts proves to be helpful. I get a rush from helping him, and the kick of excitement revs my engines.

Diving back into the FBI hack, I’m more determined than ever to figure out a new way in. *There’s always a way.*

After a while, Cal excuses himself to get our lunch delivery from the front desk. When he returns, he sets a chicken pita pocket in front of me. “Take a break. You need to eat.”

“I don’t need to eat. I need answers.”

He chuckles. I guess he realizes I’m *mostly* kidding by the maniacal quality of my voice.

Once he stops turning me on with his husky laugh, he unwraps my pita and holds it out. “Eat. I’m serious.”

Grabbing the pita, I dutifully take a bite.

My nips perk up when a breathy “*good girl*” passes his lips. Immediately, I take another bite with my eyes fixed on his in an unspoken invitation for more praise.

His tongue sneaks out, swiping his lips hypnotically. “You like that? The good girl thing?”

I dab at the corners of my mouth with my napkin. “Well, it’s hot to be taken care of, and I bet all girls with daddy issues enjoy a little praise mixed in with their degradation.”

“Daddy issues?” he asks, one side of his face lifted inquisitively.

Thrusting a thumb toward my chest, I clarify. “Child of divorce.”

“Tell me about your family,” he orders, asking and demanding simultaneously. “While we eat. Then back to work.”

I take another bite, swallow, and chase it with some water. “Well, let’s see. My mother passed away five years ago from complications from plastic surgery. We weren’t very close. She was a cold woman, always calculated and guarded. Not the least bit maternal. Although it was sad to lose her, it

didn't hit me as hard as it would hit most people."

Having stopped eating to listen, he sits quietly. I hope my talk about my bitchy mother doesn't upset him by reminding him of his sweet mother.

My gaze searches the ceiling as I decide what to share next. "Dad bounced when I was in elementary, and other than a few pop-in visits in my teens, I don't have many memories of him."

My stomach twists like someone jabbed their hand inside me to grab a fistful of my intestines. It's not easy for me to talk about myself, but I'm determined to do this for Cal. He needs this... to know me.

And *I* need this. I *want* him to know me.

My cheeks warm when I force a shaky breath and plant my vision on him. "I also have two younger sisters, Portia and Claire. They both live in Orlando with their families. They don't know that I worked for the CIA. I thought it best to keep it from them for their safety. The last time I saw them was at my mother's funeral. Before that, it was probably six or seven years earlier. I've never met my nieces and nephews."

Cal's hand goes to his chest, as if his heart aches from my confession.

My heart isn't fairing much better. I sense echoes of its frantic rhythm in my neck and wrists.

I blink some of the emotion away and expel a whoosh of air from my lungs, then turn away from Cal's perceptive eyes.

As if that would help.

*As if it would prevent him from seeing me.*

The next few words rush forward, practically scraping their way up my throat to crawl out. "The funeral was awkward. My sisters were cold to me, but that was my fault. I'd been avoiding their calls and didn't know Mom had died until I got a Google alert with her obituary. I have those set up to track my family. Otherwise, I wouldn't have known. You believe that? Me. A fucking Google alert. Something anyone can set up. But if I'd been talking to them, I'd have known sooner and could have helped with the funeral arrangements."

I laugh, but there's no humor there.

Only pain.

Loneliness and regret.

Yeah, there's loads of regret.

"There's not much else to tell about my family. It's just me now, and that's fi —"

I catch myself before I continue that thought. Because it's *not* fine.  
And I don't want to lie to him. Never again.

My vision catches on the few bites I took out of the pita, but it no longer holds any appeal. I wrap it carefully and seal the foil with a piece of tape.

"I'm going to put this in the fridge to save it for later."

Before I get past his chair, he grabs me around the wrist. My feet lock me in place, but I focus on the closed office door.

"Mia."

My name leaves him in a hushed timbre, fraught with so many emotions I'm unable to identify a single one.

He says it again. "*Mia.*"

Not sure how he conveys that much understanding and compassion in two mere syllables. Just my name. Nothing else.

Yet I hear his message, loud and clear.

*You're not alone anymore.*

It's in the slight hum of the *M*.

The feathery brush of the *I*.

And the warm embrace of the *A*.

My view of the door blurs from the moisture pooling in my eyes. I wiggle my nose to fight off the sting and shake my head to distract myself from the tremble in my chin.

Then he's there.

Holding me. Giving me someone to cling to.

Pulling me from my solitude.

Cal cups his warm, strong hand around my nape and pulls my face against his chest, and I breathe him in, letting his scent and touch soothe me. His other hand wraps around my waist. I drop the stupid pita and lock my arms around him, crushing myself against his firm chest.

He doesn't try to fix my issues. He doesn't badger me with questions or claim to hold the answers.

He simply comforts me, existing beside me as a source of solace.

And isn't that what we all want? A safe place to let our emotions run free. Someone to hear us without judgment. To provide support without control. Shelter from the storm.

Despite my attempts to keep them at bay, my tears spill onto his skin.

He pulls away only long enough to kiss my forehead. "It's okay, Mia. I got you."



His words and loving touch ground me, slowly tugging me back into this moment and away from the pain and loneliness of my past.

After indulging in his warmth for a few peaceful moments, my tears subside. Stiffening my shoulders, I slide from his grasp and wipe my eyes. He lets me go, sensing I'm ready to stand on my own again, but he keeps one of my hands in his.

We stare at each other for a few heavy seconds until he breaks the healing silence. "Can I kiss you?"

Well, I might be sad, but I can't miss this golden opportunity.

"No. Because I'm going to kiss you."

## CHAPTER 37

**TO SEE AND BE SEEN**

KLEIN

The second Tomer answers the phone, I jump right in, not bothering with a greeting. “Head’s up, buddy. You’ve got incoming.”

“What? Who?” he snaps, instantly on alert.

Maybe I should dial back the fearmongering. “It’s Boss and Lionheart. They just left for your place.”

“My place? Why? I’m taking personal leave. Doesn’t he understand that?”

I hear some rustling on the other end of the phone line.

“Easy, buddy. He only wants to talk to you and check on Lettie. And he’s bringing some resources for her. The Langley foundation is offering a safe place for Lettie and the other girls to stay, counseling and shit, along with help getting jobs and their own places to live when they’re ready.”

“Fuck. Fine,” he huffs. “She’s not staying at some shelter, though. I’m moving her in with me permanently.”

I hear a feminine voice in the background but can’t decipher her words.

Tomer must be holding the phone to his chest. I only pick out four words from his muffled reply. “Talk. Later. Sugar bear.”

Sounds like Lettie isn’t exactly on board with Tomer’s plan.

Not my problem.

“Anyway, we’ve got things under control here, but if you want an update later, you know where to find me.”

“Boss and Leo just left HQ?” he asks.

“Yeah, no more than five minutes ago.”

“Okay, we’ve got a little time before they get here. Give me the ten-minute or less update. What happened to the pieces of shit who abducted Lettie?”

“Boss can tell you more about what he and Shep are planning to do with Yuri and Yev, the guard from the strip club. We haven’t been involved with that.”

“And the other two Russians?”

“We’re not giving Savin to the authorities yet. You left before hearing this last night, but he was involved in the ring against his will after being kidnapped as a child. His sister is a captive there, and they used his love for

her to coerce him into compliance. He cooperated last night and also claims to know about several other houses. He confirmed Lenkov is the pakhan. So in light of all that, we're holding Savin and his girlfriend in a safe place, under twenty-four-hour guard."

He grumbles, clearly pissed off that we're protecting one of the men who abducted Lettie.

"We're not sure how long we'll be able to keep Savin out of it, because after we dropped off the girls at the ER, the police were called, and CPD has a full-blown investigation underway."

"Good."

"Maybe, maybe not. Looks like they've already put in a call to the trafficking task force, so we're not sure how well justice will prevail. Mia is having trouble finding out who the dirty FBI agent is who's been protecting Lenkov. Boss had a call with the CPD chief this morning, but I don't know the outcome yet."

The line crackles with his heavy exhale.

Moving on, given the clock is ticking, I update him on the break-in at Mia's and the bugs we found in her room. Like Boss, he's irritated that Mia hasn't called the cops yet to file a report.

"We'll get there, man. We can only do so much at once."

"Sorry I'm not there to help," he offers.

"No sweat, T. We know where your priorities are, and that's fine. We've got it under control."

"Thanks, Klein."

"That's what family is for," I toss back. "Speaking of which..."

"I know. Don't remind me."

"Well, Mia and I are the only other people who know. She and I are leaving it up to you to decide what to do. You know Violet best. So it's your call."

I'm met with silence for several long seconds. Long enough that I pull the phone away from my ear to see if the line is active.

Finally, he responds, "I'll tell her later this week, once she's feeling a little better, and let her decide."

"After last night, we figured she doesn't know, but we weren't sure."

"She has no clue."

My chest swells with a deep intake of air. "Your call, man. Let us know how we can help."

“Copy that.”

We say our goodbyes, and I end the call. Mia’s big green eyes spear me.

“Yes, ma’am? Can I help you?” I tease, knowing full well what she wants details about.

Leaning back in her chair, she crosses her legs and flicks her wrist at me. “Spill it.”

“Spill what?”

She tips her chin to point at the phone I placed on the desk seconds ago.

Playing dumb, I offer a bemused smile. “Oh, the call? You want an update on the call?”

Instead of responding to my sarcasm with words, she merely flips me off to hide her grin.

I can’t help messing with her. I’ll do anything to make her laugh. After all the heavy feelings she unloaded on me during lunch, she’s probably craving some light-hearted moments. We all need balance.

“Okay, an update on the call. Let’s see. Tomer isn’t thrilled about Boss and Leo’s forthcoming visit. I told him about the key shit from the case, let him know about your break-in — by the way, he agrees you need to report it to the cops — and yeah, that was about it.”

“Were you a slippery baby?”

I crick my neck and squint at her in confusion.

“Dropped a lot on your head?” she jokes. “Tell me what I want to know!”

Tapping a finger against my chin, I warm my tone. “What’s this information worth to you?”

“Are you the world’s horniest man?” she quips. “How do you have any fluids left in your body?”

My head swoops backward as laughter overtakes me. “I was thinking a kiss. Maybe a cheap feel. A nipple tweak. But by all means, drain me of my fluids.”

She snorts, trying to hold in her big guffaw — the one I dream about. At some point, it became one of my life’s missions to make her laugh like that as much as possible.

Once the moment fades, I finally tell her what Tomer shared about Lettie. She thanks me with a deep kiss and then tweaks my nipple.

Not what I meant, but that’s fine.

A little while later, I catch her tugging her hair at the roots in frustration. “I can’t get in.”

“Call Tomer. Maybe he can...” I let the words trail off once I remember there’s no chance he’s coming in, even for this.

She shoves away from the desk in a huff and springs to her feet. “Have you checked on your mom lately? Should we get going? I can’t do this anymore. It’s cake thirty.”

I check my watch, surprised to see how late it’s getting. I haven’t checked on Ma for about a half hour, so I grab the phone and open the app.

“All’s good with Ma, but we do need to leave so Gloria can get home.”

And then I remember the pickle I’m in with my heart split between the two women I need to protect.

*Shit.*

I’d been working so frantically, compartmentalizing all my problems, I didn’t return my thoughts to figuring out sleeping arrangements so I can watch Mia *and* my mother until now. When it’s too late for me to solve it.

Mia’s hand cups my shoulder a second before I hear her sweet voice. “How comfy is the couch at your mom’s house?”

Reaching across my chest, I grip her hand, holding it on my shoulder.

She already knows what I’m worried about.

Of course she does. This is Mia.

While I sort through my racing thoughts, trying to figure out how to respond or what I want to say, she makes me fall a little in love with her with the next words that cascade from her rosy lips.

“If you think my presence might be too upsetting for her, I’ll stay in the bunk room here so you’ll know I’m safe while you care for her. I won’t let you choose between us, but I don’t want you to worry about me either.”

Dropping her hand, I bolt upright and surround her cheeks with my palms.

And then I kiss her.

Like my fucking life depends on it. Like it’s my first kiss and last kiss and every kiss in between.

Everything about this woman has been confusing as hell since I first met her. She’s turned what I believed to be true about myself on its head and brought out parts of me I never knew existed.

Anger and jealousy.

Passion and fire.

And all the while, I had no idea who she was.

Beyond that laugh and her jovial personality. Beyond the red hair,

freckles, and emerald eyes. Beyond her seemingly compulsive need to avoid being caught off guard. Beyond her cunning mind, technical skill, and tenacity.

What's beneath all that?

That's what was killing me the most. I didn't *know* her, couldn't get a read on her or a glimpse of her motives. Therefore, I couldn't trust my primal reaction.

But for the first time, everything is crystal clear.

Today, with one caring gesture and a simple conversation over a half-eaten pita, she's revealed more about her character than hundreds of shallow days with Jenna ever could have. Or with any other woman who's come before her.

I'd say it's more than any woman who'll come after her, but I doubt any will.

Because I finally know Mia — the real her.

I see the woman hiding under the pain and the shell she erected to protect herself. The woman who chooses to be alone since it's less painful than being vulnerable. The one who seeks information so she can predict what people will do to her, thus eliminating the risk of the unknown. So she's never caught off guard again.

Because she's been hurt.

I don't know who or how yet, but I'll find out. Until then, *I see her*.

And that's all I ever wanted.

*To see someone and be seen in return.*

I know her heart.

And she knows mine — what's important to me, what I need in a partner, what my priorities are, and what my family means to me.

No, I don't have Mia's entire story yet, but that doesn't make my vision of her cloudier.

What I see of her is already enough for me.

As I reluctantly break the kiss, I hold her face and wait for her eyes to flutter open, revealing those vibrant green irises that remind me of an endless forest in bloom. I want to escape there, build a tree house, and live forever under the canopy of her lush flora.

“I want you to stay with me tonight.”

*And every night.*

She grins, eyes twinkling and sending a pulse of electricity to all my



nerve endings.

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll sneak you into my room after I put my mom to bed.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel obligated. I’ve done some research and know that nighttime can be rough. The last thing I want is to make it worse for her or you.”

“When did you do this research?”

Her nose twitches as her gaze sweeps across my face. “Feels like it was longer ago, but it was yesterday.”

“Weren’t you busy digging up Lettie’s location and all that shit?”

She lifts one shoulder in a half shrug. “I had a few minutes before you came over.”

Amazing woman.

“And you did this research because...” I trail off, inclining my head, prompting her to continue.

“Because I wanted to know what you were going through. So I could support you better.”

My heart slams wildly, battering my ribcage.

With all the shit she was dealing with yesterday and the weight she put on her shoulders to save those girls, she took the time to learn about dementia. For me.

“Mia, I’ve changed my mind about tonight.”

Her face falls, but I don’t leave her hanging long.

“You don’t have to be a good girl, and I’ll still sneak you into my room.”

## CHAPTER 38

# **THAI, TEXTS, AND THIRSTY BITCHES**

MIA

“I assume this is normal?” I ask Cal quietly, hoping she doesn’t overhear me.

We got to his mother’s house about ten minutes ago with takeout from a nearby Thai place.

His mother isn’t responsive right now. She’s been stuck in a loop since we got here. She opens the kitchen cabinet and stares inside for at least thirty seconds before she closes it, then opens it again. Rinse and repeat. Gloria said she started doing it about fifteen minutes before we got home.

Cal was so sweet to the dear lady from next door. His appreciation for what Gloria has done for his mother is so genuine, and he wears it right on his sleeve. Knowing him the way I do, it’s not an act. That’s just him. What you see is what you get.

While he stares at his mother, his pained sigh batters my heart.

He tsks, shaking his head. “Nothing is normal anymore.”

Springing into action mode, I offer to help the only way I can. “I’ll set the table and get the food situated. Maybe she’ll snap out of it with some dinner.”

“Thanks, tiger,” he mutters, his vision locked on his mom and his face pinched tightly.

As I start my task, he approaches her again and rests his hand on her shoulder. “What are you searching for, Ma? Do you know what you want in here?”

Nothing.

I grab plates from the nearby cabinet and shoot him a sympathetic look before finding the silverware drawer and piling a few utensils on top of the plates.

He grabs the binder, thumbing it open in front of her. “The recipe book? Is that what you want?”

Her only response is to glance at the book and then return her sight to the open cabinet.

Again, Cal tries to distract her, tugging her shoulder a tad stronger to distract her from the cabinet. “Ma, it’s time to eat. Are you hungry?”

She mumbles unintelligibly and shrugs him off.

His posture sags, but he shakes it off and tries again, this time with more

authority in his tone while still being his compassionate unicorn self. “Come sit down, Ma.”

“No, Danny,” she shouts forcefully out of nowhere, raising her elbow to brush him off. “Let me find it, dammit!”

Cal takes a step back from her, hands shifting to a defensive posture. I can’t see his face, but it must be wrought with anguish. The cords on the sides of his neck are protruding, and his jaw is set in a firm line.

Danny — Daniel Allen Klein — was his father. She must think he’s his dad.

*Ouch.*

Not recognizing her son *and* mistaking him for his deceased father. That’s a double-edged blade into Cal’s tender heart.

I want to help them, yet I don’t want to intrude. Maybe Cal doesn’t want assistance.

I’m sure he can handle the situation better than me, but he’s been trying to talk to her for nearly fifteen minutes, and it’s not working.

After quickly setting the utensils on the table, I pad to his side and squeeze his forearm. “May I try something?”

His glassy eyes meet mine. He gives a subtle nod and steps back a few paces.

Pulling out my phone, I open my music app and quickly scroll to the Rat Pack playlist I’ve recently fallen in love with. I blame Cal for tainting my normally flawless musical taste in all-girl punk bands and replacing it with his beloved boys’ club classics.

I set the phone on the table behind us, and music emits from the tinny-sounding speaker. Her ear tilts toward the sound, but she stays fixed on the cabinet.

Approaching cautiously, I inject some cheeriness into my voice while keeping my volume low. “Charlotte, I see you’re frustrated. How about I help you? I’ll search for it, and you dance with Danny. He wants to dance with you. Would that be okay?”

No clue if this is the right thing to do. But if she thinks Cal is her husband, it doesn’t seem helpful to correct her. Maybe we should go with it.

The few articles I read yesterday said it’s best to provide distractions and soothing activities while providing options. Music may also help reduce her agitation.

The tight pinch of her face relaxes as she looks at me and considers my

offer.

Then she grins.

It's the slightest lift at the corner of her mouth, just one side, but it makes my stomach flip-flop with hope.

Cal steps in, hand extended in a silent offer.

With the most non-threatening expression I can manage, I encourage her to move to him. "I'll find it. You dance. Okay?"

The playlist advances to "I Will" by Dean Martin, and she steps eagerly toward Cal, bringing her hands up.

Relief flutters into my chest, pulsing and swelling. I square my shoulders with the cabinet and close my eyes to stave off the tears. I don't want to cry. That's the last thing either of them needs.

I manage to hold in the emotion until I turn around and see them dancing. Slowly at first, then moving faster with the pace of the upbeat song. A lone tear sneaks free, but it's a happy one.

Cal's a *fantastic* dancer, which shouldn't surprise me, but it does. This isn't the kind of knowledge I could glean with my trademark snooping.

I don't know much about dancing. Not the names of the holds or styles beyond what I picked up watching one season of *Dancing with the Stars*. But if I had to name it, it looks like some type of ballroom hold.

One of his strong hands firmly holds her around her middle back; the other is shoulder height, elbow bowed out regally. Even the way he holds her hand appears practiced and polished.

Using her distraction to our advantage, I silently close the cabinet door and glide around them on my way to the table to finish setting up for dinner. As I move past them, Cal and I trade glances.

He winks.

My cheeks blush, and my ovaries explode. *Ka-pow!*

Once the song ends, he ambles her to the table, ushering her like a proper gentleman. She goes willingly, appearing pleasant once again.

"Thanks, Calvin," she tells him when he pushes in her chair.

With those two words, the remaining tension melts off him. He mashes his eyes closed as a genuine smile eases onto his handsome face, leaving him with an expression resembling serenity.

After kissing the top of her head, he takes the seat beside her, and we eat.

During the meal, she's not totally lucid and doesn't address or acknowledge me other than a tight grin.

But she's calm and seems happy.

From what I know of this horrible disease, I think that's the best we can hope for.

Yes. *We*.

I'm going to help him through this in any way he'll let me.

Once dinner ends, I offer to clean up and put away the leftovers while he helps her get ready for bed.

With the kitchen clean, I grab my phone to turn off the music. There's a text message from my friend.

That's right. I have one. *Humble brag*.

After bringing a cup of ice water into the living room, I cuddle on the couch with my phone.

KRI

Hey, girl crush. Are you up for dinner later this week? Sammy is going stir-crazy and insisting on getting out of her house. Sawyer and Shep are "allowing" it, assuming they sit at the table behind us and we pick a low-key place. 😏 <eye roll emoji>

MIA

Sounds fun. I'll talk to Klein. He's a little on edge. Did Shep tell you someone broke into my house?

KRI

Yeah. Are you upset about it? Need anything?

MIA

It's not ideal, but I'm dealing fine. Just another day in my life, right?

KRI

I feel ya. I'm done letting the bad guys stop us from living. Fuck them.

MIA

Amen, sister.

KRI

We'll have multiple highly trained special ops soldiers surrounding us. I think we'll survive one meal out. I refuse to live in fear.

MIA

My life has been at risk for fifteen years. This is nothing new. I won't be reckless, but a dinner out with multiple armed bodyguards isn't exactly living on the edge.

KRI

Exactly. BTW, are you staying with Klein until this blows over?

MIA

Yes, it looks like it.

KRI

Good. Hope that's "fun" for you two. Silver lining and all.

MIA

By fun, I assume you mean pleasurable.

KRI

Of course I do. I once stayed with one of Redleg's finest, and it turned out nicely for both of us. 😏 <winking emoji>

MIA

If we go to dinner, what about Val?

KRI

Junior is going to guard her. He's staying here anyway until Boss dials back the threat level. Fucking Lenkov.

MIA

You're okay leaving Val and Junior alone? After what we saw last night? 🎆 <fireworks emoji> 😘 <kissing emoji>

KRI

It's just a silly crush. But given Boss's directives for those of us on the op not to be alone at night, Junior's going to have another guard come to sit with them until we get home.

MY EYES FLIT around the room as I consider what we can do about Cal's mother. I can't believe how long he's been caring for her with only Gloria's help. He needs a night out, even if it's only a simple dinner with friends. But he won't leave her. After what I saw tonight, I understand why. I could go to dinner without him. He'd know I was safe with Sawyer, Shep, and Kri.

But I want him to go too.



MIA

I'll let you know later in the week. Let's see how everything unfolds. Don't want to add more stress to Cal's plate.

KRI

Torn between replying with an "aw" or a "puke" emoji. It's sweet how you call him Cal. And it's sweet that you're looking out for him. He needs that. The poor guy does everything for everyone else.

MIA

He's too good for this world. Like a labrador retriever.

KRI

I was thinking golden retriever, but lab works too. Speaking of being too good... you kicked ass last night. Redleg is lucky to have you. Saving those girls was the best feeling. You're my hero.

MIA

Right back atcha, girl crush.

KRI

You're making me blush. Got to run. Talk later. Stay safe.

MIA

<saluting emoji>

DONE TEXTING, I grab my laptop and return to the couch, quickly making myself comfortable. I'm torn between trying to access the FBI server again or brainstorming other ways to identify who was in my house.

My mind races through options in a haze, displaying potential paths to take like a banner of binary code scrolling through my head. Each path ends in a dead end, but I quickly shift to consider other options.

Cal comes in a few minutes later, finding me staring into space and unable to decide which wheels to spin next. "Why don't you get ready for bed?"

Blinking to clear my vision, I glance his way. As I take him in, my mouth goes dry, and I suspect it's because all the fluid in my body has been diverted to the space between my legs.

"Holy shit, Cal. Bed suddenly sounds like an incredibly good idea."

He's changed into a tight white tank top and black basketball shorts that hang low on his hips. And he's sweaty.

Deliciously sweaty.

His lip quirks on one side. He's clearly enjoying his effect on me. Bending down, he kisses me on my forehead.

Okay, I could get used to that.

He disappears into the kitchen wordlessly, and I watch him go.

Just kidding.

I follow him like the thirsty bitch I am. His perspiration calls to me in much the same way cake does. The last time he was all sweaty, he was pounding into me.

That probably won't happen tonight, but a girl can dream.

When I get into the kitchen, he's chugging a bottle of water. I lean on the counter and greedily take in the heavenly sight of his throat bobbing and his lips wrapped around the bottle top.

He finishes off the water in one long chug, then makes that delicious breathy gasp sound. *So hot.* After he effortlessly crumples the bottle in a showy act of masculinity, my knees quake and my core flutters.

If I promise to do it quietly, I wonder if he'll let me sit on his penis. I only need to hold it and keep it warm. Give it a hug.

"You're staring a lot. You good, tiger?"

*Cocky, sexy baby.*

"Why are you sweaty? And where's Mama Klein?"

His brows knit tightly, and he takes a step in my direction. "I worked out. And she's asleep."

"Already?"

"Yeah, I helped get her ready for bed. She was exhausted and fell asleep almost instantly. So while you were on the laptop, I got some exercise in." He gestures down his ripped body. "Hence the sweat."

I close the rest of the distance between us and tug on the bottom of his tank top, hoping to cop a feel of his abs. "How did you do all that so fast? Do you have access to a wormhole that distorts time?"

"So fast? It's been well over an hour." He glances at the clock on the microwave. "More like an hour and a half."

"What?" I squeak, the word flying out far too loudly.

"Shh!" He glances from me to the hallway and back. "She's sleeping. Keep it down, babe."

“I’m sorry, but how the hell could it have been *that* long?”

“I guess you got absorbed in your work and lost track of time.”

“My work? I didn’t do any. I was only *thinking* about working.”

“When I peeked in here, you had your face in the laptop. I told you I was going to work out in my room.”

I press the heel of my palm against my forehead, trying to figure out how I lost track of that much time. Did I sleep while I was awake? Is that a thing? “I didn’t even hear you. All I was doing was trying to figure out how to solve this mess with the FBI shit and whoever was spying on me. Next thing I know, you’re in here looking like a sweaty-sexy-man-stick I want to suck on.”

He bobs his eyebrows at me, all flirty and sexy-like. “I need to shower first. Then you can suck on anything you wish.”

*Ooh.*

“May I join you? Two birds and all?”

He twirls a lock of my hair around his index finger. “Yeah, but first... tell me what you figured out about your break-in while you were deep in thought. Did you come up with anything good?”

“Not really. Tomorrow, I’ll pull camera footage from the closest traffic light cams to my neighborhood and see if I recognize anyone coming or going, but I’m not optimistic. And I promise I’ll report the burglary to CPD. I’d like to see if they can send someone to dust for prints, but I don’t expect there to be any but yours and mine. If they were good enough to bypass my system, they wouldn’t be dumb enough to leave a print behind.”

“True. What about your tablet?”

“What about it?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. Are you sure there’s no way to track it?”

“Well, it *may* have been possible, but it’s fried by now.”

“Fried?”

“Yeah. I activated the kill switch.”

“English, please. For the slippery baby who was dropped on his head.”

I giggle until my knuckles graze his slick abs. Then I suck in an audible gasp at the feel of the silky wet skin over the ridges.

Oh, I want to lick that washboard.

*Focus, girl.*

“All my devices have a kill switch, and I can activate it from any of my other devices. It’s a safety feature.”

“How does it work?”

“Once activated — which I did yesterday morning, once I realized it was stolen and I got my shit together — the device will self-destruct the next time it’s powered on and close to any data or Wi-Fi signal. They won’t be able to get anything off it.”

He seems impressed. “Nice. Your design?”

“I’ll never tell,” I tease coyly.

His teeth clamp down on his lower lip. “I bet I can make you talk.”

“Perhaps you should try in the shower,” I prompt, tugging his shirt.

I want to strip him bare and rub my hands all over his slick, soapy skin. His answering laugh is throaty and fuck hot, sending a zing of arousal to my clit.

“Let me check on my mom again, and I’ll meet you in there.” He tips his head, indicating the direction of the shower. “I already put your bag in the bathroom so you could get out your toiletries. After you do that, I’ll move everything else into my room.”

Rooting myself in front of him, I arch a brow and lower my chin. “Oh, your room, huh? Mighty presumptuous of you, sir.”

He hisses through his teeth, then grits out a hoarse sounding “*ooh*, I like that. Say that again, tiger.”

“Which part? Mighty presumptuous? Your room? Huh?”

He locks his arms around my waist and viciously yanks me toward his chiseled body. “Call me *sir*.”

My hands land on his shoulders, and I instantly start rubbing them over his damp skin, the ink glistening thanks to his workout.

Batting my lashes at him, I seductively purr, “Make me.”

His grip on my waist tightens, and he draws his eyes to slits. The tension of an alpha brews behind his playful facade. “You have no sense of self-preservation, do you?”

I rise to my tiptoes, bringing my mouth a fraction of an inch from his. “On the contrary, I have too much self-preservation. Just none where you’re concerned.”

“Your sexiness is going to get you in trouble one day.”

“I sure hope so.”

He closes the distance between us, fusing our lips in a passionate kiss. The kind that makes promises of what’s to come.

As it intensifies, his tongue demands my submission, which I give

without hesitation. His mouth devours mine, and one hand grips my waist tighter while the other trails up my spine and over my shoulders. The stirrings of his erection press against my lower belly. One of his strong hands comes to rest possessively under my jaw. A moan struggles free when he applies the slightest pressure to my throat.

Did I say this kiss holds promises? Allow me to amend that.

Not only does this kiss give me a glimpse of what the night holds, but it's also the kind that gets girls pregnant.

Never thought much about having kids one way or another, but with a man like him, this bitch might start thinking about it.

## CHAPTER 39

**SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I  
GO?**

KLEIN

**D**o you ever have a dream where someone is chasing you? I frequently do, but with a strange twist — I can't stop laughing.

When I have that dream, I'm always scared on some level, but the excitement of the chase miraculously erodes my fears, leaving me giddy.

Because of my chosen belief system in life, I always figured the dream was about taking a crummy or worrisome situation and seeing the good in it. A nocturnal reminder to find the silver lining.

Does it seem like everything is going wrong in your life? Check again. *Something* must be going right. Facing an insurmountable challenge? That just means the payoff will be even sweeter once you overcome it.

A little rain falls into everyone's life, but how we view the storm defines us. Look closer and find the rainbow.

Cheesy, I know. But what else do you expect from me at this point, a Rat Pack reference? Fine. Here you go.

Frank sang about it in "That's Life" when he talked about the ups and downs of life. When you fall, just dust yourself off and get back in the race.

I'm loosely paraphrasing Ol' Blue Eyes, but you get the idea, right?

Anyhow.

So I had the dream last night.

When I woke up, I realized I was in the midst of a rather profound time of my life — opposing forces are battling for dominance in my psyche. Joy and strife. The good and the bad. And like always, the dream reminded me to focus on the positive, allowing it to comfort me through the struggles.

This last week has been a mash-up of worry, comfort, pain, happiness, pleasure, sadness, and even a dash of wonder.

But the biggest one shining through is *hope*.

Mia has stayed with me at my mother's house for the last five nights. Not on the damn couch either, because fuck that. In Ma's cognizant moments, she's come to like Mia, which isn't surprising. Most people love her. Together, the three of us have had light-hearted moments of laughter, along with times of worries so crippling that I don't know how we'll survive them.

Adversity surrounds me, pelting me from all sides.

My mother's deteriorating condition. The threat from Lenkov. Our



inability to find whoever broke into Mia's house. Whatever is happening at the FBI. General stress at work from Tomer's prolonged absence. And more.

*All those issues pose great risks to my safety and happiness. Solving them seems impossible at times. The consequences of failing are severe and breathing down my neck.*

So you'd think I'd be a wreck, living in a dark haze of misery.

Yet I've *never* felt so much hope.

Hope.

It makes no sense. None at all.

*Why would I want Mia to witness some of my worst moments?*

*Why would I want a woman I care about in danger?*

I don't want those things, but the upside is so strong it obliterates the downside. These last few chaotic days have shown me more glimpses of the silver lining than I ever dreamed possible. And that's saying something, considering my glass is perpetually half-full.

Mia stands at the center of it all.

And to think, only a few weeks ago, I was cursing the night we met. But now? I'm thanking my lucky stars she waltzed into my life when she did.

"Are you ready?" Mia asks, purse tucked under her arm and hand resting on the strap.

Heaving a deep sigh, I sneak another peek at my mother. She's on the couch with a book spread open on her lap. Kate, a caregiver who specializes in memory care, sits beside her, engaging her in quiet conversation. Kate gives me a slight wave, encouraging me to leave.

Mia found her through extensive online searches and reference checks this week. Despite all the other priorities she's juggling, she made it her mission to provide Gloria and me with a night of guilt-free respite.

After narrowing it down to the top three, Mia followed it up with phone interviews. After we discussed the candidates, we asked Kate to stop by last night for an in-person meeting. Turns out, she recently moved to the area and hasn't found a permanent placement yet. She's been working as a floater for a temp service and comes with glowing recommendations from the agency and her prior employers.

Since you can never be too careful with your loved ones, we thought it'd be wise to get a feel for how she and Ma got along. We paid her for a few hours last night while we listened from the other room, checking in periodically to ensure all was well.

It went better than expected, so I agreed to dinner with our friends tonight.

But I'm having second thoughts.

And it's not because of safety. Thankfully, there's been nothing to indicate Lenkov is targeting us. No retribution. No threats or close calls. And nothing else from whoever broke into Mia's place. We have our guards up, but it's been calm. So a few of us having dinner out doesn't seem risky.

My hesitation to go is only out of fear of what might happen with my mother.

"Cal, come on," Mia encourages, squeezing my hand.

My gaze flits from her to the sofa. "Hang on."

Mia tips her head, understanding reflected in her expression.

Releasing her hand, I dash over and squat in front of my mother. "Ma, do you remember where I'm going and when I'll be back?"

The laugh lines around her mouth deepen. "Of course I do. Don't be silly. Have fun."

That doesn't answer my questions, but she seems comfortable with Kate. No signs of agitation.

"Okay, Mia and I will be home in about two hours. Three tops. You and Kate will be fine. She'll help you get to bed when you get tired, the same as last night. And I'll have my phone, so call me if you need anything."

"Mr. Klein, there's nothing to worry about," Kate interjects in a calming voice. "We'll be fine. You go and have a nice time. I promise Charlotte and I have everything under control." She looks at my mom. "Right, Charlotte?"

My mother nods and smiles warmly at me. She's doing okay tonight. Not too bad, but not fantastic either. Somewhere in the middle.

It probably helped that Mia and I were off today since it's the weekend. Aside from her continued FBI hacking attempts, Mia and I enjoyed a relaxing day with Ma. This morning, Mia had a front-row seat to a pie-baking lesson. Not really a lesson, so much as an excuse for me to elevate Mia's dessert tastes.

She said she'd try my pie if I ate her cake. And yeah, it was as innuendo-filled as it sounds. Tomorrow, she'll show me her Hummingbird cake recipe. And on the third day, we'll all have diabetes.

I glance at Kate and offer a tight-lipped grin. "I'll call in a bit to check in with you. And you know where the panic buttons are, right?"

Her eyes warm with an air of sympathetic understanding. "That's not

necessary, but if it makes you feel better, go right ahead and call me. And I have never had to use a panic button, and I don't plan on using one tonight."

A few minutes later, I triple-check the SUV for GPS trackers or tampering, and Mia and I load up. We'll only be a few minutes late to meet the others at Crabby's at the Pass — a seafood restaurant with outdoor seating overlooking Johns Pass Marina. The weather is perfect for it.

Once I'm behind the wheel with the ignition started, Mia grips my forearm. "You okay, Cal?"

There's no judgment or condemnation in her words.

For a moment, I'm smacked with an unpleasant memory of Jenna serving me a double-decker guilt sandwich for canceling plans last minute. It wasn't long after my mom was diagnosed, and she was upset. I asked Jenna to join me at Ma's for dinner and cards instead of our planned date. She flipped out, ended up going out with a friend instead, and didn't talk to me for three days.

Should have known then it wasn't meant to be.

Shaking off the twinge of negativity, I school my features and focus on the woman before me.

"Yeah, I'm good. Just a little worried about her. But it's not all that different from leaving her with Gloria for work, right? It'll be fine. Yeah. No problem. I'm fine. Everything is good. No worries."

"Then why are your knuckles white? Does that steering wheel owe you money?"

I blink toward the steering wheel, and sure enough, I'm gripping it like it's a flight risk.

Her grip on my arm pulses. "Babe, listen to me for a second."

I shake my hands, forcing them to relax, and focus on her.

"If you don't want to go, we can stay. I won't even pout. It's understandable to be concerned."

"But you've been looking forward to this. You don't have many friends down here and have been cooped up with me and my mom all week."

She runs the back of her knuckles over my cheek. "You need a night out as badly as I do. But it won't be fun if you're worried the whole time. I understand how important she is to you, and if you want more time to get comfortable with Kate, that's fine. We can try again next week."

Carefully, I search her expression for signs to indicate she's putting on an act.

I see none.

Her smile turns naughty when she adds, “And staying cooped up with you won’t ever be a bad thing, *sir*.”

She’s been edging me with that shit all week. Despite my absurd request for her to call me that in the bedroom, she’s yet to do it. However, she’s taken to doing it outside the bedroom occasionally. She enjoys getting me fired up and denying me a little.

Teasing me like I do her. But she’ll come around. I’ll win eventually.

And her resistance will make the payoff sweeter.

See my lesson above on finding the silver lining.

I kiss the back of her hand gallantly. “Thanks, tiger. I want to go. You’re right. We could use a night with friends. No drama.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll check on her via the app and call Kate for updates.”

“If you change your mind once we’re there, we can leave. No questions asked.”

Somewhere in the last few moments, we’ve drifted closer. Our lips are only inches apart.

“You trying to earn a reward or something?”

“No rewards. Only you.”

“Some might say I *am* the reward,” I jest, moving closer yet.

“Then some would be right.”

She removes the last inch, kissing me delicately. My hand goes to her nape so I can hold her close. I don’t want to let her go until I soothe some of this ache. Like a junkie, I need a fix.

Her tongue tentatively licks the seam of my mouth. Not demanding entrance but requesting it. I open for her, welcoming the tip of her tongue between my lips and drawing a quiet whimper.

The kiss isn’t hurried or frantic. It’s simply tender and loving.

Loving.

*Love.*

It’s too soon. I know it is.

But I feel it. Bubbling up and threatening to break free.

Once I break the kiss, I keep her near for another few seconds, content to be with her in silence. From this view, her eyes seem different. Darker and more mysterious, with a line of silver sparkles at the base of her lashes.

“Did you put on extra eye makeup?”

“Yeah. This is my nighttime look. Don’t like it?”

“I love it.”

*I love you.*

“Good. Because if you didn’t, I would’ve told you that’s too damn bad and that if you don’t like eye makeup, then don’t wear any.”

We laugh together, and then I give her a quick peck. It’s getting harder to keep my lips off her. I nearly kissed her in a meeting the other day.

“To dinner,” I announce.

On the way to the restaurant, we take turns picking songs. She’s into girl bands, which isn’t surprising since she’s a feminist at heart. It’s my third selection when I catch her singing along to “I Who Have Nothing.”

“Excuse me, ma’am. Are you singing along with Sir Tom Jones?”

She mashes her lips together and crosses her arms like a petulant child, then vigorously shakes her head.

I indulge her denial. “My mistake. I must have misheard.”

“Yep. Guess you did.”

I sing along with the next chorus, hoping to get her to join. And it works.

By the time the big finish comes, we’re both crooning at the top of our lungs.

Ironically, those words are the very same ones that have been threatening to break free.

*I love you.*

“That’s a great song,” she reluctantly admits.

“About time you recognize the power of the man, the myth, the legend.”

“For your information, he’s not the first to record it in English. Ben E. King did. It was also covered by Joe Cocker, Luther Vandross, Gladys Knight, and a dozen others.” She points her finger at me, and I snap my teeth at it playfully. Chuckling, she continues, “And the best cover — the *best* — was by a woman.”

“Gladys?”

“While I can’t deny the magic of Gladys, I was referring to Candice Glover.”

The name rings precisely zero bells. “Who’s that?”

She cringes and hides behind her palms. “Season twelve winner of *American Idol*. And no, I’m not proud of knowing that.”

“Don’t worry. I’m an Army Ranger who bakes pies and dances in the kitchen with my mom. I listen to music from forty years before I was born. You knowing *American Idol* contestants isn’t anything to be ashamed of,

relatively speaking.”

Her answering laugh is melodic. I fucking love her laugh. “Speaking of dancing...”

“Yes?”

“How did you learn to dance so well?”

She’s encouraged me to dance with Ma a few more times this week, often observing from the sidelines and wearing a dopey grin.

“Legend has it that my mother convinced my father to take ballroom dancing lessons to prepare for their wedding dance. Allegedly, he had two left feet. But they ended up loving it. Dancing became their typical date night.”

She shifts in her seat to face me. “And you learned from watching them?”

Oh boy. This might be embarrassing.

But fuck it.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Um, Cal, I’m sorry. No. I’d *never* make that promise.”

I should have known better. “Can you at least promise to keep it to yourself and not blab it to people at work?”

“Yes. I can promise that.”

“Go ahead,” I prompt. “Promise.”

Her head droops in an arc, and she sighs. “My gosh. Yes. I promise I won’t tell anyone your dancing-related secret.”

*Like a bandage, let ’er rip.*

“Try not to judge. I was about four or five years old when this started.” With a groan, I blurt it out before I change my mind. “I used to watch my parents dance around the house. I’d mimic them while holding my sister’s Wispy Walker doll, so my mom signed me up for ballroom dancing lessons. And I was pretty good. Competed locally until I was about twelve.”

“Stop!” She brings her hands to her chest with a thump. “No friggin’ way. That’s adorable.”

“It’s not adorable. It’s embarrassing. I can’t believe I admitted it.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. I want to know everything about you.”

“I’m going to ask you to get out of the car at the next light so I can drive off the pier.”

“Oh, stop. It’s not *that* bad. I’m just having a hard time reconciling the pie-baking ballroom dancer with the man who pulls my hair and orders me to gag on his cock.”

I nearly choke on my tongue.

“Well, shit, Mia. Now I’m getting hard on the way to dinner,” I feign annoyance.

It’s suddenly difficult to focus on the road and check for tails. All I can picture is how good she looked on her knees in the shower this morning, sputtering around my dick as I used my grip on her hair to work her back and forth along my length.

*Dammit.* Mia gives head like a champ. We’re talking gold medal.

Taking one hand off the wheel, I adjust myself in my jeans. “New subject,” I bark out. Instead of defusing the mounting sexual tension, it only makes her laugh louder, which forces more blood into my dick.

“If you don’t stop laughing, you’ll have to do something about this growing situation in my pants before dinner.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, stud.”

## CHAPTER 40



**SHIELDS DOWN, GUARDS UP**

MIA

“You made it!” Sammy squeals, arms spread wide.

Without giving me a chance to respond, she bounds into my arms for a hug. Her huge baby bump protrudes between us, halting her before she can fully embrace me.

“Damn these kids. Already hug-blocking me,” she grumbles, then adjusts her position to more of a side squeeze.

Did I say baby bump? Correction. It’s a baby hill or small mountain.

Amusement rippling through me at her exuberance, I return the squeeze. “Hey, girl. Good to see you again.”

Klein greets her warmly when she ditches me for him, eagerly soaking in all the love she can. “Hey, Sammy. How are the twins doing in there?”

She smacks the side of her belly playfully and hoists herself onto the bar stool. “Still cooking. Two fat little hams doing their best to make me look like a pig.”

Sawyer’s brow furrows, and he feigns shock, one hand clutching his upper chest. “My goodness, woman. Don’t talk about the twins like that.” He bends and pointedly stares at her boobs, then shifts his face toward her round belly. “And also, don’t talk about our fetuses.”

I snort, trying to hold back my loud guffaw.

After greeting us newcomers, Sawyer returns to his spot nestled behind her, his hands protectively on her shoulders. As chit-chat commences, he periodically massages her back. *So sweet.*

Kri and Shep return to their seats at the high-top table on Sammy’s left, leaving two chairs for Klein and me opposite them. He instantly pulls out his phone to check on his mother, then nods to reassure me that she’s fine.

Once we’re all seated — except Sawyer because he had too much coffee to sit, most likely — Cal’s hand makes it under the table and rests above my knee. Not regretting wearing a skirt one bit. His hand on my bare skin is always a welcome sensation.

A server swings by, grabs our drink orders, and scurries off.

With a shake of her head, Sammy tsks at her retreating back. “I do *not* miss those days.”

Shep’s expression takes on a diabolical glow. “Yeah, the customers don’t

miss your attitude either. I heard the Sassy Parrot's profits increased 35 percent after you left."

"I can only imagine. Think of all the money they save on replacing broken plates alone." Sammy plays along, not the least bit annoyed by being the butt of his joke.

A girl after my own heart.

Between her and Kri, I hit the girlfriend lottery. Throw in sweet and quirky Sue — when she wants to be social — and I somehow landed right where I was born to be.

"Our tables won't be ready for a while, since we're waiting for two back-to-back," Kri huffs with an eye roll. "We also asked for outdoor seating. Hope that's okay."

"That's perfect," I reply. "And it's fine with me if you wanted to get one larger table for all of us if that shortens the wait. Whatever the group decides."

"Oh no. No, no, no," Sammy decrees, patting her hand on the table. "No offense to my fiancé — whom I love dearly — but I need estrogen. Badly."

"In that case, are you sure you want me at your table?" Kri teases, embracing her not-so-girlish side.

"Wait. What did you say?" Klein tips his head dramatically in Sammy's direction, his mouth gaping.

"Oh my gosh!" Kri catches on, her shoulders stiffening and her jaw dropping.

Beaming like a sparkling ray of sunshine, Sammy wiggles her ring finger in front of her. It's adorned with a breathtaking and rather impressive engagement ring.

Everyone breaks out in varying levels of congratulations, hoots, and hollers.

Except Shep.

Staring crossly at the ring, he taps Sawyer in the chest with the back of his hand. "Damn, you bougie fucker. How are the rest of us supposed to top that shit?"

Shep glances at Klein for moral support. Instead of agreeing, Cal lets loose a nervous chuckle with his shoulders raised to his ears. His eyes look anywhere but at me.

Despite my rapidly strengthening feelings, I'm not expecting a ring, but I wouldn't mind experimenting with a cock ring. Wonder if my corruptible

man has ever worn one of those.

After Sawyer kisses Sammy's ring finger and winks at her, he meets Shep's criticism with some of his trademark humor, and unsurprisingly, a British accent. "Quit whining, mate. 'Tis no concern of mine if commoners such as you lot are helpless to embellish their ladies with the finest bobbles and trinkets."

Shep playfully punches him in the arm while the rest of us snicker at his silliness and continue tossing congratulatory wishes at the happy couple.

A hush falls when the waitress drops off our drinks. Sammy and Kri ordered mocktails, whereas my cocktail virtually jumped off the drink menu at me. A pineapple upside-down cake in a glass — cake-flavored vodka, pineapple juice, and grenadine with a pineapple and cherry garnish.

*I'm sure you're shocked I'd order a drink with cake in the name. I'll give you a minute to compose yourself.*

The guys are having one beer a piece, and that's it. Enough to relax and be social without compromising our safety.

Very responsible protectors.

"Oh! Don't drink those yet," Sammy snips at me, practically shooing my drink from my face. She rifles through her purse, pulls out a box of straws, and hands one to everyone at the table.

With hearts floating above his head, Sawyer leans over and kisses her cheek. "That's my girl."

I scan the table. Everyone dips their straw into their drink, swirls it around, pulls it out, and studies it closely. Even the guys dip straws into their beer bottles. Like a conditioned lab rat, I do the same.

Kri captures my attention with a slight head tip. "The straw checks for —"

My brain catches up at that exact moment, and I finish her sentence. "Date rape drugs, right?"

"The common three," Sammy offers, tapping her straw on the side of her mocktail. "If the straw turns blue, don't drink."

My mind whirls, and my eyes blink rapidly as I process this. For one thing, this is amazing technology, and every woman or at-risk person needs this. But second, has she always done this?

*Geez. I thought I was paranoid.*

After everyone has satisfactorily tested their drinks, conversation resumes.

I tap my elbow gingerly into Sammy's arm. "Is that something you've done for a while?"

"No, it's a new thing. Tomer brought some by our house the other day. He was concerned about the babies. Considering what happened to his girlfriend, he thought it was something we should have. He bought them in bulk for everyone at Redleg."

"He brought some by for Val and me yesterday," Kri adds.

A sad smile pulls at the edges of my mouth. "That's so thoughtful."

Tomer is a bigger person than me, that's for damn sure. Especially since Sawyer's been trolling him for years with that damn door sign.

Maybe he's not as bothered by the *Chuck* thing as I assumed.

Interrupting my thoughts, Klein raises his drink toward the table center. "A toast to the happy couple. Sammy and Sawyer, may your love continue to bloom and grow like those two precious baby hams. Don't take a second of your time for granted, for it's fleeting, but your love will be everlasting."

Sammy wipes a tear from her cheek. "Aw. Thanks, Klein. That was beautiful."

Sawyer cups Cal's shoulder and beams at him, emotion flowing between the friends.

After we all drink in their honor, Shep catches Sawyer's gaze. "I knew Henderson and Jonesy weren't coming tonight. But no Lionheart? I thought he might come."

Sammy screws up her face like she's eaten a rotten street taco.

"What's wrong with big brother?" Kri asks her. "He PMSing about our little rescue op?"

"Oh yeah," Sammy replies with an exaggerated nod.

"Can't believe he's still pouting. Hell, even Boss got over it," Klein muses, his eyes flicking from Sammy to Sawyer, seeking elaboration.

"First off, he's not here tonight mainly because Sue wasn't up for socializing with the heightened threat level," Sawyer corrects. Then he adds, "But yeah... he's also holding a grudge."

"Is it because we left him out?" Shep prods. "Is he mad we compromised Redleg? Something else?" While he talks, his eyes scan the room, and he keeps his head on a swivel.

There's something comforting about how vigilant they're staying while socializing. I feel incredibly safe with this crew.

Sammy answers, "My brother is incredibly protective. I know you all are,

but you don't hold a candle to him. And he's sensitive to crimes against women, given our past." She clears her throat. "So I think it was everything combined. He felt like he didn't get a chance to protect his Redleg family, plus he missed out on a chance to save those women. He's glad you rescued them; that's for sure. But he has complicated feelings about the whole thing."

"And he's severely pissed off at Tomer too," Sawyer tosses flippantly.

Interesting.

Klein's shoulders stiffen a touch, barely noticeable, but since I'm keyed into him, I see it easily. "Why Tomer more than the rest of us?"

*Uh-oh.* Cal's guilty conscience is showing.

Sawyer sets down his bottle and returns both hands to Sammy's shoulders, resuming his casual massage. "Tomer has been there for us when Redleg family was in danger. I think Leo was genuinely hurt that he didn't ask the same in return. When Sue was in danger, Tomer worked around the clock, trying to find out who was threatening her. For Tomer not to come to Leo for his girl..." He trails off, letting the silence finish his sentence.

*Oof.* Now my guilty conscience pokes its familiar nose around my psyche. Wonderful.

For the most part, I've been silently observing the conversation, studying the group dynamic. I'm still an outsider and haven't interacted with them all in a big bunch like this.

When no one else jumps in, I can't resist asking, "Aren't you bothered we didn't invite you, Sawyer? The team rallied for Sammy, right? I've heard the stories."

And read the police reports, hospital records, and obituaries for the men killed in the airport shootout. But they don't need to know that.

Unless they ask me.

If they do, I'll tell them everything, without hesitation.

In fact, maybe I should come clean without waiting to be asked.

My shoulders lighten at the mere idea alone.

Sawyer takes a small pull from his beer bottle before answering me. "I assumed you guys had a good reason for leaving me out. Slightly bothered by the snub, but," he pauses to look at his fiancée, "I didn't have to leave my princess late at night to risk my life, so who am I to complain? The team didn't need me and got the job done safely. 'Cause that's what we do."

Simple explanation. And he seems genuine.

It eases my guilt some.

He holds up his bottle, crowing in a melodic chant, “Red-leg.”

Klein, Kri, and Shep answer back in the same cadence.

Military through and through.

The lone civilians, Sammy and I, swap amused glances.

With the impromptu toast finished, Kri leans forward and sweeps her gaze across the table. “What’s the latest with the case? I only hear what Shep tells me.” She throws him a playful side-eye. “And I don’t trust that guy.”

Laughter works its way around the group at the friendly fire she threw at her man.

“The case? Let’s see,” Klein starts, shooting a glimpse at me. He raises his brows, inviting me to share. When I don’t jump on the chance, he prompts, “Mia’s running point on that.”

Not a hint of annoyance or bitterness. Considering how bent he was when I got to Redleg, it’s comforting to see. I wonder if his tune would have changed so much about me if he wasn’t constantly making me beg for permission to climax.

Honestly, I think he would. He’s been quick to praise me for my skills in the office. And the bedroom. But my office prowess is more relevant to this topic.

“So far, there have been four arrests, including that shit stain kidnapper Davidov. He was the one with the colorful language who enjoyed *breaking in* the girls.” My upper lip curls, and I choke down a grumble of disgust. “Lettie was brave enough to file a police report and asked them to press charges. Redleg happily turned over Davidov *discreetly* via our CPD liaison, and Lettie identified him from a lineup as one of her kidnappers.”

“Will that be enough to make charges stick?” Sawyer asks me.

“It should be. But I also shared the pictures I found with Detective Patterson, off the record, of course. Then he retraced my digital steps to obtain that info himself for the official investigation. With Lettie’s positive ID and the pictures, they should have enough admissible evidence to put him away for a while unless the FBI gets involved. Then who the fuck knows.”

“Those pictures also incriminate Yuri’s guard, Yev. The one I roughed up with Aaron’s help,” Shep informs the group. “There’s a warrant for his arrest, but he’s on the run. There’s been no sign of him.” He wads his cocktail napkin and tosses it on the table. “If he ever shows his face again, there won’t be enough of him left for CPD to arrest.”

Sammy rests her elbows on the table, cradles her chin in her hands, and

puckers her lips while languidly nodding at Shep. “That’s *hawt*.”

*Hilarious*. That was a top-notch Paris Hilton impression.

Sawyer’s already chipper face brightens a shade lighter than the sun, and his grip on her shoulders intensifies. “That’s my woman, boys,” he boasts in a hillbilly accent. “Back off naw, ya hear?” He kisses her on the cheek, then in his regular voice whispers loud enough for everyone to hear, “Nice impression, princess. Two thumbs up, and one penis *waaay* up.”

Sammy sputters on her drink in reaction to the last bit, and everyone breaks out in hysterics.

Once we’ve calmed down, Sammy redirects us to the case. “You guys keep talking about pictures. What pictures?”

“In order to find the guys who took Lettie, I dug up a friggin’ ton of social media photos and videos. One of Lettie being led out of the club by Yev and Davidov. She was stumbling all over the place, so it’s clear she wasn’t consensually leaving with them. Another picture clearly shows her drink being spiked.”

Sammy wobbles her head in a lazy arc, mouth hanging open. “Holy shit, woman. That’s impressive.”

Shep tips his beer in my direction. “Ghost is still a badass.”

My cheeks warm.

“Back off, Shep. She’s mine,” Kri growls at him, then shoots me a wink.

I get such a kick out of watching her rile him up. Couple goals.

Cal’s hand on my knee pulses. I spare him a quick glance, awed by the adoration shining at me in his bubbling smile. Fondness radiates from every line and smooth pane of his striking face.

I turn warm and gooey inside looking at him. Just like a molten lava cake.

*Mmm*. Wonder what they have on the dessert menu.

Kri grows serious, her game face snapping back into place. “Since Yev is on the run and we didn’t hand over the other dude... the one with the girl we rescued.” She snaps her fingers a few times. “What’s his name?”

“Savin,” I answer.

She flashes a grateful nod. “Right, so if Yev and Savin aren’t included in the arrests, who were the other three people arrested? You said there were four, right?”

It’s painfully obvious she’s sick of being on medical leave. Poor thing. I can imagine how frustrating that must be. But she’s doing so well with her recovery. I’m sure she’ll be back on the job in no time.



“Jonesy snapped pictures of the six tangos at the trafficking house, which I discreetly fed to Detective Patterson. So far, they’ve caught three of them. It’s up to him to make sure the charges stick without those photos coming up in court because they’re inadmissible. Lettie gave him enough to make an arrest by picking them out of a lineup like she did with the first guy. Fortunately, they also have a few other rescued girls brave enough to be witnesses. The shitty part is the FBI could fuck it all to hell. The chief is trying to keep jurisdiction over the smaller fish like these guys, but ultimately, if the feds want the case, they can take it.”

“How can the FBI destroy a case when they have the victims willing to testify? How do they manage to do that?” Sammy asks, irritation wafting off her.

“They can manage my dick; Fucking assholes,” Kri grumbles, getting a few chuckles from the group.

Sammy’s question sends my thoughts spiraling down unpleasant paths. Memories of what happened right before I left the task force press against my breastbone. “If the evidence gets tainted or something happens to violate the rights of the accused, then the case could get thrown out. That happened with some of the cases we worked on the task force.”

The frequency of those cases getting dogged caused a huge blow-up with my on-again, off-again bang buddy.

*Tony. That fucker.*

“FBI involvement aside, how do we go after the bigger fish?” Sawyer asks, then resumes his careful observation of everyone around us, searching for trouble.

I need to chug my cocktail... *or caketail...* to quash the discomfort at Tony’s memory jumping into my mind uninvited.

His words march across my memory as vividly as if they happened yesterday.

*“Why do you care so much?” he said.*

*“Why don’t you care enough?” I pushed back.*

*“We can’t catch them all,” he started, but I got in his face and refused to back down.*

*“But we had them, Tony. We fucking had them. We know someone on the team is dirty. Help me find them or fuck off out of my life!”*

*“You’re obsessed, Mia. It’s consumed you. That’s why we aren’t more than what we are. Fuck buddies. We could be so much more.”*

*“What is that supposed to mean? This isn’t about us. It’s about the case. Someone is tampering with the evidence.”*

*“If you’d open your eyes, you’d see I’m in love with you. I’m right in front of you, and you don’t see me because all you care about is the case. Work over everything else! Where does that leave us?”*

Cal jumps in to answer Sawyer’s question about the big fish since I’m busy with my delicious drink and trip down shitty memory lane. “That’s where it gets dicey. To go after the higher-ups, and Lenkov specifically, law enforcement needs to follow the money and get the smaller fish to turn on the big ones. But those kinds of deals almost always involve the feds. Until we find out who at the FBI or justice department is in Lenkov’s pocket, we don’t want to rock the boat. For now, the lower-level guys are the best we can get.”

For the next few minutes, the group tosses out suggestions and asks a few more questions about the case, but I mostly check out. I offer a head nod here. *A yeah sure* there.

Bitterness at how things ended with Tony blends discordantly with self-loathing over the snooping I did on everyone at this table before coming to Redleg. I care about these people. Unlike me, the coward, they’re all good, kind, brave souls. They didn’t deserve to have their lives put under a microscope. I had no right to judge them the way I did.

Threat or no threat.

Liability or asset.

I’m pathetic.

Cal notices the shift. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. “You okay, tiger?”

With my mouth sealed tight around my straw, I nod but can’t speak. My thoughts are too frantic.

I want to say so many things. The need to be honest with everyone I care about thrums wildly through my veins, leaving me light-headed.

When my mind stops spinning, one thing is perfectly clear.

I need to tell Cal *everything* about my past.

Hold nothing back. Leave no layers of protection to shield myself from heartbreak. I need to wear my heart on my sleeve, just like him.

He deserves to hear the full story about my family and why I left. About my past relationships. About everything I found out about him and everyone else when I investigated them before taking the job at Redleg.

Sometimes I wonder if he realizes I didn’t target *only* him. That shouldn’t

be something I have to question. I should've already come clean with him about everything.

That's what he meant by *earning* him.

Our Sassy Parrot not-so-chance meeting aside, I gathered everything I could on *all* the key Redleg players and most of the support staff. Satisfied my inner pimp so nothing could catch me unaware. That's what I was trained to do. And it's what I've always done to guard myself. Keep everyone at a distance. It was my armor.

But I'm not in the CIA anymore.

I refuse to keep living like I am. People can't be broken into only two categories.

I turned in my badge before I left Virginia — the one with the eagle and the sixteen-point compass star resting on a shield.

*No more shields.*

"Wait, wait, wait," Sawyer says, motioning between Cal and me, capturing my attention and shaking me from my melancholy thoughts.

It's not possible to be sad in his presence, especially while he's effusing joy out of every pore.

He trains his dark brown eyes on Cal. A dimple prominently deepens on his cheek with his widening grin. "Did you call her *tiger*? That can't be what I heard."

A grumbling sound comes from Cal. "Yeah. So what? You call her princess." He tips his beer at Sammy. "I've made no secret that I'm involved with Mia. What's the big deal? This isn't news."

Sawyer's smile grows wider until he breaks out in an overdramatic fit of hilarity, complete with thigh slaps and gasping breaths. Through his hoots and snickers, he tries to explain what's so funny but fails spectacularly. The rest of us glance around, wearing equally stupefied expressions.

"What is so damn funny, babe?" Sammy demands, grabbing him by the collar and shaking him gently. "Calm down and use your words!"

He cushions his face in his palm, the skin of his cheeks and forehead glowing bright red. Once he's composed himself, he points at Cal. "Calvin and," he points at me, laughter still shaking his entire torso, "Hobbs. Calvin and Hobbs. The comic strip. Hobbs. Is. A. Tiger."

Hysteria breaks out so wildly I'd be surprised if they don't kick us out.

"Hold up, hold up, hold up," Sammy blurts out through choking laughs, smacking her hand on the table. "Your real name is Calvin? You're Calvin

motherfucking Klein?”

Although everyone else at the table already knew this, another wave of chortles, snorts, and guffaws rolls through us. Even Cal cracks up.

A sense of humor is sexy. But being able to laugh at yourself too? Holy hotness.

Just one more thing I love about him.

Love.

It hasn't been long, but I'm falling hard. Sometimes, the heart knows. So the next chance I get, I'm telling him everything. Opening myself wide for him to see all my secrets. No more hiding. Nothing left to shield me.

And if he doesn't run, then I have a chance. Maybe one day, he'll love me too.

## CHAPTER 41

**SMILE AND WAVE, BOYS**

KLEIN

Sawyer sucks the pad of his thumb, licking off the cocktail sauce. “Did they find anything at her place?”

I glance at the girls’ table, then at my meal. “Nope. We didn’t expect they would. The cops have nothing to go on. And she hasn’t been able to find anything on traffic cams, satellite imagery, or in any of the hundred other places she’s looked. We have no fucking idea who was in her place.”

“What about the surveillance equipment you found?” Shep asks.

“Standard issue stuff anyone can get off the internet. Nothing we could trace. No clue where the signal was being sent.”

“Not military grade?” Sawyer slants his head, suspicion dancing over his features. “CIA? FBI? Law enforcement grade? Nothing?”

Leaning in the high-back chair, I cross my arms. “Mia thinks it was bought off Amazon and only slightly modified.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Shep scoffs. “That makes no sense. Someone is savvy enough to disrupt her security system, but then uses bargain-basement spy tech?”

I dig my fingertips into my forehead, scrunching the skin to reduce the tension. “And she still wasn’t able to crack it.”

Our phones all chime simultaneously with the hourly check-in request from the Redleg comm app. We enter our codes to silence the chirping.

At the table behind me, Kri and Mia do the same, while Sammy spews a litany of curse words. That’s the third time Sammy’s snapped at the alert. This time, her colorful rage rant was a bit louder than what’s probably acceptable, despite the loud music and our tables on a deck overlooking the marina.

“Your princess swears as much as a drunken pirate,” Shep teases.

I pile on. “Call it a hunch, but I don’t think she’s a fan of the hourly check-in alerts.”

Sawyer leans closer. “She says the babies will be born making that chirping sound instead of crying if we don’t bust Lenkov soon.” He runs a napkin across his mouth, then chugs his iced coffee. “On the bright side, there’s been no sign of retribution from the Mafia.”

After shrugging his shoulders and rolling his neck, Shep ominously adds,

“Yet.”

“Speaking of which.” Sawyer stands and spins his pointer finger around like a rotating helo blade. “My turn.”

He kisses Sammy’s cheek on his way past their table. She shoos him away jokingly. The ladies have been giggling and whispering most of the evening. It’s nice to see how readily they’ve accepted Mia. Some of her comments about her past lead me to believe she’s struggled to make friends beyond work acquaintances. And since her family has all but abandoned her — or perhaps it’s the other way around — she’s gotta be lonely. Her bonding with Sammy and Kri, and even Sue, Marley, and Deb, gives me hope she’ll stay.

I want her to be happy here. At Redleg.

With me.

Staying on high alert, Shep, Sawyer, and I have taken turns patrolling the outdoor deck and interior of the restaurant every ten minutes. Each time I do my check, I pause to text or call Kate once I’m out of view of the guys. They don’t need to know how worried I am about what’s going on at home. Unfortunately, I can’t hide my checking at the table, but I’ve been discreet with my simple glances at the app every few minutes.

So far, Ma seems to be doing great. Only some mild agitation that Kate was able to handle easily. She distracted her with specialty puzzles made for people with dementia. Kate brought a bag of items with her tonight: an assortment of puzzles, fidget items, and wooden mazes.

I’m pushing our luck with how long we’ve been away from home. But the last time I called Kate, she said we should stay as long as we like. She was about to get Ma ready for bed. Another quick check of the app shows that Kate is making good on that promise.

“What’s with the phone, Klein? You cheating on Mia?”

I cut him with a side-long glare. “Give me a fucking break, Shep. You know me better than that.”

“Then what’s so important that you check it every five minutes?”

Shit. Can’t hide anything from these fuckers.

Why am I still trying?

It began as burying my head in the sand so I could stay in my denial bubble, but it soon morphed into something else.

A fear of something.

But I’m not sure what.



“Just a family thing,” I hedge, pivoting swiftly to another topic I’ve wanted to talk to Shep about. “Can I ask you something? It’s personal.”

His expression dances with amusement, the smirky bastard. “Personal, huh?”

A tumbleweed of nerves blows through my stomach. I’m a grown man. I should be able to talk about sex with one of my best friends.

*Go ahead and spill it, kid.*

“It’s bedroom related.”

Averting my eyes, I gulp my water, stalling and aiming to reduce the sudden dryness in my mouth.

“Klein, I thought you knew this, but I’m straight and taken.” He pats my head like a dog. “I’m flattered, but the little blond firecracker at the next table would murder you for even considering propositioning me.”

His teasing lightens the mood and somehow emboldens me to spit it out. “I have questions about... uh... punishments. In the bedroom. Is that something you have ever... uh... done?”

He sets his glass down and shifts in his chair, squaring his shoulders with me. “You? Or her? Or both?”

Okay, he’s way more eager to have this discussion than I expected.

“Uh.” I mash my eyelids shut. “Her. Well. Wait. I mean, I’ve been the one doing the punishing.”

When my eyes spring open, his face is masked in something between amusement and shock. “Well, well, well.” He purses his lips and squints at me. “This is quite the surprise.”

My spine stiffens. “Really? Why?”

He swivels his neck one way, then the other, giving the area around us a good check. I do the same. Everything’s good. No suspicious characters. No one paying too much attention to us or the ladies, who are happily chatting.

“It’s a surprise because I never saw you as one for the lifestyle. And if I had to choose, I’d have pegged you for a subbie.” He snorts. “Pegged you. No. No, I would not. That’s funny. Pegging the sub.”

I can’t hold back my laugh.

“Who’s getting pegged?” Sawyer asks once he returns to his seat.

“Not me, and surprisingly, not Klein,” Shep quips.

*Kill me now.*

Sawyer’s brows do the wave. “Don’t knock it ’til ya try it, boys.”

Shep and I share a glance, then quickly shift our bulging eyes across the

table to our friend.

I'm the first to find words. "Are you kidding? I can't tell."

Shep whips his head toward the ladies, then back. "Does Sammy do that to you?"

There's no judgment in Shep's tone. No teasing or anything I'd have expected. Just genuine interest. Makes me feel better about what I need to ask.

Sawyer rolls his eyes. "No, she doesn't peg me. That's not quite our thing. However, I like it when she plays around back there. Plugs? Yes. Vibrators? *Fuck yes*. If you haven't let your woman ride you with a butt plug in your ass, you're missing out on one of the best orgasms ever. In fact, plugs in both your asses? Even better. Because then you feel it with your —"

My jaw drops, and I cut him off. "Jesus. He's serious."

And I know what he means about feeling the plug with your cock, thanks to Mia's corruption.

Sawyer raises one of his well-groomed brows and leans an elbow on the table. "Two words. Prostate Orgasm."

"Nice." Shep puts his hand in front of Sawyer for a high-five.

Sawyer slaps his palm, then his eyes bounce between Shep and me. "You guys tried it?"

"No," I answer immediately.

"Yeah. A couple of times. It's been a few years, though." Shep's totally nonchalant about this topic.

But me? I'm *chalant* as hell.

My heart races, and my throat tightens more as the conversation plods along. I have no freaking idea how they're talking about this like it's the weather. Or another case.

Am I sexually repressed?

Sensing my sudden distress, Shep punches my shoulder. "Calm down, twinkle tits. You're the one who brought it up."

I exhale a deep breath. "Sorry. You're right. Not sure why my head is spinning. Just surprised."

"Why did you bring it up? What's going on in that ass of yours, Klein? Did Hobbs stick something up there and you liked it?" Sawyer laughs at his own joke.

"Hobbs," Shep echoes with a snickering laugh. "Nice."

My hands flop on the table. "Okay, can we focus, please?"

Sawyer flounces his open palm at me, impersonating Vanna White.

“I guess my sex life has been a bit more... tame than yours, but that seems to be changing.”

“Vanilla,” Shep interjects.

My nose wrinkles. “You want ice cream?”

He chuckles and grabs my shoulder, shaking me enthusiastically. “Not dessert, dummy. I’m talking about your sex life. It’s been vanilla. Plain but still good. Right?”

“Oh, yeah. Exactly. Just normal stuff.”

*I’m such a Harvey. Frank would have banished me from the Rat Pack a long time ago. I’m not fit to shine his shoes.*

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Sawyer reassures me. “Not everyone is down with the kinky shit. No big deal. As long as you’re both satisfied, what’s the problem?”

“I’ve had zero complaints, but I’ve always felt like... something was missing.”

“Until Mia,” Shep surmises.

“Hobbs,” Sawyer corrects.

I flip him off, but it makes him smile wider.

Shep nudges me with his elbow. “What’s the question, kid?”

*Peel the bandage, pal.*

“So Mia and I have a complicated past.”

I quickly bring Sawyer up to speed, telling him about our one-night stand before she came to Redleg, leaving out the part where she used me as a mark.

For some reason, I want to protect her from any harsh judgment. I’m already working on forgiving her. I don’t want the others to have to forgive her too. Like the rest of Redleg, Sawyer is family, and he’d take issue with her treating me like an op.

“That first night, things were *normal* between us.” I glance at Shep, lowering my chin. “Vanilla. But amazing.” I clear my throat, trying to focus my thoughts and get to the point. “Then she gets the job I wanted, and I didn’t know she was coming to Redleg. It caught me off guard, and I was angry with her.”

I cut my gaze at Shep, and the way he’s eyeing me tells me he knows I’m refraining from throwing her fully under the bus.

Shaking it off, I continue, “Once we finally gave in and stuff happened again, I was totally different. Something inside me snapped, and it sort of

scared me. I'm bringing it up tonight because I need reassurance, guidance, or *something*. I don't want to get into all the details, but perhaps you can tell me where to turn for more information. The internet on this topic is sketchy, at best, and I'm unsure of what to believe." I pull in a large swell of air and force it out quickly. "I mean, I was an entirely different man. I need to know if it's okay or if there's something wrong with me?"

"Different how?" Sawyer asks, his voice free of his typical levity.

"I was mean to her. Not violent. But I wanted to punish her. I ordered her around, said some dirty shit, did some other stuff I've never done, and I *really* fucking liked it."

Not mentioning the cock slapping. *That secret stays between us, got it?*

Shep stops me, tapping my forearm. "Pause right there, buddy. Consent. Did you have her explicit consent?"

"Oh yeah. She was totally on board."

"I'm talking about verbal consent." Shep presses, eyes boring into me. "Not just her seeming into it. No coercion either."

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," I answer again, more emphatically this time. "I'm all about consent, man. She was a hundred percent into it. Before we started, I told her I would be very different with her than the last time, and she was down with it. She said it's what she wanted. Hell, I stopped at one point, but she asked for more and encouraged me to go farther."

"Good. Because what you're talking about sounds like Dom/sub stuff. And with that, open communication and consent are *everything*. You have to talk about what's going to happen. You need clear lines. Both of you must be on the same page without any lingering questions or gray areas. And she needs to be able to stop you at the first sign of a line being crossed. A safe word. Some signal you agree upon beforehand. Anything. And if she gives you the signal, you stop immediately. No hard feelings. No punishments for stopping. Nothing. You have to shift instantly into aftercare and recovery mode." He snaps his fingers. "*Immediately*. Untie her, take whatever is on or in her out, comfort her, hold her, reassure her, wrap her in a blanket and sit her on your lap, talk to her, let her cry, get her some water, whatever you need to do to make her comfortable and happy."

*Shit*. I should have thought about a safe word.

"Okay. I can do that."

Shep's tone deepens. "And above all, the sub is in control, even if you're in charge of the scene. Do you get me?"

"Yeah, I get it. Makes sense."

For the first time, his voice dips into uncomfortable territory. "This next question might push the lines of our friendship, but I care for you both and need to know you're being safe."

"Okay."

"Earlier, you mentioned punishing her. Can you explain what you meant without getting *overly* specific? I don't need a visual. But are you talking about causing physical pain? Or denying her? Or is it verbal degradation? Keep in mind, a good Dom should *never* take their frustrations out on their partner. Her well-being should always be paramount. So punishing her out of anger is a no-go."

I take a moment to sift through my memories, going back to that night at her house. I was angry with Mia, but not in that moment. I was enamored with her that night. Blown away by how smart and selfless she was when it came to saving Lettie. The punishment was more of a repressed need to dominate her that erupted from deep inside me.

"Although I was angry with her *prior* to that night, I wasn't during our time together. It was more of a primal thing. As if my body was responding to our situation or her in general. I wanted her to surrender control to me. It's hard to explain."

Sawyer's expression is impassive as he observes the exchange between Shep and me.

Shep nods reassuringly. "Okay, not being angry in that moment is a good thing. The control bit makes sense in your case since I remember you saying that you were blindsided. You wanted to regain control because you were in a position with her outside the bedroom where you had none. Now, what type of punishment are we talking about?"

I lower my face, shame spiking through me. "There was some degradation, denying her, and making her beg. Stuff like that."

When my eyes raise, there's no judgment being thrown at me. No disgust or revulsion. They aren't ready to kick my ass for how I treated her.

Maybe I should cut myself some slack.

"And she was good with all that, right?" Sawyer asks plainly.

"Yeah. Very much so. I'm not entirely sure why she was, so I'll talk to her about it more. For me, it was empowering and freeing. And seeing how

much she loved it was even more gratifying. I think that was the best part. But I'm not sure what she got out of it, other than the eventual pleasure I let her have."

Shep taps his knuckles on the table. "Oh, damn. Spoken like a true top."

Sighing, I hit him with a grin and shake of my head.

Sawyer gnaws on his knuckle in jest. "I fucking love it when Sammy makes me beg." After his eyes meet ours, he huffs, "What? We switch."

"Oh," Shep mutters. "The butt stuff makes more sense now."

"Whatever. I know who my princess is. Happy to worship at her sexy feet." Waving off Shep, Sawyer addresses me. "Everyone is different, but I can guess what she gets out of it."

After I scan the restaurant again to check for anything amiss, I square my shoulders with him, inviting him to explain.

"Mia seems like the type who has had to fight tooth and nail for everything. She's probably been stronger than most for a *long* time. She's tough and works hard to stay a step ahead of everyone. That's how I see her in the day-to-day. And that shit is exhausting. Mentally and physically."

Shep encourages him by spinning his hand around. "Keep going, buddy. You're on the right path."

"When someone battles all day, there is something so damn liberating about submitting in the bedroom. It takes trust and respect to cede control, knowing the other person cares about you and will see to your needs. You don't have to worry or think. Just do as they say. Shut your mind off. And the best part is knowing the person in control *enjoys* having that power over you. It's fucking beautiful, man. The same way you enjoy her response, she likely enjoys yours."

"Wow." My head is swimming.

Shep stiffens beside me. "Okay, buddy. It's almost my turn to check the perimeter. But regarding punishment, remember this rule. If she ever wants pain — even if it's just a spanking — the golden rule is to hurt without harm. If a sub enjoys some pain, that's fine to administer, assuming you're okay with it too. But make sure the pain is temporary and doesn't cause any long-term harm. Safe. Consensual. And not harmful, physically or emotionally."

"Got it. Thanks. That's exactly the kind of thing I wanted to learn."

"You said something earlier that I want to circle back to," Sawyer begins. "You asked if there was something wrong with you for being this way. The answer is a resounding fuck no. There's *nothing* wrong with enjoying being

in control. Just like there's nothing wrong with wanting to be dominated. Both are healthy. There's a stigma around sex that's pretty fucked up, if you ask me. As long as both parties are consenting, communicating, and safe, there is nothing wrong with exploring new things together. Be it with toys, dirty talk, bondage, edging. Do some research if you need to. You can ask us about shit too."

Shep adds, "Whatever you do, don't learn from porn, because that's all bullshit."

While I process their words, I feel light enough to float away. All that guilty weight I've been carrying around since the night of the *cock slap heard 'round the world* has been shed.

*Fuck.* I feel good.

"Guys, thanks for this talk. And I'm glad to learn I'm not alone in this... non-vanilla thing."

"You didn't hear this from me, but the one you work with knows even more than we do about the lifestyle," Shep announces quietly.

"What the fuck, man?" I snap, my spine instantly stiffening, my chest puffing, and my heart racing. "You said you didn't have a past with her."

"Not her, nimrod," Shep retorts with a pointed eye roll and a swat against the back of my skull.

My blood pressure plummets. "Huh?"

What in the hell is he talking about? The one I work with?

Sawyer's jaw falls to his chest. "*Chuck?* No fucking way."

And the blood pressure spikes again. "Wait. What? Tomer?"

Shep leans close, and we mimic his position. All three of us hover in the center of the table, waiting for him to elaborate.

He whispers, "He's a dungeon master."

Sawyer's head slices pointedly from left to right. "I take it you don't mean Dungeons and Dragons."

"No. Like at a BDSM club. The dude who monitors all the scenes to make sure everyone is being safe."

If I were standing, I'd have fallen by now, never to rise again. The outdoor seating area at Crabby's would be my final resting place.

"That *cannot* be true," I protest. "Are you fucking with us, Shep? How do you know?"

"A girl I topped about five or six years ago took me to a club in Tampa once. She had an exhibitionism kink. And I saw him there, but thankfully, he

didn't see me. Needless to say, we dipped out immediately."

"Run away! Run away!" Sawyer yells in an accent eerily reminiscent of the attack bunny scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

After puffing my cheeks with a deep pull of air, I press it out forcefully, making my lips sputter. "Well, guys. We've been wrong about Tomer for years. He's been having more fun than all of us combined."

"He needs a new sign," Sawyer says.

"Don't, man. Mia will come after you. She treats him like a baby brother."

Shep stands, ready to do his round. "Don't want to get on Ghost's bad side, Sawyer. Or Sammy won't be the only one with your balls in a vise."

*Shudder.*

Sawyer and I sit frozen for a few seconds, staring at each other. He doesn't even respond to the ball thing. We're both too stunned about Tomer.

Shep dashes over a minute later, and we all go on high alert. Sawyer moves toward the women, and I spin around to find the danger. My hand hovers by my sidearm tucked in the back of my jeans.

"Guys. Hey, guys!" Shep whisper-yells at us.

Glee dances across his features, making my shoulders droop with relief. He wouldn't be giddy about a threat. He's not *that* kind of crazy.

Sawyer shifts back to us, the girls surrounding him.

"What is it, babe?" Kri asks Shep.

"Turn around. Look in the water." He points at the railing along the edge of the dock. "Go. Now. All of you."

He ushers us to the railing and points into the marina.

"What is it? A dolphin? Big damn deal. They're here all the time," Sammy grumbles, agitation coming off her. A hair trigger, that woman.

Kri gasps, then cups her hand over her mouth.

"No fucking way." Sawyer pulls out his phone and opens the camera.

Shep taps him on the shoulder. "Zoom in for me, buddy. Get a real nice shot we can use for blackmail."

I follow their line of sight.

And then I see it. Or see *them*, rather.

"What is it? Someone talk to me, or I'm going to push all you off the damn dock!"

"Easy, princess." Sawyer pats her hair, then twists her head in the right direction. "Look down there. On the boat."



Having been away from Mia for far too long, I slide in behind her and trap her body between the railing and my front. Mia cranes her neck, straining to see. “Is that Boss?”

The other two guys and I answer simultaneously in the affirmative.

“Yep.”

“Yes.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t know Big Al had a boat,” Kri mutters.

“It’s new,” Shep answers and moves behind Kri in the same position as Mia and me.

Mia squints at the dock, where Big Al is filling his boat with fuel. “Who’s that with him?”

I’m about to answer when Sammy does the honors for me.

“Hey, Mom!” Sammy yells, waving both her arms wildly above her head. “Mom! Up here! Mom!”

“Madeline!” Sawyer bellows.

Holding a glass of wine, she waves at us from her seat at a little teak table in the cockpit of Big Al’s thirty-seven-foot cruiser.

Is the one and only Madeline Mason. Leo and Sammy’s mother.

On a date with Big Al.

A romantic boat ride.

“Shep, we’re officially off the shit list,” I tell him. “All we have to do is keep this from Leo, and we’re golden.”

Done fueling the boat, Boss puts his fists on both hips and somehow manages to look down on us despite being thirty feet below us.

Sawyer quotes the penguins from the movie *Madagascar* — yes, I’ve watched it because I’m a good uncle — with a flawless impression of Skipper. “Just smile and wave, boys. Smile and wave.”

## CHAPTER 42

**LOVE IS SCARY**

MIA

Cal closes and locks the front door once he's safely seen Kate off. After rearming the security system, he bounds to me in the kitchen.

Wordlessly, he takes the glass of water from my hand and sets it on the counter. A split second later, his palms hold my cheeks firmly and his mouth crushes into mine, hot and demanding.

He drives his tongue past my lips without teasing or hesitation. Nothing tentative or delicate tonight, only straight-up passion and dominance. *Fire.*

There's no time for me to be shocked or think. All I can do is instinctively respond to his desire with instant acquiescence.

I'd willingly suffocate in his kiss, surrendering everything I am, if that's what he asked of me.

As his tongue pulses and glides against mine, his hands work their way down my body and nestle under my skirt. Using his strong, greedy hands to palm my ass, he forces our lower bodies together.

His delicious assault on my mouth, coupled with the friction of his erection against my clit, causes arousal to flood my core.

Awash in pleasure, I moan into the kiss, drawing a growl from him. I freaking love how he responds to me — my sounds, my breathing, the expressions on my face. He studies it all, responding instantly to keep me as desperate for him as he is for me.

And he's *achingly* desperate right now.

He doesn't ask for permission to slip his hands under the silk of my panties; he knows he doesn't need it. Using his grip on my bare ass, he hoists me onto the counter, drawing a shocked yelp from me.

Our lips finally break apart, and we gasp for air erratically, sounding like we've been running uphill.

"Fuck, tiger. I should take you to the bedroom, but I can't wait that long. Need you now."

"Then take me."

He works his mouth along my jaw, lapping and nipping at my skin with a mix of tender and rough kisses. A smile fastens itself onto my face at the thought of how perfect a metaphor that is for the man himself.

Hard and soft.

Sweet and spicy.

Gentle and merciless.

“Is the door alarm turned on for your mom’s bedroom door?” I rasp, cupping the back of his head to hold him in place. I love how he worships my neck. Every press of his lips shoots pulses of arousal straight to my clit.

“Yes,” he murmurs against my throat.

His fingertips bite into the soft flesh of my hips and thighs when he drags me forcefully to the edge of the counter so he can drag his cock against me.

“Good. Then we’ll hear if she opens the door, right?”

He runs his tongue up toward my ear, then tugs my earlobe between his teeth. “Uh-huh.”

I bite my lip to suppress my moans as he trails lower, shifting his attention to my breasts. My nipples strain against the fabric of my bra and blouse like they’re trying to get his attention.

*Mission accomplished, nipples. You did it.*

He plucks and rolls them with both hands while he takes my mouth again. I reach between us to open his belt buckle and fly.

“This is gonna be quick, Mia. We’ll do slow later.”

Like we’ve choreographed and rehearsed the movement, we simultaneously break apart to ready ourselves, him freeing his cock and me shimmying my skirt.

When I hook my thumbs into the top of my panties, he stops me. “Not waiting for that.” He swoops the fabric of my panties to the side and nudges the swollen tip of his cock into my entrance.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I cry out, my voice high-pitched and breathy as he slams himself in to the hilt in one smooth stroke, giving me no time to adjust to his invasion.

And then he’s hammering into me, bucking his hips wildly and grunting faintly in my ear.

He hooks one of my thighs in the crook of his elbow to give him better access. He keeps his other hand wrapped around my ass to lock me in place, allowing no escape from his powerful thrusts.

As if I’d shy away from them.

His frantic strokes move in time with the forward pressure he keeps on my lower back, driving me harder and faster onto his cock. I brace myself on the counter with both palms behind me so I can absorb every inch of that beautiful cock drilling into me.

“Oh my god, Cal,” I exclaim, unable to silence myself with the way he’s fucking me.

Feels so damn good. I quickly spiral toward a climax.

“Shh, tiger,” he warns when my keens and gasps spike in volume.

I mewl like a feral cat in heat, earning my pet name.

“Trying. To. Be. Quiet,” I pant the words. “So. Good. *Fuck.*”

My praise must inspire him, because miraculously, he increases his pace. Is he part rabbit?

As my climax blooms, a coil springs loose inside me. If I don’t put something in my mouth, I’m going to scream.

Without thinking, I find the closest thing — his shoulder — and bite down on it. My pussy clamps around his cock simultaneously, pulsing and fluttering around his rock-hard length. My mouth and core are both staking their claim on him.

He roars in a hushed timbre, bucking harder. My orgasm bursts free, making me moan into his inked flesh. Lights shine behind my eyelids as tendrils of ecstasy skate through my bloodstream.

Deep inside me, his cock swells and pulses, signaling his impending release. His thrusts get clumsy and ragged when he comes, but the continued pressure of his pelvis on my clit gives me everything I need to ride out my pleasure.

Our breaths echo around the kitchen, and our chests rock against each other with every deep pull of air. His hips slow to a halt, but he stays inside me, small pulses drawing out the sensations.

Once my vision comes into focus, he’s wearing the grin of a sated man. He kisses me, caressing me with graceful and languid strokes of his tongue.

As the kiss continues, the intensity changes. Tenderness becomes desperation. A longing. But not sexual desperation this time.

It’s more than that. It’s deeper.

My heart slams wildly in my chest, and it’s not because of the sexual workout. It’s how he looks at me when he pulls back.

A mix of happiness and sorrow etched into his features.

Or is that *fear*?

My need to know what’s happening rages, unchecked, until the words burst free. “What’s the matter?”

The lines beside his eyes pinch tight, and his forehead wrinkles. After a subtle shake of his head, he kisses me again. This time with a tangible

longing.

He withdraws from my body, then tucks himself in his pants while I straighten my underwear and skirt so I don't drip all over the counter.

Once we're better situated, he cups my cheeks and captures my gaze. "Mia, I'm falling for you. I can't stop it. Believe me, I've tried."

There's a *but* coming.

I sense it there, hiding behind the heavy pause.

It would be easy to let him end his declaration there. To tell him I feel the same, kiss him, and ask him to take me to bed.

As painless as that might be, it wouldn't be fair to either of us. I don't want to hide anything from him and won't let him hide from me.

We started with too many things unsaid. Too many secrets — all of them mine.

If this is going to work — and dammit, I *want* it to work more than I've ever wanted anything — then we have to be honest with each other. No shields and no denial.

"But?" I prod, determined to expose whatever is troubling him.

He exhales, sailing a wisp of his warm breath across my face. "But we're not balanced, and it worries me."

"Balanced?"

"You know everything about me. *Everything*. Yet you're so guarded. I'm picking up little bits of you, trying to put the pieces together like a puzzle. I'm crazy about the parts of you I can see, and I *feel* like I know you. But the truth is, I don't. I need you to let me in."

Tears sting the back of my eyes. "I want that kind of balance with you. *I do*. It's hard for me, but I *am* trying. I've never wanted anyone to see all of me before. Until you." In a scant whisper, I confess, "But I don't know how to let you in."

"All you need to do is show me your missing pieces. Let me see all of you. The jagged edges and the rounded corners. Whether they're good or bad, dark or light. I want to see everything that makes you who you are. And I swear to you, I'll put the pieces together. All you have to do is show them to me."

"What if you don't like what you see?"

"And what if I do?"

Moisture pools in my eyes, making it hard to see him clearly, and his words slam into my solar plexus. "I'm afraid you won't."

“I know you are, baby. Love is scary. I’m scared too. But my fears are different from yours.”

“What are yours?”

His grip on my cheeks falls away, and he skims his hands to my neck, somehow infusing me with his comfort through his touch. “You’re scared I won’t love you when I see the real you. But I’m scared you won’t *let* me love you even when I do.”

My chest shakes and quivers with each intake of air. He holds me, steadfast and unwavering. His gaze fixes on me, staring deep into my soul.

All my broken pieces are there, below the surface, calling to him. He’s asking for them, begging, even. He wants to put them together — to heal and support me. Make me stronger.

He wants to teach me how to love.

And I could have no better teacher than him.

He *is* love.

I wonder if he knows he’s already helping me become a better person, someone worthy of love like his. Every day, he shows me how to live an honorable life. Since the night I met him, he’s encouraged me to live honestly and with integrity.

*To earn him.*

I’m not sure why I do it, but my right hand lowers and locks over his heart. The steady pounding under his strong pec gives me the last bit of courage I need.

*I’m ready. I can do this.*

“I will, Cal. I’ll let you love me. I’ll show you everything. All of me. No more secrets or lies.”

“Just you.”

“Just me. I promise. I won’t hide anything from you. And I’ll never hurt you. Because I’m falling for you too.” My tears continue streaming. “No, that’s not right. I’ve already fallen.”

His grip on me tightens as he pulls me forward, then kisses me deeply. Our lips seal tight enough so nothing can come between us.

And nothing will again.

His hazel eyes sparkle with sincerity when he pulls back and whispers, “Then my heart is yours.”



## CHAPTER 43

**A KICK IN THE HEAD AND A  
SMACK ON THE ASS**

KLEIN

Mia joined me in the shower, and we held each other until the water ran cold. Our lips were never more than an inch apart. But even better... our hearts have never been closer.

Everything about tonight was epic perfection.

Still not sure what came over me when we got home or what made me take her in my mother's kitchen like that. I just had to have her; there's no other explanation.

Claiming her was a *need* I couldn't suppress for another second. Not long enough to take her to the bedroom and remove our clothes or even get her out of her underwear.

And if that pair had been tight like the others in the office last week, I'd have ripped them too. No regrets.

After our shower, I throw on a pair of drawstring sleep pants and dash into the kitchen to clean our mess. She flounces in like a ray of ginger sunshine while I scrub the second round of disinfectant on the counter in the spot I ravaged her.

Again, no regrets.

"Hey, stud," she simpers and wraps herself around me from behind. "Wow, he bakes, cleans, fucks like a champ, and makes julienne fries!"

Chuckling, I glimpse over my shoulder, noting her damp hair braided to one side. She's in one of my old Army T-shirts.

*Fuck, she looks good.*

She places a featherlight kiss on my bare back, then releases my waist. "Okay, let's try this allegedly top-tier dessert."

After washing my hands to remove the chemical residue, I turn around, and the most luscious view greets me.

Mia's ass.

Practically on display as it teases me, peeking from under the hem of my shirt, hidden by a pair of silky pink panties. The muted glow from the fridge outlines her silhouette. Bent at the waist, she rearranges the leftovers and Mom's pre-cooked meals to get at the strawberry chiffon pie we made this morning.

Like my body isn't mine to control, I'm propelled forward with my hand

twitching.

*Smack.*

“Oof!” She yelps at the sudden contact my palm makes with one of her plump cheeks.

Instead of protesting, she tosses the most alluring look and drinks me in, sweeping her gaze over my shirtless chest and nibbling her lip.

She wiggles her ass, then resumes moving shit around to get the pie at the rear of the middle shelf. Before she retrieves it, I rest my hands on the swell of her hips and dig my fingertips into her curves. Then I do the stupid guy thing that’s hard coded into our DNA since prehistoric times — I pump my hips and drive myself against her.

If you’re wondering why we do this, allow me to shed some light on the subject.

When a male first gets his driver’s license or passport, he’s pulled aside to learn the importance of this courting ritual. From that day forth, if a person you’re involved with bends over in your vicinity, it’s your masculine duty to grab her from behind and thrust against that ass.

So it is written.

So it shall be done.

Giggling, she removes the pie while I grab plates and silverware.

Once we’re seated at the table with our plates full of yummy goodness, I hover my fork in front of her mouth. “Are you ready to have your mind blown? This is the first moment of the rest of your life.”

She licks her lips and studiously gazes at the perfect bite I’m offering her. I loaded all three decadent layers for my tiger, having taken the utmost care to achieve the perfect filling-to-topping-to-crust ratio for her first bite. We’ve got the light and fluffy strawberry filling made with fresh strawberries from nearby Plant City, graham cracker crust, and homemade whipped cream.

In a word... *exquisite.*

“Nice job keeping the expectations in check,” she mocks with a pointed eye roll. “If this pie doesn’t blow my socks off, cause a spontaneous orgasm, and then do my taxes, I’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“Hush and taste it before I spank your ass.”

“Do you want me to taste it or not? Because now I’m getting mixed messages.”

My dick twitches, and I lower the fork. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Her cheeks instantly redden. “For you to spank me?”

Nodding, I launch my brows skyward. “Yeah. Would you?”

She slants her head. “Were you eavesdropping on the girls’ table tonight? I thought I was the only creeping creeper among us.”

My shoulders shake with silent laughter, and a lightness surrounds us. I can’t believe we’re joking about her snooping past with no trace of discomfort in my chest.

And I do believe it’s in her past. For the most part.

“No, but we had a related discussion at our table.”

“Hmm.” She shrugs and feigns nonchalance. “To answer your question, yes. I would very much like you to do that. Just not now, because this pie is about to fold my laundry or something equally impressive.”

My heart speeds up, pumping blood so forcefully that it threatens to shatter my rib cage. Never expected the idea of spanking a woman to excite me, yet here I am — already half-erect and rapidly inflating.

“After you taste this dessert perfection and see the error of your cake-loving heathen ways, we should talk. Lots of stuff. So much stuff. The spanking topic and a few others. Assuming you aren’t too tired. Now, open up for me, baby.”

“Yes, sir,” she purrs with a saucy wink.

I stifle a growl, then lift the bite. She opens, graciously allowing me to feed her. Her lips wrap around the fork tines seductively, reminding me how she pulled the lime from my mouth that first night at the Sassy Parrot.

Her green eyes glance toward the ceiling while she swirls the lush goodness around in her mouth. She stares blankly at me for a few long seconds, her expression giving nothing away. My gaze catches on her pillowy lips as her pink tongue peeks out to wipe the small smear of whipped cream.

I lean forward, my eyes beseeching. “Well?”

Instead of answering, she lifts her index finger in front of her and rises from the table. She returns a few seconds later with her phone in hand.

“Mia, come on. You’re killing me here. Have pity, woman. Do you love it, or do you love it?”

“I’ll answer you in the way you’re most likely to understand.”

Then she taps the screen, and music fills the air.

Once the song’s title dawns on me, I break out in unrestrained laughter. “Is this directed at me or you?”

Adding to the suspense, she makes me wait a few seconds longer before finally admitting, “It’s directed at me. It’s a *kick in the head* that I haven’t

been lusting over pie all my life. That's fucking delicious."

"Ain't that a Kick in the Head" by Dean Martin plays from the bluetooth speaker.

Feeling ten feet tall and bulletproof, I stand and extend my hand. "May I have this dance?"

This song was made for the foxtrot. I can't let the moment pass.

She sweeps her vision around the room, either trying to find the exit or ensuring no one is watching. I'm not sure which. Ultimately, she lifts one shoulder and takes my hand, letting me pull her to her feet.

With one hand wrapped around her lat muscle and the other holding her hand out right below shoulder height, I pull her close and start swaying to the music. Nothing fanciful, just a back-and-forth slide at first, then I work us into a basic box step.

She's got some work to do if she wants to keep up with me, but she has natural rhythm. It gives me enough to work with.

This might be our first dance, but it won't be our last. I'll be spinning Mia around the kitchen until we're old and gray. I feel it in my bones.

With our vision locked and wearing matching grins, we glide across the tile. She giggles when I adjust my grip to spin her out, then yank her to my chest. The way her breasts slam into me is more appetizing than the luscious pie on the table.

I tuck her hand close to my chest and rest my cheek against the crown of her head. Closing my eyes, I let the music and the moment put a cap on a perfect evening.

By the time we hit the last chorus, she's mimicking my slight rise and fall.

When the song ends, I add the pizzazz she's probably expecting and lower her in a dip, supporting her back with my splayed palm. Her cheeks glow, and her eyes sparkle. Pure joy radiates around us.

So this is what it's like to fall in love.

I've waited for this moment my entire life. In her, I've found my forever.

"You're not so bad, tiger."

Resting her palms on my chest, she bats her lashes at me. "I might need some lessons. If you happen to know a good teacher."

"No one dances with you but me. Got it?" There's no anger in my tone, only a flirty heat.

She raises to her tiptoes, presenting her lips in an offered kiss. "If you

insist, stud.”

I kiss her eagerly, willingly falling further under her spell.

After we return to the table, we dig into our dessert.

“So Kate said it went well with your mom, huh?” she asks between bites.

“Better than I dared to hope. Thanks for helping me find her.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so glad.”

When we got home, my mother was sleeping peacefully. She had a great night with Kate, which I verified with multiple texts and calls, along with occasionally spying on them via the camera feeds. I guess I shouldn’t call it spying since I told Kate we had nanny cams and would be checking periodically.

“Before she got in her car, she asked if she could come next week to visit Ma. Her mother passed from the disease about ten years ago, and she felt an instant kinship to my mom.”

Mia’s palm presses against her chest. “That’s so sweet. What did you say?”

“I told her to pound sand. What do you think?” I tease.

She gasps, her mouth hanging open. “Cal! You did not.”

“Kidding. I told her absolutely yes. In fact, I asked her to work up an estimate of how much she’d charge to be an in-home caregiver for Mom.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I doubt I’ll be able to afford it, but it doesn’t hurt to ask, right?”

My stomach sours. The chances of being able to swing it are nonexistent, but a son can dream.

“What is your long-term plan for her, if you don’t mind me asking?”

No longer only souring, my gut threatens to revolt.

Wordlessly, I scoot my chair a few inches from the table and pat my lap. She studies me, contemplating my offer. With a shrug, she capitulates and saunters over. Before she sits on my offered thigh, she grabs her pie plate and pulls it across the table. I laugh silently.

I knew she’d love my pie as much as she loves my cake.

“Calvin, are you distracting me to avoid the question?”

I squeeze her thighs and help her swing her legs to one side. She settles across both my quads, placing her generous ass in groping range of my left hand. Perfection.

“Not distracting you. I figure if you’re on my lap, it’ll hurt less to talk about it. Holding you makes everything better.”

She cups my cheek and kisses me. “Oh, you sweet, sexy man. Quit trying to melt my heart. I don’t have one.”

It baffles me how she’s never gone for the low-hanging fruit and teased me for being a mama’s boy. She wouldn’t be the first. To be fair, I wouldn’t deny it. But it’s never felt quite right. I’m close to my entire family, not only to my mother. She’s just the one who needs me most.

“My sister, Caroline, and Ma want to find a full-time memory care center for her to live in. Permanently.” My voice cracks, so I take a pause. “Caroline is coming down in a few weeks to help me find a facility and put the house up for sale. They think she’ll make enough to cover the lion’s share of the costs, offsetting her own retirement and my father’s firefighter pension. She did the math and should have enough to let the disease...” I trail off, refusing to say those last few words: *run its course*.

Mia spares me from having to say it. “When did your mother make that decision?”

“Not too long after she was diagnosed. Once she accepted her fate, she apparently made a plan, discussed it with Caroline, and put it in writing. She didn’t tell me about it back then because she knew I’d fight her on it.”

I hit the high notes from some of the lengthy conversations I had with my sister before and after she told me about the letter.

Mia runs her hands soothingly through my hair. “Did you see the letter?”

“Yeah, my sister texted me a picture of it a few days ago.”

“What was the main reasoning? Is it all financial?”

I take a moment to steady my emotions by feeding her another bite of her pie.

She grins around the fork. “That’s so damn good.” Then she patiently waits for me to answer her question.

“It was partially financial, but also concern about Caroline and me being burdened with her care.”

“Makes sense. Considering how selfless you are, it figures she’d be the same way.”

“The part that finally got me to acquiesce was when she said that she hated the idea of me changing her diapers, bathing her, and shit like that. It wasn’t her modesty so much as a desire to maintain her dignity. But more importantly, she didn’t want me to see her that way. She wants me to remember her how she was.”

“Do you blame her?”



“Nah.”

“It’s the last gift she can give you. Memories of her as untainted as possible.”

The longer this conversation goes on, the more I find myself caressing Mia. Her skin on mine is a balm, easing the burn inside my soul.

“I’m sorry, Cal. She doesn’t deserve this. Neither do you. Will you tell me once you get the estimate? Before you decide on anything?”

I study her carefully, wondering what she’s angling at. The last thing I want is for her to feel obligated to help cover the costs. That’s not gonna happen.

When I don’t respond, she adds, “Please, talk to me before you say no. I want to help you analyze it from all angles. Okay?”

I wink and take another bite of the pie of the gods. “Well, since you asked nicely, I’ll consider it.”

Her answering smile fades into a moan as I slip another bite into her mouth. “Before your pie made me question my retirement plan, you said you wanted to discuss some other stuff.”

I chuckle. “Hold up. What’s your retirement plan?”

Knowing Mia, this should be good, and I could use a lighthearted moment after talking about my worst nightmare.

“I was going to sell my house and move into the bakery at a local Publix. Find a corner and call it home. All I’d need was a cot and sleeping bag. The cake gods would provide the rest.”

I lick the back of my fork. “Squatting at a grocery store. Solid plan.”

She shimmies playfully, drawing a laugh from me. I lean in to kiss the warm, silky skin along her neck.

“Thanks. I spent a lot of time thinking it through.”

Once our combined laughter fizzles, the desire to know more about her claws its way out of my chest. “Okay, so with your retirement plan exposed, I know about your future. Tell me about your past. I want to know everything about you. It’s your turn to talk about the heavy shit.”

We’re more out of balance with that hanging between us. But it’s so damn easy to talk to her. Before, I used to avoid talking about painful shit out of fear it’d become too real. Now, I want to share everything with her because she’ll calm the storms in my heart.

Her face pinches tight, but it quickly eases. “Fair warning. It might make you see me differently, but I promised you I wouldn’t hold back. I intend to

keep my word for as long as you want me.” She brushes her shoulder against my chest, then nuzzles deeper into my hold.

The idea of no longer wanting her is almost laughable.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“What happened with your sisters to cause that rift you mentioned? It can’t *all* be due to your career at the CIA. There must be something else. Will you tell me about it?”

She nods and takes a steadying breath, then blurts it out in a rush. “It’s my fault my sister was raped and nearly died.”

My heart lodges in my throat, and my scalp prickles with unease. I want to refute her assertion without hearing the details. Mia would *never* cause something like that.

But I remain silent, waiting for her to be ready to continue.

“In college, I dated a guy named Luke. I thought he was a great guy. He was a gentleman and always respectful to me. He got along with everyone. I brought him home to meet my family during winter break. My sister Portia was fifteen at the time.”

Her eyes close, and she tugs in a deep inhale through her nose. “One evening, I was making dinner with my middle sister, Claire. It was Chinese food night, which was our favorite to cook together. Everything homemade, even the egg rolls. My mother was running late, no big surprise. Portia would not stop whining because she wanted to go to the mall to buy a Christmas present for her best friend. I told her I’d take her the next day, but she was insistent about going right away. You’d swear the world would end if she didn’t get the damn gift immediately.”

I see where this is heading, and my blood is already boiling.

“Like a knight in shining armor, Luke offered to take her to the mall for us and promised they’d be home in time for dinner. But they never made it to the mall.”

Her chin quivers, and tears fill her eyes.

“It’s okay, baby. Take your time.”

“He came back about an hour later. No Portia.”

“What did he say?”

“He said they ran into a group of her friends at the mall. Portia wanted to spend time with them, and they promised they’d drop her off in an hour or two. He thought it would be okay since the mom of one of the girls was there. He acted as if everything was fine. Gave me a kiss and went to watch TV

while we finished making dinner. You'd never have known what he'd done."

I run one palm along her back and squeeze her thigh with the other, offering silent support.

"Claire pulled me aside when I was setting the table. She said she saw splatters of something dark on his jeans."

Unable to hold in my disgust, I curse under my breath.

"She looked closer and noticed red flecks along the underside of his forearm. Blood." Her tears spill over. "It was my sister's blood. Guess he didn't do a good enough job cleaning it all off."

"What did you do? How did you find her?"

"My mom got home a few minutes later, thankfully. She had phone numbers for most of Portia's friends and their parents from a cheerleader contact list. Discreetly, Claire and I called them while Mom kept Luke distracted."

"No one had seen her?"

Mia shakes her head. "No. So I told him I was running to the store to get more soy sauce. Mom wanted to call the police, but I felt it was my responsibility to handle it since he was my boyfriend. Plus, I didn't want him to know what we were suspecting. What if it turned out to be nothing? That's not something a relationship can bounce back from." She takes another steadying breath. "I left him with Mom and Claire, making sure they both watched out for each other around him. I went to the police station, but they were no help at all. She wasn't *missing* long enough for them to care."

"The blood didn't point to foul play?"

"The cop I spoke with said it was probably nothing, but they'd come by and question him if I insisted. I considered it, but what was the point? He'd only lie."

"What happened next?"

"I went home, excused myself to my bedroom, powered on my laptop, and hacked into her cell phone provider's system to ping her phone. In a matter of minutes, I knew the area of town where she was. Back then, cell phone towers only gave approximate locations. But I found her."

Judging by the gutted look she wears, it wasn't a pretty sight.

"The tower showed her in a fairly sparse section of town, which initially scared me. I had no idea how to find her in miles of fields and forests. But a new subdivision was under construction, and something told me to start there. None of the builders were there, given the late hour and being so close to

Christmas. I searched the partially constructed houses one by one until I found her.”

She sobs openly, barely able to choke out the rest. “Her clothes were ripped, and her pants were off. She was beaten and bloody. Lying on an unfinished concrete slab. Nails and sawdust on the floor around her. Unconscious, but alive.”

I press her head into my chest and let her cry. “Oh, baby. I’m so sorry.”

“She was only fifteen, and he...” Her words trail off when another sob shakes her chest. “How could he do that and come back like nothing had happened? The fucker honestly thought he’d get away with it. When he was arrested, he had a whole bullshit story ready to go about how it must have been one of her friends who attacked her. I guess he thought she wouldn’t survive to identify him. Thankfully, she did, but she has to live with those atrocious memories every single day. And it’s all my fault.”

Keeping her close, I wrap her tight and whisper soothing words as she sobs and wails.

“Mia, that wasn’t your fault. Why would you think it was?”

“He had a criminal record and served time in juvenile detention. He had a violent past, including sexual assault when he was fourteen. Fourteen. And I brought him around my sister and let him take her. I gave her to him, practically gift-wrapped.”

“Yeah, but there was no way you could have known.”

And then it hits me. I know what she’s going to say before she speaks.

“But that’s the thing, Cal. *I should have known*. A simple background check would have saved Portia. I had the skills. Hell, I’d been hacking for eight years by that point. Accessing a sealed juvie record would have been child’s play for me. If only I had looked instead of trusting him blindly.”

“Baby, I realize nothing I say will convince you otherwise, but I’m going to try anyway.” I cup her nape to keep her gaze on mine. “It wasn’t your fault. Most people don’t do background checks on people they date unless they have some damn strong suspicions. It could have happened to anyone. You have to forgive yourself.”

“I can’t do that. Maybe one day, but not now. I had the skills and opportunity to prevent it, but I didn’t. It’s unforgivable, as far as I’m concerned.”

Something doesn’t sit right with me, aside from the obvious misplaced guilt she carries.

“How has this come between you and your sisters for this long? They can’t possibly blame you for this. It’s his fault and his alone. Surely they see that.”

Something I can’t decipher passes through her features. It’s enough to make me dig further. “They don’t blame you, do they?”

She lifts her chin, spine stiffening. “They say they don’t, but they must.”

There’s more to this story, but she’s already gone through so much tonight. I know how hard it was for her to admit this. For now, I’ll let it go and simply hold her, stroking her supple skin and kissing her forehead.

After a while, I muse, “All this time, I thought your need to dig up intel was because of your time at the CIA.”

“It’s easier to blame that, but it was mostly this. The company saw it in me and exploited it.” Her eyes glaze over as thoughtfulness settles across her features. “The company is exceedingly skilled at finding people who will thrive in a world of deception. My hack into a Fortune 500 company’s system caught the attention of a CIA recruiter. I guess they figured if I had the skills and the gumption to pull that shit off, I’d have no problem getting my hands dirty for the country. It’s almost as if they preyed on me.”

Her mouth slams shut, and she shakes her head. “That sounds stupid. I’m sorry. But sometimes I think if I hadn’t been so desperate to hide from what I’d done by running to the CIA, then I’d have faced what happened and made amends. My relationship with my family wouldn’t be forever severed. And best of all, I wouldn’t have spent the last decade serving my inner pimp.”

“Inner pimp?”

Her mood slowly brightens, and she palms her forehead. “Is this when you learn how crazy I am?”

I stay quiet, waiting her out until she caves.

“For years, I’ve internally joked that I have a pimp inside me. Or I’m the pimp, and intel is my whore.”

My chuckle starts slow and low, but I’m laughing outright before I know it. She ends up snickering along with me until her cheeks turn as red as her hair. There’s something so freeing about a tension-breaking laugh.

“I told you I was crazy.”

“So you’ve been bribing your pimp with intel for years and years. Damn, that’s hilarious.”

Sadness befalls her sweet face.

“What?” I ask.

“You didn’t think it was hilarious when the pimp sent me after you.”

My gaze falls on my half-eaten dessert. “No, I didn’t. I’m making peace with it. A week or two ago, Shep and I had a chat. He helped me put it into perspective. Considering your past of always looking over your shoulder and now learning about your sister, I understand why you had to find out more about me.”

“I’m so sorry for lying to you, Cal. And I’m grateful for the second chance. I might not deserve it, but I won’t turn it away either.” She exhales, her lips sputtering comically. “I only hope the others are as forgiving. I can’t offer them a biology like I did with you.” Her grin reappears.

My stomach flip-flops. “Huh? Others?”

“Yes. I’ve decided to come clean. With everyone.”

I must be missing something.

“Although we’re speaking the same language, something’s getting lost in translation,” I joke nervously. “What others?”

Her face blanches, lips tugging downward. “You didn’t know?”

After she takes in my confused expression, her entire frame sags. “I knew it. There were flickers of this in the back of my dumb mind. A few times, I thought you had the wrong impression. I should have brought this up sooner, but then you’d get that sullen look on your face, and your puppy dog eyes would get all sad. So I avoided it. Deep down, I’m a coward. I’m so —”

I press my index finger to her mouth to halt her frantic rambling. “Mia, stop. What are you talking about?”

“Cal, you aren’t the only one at Redleg I investigated. I collected intel on everyone there. Hell, if my laptop hadn’t died when it did, I would have started on the janitorial contractors. Once I got up to get the power cord, I stopped the insanity.”

“What did you dig up?”

“Anything I could find. Credit reports, family members, social media, employment history, military service records, and a dozen other things.”

“Medical records?”

The seriousness in my tone must convey who I’m asking about, because she answers right away. “I didn’t find out about your mom that way. But I did take a quick peek at some of the files from the doctor Redleg uses for preemployment and ongoing fitness for duty medical exams. I’m not proud of it. You have a good, strong, healthy heart, though. Good job on that.”

How else did she know about Lettie if she wasn’t investigating everyone?

*Duh.*

“Well, don’t I look like an ass?”

With her features masked in shame, she shifts her position to straddle my lap. I run my hands down her lower back and squeeze her haunting ass.

Locking me in her embrace, she holds my stare. “You are not an ass. I’m an ass. I violated everyone’s privacy. *Shit.* I even knew Sue’s family calls her Susie Q. How am I supposed to confess to that?”

This woman is far too talented at what she does for her own good.

“How the hell did you find that out?”

Her chin falls to her chest, and her eyes slip from mine. “Text messages.” I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help it now.

She glances up at me, her eyes widening in shock at the blasé expression I wear. “What’s so funny? You should be disgusted by me, not squeezing my ass harder. And speaking of hard, are you getting a boner right now? How could you? I’m the human equivalent of a gray sprinkle on a stale cupcake.”

“Shh, stop that.” I suppress my chuckle. Only barely. “You are not a disgusting sprinkle. And while we’re on the topic, that should have been a sign of the superiority of pie over cake. You’d never see a flavorless wax speck like that on a pie.”

Her teeth lightly press into the pink flesh of her lower lip with her snicker, but there’s nervousness etched on her features.

“If you’re a dessert topping, you’re a decadent caramel drizzle or a raspberry glaze. I never get enough of it and want to lick it off the plate.”

“That’s oddly arousing.”

Not sure if I initiate a kiss or if she does, but our lips lock, and our hands grow needier by the second. Settling into the connection, I let time fade, along with memories of past wrongs or guilt. I focus on forgiveness and hope for what’s to come.

After we break apart, I catch my breath and reassure her. “Mia, I should have known you’d have looked into everyone else the same way you dug into me. That doesn’t make it okay, but I understand. I’ll be able to put this behind us and forgive you. But I want you to put it behind us too. No more guilt. Not about me or the others at Redleg, and damn sure not about your sister.”

I soak up the relief befalling her features as it softens the pinched skin across her forehead.

“I’ll try.”

My mouth splays into a grin. “Truth be told, I’m unsure if it makes it better or worse, not being the only one you put under your microscope. I felt special for a minute. Now I’m the same as everyone else at Redleg.”

“Cal, I assure you that you are *nothing* like the others. You are exceedingly special.” She joins our lips for a quick peck, then another and another. “Thanks for listening and not kicking me out. You’ve got an impressive capacity for forgiveness in that big heart of yours.”

“Well, you did let me motorboat your rack.”

We laugh together, a lightness filling the room and drowning out all the remaining darkness.

“So tiger. Did you have a location picked out for your retirement plan? Publix stores are on every corner around here.” I feed her the last bite of pie. “Still a valid option for you. They make pies, although nothing as good as this.”

“I was thinking of the one in Harbor Oaks. Seems nicest. I’m not that picky when it comes to spending my golden years surrounded by ganaches, chantillies, tortes, carrot cakes, cream cakes, marbles, fudge, and *fuck*, Cal. Did you know they make a cannoli cake?” She pats her palm on my chest to add emphasis. “A *cannoli cake*.”

“I’ll make you a cannoli pie that’ll make you climax on the spot.”

Her laughter makes her eyes dance. The way she wiggles causes her to tease my cock with that delicious pie between her legs. “Be careful, Cal. Them are some baby-making words.”

*Hmm.* Should I go there?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

*Oh fuck it.*

“Do you want kids one day?”

Her eyes bulge. “How long have we been dating again?”

“Long enough for me to see a future with you.”

Her lips part, and a delicate puff of air escapes in a rush. “Putting it all out there tonight, aren’t you?”

“You showed me some of your worst tonight, and I’m still here, holding you and desperate to get inside you again. Into your heart and body.”

She’s silent for a few long seconds.

A frisson of unease threatens to bubble from my gut, but it quickly fizzles as her expression morphs into sheer radiance. “Cal, to be honest, I haven’t considered it much. It’d be foolhearted to imagine something that permanent



and meaningful when I've spent the last fifteen years pushing everyone away."

She pauses and gulps. There's a slight tremble in the hand she's wrapped around my neck.

I patiently wait for her to finish, sensing intrinsically she has more to say on the topic. Perhaps it's wishful thinking on my part.

"And now," she begins, moving her mouth closer until her lips graze over mine, "it seems not only possible but probable."

"I'm just asking this flat-out. We're being open and honest, right?"

She nods.

"If this thing with us works out the way I bet it will, would you consider having my babies one day?"

Her body tenses, and she lifts off my lap. My heart stutters to a stop.

Then she jolts it back to life when she says, "Yes. And maybe we should go practice." She winks. "Just in case."

## CHAPTER 44

# WHACK A MOLE

MIA

The shrill sound of my phone alarm wailing startles us awake.

“Why? Why? Whyyy?” I slap at the bedside table, my flailing arms sending the little sleep killer flying to the floor.

*God speed, phone.*

But the incessant beeping doesn't stop, thus drawing another round of me whining, complete with a tantrum-style punch to my pillow. “Aw, man. We just fell asleep a minute ago.”

Cal kisses my bare shoulder and dives over me to swipe my phone from the floor. Is he part dolphin?

“My hero,” I coo as he hands it to me.

“Eh, it wasn't for you so much as it was to avoid waking my mother. Last thing we need is for her to come in here all confused and catch us naked.”

After I tap the screen to silence the phone, I glance down our bodies and notice that we are, in fact, still naked. Our bedtime sexcapades were quite exhausting, and I passed out minutes after my third orgasm.

Now that my vision has come into focus, the alert on my phone screen is legible.

And it's *not* good news.

My heart seizes. “Oh no. Son of a bitch. Not again.”

Was it too much to hope for a flash sale on *Amazon*?

Cal's body tenses, and he's immediately on full alert. “What's wrong?”

Side note: How does he react so quickly in the middle of the night? I need a hand crank to get going, even with shitty news like this. I'm just going to say if a zombie apocalypse happens, it best be while I'm well rested, or else I hope I enjoy the taste of brains. My adrenaline delivery system is down for repairs between the hours of midnight and seven.

He shakes my shoulder when I don't answer him, jostling my thoughts to the impending doom.

But words. They're hard.

“The security system at my house went out again.”

“Son of a bitch.” Springing out of bed, he quickly dons his boxers.

“That's what I said. Get your own reaction.”

“Watch your eyes; light's coming on,” he warns a few seconds before

flipping the switch. That was considerate for someone who pounded me into the mattress and called me his dirty slut two hours ago. *Fuck, I love him.*

“Checking on Ma. Get dressed. Fast, please.”

Tossing on the Army tee I pilfered from his dresser earlier, I root around the floor to locate my panties, then quickly abandon the search and get a new pair out of one of the three drawers he cleared for me.

Not one, but three.

*I'm keeping him. You can't have him, ladies.*

Cal returns and dashes into his closet, quickly throwing on clothes. “Somehow, she slept through that. *Thank Frank.* Call Big Al for me while I get dressed.”

“Wait. What’s the plan here? You wanted me dressed, but now you don’t? And who is Frank?”

My brain isn’t awake. I hope he speaks slowly. Maybe I was the slippery baby.

“I need you dressed so you can watch Ma. I’m going to your house. Where’s your gun? Do you need one of my Glocks?”

“Hold the fucking phone. No way. I’m going if you are. I’m not letting you walk into a trap without backup.”

He pauses after stomping his foot into his boot, indecision written on every handsome line of his face. “Shit. Well, we can’t both go. I’m not leaving her alone in the middle of the night. And I’ll be damned if you’re going there solo.”

I rake my hand through my hair. “You’re right. That could be a trap too. If they get her, they could force us to do anything they want.”

“Fuck that. We both stay here.” He puts his fists on his hips, clenches his jaw tight, and grits out, “Shit. This was our chance to catch them. None of the cameras in your place work with your system down, huh?”

“No. *Dammit.*” My palm meets my forehead with a resounding smack. “Why didn’t we install new cameras linked to Redleg’s system?”

“Too many other problems, babe.” He grabs his phone from the nightstand and fires a message in the SOS chat group on the Redleg comm app.

Jonesy and Aaron are closest to my place and respond almost instantly. I follow that with a call to CPD. No offense to law enforcement, but our guys will be there sooner. The dispatcher didn’t sound too worried about a faulty security system on a house that’s currently unoccupied.

While we wait, I fire up my laptop and try to get my system online. Cal checks the perimeter and contacts Big Al with an update.

Twenty-minutes later, I slam my laptop shut in utter frustration. “It doesn’t make sense. I thought I’d locked it down after the last time.”

Cal joins me on the couch and rubs my back. “We’ll figure it out, babe. At least you weren’t there tonight. You’re safe. We’re safe. Everything else can be handled as long as you’re okay.”

Normally, his positivity is refreshing, but I’m not in the mood. I jump to my feet and begin pacing. “Whoever he is, he’s good. There were *no* open doors to my system. I was certain of it.”

Cal quirks his head to the side, looking like an adorable puppy dog. It lessens my rage a touch. “What did you just say?”

My feet lurch to a stop. “Whoever he is, he’s a good hacker.”

“Not that. The door thing. You said you didn’t leave a door open.” He snaps his fingers, and his eyelids narrow to slits. “Remember when we were at your house on the night we rescued Lettie?”

“The night of the biology, right?”

He shakes his head and blinks. “Yeah. You said you got into the FBI so easily because a door was carelessly left open.”

“It was an expression.”

“What if it wasn’t just an expression?”

My racing mind accelerates, going from sixty to ninety in two seconds. “You’re suggesting someone intentionally left it open for me and then closed it?”

He raises his shoulders. “Maybe. Is that technically possible? If so, it would explain why you can’t get in that way again.”

“Yes, it’s possible. But why would someone do that? And why are you bringing it up?”

He joins me in the middle of the room. “I think it’s related to whoever is fucking with your security system.”

I tug my braid over my shoulder to fiddle with the ends. “Explain.”

“Maybe they weren’t trying to draw *you* into their system — not you specifically — but perhaps they left that little bit exposed so they’d know if and when someone started investigating the mole. If someone got into their system through the open door, they could trace it back so they’d know who they needed to silence.”

“The timing tracks,” I offer, quickly getting on board with his theory. “I

accessed their servers, then my place was hit a few hours later. But why put me under surveillance instead of putting a hit out on me?”

“Mia, this guy is talented, but so are you. Since you covered your tracks, it couldn’t have been easy for him to trace the FBI hack to you. Maybe he wasn’t entirely sure it was you and thought it was safer to watch you for a bit to ensure they found the right person.”

While my thoughts spiral, I suck in a big inhale, letting it puff my cheeks. With a grin, he squeezes my cheeks and makes the air sputter out. We share a cleansing chuckle.

I bring us chest to chest and wrap my arms around his waist. “Your appearance says himbo gym rat, but your brain is as impressive as your cock.”

“Lately, I’ve spent a lot of time inside the body of a certified genius. It must be rubbing off.”

My next exhale comes out with a quiver. “Speaking of rubbing off.”

His grin turns devilish. “Hold that thought until we figure out who’s gunning for my girl.”

“That could take forever. My clit needs rubbing now,” I pout jokingly, adding a foot stamp for dramatic flair.

He kisses the tip of my nose. “You’re a mess.”

“But would you want me any other way?”

“I’d love nothing more than to make you scream, but I’m trying to focus on your safety. Stop making it so hard.”

One of my hands slips from his waist to his front on a path to his dick. “But I love making it hard.”

He grabs my wrist to halt my groping. I stifle a groan, but it’s all sarcasm. He’s right about needing to focus.

“Tiger, if you’re trying to earn a punishment, it’s working.”

Instead of a quivering breath leaving me, this time it’s a shaky humming stutter that sounds something like *uh-huh-ga-ga-mm-pah*.

My articulation around this man knows no bounds.

“Be serious for a second, Mia. Now that we have a potential reason for the perp’s madness, let’s peel it back another layer and talk about who it could be.”

“Good point. Let’s see.”

He leads me to the couch. “There can’t be many people at the regional FBI branch with the technical skills to carry this out.”

“This is true. But it could be done remotely. For all we know, it’s someone at headquarters in DC.”

The second the words are spoken, the blood drains from my cheeks, and panic seizes my chest.

Cal shifts his body and grabs me by my upper arms, giving me a slight shake. “What is it, baby?”

Cupping my mouth with both hands, I meet his concerned gaze and mumble through my fingers. “I think I know who it is.”

The room closes in on me. It’s getting hard to breathe.

Leaping up, I shake out my hands and force a deep inhale to fill my lungs. My legs eat up the floor, propelling me in a frantic loop around the couch.

He plants himself in my path and grabs my cheeks to steady me. “You’re safe, Mia. I’ve got you. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Ever.”

*Yeah, but what if it’s not only me in danger?*

Lifting my hands, I lay them on top of his, desperate for more of his soothing touch.

“Can you tell me who?”

I nod and focus on his hazel depths. “Tony.”

“Okay, great. Who is Tony?”

Cal’s voice is calm, ebbing my hysteria instantly.

“He was my counterpart at the FBI. We worked on trafficking cases together.” My face pinches when I add, “And we sort of slept together occasionally.”

Cal’s jaw clicks, and his eyes frost over. “I hate him already. Now, tell me why you think it’s him, and then tell me where I can find him so I can end his life immediately.”

Finally composed enough to explain, I pull his hands from my face and lace our fingers together to steady him the same way he does for me. “A few years into our work together, little things started going wrong with our cases. Missing evidence — some of which was digital. Warrants were fucked up, which rendered the search and seizures illegal and made the traffickers nearly impossible to prosecute. Key witnesses would suddenly recant their statements or go missing altogether. Files we needed would become corrupted. It was a dozen things. At first, it happened sporadically. Soon, it was too prevalent to ignore. It had to be someone on the inside.”

“Was it him?”

“I never found out who it was. I asked for his help to find the rat, but he



refused and gaslighted the hell out of me. Instead of focusing on the botched cases and uncovering the source, he kept spinning the conversation to our *relationship*.” I throw up air quotes around the word because it was hardly more than stress banging. Well, that’s all it was for me.

Cal’s sexy upper lip curls into a snarl, drawing a tiny laugh from me.

I pulse my hands around his. “Settle down, stud. It was a fling a long time ago.”

“Move along. What happened?”

“I didn’t suspect him at that time. I assumed he refused to help me find the mole as revenge for not returning his feelings. Although he wouldn’t help me, I kept at it, but the mole hid his tracks *so well*. I needed his help because he was the only person who could out-hack me. He’s Tomer on steroids.”

I pause as the memory of that night wraps its frozen hand around my spine.

Cal prompts me to continue. “So Tony has the skills to hack your security system and pull off the FBI open door trick.”

“Yes. But there’s more.”

His earlier jealous anger recedes, bringing back his tender side. “Go ahead, baby.”

“After almost a year of failing to find the mole, I approached him again, ready to beg. But there was something different about him that night. His eyes were bloodshot. I figured he’d been drinking. I should have left then, but I was hell-bent on convincing him to help me, so I went inside.”

“What the fuck did he do to you?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. He didn’t attack me or anything. It was his demeanor and the things he said.” I sway my head while attempting to remember the exact phrase he used. “He threatened me. Told me to let it go before someone gets hurt. Then he paused and said, ‘You wouldn’t want to be responsible for someone else you love suffering, would you?’ Obviously, he was talking about Portia. But the thing is, I never told him about her.”

“He must have looked it up.”

“Yeah, but I never told him I had sisters. And how did he know I was to blame for Portia’s attack? The whole thing was fucked up.” I squeeze the bridge of my nose. “Anyway, I left, called my director, and asked to be reassigned immediately or I’d quit. The next morning, I went to Tony’s boss to express my concerns over his behavior. I showed her the evidence I had and shared my suspicions about him. I asked her to continue the investigation

or forward it to someone who could. And then I left.”

“What became of it?”

“No clue. I never heard anything about any traitors being exposed. The last time I checked, Tony was still working trafficking cases nationwide for the bureau.”

Cal stretches his neck and rolls his shoulders to release the tension. “Only one problem with this theory.”

“What’s that?”

“If he’s in DC, then how did he get inside your house?”

I release his hands. “I need my laptop again.”

His phone rings a few minutes later. “It’s the guys.”

My fingers freeze, hovering above the keyboard as I pause my review of flight manifests and airline reservations.

Cal puts the call on speaker. “Jonesy, did you find anyone at her house?”

“No one here, but someone left a present on the bed.”

My heart jumps into my throat. “Please tell me it’s not a severed horse head.”

Jonesy’s booming guffaw rattles the line. “No, you crazy ass. It’s an actual gift. A box with a bow, wrapping paper, and the whole nine yards.”

“You didn’t touch it, did you?” Cal asks. “It could be explosives.”

“Oh, you don’t say, Colombo,” he quips.

“Smart-ass,” Cal retorts.

Jonesy chuckles. “CPD beat cop is here, and he called for a bomb response team and someone to dust for fingerprints.”

“Turn on your camera, Jonesy. Let me see the gift box,” I instruct.

He complies, and Cal’s phone screen lights up with the view from inside my house.

Jonesy explains, “I’m staying by the bedroom door, but I’ll zoom in for you.”

Cal angles the phone to give me a better view of the small package. “Anything look familiar about the wrapping?”

“Nah. Nothing.”

“Did you see a note or anything with it?” Cal asks them.

“Not that we could see,” Jonesy responds.

Cal and I trade frustrated glances, and he wraps up the call. “Thanks, guys. Why don’t you wait outside and let the cops clear the house? But don’t let them take the gift unless they need it for evidence. We might need

whatever it is.”

“Copy that. We’ll keep you updated.”

I resume searching for any flight records for Tony. Cal settles beside me, periodically offering suggestions or asking thought-provoking questions.

A few minutes later, my home security system kicks on; the same as it did last time. No sign of foul play, although we know there was.

It’s gotta be Tony. He’s the only one who could be that slick.

An hour later, we still don’t have any new information. Jonesy and Aaron haven’t called, and a check of the cameras in my house shows them talking to the cop on the front stoop. Sadly, I haven’t found any smoking guns related to Tony’s travel history.

Frustrated, I close my laptop and set it on the coffee table. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too.” He grabs his phone and types out a text. “I’m telling the guys to take the package with them if it’s cleared by the cops. We’ll meet tomorrow at Redleg to get it from them.”

“Good plan. As curious as I am, I feel like burnt toast.”

“Ah, come on. You’re a soft hoagie roll at worst.” Cal rises and offers his hand. “Do you have any photos of Tony? We could go to Redleg tomorrow and search face rec for him like we did for the guys who took Lettie.”

Nodding, I take his hand, letting him pull me to my feet. “I should be able to pull his DMV photo.”

“Good. That’s the plan. Enough for tonight. Let’s get some rest.”

Once we hit the sheets, he curls his body around me and pulls me to his chest. Everything else fades.

Right before I doze off, I remember all we shared last night and this morning.

I showed him my broken pieces, and he didn’t run or push me away. If anything, he’s holding me closer.

And damn, that pie was delicious.

## CHAPTER 45

# **GIFTS FOR BABY RAPTORS**

KLEIN

“Hi, Boss. Thanks for coming in. Hope we didn’t pull you away from anything important on this fine Sunday morning.” I punctuate my statement with a waggle of my brows since we all know what he was doing last night.

Or perhaps who.

He glares at me over the rim of his coffee cup, then lifts his middle finger. “At least you guys called me this time.” After sitting in Tomer’s empty chair and rolling it closer to Mia, he gets down to business. “What’s the latest, Red?”

She returns fire with a glare of her own. “That’s as offensive to me as *sir* is to you.”

Smirking, he raises his palms out. “What’s the latest, *Mia*? Is that better?”

Her cheeky grin returns. “Okay, so we’re 99 percent sure that the man who broke into my house is the same man who’s been dicking up trafficking cases at the FBI. Probably because he’s getting paid off by traffickers like Lenkov. His name is Tony Mattera. Extremely gifted tech guy at the bureau and the only person I know who could hack my system. Twice. He’s based in DC, but we caught him in front of a coffee shop earlier this morning here in town. That can’t be a coincidence. All the evidence is circumstantial, so this isn’t enough for the cops to get involved yet. Klein suggests we send in a four-man team to confront him and force a little chat. Maybe we can get enough out of him to hand him to law enforcement.”

Big Al arches an eyebrow. “A little chat, huh? With a federal agent?”

“One who broke into my house and is in bed with human traffickers.”

For only being here a few weeks, she knows exactly what buttons to press to get Boss on her side. Impressive.

Mia brings Big Al up to speed on her past with Tony and how their task force cases slowly started falling apart. Thankfully, she leaves out the part about her and Tony the fuckhead sleeping together, which does wonders for my blood pressure. She also softens the details about his threat regarding her sister’s assault.

Speaking of which... if she doesn’t stop blaming herself for that sick

bastard's atrocities, I won't be held responsible for my actions.

No wonder she's made it her life's mission to investigate the shit out of everyone around her. The guilt and regret — although undeserved — have been her constant companions.

While Boss bounces questions off her, something hits me square in my chest.

*Her guilt.*

That's why she was so eager for me to punish her. I already knew this based on what she said to me that night at her house. But the magnitude of her guilt didn't click in my mind until now.

It wasn't only about what she did to me, but about her underlying guilt over everything she's carried for fifteen years. Her sister's attack, the falling out with her family, and all the times she invaded someone's privacy are stacked in her psyche and piling up on her remorse.

Judging by what Shep and Sawyer told me, that isn't a healthy way to go about our *non-vanilla* sexual encounters. Just like I shouldn't punish her out of anger, she shouldn't want punishments to assuage her shame and guilt.

I wish I could pull her aside and talk to her about this while it's top of my mind, but this isn't the time. I'll need to put this topic in one of the lock boxes in the back of my brain until we've got this Tony fucker behind bars.

"We come bearing gifts," Jonesy announces as he enters, holding the present Tony left on Mia's bed. CPD found nothing to indicate explosives or hazardous material. Unfortunately, no prints either.

Aaron and Sawyer trail behind Jonesy. Only the former was expected.

"Where's Lionheart?" I ask Sawyer.

"Sue's not feeling well, so he tagged me in."

"Thanks for coming, Sawyer." Mia smiles warmly at him, then takes the gift from Jonesy. "I appreciate you and Aaron rushing to my place last night and risking your life for this." She glances at the box and turns it upside down. "Whatever it is."

"We got you, girl. You're Redleg family," Aaron says, clinching her shoulder on his way past.

I'd be lying if I said that didn't make my heart speed up. Not with jealousy, but with appreciation for his words and how they make her glow. Mia's been alone for far too long.

She glances around the room, her eyes landing on the *gift*. "If it's all right with everyone, I'm going to open this in my office. Tony set up surveillance

in my bedroom, so there's no telling what this is."

Boss gives her a quick tip of his chin, and she strides quickly from the lair.

Pausing at the doorway, she catches my gaze from over her shoulder. "Klein, aren't you coming?"

My feet propel me before I process the significance of her request.

*She's done hiding things from me.*

As she sits at her desk and places the gift in front of her, she tosses a side-long glance at me. "Were you going to just let me go?"

Positioning myself on the same side of her desk, I lean against it so I'm facing her. "Tiger, if I haven't been clear, let me rectify that. I have no intention of *ever* letting you go."

Her lips splay in a toothy grin. "I meant letting me leave the room."

"Oh. I thought you might want privacy."

She looks at me like I have seven heads, none with any brains. "Not from you."

I'm not strong enough to resist kissing her sassy mouth after that.

My hand lingers on her cheek after our lips separate. "Thank you, beautiful."

Her chest rises and falls with a deep breath. "Here goes nothing."

Making quick work of the wrapping, she shreds it with all the grace of a baby raptor.

My eyes widen to saucers. "Do you always open gifts that way?"

"Yeah. What's the problem?"

I tsk at her. "There are two types of people. Those who unwrap presents like civilized members of a higher society. And those who tear into gifts like a high-strung husky with separation anxiety."

She bares her teeth, hisses, and curls her hands to mimic having claws. "Why not a feral feline? A tiger, perhaps?"

Once she annihilates the remaining shreds of paper, we're left with a sleek white box. She pops it open and pulls out a shiny new tablet with a yellow sticky note on it.

Out loud, I recite the words crisply printed on the paper. "I heard you were missing one of these." My shoulders stiffen at the reminder of that asshole in her house. "Is he fucking with you?"

"Should we turn it on and see if he left anything on it for me?"

I nod but add, "Let me grab a signal jammer first. I don't want it to



connect to our phones or Redleg Wi-Fi.”

“Good call, stud.”

After I return with my jammer, she powers on the tablet. The home screen is blank except for the notepad app. She opens it and reads the message audibly.

“Mia, you were told to leave this alone, but you always were stubborn and self-righteous. In light of our history, I’m giving you one more chance to do the right thing and protect those you care about. The people I work with aren’t as generous as me, especially after the stunt you and your team of bargain-basement avengers pulled last week. That won’t go unanswered. But if you come to me willingly, I’ll do what I can to keep you safe. Meet me Sunday at noon at Pier 60 and come alone. I’ll know if you bring your little squad of heroes or the cops. I’ve always been one step ahead of you. You can pretend that there’s no one you love, but you don’t fool me. I know you’ve been watching them for years. It’d be a shame for something to happen. All because of you. Again. Noon at the pier. Only you. Don’t be late.”

She sets the tablet down and blinks wildly. “What time is it?”

“Mia, look at me.”

It takes her a few seconds, but she eventually trains those gorgeous green irises on me.

“It’s not your fault. It wasn’t your fault back then, and it’s not your fault now. You got me?”

She nods, but it doesn’t convince me of anything. “What time is it?” she asks again.

After a quick check of my watch, I answer, “Ten thirty-seven.”

“Good. You have time to get him before noon. Go get the guys ready. I need to call my sisters. Show Big Al this. It should be all he needs to get on board.” She hands me the tablet.

Bending close to her, I wrap my free hand around the side of her neck and kiss her forehead. “I’ll be right next door if you need me.”

As I’m leaving, my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

*Son of a bitch.*

It’s Gloria.

We left her at the house this morning to look after Ma for a few hours. But she needs to leave soon. Her granddaughter has gone into labor, and the whole family is gathering at the hospital.

Thumbing through my contacts, I find Kate’s number and fire off a Hail

Mary text.

While I wait for a reply, I rejoin the team and show them the message on the *gift*. As expected, Boss gives us the green light and steps away to call Detective Patterson at CPD to give him a heads-up. Boss doubts the threat on the tablet will be enough for an arrest, but we'll have tried. He's forever trying to keep peace with local law enforcement.

Kate replies when we're grabbing gear in the armory. She can come but not until early afternoon. We don't have time to wait.

*Think, think, think.*

Bailing on the mission won't bode well with Boss or the guys. And how would that make Mia feel? Although she'd understand, it would be like I was abandoning her.

And I want to get my hands on that cocksucker Tony.

All geared up, I stand outside Mia's office and rack my brain for a solution. I could call Kri and Shep, but they had plans with Val today for some mathletes thing and brought Junior with them. Leo is taking care of Sue. I could potentially send Sammy to sit with my mother, but they've never met. That could be a nightmare for my mom and Sammy.

Only one viable option doesn't involve me bailing on the mission.

*Mia.*

My mother has gotten comfortable with her this last week, and Mia can handle her if she gets agitated.

Best of all, Mia wouldn't need to sacrifice her role in the op. With her laptop and mine, she can keep tabs on us from there.

I'm sure she'll do it, assuming that calling her sisters after this many years of no contact doesn't upset her too much.

Shaking it off, I reply to Gloria, letting her know we'll be there in less than an hour.

Nothing left to do but wait until Mia comes out.

So I wait. And wait some more.

## CHAPTER 46

# MY FARKING HOME

MIA

Shocked doesn't begin to cover the feeling I get when Portia answers my call.

"Never expected hell to freeze over in the heat of a Florida summer, yet here we are," she snarks, and the sound of her dainty voice makes my heart squeeze, even after all this time.

*Deep breath.*

"Hey, butter butt. How are you?"

Over the crack of the phone line, I hear her huff at my use of her dreaded juvenile nickname.

"I'm fine, I suppose. Just another Sunday. We got home from church a few minutes ago."

Silence settles. Neither of us knows what to say. Too many words left unsaid and far too much time without connecting has strained our relationship. Possibly more than that horrible act of violence she suffered.

"So to what do I owe this pleasure? It's not my birthday. Not that those even warrant a call from you."

Ouch.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, unsure of what I'm apologizing for.

Not calling on her birthday? The assault? The lack of contact? Not being able to protect her? Spying on her from afar? All of the above?

"That's nice. What do you want?"

I deserve that.

"Listen, something is happening with me, and I'm afraid it could spill over to you."

*Again.*

Even when I stay away, my life affects her.

Her tone shifts, a hint of alarm threading her words. "What do you mean? Are you all right?"

"This isn't about me." I pause to catch my breath. "Well, it *is* about me, but that's not the purpose of the call. I need you to be vigilant until we handle it. Do you have a gun? Is your husband going to be with you all day?"

"What the hell, Mia? Are you kidding me? A gun?"

I should know if she's pro-gun or not. I should know if her husband is the

protective type. I should know a lot of things. But social media activity and ring cams only tell you so much. And Portia's been private since the attack.

"I don't have much time to explain, but I'll give you the short version." I tug in another huge swell of air, exhaling shakily. "Someone I used to work with is involved in some shady shit. I found out about it, and now he's threatening me and my loved ones. The threat I got today specifically references you and Claire. We're going after him today, but until he's caught, can you stay inside? Do you have a weapon? And don't open the door to anyone, even if they seem normal through the peephole. Close your shades and keep your daughter inside too. Can you do that? Please, promise me."

"I have so many questions. For starters, I'm shocked to hear you refer to me as *your loved one*. That's hilarious. Last time I checked, if you love someone, you return their calls and try to be a part of their life, especially if they've been begging for more than a decade. And second, who is this *we*?"

"What?"

"You said 'we're going after him.' Does that mean the cops? Are you a cop?" She groans and sighs audibly. "I hate that I don't have a clue what you do for a living, but I know it's not digital app design or whatever the hell bullshit you told us."

"Butter butt, listen. You have no idea how sorry I am for shutting you out. I regret it every day, and I want to fix it. *I really do*. And I hope you'll answer the next time I call. I promise it'll be soon. I'm living in Florida again, and I'd love to see you. There's no time right now for me to tell you all the things I need to. Until then, can you promise me you'll stay safe and keep your guard up?"

Sniffles cut through the silence that follows.

"I will be careful. Yes, I have a gun and know how to use it. And yes, my husband is home with me today, and I'll make sure we stay inside. Thanks for the warning. What about Claire?"

"She wouldn't pick up my call. Can you contact her and stress the importance of keeping her and her family safe until we catch this guy?"

Her voice stiffens, taking on a somber quality that breaks my heart. "Yes. I'll do that when we hang up. But what about you?"

"Me? What about me?"

"Are you going to stay safe?"

*She still cares about me. Maybe I have a chance to earn my sister back one day.*

“Yes. Don’t worry. I’m well-protected. I work for a security company named Redleg Security and am surrounded by former military special operatives. Thank you for caring about me,” my voice cracks, “even though I don’t deserve it.”

“I’ve never stopped caring for you, Mia. And I never will.”

Once we disconnect, I sit in silence for a heavy minute or two. I cup my cell phone, squeezing it tightly and running my thumb along the smooth back. It’s not her. But it’s the closest thing I have, and right now, I want to hug her.

If something happens to her again because of me, I won’t survive it.

Wait. What am I thinking?

I work for a company with dozens of bodyguards at our disposal.

My feet carry me swiftly to the door, and I yank it open. Cal falls into my office, stumbling a few steps before setting himself to rights.

“Oh my farking gosh!” I squeal. “Were you leaning on my door?”

His smile is wide and sexy, his brilliant white teeth shining. “Yeah. Not my smartest moment, I admit.”

“I knew all your brains were in your tush.”

He laughs and wraps his arms around me, pulling me close. “*Farking gosh? Tush?* Why the hell do you talk like that here in the office and cuss like a sailor at home?”

*Home.*

I love the sound of that.

Redleg has quickly become something resembling home. But more than that, Cal *is* my home.

“My first boss, before I worked at the company, was *Pollyanna Perfect*. She marked me down on my performance reviews for what she called *locker room talk*.” I roll my eyes for emphasis.

And also because I love rolling my eyes. It’s the best way to express an emotion while expending the least amount of energy possible. It’s the bird finger of facial expressions. Huge fan.

“Are you okay?” Cal asks, his voice tender, much like his touch, as he runs his palms soothingly over my back.

He gives good hugs.

“Yes. It was hard, but I’ll be okay. I spoke with Portia and warned her. She’s contacting Claire for me since she didn’t answer my call.”

“I’m sorry.”

He presses my forehead onto his shoulder, where it meets his neck, and hugs me tightly. I lean into his touch and inhale deeply, letting his scent soothe me.

Once again, he supports me effortlessly. He doesn't try to fix it or offer platitudes. If I asked for advice or help, he'd deliver instantly. Yet he instinctively knows this is a time for a comforting embrace and nothing more.

How did I get so lucky to find him?

I pull away a few seconds later. "Cal, do you think Big Al would agree to send someone to protect them for the day? They live outside of Orlando. Is that too much to ask?"

He grins. "It's not too much to ask. In fact, he asked for your sisters' addresses as soon as he saw the message on the tablet. That's one of the things I needed to ask you."

"He did?"

"Yeah."

I gulp and blink to clear out the emotions.

"What's the other thing?"

His face blanches. "Gloria needs to leave. Her granddaughter went into labor. I checked with Kate, but she's unavailable until later this afternoon. So I told Gloria to give us an hour to relieve her."

My breath hitches, and my chest tightens. I'm not upset he'll be leaving, but that he had to choose between us in the first place. The tight lines of his face show how much he hates not being part of the mission; it's clear he's struggling with his decision. I never want that for him. There is only one choice.

She comes first.

Always.

"Oh. Okay. I understand. You need to go."

"No, Mia. I don't want to abandon the op. Protecting you is important to me too, and I need to get this guy. It's personal. I feel split here, but I thought of a way we can both still be part of this."

My heart flutters. "How?"

"I was hoping you'd be willing to monitor the op from my mom's house while keeping an eye on her. She's usually calm during the first half of the day and won't likely need much attention. Just ensure she doesn't get into something she shouldn't or wander off. As for the op, Big Al will officially take the con from here. You would assist remotely for technical shit he can't



handle. You can VPN to anything here that isn't already on your laptop, right? And you'll have mine too, so you'll have an extra screen. Plus, I have a dual monitor extender there from when I've worked from her place. You'd have enough screens to manage."

Here come the waterworks.

"You'd trust me with your mom?" I croak.

Oh great, a toad has lodged itself in my throat.

The lines on his forehead become more pronounced, and he licks his lips. "I guess I do. Never once in my thought process did I doubt your ability or desire to care for her the same way I would. It might be stupid or foolhearted since we haven't been together for long, but I trust you with everything. Trust you to have my back. Trust you to watch my mom. And trust you to hold my heart."

"I love you." The words fly out at Mach speed.

But I don't regret saying them.

His chin quivers, and his eyes warm. He cups my cheeks in his special way that always makes me feel cherished.

And loved.

He kisses me slow and deep, his tongue tasting mine with languid strokes. I sense his love for me before he says the words.

But he does say them.

"You're my once-in-a-lifetime, Miriam Ella Bennett. I am over the moon in love with you."

## CHAPTER 47

**SHE'S OUR MAMA NOW TOO**

KLEIN

With one hand on the door, I toss one last look over my shoulder. “See you soon, Ma.”

“Bye, Calvin,” my mother calls back from the dining room table. A puzzle is spread out in front of her, and she’s pleasant as pie right now, thankfully.

Mia offers her lips to me for another goodbye peck.

“We’ll be fine here. You be safe,” she whispers when we break apart. “And try not to kill Tony. Not that I care if he lives, but I don’t want you to go to jail. A throat punch is totally warranted, though. Encouraged, even.”

“Thanks for clarifying the reason you think he should live. I’ll take that under consideration but make no promises.”

“Aw, that’s my sexy caveman.”

I place a tiny kiss on the tip of her nose, because I can, and I want to see her smile one last time before I go.

The team is waiting in the SUV in the driveway. Jonesy honks the horn, and I wave at him.

“Kate’s last text said she needs another hour or two. Remember where I hid the keys to Mom’s car in case you need them?”

My mother hasn’t driven for over a year. She kept getting lost, even on short trips. We had to hide her keys since she would sometimes forget she shouldn’t be driving. She told me I should sell her car, but I haven’t been able to do it yet. More of that denial and telling myself that she’d get better.

Mia’s car has been at her house, so I’m glad to have another vehicle for her to use. I’m also thankful I had the foresight to drive it to the store once a week to keep it in working order.

“Yes, I remember. I’ll be watching you. Now go get him.”

“Love you.”

The apples of her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink. “I love you too.”

One more kiss, then I leave. When I get in the car, Jonesy gives me a curious once over.

“What’s that look for?”

He shrugs. “Is your mom sick?”

“Huh?”

Not sure whether I’m playing dumb or stalling. Maybe both.

“Is she sick?” he asks again, this time with his brows raised and an air of annoyance coming off him.

I gulp, then face the road for a bit.

Why can’t I say it? It’s nothing to be ashamed of, and I’m no longer in denial. My Redleg brothers will understand.

I’m about to answer honestly when Sawyer takes the opportunity to add a bit of levity, throwing his voice to impersonate Chris Tucker from the movie *Rush Hour*. “Do you understand the words that are coming out of his mouth?”

We all laugh.

It’s always felt surreal, how we can be on the way to do some badass shit like apprehending a dirty FBI agent and still break out in hysterics. In five minutes, we’ll be stone-cold serious, with our game faces securely attached.

Once we sober, I clear my throat and come out with it. “Yes. She’s sick. She has Alzheimer’s. It’s gotten worse lately, so I can’t leave her alone.”

Jonesy glances at me from the driver’s seat, compassion pulling his visage in tight and a hard set in his jaw. “Man, I’m sorry. I feel like a dick. I didn’t know.”

I clap his upper arm. “No apologies. I haven’t told anyone yet. Except Mia.”

“Not even Boss?” Aaron asks.

I meet his eyes over my shoulder. “No. Not yet. I’ll tell him the next chance I get. He’s probably wondering after this.”

To be honest, I’m surprised he didn’t insist on an explanation, but I guess he trusts me.

“Klein, how long has she had it? She’s so young.” Sawyer’s words are free of his typical jest, and his tone is reserved.

“It’s early onset. She’s only sixty-two, but she was diagnosed around fifty-eight. At first, the symptoms were barely there, but over the last year, her decline has accelerated.”

“So you’ve been dealing with this for four years? Two of which have been totally alone since your dad passed away?” Jonesy looks at the guys in the back seat, then at the road. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Sawyer reaches around the headrest from behind me and squeezes both my shoulders. “Yeah, man. You’ve always been there for us when we’re

dealing with shit. We'd do the same for you."

"I know that. It was hard for me to talk about. Still is. I was in denial. Talking about it made it too real."

"Well, I'm glad you finally told us. Anything you need, say the word. You're not alone in this anymore. She's our mama now too," Aaron chimes in.

In true Aaron fashion, he only speaks if there's something worth saying. And those words mean so much to me.

"Thanks, guys. I appreciate it."

A grin crawls up one side of Jonesy's face. "So, you and Mia? The lime trick really drew you in, huh?"

With a straight face, I shrug and act casual. "Yeah."

"So verbose," Sawyer teases. "Does she know you speak so highly of her?"

"Not everyone needs to fill every second of silence. Sometimes less is more," Aaron playfully chastises our resident big mouth.

"Everyone is entitled to an opinion, A-A-Ron. Even incorrect ones such as yours," Sawyer quips.

"A-A-Ron." I chuckle. "Classic."

"Fuck you both," Aaron mutters, obviously over the joke he's heard since that hilarious *Key & Peele* skit went viral a few years ago.

Jonesy chimes in, "Don't let him get to you, Aaron. Sawyer doesn't understand people who don't talk around the clock. That man could talk the ears off corn."

"How did this turn around to me? Weren't we asking Klein about his fling with Hobbs?"

I flip him off. "It's not a fling."

"Hobbs?" Jonesy asks, but he doesn't have time to get an answer because his phone rings with an incoming call. "Speaking of our little gingersnap."

I'll punch him later for that. She has a nickname already. Two of them, if you count *Ghost*. Three if you count *Hobbs*, which I don't.

He taps the answer button, and her voice rings through the speakers of the SUV. "You guys are about two minutes out. Time to mic up. Boss is waiting on the comms."

"Well, we would have done that already," Jonesy gives me a teasing side-eye, "but your sweetheart here was gushing about you, and we didn't want to embarrass you."

“That’s funny. But Klein doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Thanks for having my back, Mia,” I say through a toothy grin.

“Always,” she replies instantly.

A chorus of *aws* surrounds me from the peanut gallery. Mia’s big, vibrant laugh comes through the speakers loud and clear.

“Mic up, boys. And get this asshole for me, okay?”

“Thanks for watching our mama while we handle business,” Aaron says.

My airway gets tight as emotion threatens to overwhelm me.

He was serious about that.

*She’s our mama now too.*

Why did I force myself to suffer alone? Burdens are so much lighter when you’re not the only one shouldering them.

Mia ends the phone call once we insert our earbuds and connect to the team comms.

Big Al addresses us right before we pull into the parking lot of a hotel a few blocks away from the beach. “Listen up, team. This needs to be peaceful unless he forces your hand. This is a federal fucking agent we’re talking about. You got me?”

“Yes, Boss,” I respond instantly, and the other guys answer similarly.

My knee bounces from a hit of adrenaline as we pull into the parking lot.

We all wore vests under our shirts, so aside from looking a little bulkier than normal, we shouldn’t stand out to hotel guests or staff.

Mia caught Tony breezing through the hotel lobby on their surveillance feeds after he left the coffee shop around the corner. She lifted his room number from the hotel’s system, recognizing one of the aliases he used to use when Mia was on the task force with him and was able to catch him going into his room.

It’s odd he didn’t change it. Almost like he wanted her to find him. Just one of the questions we’ll ask him, once we get him talking.

Mia gives us an update. “I have eyes on the fourth-floor hallway. It’s all clear. He should be in his room.”

“We got here just in time. He’s probably planning on leaving in about fifteen minutes to get to the pier for your little meet and greet,” Jonesy says, pulling his hat down a little farther and adjusting his camera.

We take the stairs two at a time.

Sawyer gets the honor of knocking on the door while the rest of us press flat against the wall, staying out of sight of the peephole. Ideally, he’ll open

the door for Sawyer, and we'll slip in behind him to take him down before he has a chance to get suspicious.

After a few seconds, he knocks again. "Hey, buddy, are you in there? I'm staying in the room beside you. I have something that belongs to you. Just trying to return it."

He waves an old CVS receipt in front of the peephole in a gesture that will show he's holding something but won't reveal what it is. It also hides a portion of his face, so if Tony has been digging up intel on Redleg, he shouldn't be able to recognize him.

As an aside, it's nice to know the tree that died to make that single, long-ass receipt didn't die in vain.

A deep voice replies from the other side of the door. "Who are you?"

"My name is Smitty. I'm in the room next door. My daughter said she was walking behind you this morning, and this fell out of your pocket."

Another few tense seconds pass. Sawyer jiggles the receipt again.

"My daughter was too scared to approach you. She's shy. But this might be important, so I figured I'd get it to you."

Sawyer rocks on his heels, having given it his best shot.

*Come on, Tony Fuckface McGee. Open up and say ahh... to my fist.*

The crick of the safety latch unlocking is music to my ears.

He opens the door about a half foot wide. Thankfully, he doesn't stick his face out into the hallway. Otherwise, he could have caught a glimpse of us. He holds his hand out.

Sawyer puts the receipt in his outstretched palm but doesn't let go. Instead, he clutches Tony's wrist and bends it hard, resulting in a nauseating snapping sound.

Tony gasps in pain. Sawyer quickly covers his mouth to silence his scream.

Using the surprise to his advantage, Sawyer slams his shoulder into Tony's chest, knocking him backward ambush-style. I closely follow Sawyer and Tony into the room, Jonesy and Aaron behind us. I hear the click of the door shutting.

There's not much space in the entryway of the hotel room, so I struggle to find a spot to jump in to help Sawyer without taking a boot to my skull.

Tony's flailing around, somehow drawing Sawyer into a barrel roll like an alligator does to disorient and drown his prey. In the process, Sawyer knocks a gun out of Tony's other hand.



Sawyer quickly emerges victorious, landing on top of Tony with a knee to the chest. Tony's right arm is bent behind him, bearing the brunt of their combined body weight.

Since his mouth is free of Sawyer's palm, Tony wails in pain.

"Shh," I whisper, kneeling to get right in his face. "Recognize me from your little spy camera?"

He shakes his head no, and veins bulge in his neck. "Did she send you? I don't know what she told you, but you can't trust her."

"Well, now you're being mean. Don't talk that way about the woman I love."

My cocky attitude must piss him off. He suddenly looks disgusted, with his pouty lips and flared nostrils.

"She's not capable of love," he forces out through gritted teeth. "She had me fooled too, man. Then I found out how damn dirty she is. She'll sell you out too."

I hate admitting it, but his words give me pause for just long enough to let doubt creep in. Am I an ass to trust Mia? Did this fucker trust her and get burned? Enough to threaten her life and the life of her family?

No. That doesn't make sense.

*I know Mia.*

I saw her fear when she realized who was after her. I felt her panic as acutely as I felt my own. And our love is real. More genuine than anything I've ever known.

Confidence quickly returning, I grumble, "That's not going to work on me."

"How did she get to you? Aren't you the one working with Mia? What are you? A double agent?"

His words make less sense by the moment.

Sawyer forces him onto his stomach to restrain his hands. I stand to gather my thoughts before they careen out of control.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I didn't leave it with anyone this time since this isn't exactly the same risk level as raiding a trafficking house. I let the call roll to voice mail.

"Mia, you getting this?" I ask, desperate for her reassurance. "What's he talking about?"

No response.

Jonesy and I catch eyes.

My phone buzzes again. Another call?

*Son of a bitch.*

I pull out my phone. It's my mother. My stomach sinks.

A second later, the panic alarm on my phone signals. Someone tripped the damn panic button at Ma's house.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

"I have to take this," I whisper to Jonesy, flashing him the phone so he can see the caller ID.

He tips his head toward the other side of the room.

While I shuffle away, I see Sawyer binding Tony's wrists, knees, and ankles with an assist from Aaron.

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" I whisper into the receiver.

"Jenna was here, but now she's gone," Ma says, sounding agitated and panicked.

Perfect. Exactly what this day needs. Should I correct her and remind her that Mia is there watching her or play along?

"Does Jenna have red hair?" I ask, trying to shift her focus somewhat.

"Uh... I think she did today."

"Okay, that's good. Give her the phone."

Why the hell is Mia letting her on the phone, anyhow?

"I can't. I'm trying to te — that's what I'm —"

Two more times she starts and stops, unable to find the words. I hate this fucking disease.

"Give the phone to Mia. Or Jenna. Give the phone to the redhead."

"She's gone, Calvin. Another woman came and took her."

Not the best time for her to break with reality.

"Listen to me, please. Stay in the house. I'll be home in a few minutes. Can you lock the front door and stay in the house?"

"Yes." Her breath crackles the line. "I'm scared. I'm confused. Something is wrong, but I don't know what."

*Shit.* She's crying, and it further batters my heart.

"It's fine. Just relax," I soothe. "Did you go to the front door? Is it locked?"

"It was open. I'm closing it."

Open? Why the hell would the front door be open? Is she even at home?

"Okay, Calvin. I closed the front door and locked it like you said. Is that good? Did I do okay?"

She sounds childlike, and it breaks my fucking heart.

“Yes, you did good. Sit on the couch and wait for me, okay?”

“Okay. I love you.”

I hang up, my heart souring and my soul shaken to bits.

*This right here* is why I can't do field work anymore.

“Mia, are you there?” Jonesy asks, his voice jerking my attention to the other side of the hotel room.

Wait. They *still* don't have her on the radio?

I quickly access Ma's location via the app on my phone. A wave of relief surges through my chest. Safe at home. Heart rate is a little elevated, but she's agitated, which makes sense. I flip to the other app and check my nanny cams, and my mother is standing at the front door, frozen. I scan the room and don't see Mia.

What's happening?

“Mia?” I ask this time, rejoining the team.

Again, no response.

*Please, let the comms be down. But something tells me it's not a communication problem.*

“Boss, are you hearing us?” Jonesy barks out. His thoughts must mirror mine.

“Affirmative. Mia, do you copy?”

“You're too late,” Tony moans. “She's got her already. I tried to stop her. I was trying to help. I only wanted to protect Mia.”

*What is happening?*

“Mia! Answer me, dammit!” I yell, my vision tunneling and a cold sweat forming along my brow.

My heart is in my fucking throat, my pulse is erratic, and I'm dizzy. I've *never* lost it on an op like this before. Usually, there's a steely calm, as if I'm operating my body from a remote control.

But something is *very* wrong.

“Easy, man,” Jonesy says, clapping me on my back. “Keep your shit together.”

The room keeps spinning and spinning, sending a burst of nausea through me.

At the end of the dark tunnel of my vision, Sawyer and Aaron lift Tony and throw him into a chair.

*Mia has my mother and my heart. She has to be all right. They both do.*

“Mia, are you there?” Big Al’s voice booms through the comms. “Team, we’re trying to get her on the phone. Maybe she lost signal. Proceed with caution.”

Shaking off my fog quickly, I snap into control. I close the space between me and Tony in three large strides and get in his face.

“Is Mia in danger?” I demand.

Confusion engulfs his features. “Yes.”

One word.

And my world crumbles.

“Who is after her? Who were you trying to stop?”

“Lisa.”

“Who the fuck is that?”

He shakes his head in tiny pulses but doesn’t answer. He’s confused.

*Get in line, bud.*

I grip him fiercely around the throat, drawing a gasp from him. “Answer me. Who is Lisa, and what does she want with Mia?”

“She wants —” He coughs, so I loosen my grip on his neck.

“Wants what?”

“Looking. For. Him.”

Reluctantly, I loosen my grip further. “For who?”

Before he can answer, Tomer’s voice comes through the comms. “We’ve got the wrong tango. Or he’s not working alone.”

The fuck? When did he get there?

“Explain, T,” Sawyer snaps.

“I tracked the serial number on the tablet to a local electronics store. It was sold on Friday. I found the credit card that made the purchase. Lisa Bowers. Intel director at the FBI. She’s Tony’s boss. I think that’s who Tony was trying to stop.”

I lock my gaze on Tony. “Lisa is the one working with the Mafia?”

“Yes,” he huffs, struggling to catch his breath. “She framed me so she’d have a scapegoat if she ever got caught by the bureau. But she won’t stop until she silences Mia. It’s personal for her.”

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty damn personal for me too.”

Big Al orders a retreat, instructing us to bring Tony. He agrees to come peacefully, contending that he wants to help.

On the way to the SUV, Tomer comes on the line. “I checked the security camera footage on your doorstep, Klein. Mia left at gunpoint a few minutes

ago. I'm trying to get you a location. Load up and stand by."

We're in the SUV three minutes later.

Once my breathing calms, I realize my mother witnessed Mia's abduction at gunpoint. She's alone and terrified.

"Boss, is there anyone you can send to watch my mother?"

He doesn't answer right away.

Aaron adds, "She's got Alzheimer's, Boss. She's probably terrified right now."

The answer comes a second later. "Henderson is en route."

"Thanks, Boss," I choke out.

"We'll find her, buddy," Jonesy vows with finality. "No one fucks with Redleg family and gets away with it. No one ever has. No one ever will."

And this damn sure won't be the exception to that rule.

## CHAPTER 48

**WHERE'S MY INATOR?**

## A FEW MINUTES EARLIER

### *Mia*

Too amped to sit, I shuffle from foot to foot beside the dining room table. My vision bounces between my screens. I've elevated them on upside-down cardboard boxes I found in the garage right after Cal left with the team.

*God bless Amazon for always coming through with the good cardboard. They're the real heroes.*

Thankfully, we had long-ass Ethernet cables handy at HQ and had the foresight to grab them before we left. It gave me options for where I stationed myself. The high-top counters in the kitchen would have been a decent height for standing without the need for modification, but I don't want to be that far away from Charlotte. So the dining table it is.

From here, I can watch her without stepping away from my screens and compromising the op. Both of these assignments are important to me, and I will not fail either.

Speaking of Charlotte, she finished her puzzle and is going to *try* to read on the couch.

The way she emphasized the word *try* hurt my heart.

No wonder Cal is as sweet as the damn strawberry pie filling he spoon-fed me last night. She raised him in her image. And I'm so grateful she did. No one else could have forgiven me the way he did. No one else could love me. Not in spite of my shortcomings and trust issues, but regardless of them.

With all she's going through, she's saccharin sweet. Even if she periodically calls me by the name of Cal's ex.

*Mental note: investigate Jenna and put a voodoo hex on her.*

Kidding. I don't know voodoo.

I could send her something memorable, though. Perhaps a bag of dicks or an STD treatment kit, labeled *indiscreetly*, of course.

On screen, the team files into the hotel, drawing my attention to the op. I scan the hotel's security camera feed. "I have eyes on the fourth-floor



hallway. It's all clear. He should be in his room."

Their chatter comes through as my excitement vibrates through me. Seeing Tony's face on the surveillance cameras today was painful.

Suspecting someone is corrupt is far easier to deal with than having it confirmed. I let this man in my bed at one point in time.

Well, his bed. I didn't want him in my personal space. But whatever.

Now he's threatening my life and the life of my sisters, all in service to the worst of humanity — traffickers.

Even murderers are slightly less vile. At least their victims have an end to their suffering. I've interviewed dozens of trafficking survivors whose stories will never leave me. Day after day and night after night praying for a death that never came. Reliving a nightmare, often multiple times a night.

Broken like animals.

Disgusting.

I shake off the morose thoughts and refocus. Sawyer's knocking at the door, and my heart threatens to beat out of my chest. I'm usually amped for this type of thing, but this one is different. It's personal.

I adjust the headset, increasing the volume to hear what's being said on the other side of the door.

A figure crosses on the other side of the room at the edge of my periphery. I glance quickly from the screen to notice Charlotte meandering across the room.

Simultaneously on one screen, Sawyer barges into Tony's hotel room, and the team disappears from the hallway cam, drawing my attention back to the op.

I shift my sight to Jonesy's cam footage. He's the only one we wired with a camera. Since we were going for incognito to get through the hotel unnoticed, we couldn't outfit them all. But Jonesy's ball cap made for a nice hiding place.

There's a scuffle, capturing my attention, so I careen my neck to see what's happening. My fists pulse and unclench as adrenaline zaps through my bloodstream.

Sawyer pins Tony at the same time as Charlotte waves her hand near my screen, stealing my attention.

Holy shit.

Klein's mother opened the front door to let in the intel director of the FBI. Tony's boss. The woman who sent me away with promises to investigate him

further.

Well, she failed. Clearly.

I pull my headphones off, set them beside my laptop, and glide around the table. “Lisa? What are you doing here?”

My scalp prickles, and the hairs of my arm stand on end as the shock of seeing her recedes and gives a wide berth to fear.

Not for me, but for Charlotte.

I shift my eyes to Klein’s dear mother, and although she seems a bit confused, she answers my unspoken question. “She knocked. She’s Calvin’s friend.”

*Bad, bad, bad. This is all bad.*

I must not have heard her knocking on the door with the headphones cranked up so loudly. Son of a bitch.

There is no good reason for Lisa to be here.

With a calm voice, I reassure her that everything is fine. “Thanks for letting her in, Charlotte. This is my friend Lisa. Why don’t you have a seat on the couch while she and I catch up?”

“Something to drink?” she offers Lisa.

Her answering smile is plastic. “That would be lovely. What do you have?”

Why didn’t I ever notice how evil she looks?

A wave of confusion slips over Charlotte’s kind face, and she glances at me, silently asking for help.

My number one mission is to get her away from Lisa. I don’t trust this woman any more than one trusts a viper hanging out in your commode.

“Charlotte, would you go into the kitchen and make Lisa and me some tea? Your electric kettle is beside the microwave on the counter.”

She blinks and nods, then retreats in the wrong direction.

*Dammit.* Too much is different today. Too many stressors in her environment. Her routine is shot to shit. She’s going to spin out. I sense it coming.

A few seconds later, the sound of her opening and closing doors in the hallway reaches us.

Good. She’s out of the way.

*Stay down there, Charlotte. Don’t come back out here, please.*

“What are you doing here?” I ask Lisa, aiming for a light tone.

Where did I put my gun?

*Son of a bitch.* I locked it in Cal's gun safe in the bedroom closet so Charlotte didn't stumble onto it.

I knew I should have tucked it in my waistband or strapped it on my leg when he left. But he knocked me off kilter with his adorable *I love yous* and nose kisses.

"It's time to go, Mia."

"Go where?" I hedge.

My gaze scans the room discreetly, seeking anything I can use as a weapon. Sadly, my laptop or headset are the only things I could reach, and the angles aren't great. She could fire before I reached to the side to grab either.

Too much time in the office behind a keyboard. I've lost touch with real-world shit. She caught me unaware with my dick in my hands.

So to say.

Vag in my hands? Is that better?

Ugh.

*Focus, Mia! Not the time for one of your mental yoga sessions. Take some damn Adderall and woman up!*

Studying Lisa from head to toe, I surmise I could beat her in a hand-to-hand fight. How long has it been since she's been in the field? A decade maybe?

If I can get her out of here and away from Charlotte, there's an 80 percent chance I can take her out. Pretty good odds.

I shouldn't risk fighting her in here, though. Stray bullets or grabbing Cal's mom to use her as a bargaining chip? No fucking way.

Holding my stare with an eerie calm, Lisa reaches behind her and pulls a government-issued Glock from her waistband. "We're leaving. You and me. Based on the dazed look on the old broad's face, I'm guessing no one is going to believe her version of what happened here. So I guess she can live. Unless you resist." She jerks the gun toward the front door, ordering me to head out.

I raise my hands in a surrender pose.

Another door closes at the far end of the hallway while Charlotte searches for something. Cal told me she often forgets where the different rooms are in her house, and once she starts looking for something, she gets stuck in a loop. That seems to be the case now.

If Charlotte is that far down the hall, perhaps I could go for Lisa's

midsection, take her to the ground, and wrestle the gun away before she knows what hit her. Sawyer gave me a few refresher lessons on close-range fighting. I've got to be more agile than this older bitch.

No offense to lactating and breeding dogs.

A split second before I go for the two-point takedown, Charlotte's voice calls out, "Jenna, where should I go?"

She's moving closer. Attack plan delayed.

I move swiftly to the door, keeping my hands where the cuntface bitch slut Lisa can see them.

No offense to the cool cuntface bitch sluts out there. You know who you are.

"Charlotte, why don't you watch some TV? I'm going to step out for a minute, okay?"

"Mia?" she asks, sounding perplexed, like she's surprised to see me here.

I'm getting whiplash. One minute I'm Jenna. The next I'm Mia. Any minute now, I'll be Dr. Heinz Doofenshmirtz and monologuing about my latest *inator*. I wish I had a cuntface-bitch-slut-destroying-inator.

*Perry Sawyer would have laughed at that if he'd heard it. Heh.* If I live through this shit, I'm gonna tell him what kept my mind from doom spiraling in my time of strife. And don't judge me for watching *Phineas & Ferb* even though I don't have kids. It's a great freaking show.

"Are you leaving?" Charlotte asks.

*Yes. I'm willingly leaving with a psycho holding a gun to protect you. Please mourn me.*

I cut a glance in her direction and try to infuse calmness into my tone. "I'll be back soon. Sit tight and wait on the couch. Okay? There's no need to panic."

The word triggers a memory, and my eyes flit to the small gray panic button by the door. I should be able to hit it on my way out, and Klein or whoever at HQ he has monitoring it will know something is wrong. They'll send someone to care for his mother.

She's going to be fine.

I've done everything I can to guard her. Just like I told Cal I would.

If I don't make it, I hope he knows I kept my promise to protect her. I hope he forgives me again.

On the way out, I look at Charlotte once more, hoping to draw Lisa's gaze away from me for the split second I need to tap the panic button.

“Bye, Charlotte. You relax now, okay?”

It works.

I successfully reach under the umbrella rack by the door and tap the hidden button without drawing any attention.

Cunty McWhorebitch, or whatever her name is, shoves me into the back seat of her car at gunpoint. She couldn't care less who sees her with the damn gun at this point.

This woman has the biggest balls in the sack.

I'm attempting to sit up straight to take a crack at her when something pricks me in the back of my neck.

Warmth spreads from the spot, coating my veins and soothing my muscles in a delicious high. It feels too good for me to be scared.

My chest grows heavy, and then it's nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

## CHAPTER 49

**I LIKE IT WHEN YOU'RE ROUGH  
WITH ME**

MIA

*S*plash.

The first thing I notice other than the gush of water pouring over me is the pain. Skull-splintering pain. Did I get cranked on a triple-layer wedding cake with meth frosting last night?

Why is my head spinning?

And is there a hippo sitting on my chest?

*S*plash.

Another wave of frigid water slaps me in the face and drips down my chest. I try to wipe it away, but my hands won't move.

"Jesus! Fuck!" I sputter as my eyelids flicker open. Immediately, I blink to shy away from the two-hundred-megawatt light bulbs they must have hung in this place.

"There she is. Time to wake up."

Right when I spot the source of that wretched voice, yet another bucket of cold water socks me in the mouth.

I cough and turn away, attempting to inhale air instead of liquid. Once the oxygen returns to my lungs, I curse her out. "What the fuck is your problem? Enough with the water. I'm not a freaking sea animal, you twat!"

"Just making sure you're nice and alert for our talk. We don't have much time before they get here."

Not a fan of how she said that. Who is coming?

*Fuck.* She's probably turning me over to the Russians. That's gonna leave a mark.

Lisa sets the empty bucket on the concrete. My vision comes into focus, giving me the first glimpse of my surroundings so I can see what kind of fuckery I've found myself in. I'm tied to a chair in the middle of a sparse space. No phone. No purse. Not even shoes. Sadly, that means no GPS trackers on me. She'd have probably checked me for those anyhow.

There's an unfinished concrete floor beneath me and exposed two-by-four wall studs. They're only partially insulated with puffy pink fiberglass filling. A portable dual-head construction lamp shines brightly in my face, with a long extension cord running to who knows where.

If I get a chance, I'm strangling her with that cord.



For the ice water alone.

A shiver runs through me. Fortunately, this is summer in Florida, so I'll be dry and hot in no time.

*And that's how you look at the silver lining in a horrible situation, boys and girls.*

"Let's talk, Mia. You have information I need. Give it to me, and your sisters will continue living. Understand?"

"You know what, Lisa? I used to be obsessed with finding information too. Recently, I've found Christ. And through him, I've kicked the habit of —"

*Smack.*

She backhands me so hard my head whips to the side.

I guess she hasn't heard the *good news*.

"No one finds you amusing, Mia."

"No one? That doesn't seem plausible. Surely, someone out there must —"

*Smack.*

Okay, I was asking for that one.

Fortunately, she came at me from the other side. I'd hate to have an unbalanced appearance in the crime scene photos.

"What do you want to know, Lisa? Go ahead and ask so I can direct you to the nearest trash receptacle for more shoes like that."

"Want more water for that smart mouth?"

"Aw, you think I'm smart? That's touching."

*Smack.*

A third backhand.

This is actually getting fun. She failed to account for how much I enjoy pain.

If I survive, I wonder if Cal would consider smacking me.

And if the Redleg cavalry doesn't arrive in time to save me, they'll keep my sisters safe. I believe that with every fiber of my being. So the information this cum dumpster's gonna get from me shall fill a page roughly equivalent to the length of a bee's penis.

Lisa bends, putting herself directly in my eye line with only an inch between us.

She really needs to wax her upper lip.

"Enough. I didn't want to get blood on me, but if you don't cut the

bullshit, I'll have no choice but to get messy.”

“Seriously, Lisa? First, how can you cut bullshit? It'd be a huge mess. And more importantly, don't you have henchmen to do that shit for you? What kind of villain are you? The wish dot com version? Are you throwing this together as you go? Why don't you take a beat to come up with a solid plan? I'll wait for you right here.”

*Smack.*

Excellent. Both sides of my face are perfectly balanced once more.

I wiggle my jaw in hopes it won't be swollen in lock-jaw position by the time this cunt gets around to asking me her precious question. I'd hate to be unable to speak when she finally gets to the damn point. I have a lifetime of insults saved for just such an occasion, thanks to being around members of the armed forces for so long.

She pulls out her gun again and places the barrel under my chin, pointing it up into my skull.

Suddenly, I'm 50 percent less hilarious.

“Where is Savin Sergeyevich?” she seethes.

For a second or two, I don't know what she's talking about, so my initial bewildered reaction is authentic.

Then it hits me.

Savin.

The man who wanted us to save his lady love, Tasha, from the trafficking house the night we rescued Lettie. The same man who's been hiding in a local motel under twenty-four-hour guard while we figure out what to do with him.

More importantly, he's the man who identified Lenkov as the pakhan.

Savin knows their trafficking organization inside and out and is itching to spill it all to avenge his love and get justice against the people who stole his life from him.

*Of course* they're looking for him.

“Talk,” she orders, digging the gun harder into my chin.

“Come closer, and I'll tell you,” I whisper.

“So you can head butt me? No thanks.”

It was worth a shot. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Okay, so you're looking for Savin, right? Just to be clear.”

She shoves the gun more forcefully into my neck.

“Before I answer, let me ask you this. If I tell you where he is, will you

let me go?”

Her sadistic smile deepens. “It’s hard to lie to someone who’s been trained the way you have. So I’m not going to try.”

“That’s refreshing. It’ll save us the trouble. Cut to the chase, and the truth shall set you free.”

She chuckles darkly. “I’m going to get the info I need about Savin and pass that on to my business associates who are on the way. Then I’m going to make you suffer before I kill you.”

“That seems harsh. If I give you the intel, why not kill me quick and easy? What did I ever do to you?”

Her brown eyes narrow to slits. “He never stopped loving you. Even now, he rushed down to Florida to save you.”

“Umm. That’s not entirely helpful. Care to expand on that? It’s not really a conversation if only one of us knows what’s being discussed.”

“Anthony. He’s been hung up on you for years. Even when he was in my bed, he was still pining for you.”

“Tony? You were sleeping with Tony? Your subordinate?”

“Duh.”

“And he’s in love with me? Is *that* your story?”

“Yes. It’s not a story. It’s the truth.”

“Mmm.” I crinkle my nose and screw my lips to one side. “We’re going to have to agree to disagree on that point. He threatened my sisters’ lives one of the last times I saw him. Pretty sure he’s not my biggest fan.”

“Pa-haw,” she balks.

Like a chicken. Swear to Betty Crocker.

“That wasn’t a threat. It was a warning.”

I study her closely. “He was warning me? Why would he do that?”

“Because he’d found out about my little side venture. I had to get him to fall in line by letting him know the consequences. He needed to understand what the both of you stood to lose. And he did a great job. Once he told you that, you threw up your hands and surrendered to me the very next day.”

“So he’s not in cahoots with you?”

He’s here. In Clearwater. I saw him with my own eyes.

Why is he here if he’s not involved?

“I wish. I offered it to him. But again... you were there in the back of his mind. Like a damn ginger angel on his shoulder, influencing him. Ugh.”

The longer this unravels, the closer we get to one of two things

happening. Either the Russians arrive to collect me, or Redleg does. I'm pulling for the second but need to prepare for the first. Maybe I can defuse the tension with her on this shit. It's worth a shot.

"Lisa, I have no interest in Tony. You can have him. I assure you, we've been finished for years."

"And yet he left a door open for you in the server. A neon flashing light for you to sneak in one day. He all but drew you a map. I had to go behind him and close it so you didn't get any more intel you weren't meant to have."

"You closed it? How? That wasn't easy. Do you know how long I worked on that?"

I didn't realize she could even type, to be frank. Although she's the director of the intel team at the FBI, her hands-off approach led me to believe she was there for her leadership abilities and not as a subject matter expert.

Her eyes flash wild with a perverse delight. "Who do you think taught Tony all his little tricks?"

Color me shocked and impressed.

"Lisa, I'm woozy. This doesn't seem possible. What did you drug me with? I have a penicillin allergy. You didn't dope me with antibiotics, did you?"

"You have no idea how hard it is to refrain from cutting out your silver tongue. But I need you to tell me where Savin is. If I don't find him, I'm in hot water, since my intel led to one of our houses being cleared out."

"Ah, so that's it. Makes sense. Your intel leak caused the flesh exodus. Now you have to pay unless you can deliver."

"Brilliant, Mia. Full marks."

She doesn't mean that one bit. Rude.

"Where is he?"

"Let's see. The name rings a bell. Was he the one with the blue hair and ear gauges about the size of a buffalo nickel?"

Until this moment, I wasn't aware that blinks could be profane. But she's cussing me out with her eyelashes right now.

"Oh, wait. *Savin*, right? Sorry. The blue-haired one is Kevin. Similar names. You know how it goes."

If she has a crown or any other dental work, I predict another appointment in the near future. Not sure I've seen anyone grit their teeth as fiercely as her.

Turning on her heel, she marches out of the room. The clapping of her

dress shoes against the concrete shoots pain through my aching skull.

While she's gone, I let my snarky bravado fall and give myself a chance to be scared. To have a human moment of fear where I'm not the hardened CIA analyst. I'm not a woman trained to withstand torture. I'm not a soulless operative. I'm just me.

*Mia.*

In the last few seconds before her footsteps signal her return, I mourn for what I'll never have. The relationships I'll never cement or resolve. I mourn for my sisters, my new friends, and my Redleg team.

And for Cal.

I hope he finds love again. He deserves happiness.

When Lisa rounds in front of me, I inhale deeply and meet her gaze head-on. No matter what she does to me, I won't cry. I won't yield to this evil bitch. I *refuse* to give her the satisfaction of breaking me.

I'll go out on my terms.

My way.

*Fuck.* That's a Frank Sinatra song.

Damn you, Calvin Klein. I'm going to miss you and your surprisingly good old-man music.

"I'm surprised you didn't comment on the location." She lets her eyes search the room, sweeping from side to side and from top to bottom. "Feels familiar, right?"

A rock lodges in my stomach, and my abdominal muscles pulse and cramp around it.

As I scan my surroundings again, I realize we're in a half-constructed home. Far too similar to the one I found Portia in after he...

My mouth loses all moisture, like it's been stuffed with cotton.

"How do you know about that?"

"Mia, you aren't the only one who can uncover secrets. I know everything about you."

My head snaps back and forth vehemently. "No. No. You can't."

"But I can, and I do."

"No. That's where you're wrong. People are more than documents and images on a screen. You'll *never* know me. And you'll damn sure never break me."

She huffs an aggravated breath, her shoulders rising and falling in a showy fashion. "We'll have to see about that."

She pulls out some sort of tool kit, unrolling the leather wrap to reveal an assortment of implements.

It's a pumpkin carving kit for torture enthusiasts.

My hands and ankles are bound. I'm at a construction site on a Sunday. No one will be reporting to work for a half-day or longer.

I'm well and truly fucked.

All I have in the arsenal is my thick skull if she comes close enough for a headbutt. But unless she's knocked unconscious so I can roll in my chair out of the house and down the street, that won't be much help.

I'm still gonna do it if I get a chance.

I might not walk away, but she'll have an ugly goose egg for my troubles.

She holds up a pair of medieval-looking pliers, wiggling them in front of my face. "Ready to talk?"

"Lisa, you already revealed your plan to me. Either way, I'm going to die painfully. So if it's all the same to you, I'll keep my secrets. Thanks for playing, though. Don't forget to tip your server and bartender before you go."

I gasp and yelp as she grabs a fistful of my hair. "I like it better when my boyfriend does that."

"Shut up, ass whore."

Oh, that's right. She saw me and Cal having nakey-nakey time.

"You're just jealous no one has fucked you that thoroughly before."

"That is true. I'll give you that one." She whistles. "Nice ass on that man."

I laugh at her honesty.

But then she tightens her grip on my hair and yanks my head back. With her other hand, she moves the pliers swiftly to my right eye.

*Son of a bitch.*

She's going to make me a pirate. Eye patches clash with everything.

"Arrr!" I squawk at her suddenly, shaking her concentration and making the pliers move away for a few seconds.

She shakes my hair again, jostling me around like a tambourine. Her grip is too far from the roots to be pleasurable. She'd make a terrible Domme.

"Quiet, bitch. Unless you're telling me where to find Savin, then shut the fuck up."

"I was practicing my pirate roar since you're taking my eye," I spit out.

She grunts in annoyance, sending a sick thrill through me at being able to ruffle her feathers.

My sassy mouth is buying time. This is working. I need to keep that shit up. I'll make her think I'm going to tell her about Savin's location.

"Okay, I'm ready to talk," I blurt out.

She lowers the pliers as a grin slithers across her face.

Something *barely* penetrates my panic hysteria. Unless I'm mistaken, that's the sound of tires on gravel.

Son of a bitch. The Russians are here.

And as they would say, *blyat*.

English translation: Fuck.

## CHAPTER 50



**TAKE THE SHOT**

KLEIN

Tomer's voice sails crisply through the SUV speakers, flat and monotone. "Head north on Myrtle Avenue. She seems to be moving in that general direction. Stand by for more."

He's tracking Lisa's car on traffic cams from HQ and relaying directions to us. Best he can tell, we're about fifteen minutes behind them.

Unlike the last rescue mission we were on, Tomer's calm and steady. Knowing he's running the op reduces my tension.

*A very tiny little fucking bit.*

"Careful, dammit. *Ouch!*" Tony squeals.

What a little bitch.

And that opinion is only 50 percent due to my jealousy over his past with Mia.

Sawyer releases his death grip on Tony once he's cuffed his good wrist to the oh-shit handle in the last row of the SUV. Considering his other wrist is likely broken, we're not expecting him to be able to do much with it. He's cuddling it close to his chest.

Precisely the way a little bitch would.

With Tony secure, Sawyer joins me in the middle row. Jonesy is behind the wheel, and Aaron rides shotgun.

Tony grumbles mostly to himself. "I can't believe I came all the fucking way to Florida to help — in this damn heat, no less — and got a broken fucking wrist for my troubles."

Unable to stifle my growl, I crane my neck to glare at him. "We wouldn't have ambushed you if you'd contacted Mia to tell her what was happening."

"I couldn't. Lisa was watching us too closely," he contends. "I didn't want to tip her off that I was down here. Otherwise, she'd send the damn Russians after me, and we'd all be dead."

I shake my head, not buying his bullshit. "You couldn't make a phone call to Redleg? Send a text? Encrypted email? Smoke signal? Hire a skywriter? All your alleged fucking tech savvy, and yet Mia's taken to fuck knows where by a psychopath."

Fury boiling over, I slam my fist into the armrest. Sawyer grips my other forearm, attempting to calm me.

But there's no chance of that happening until Mia's safe in my arms.  
Where she belongs.

Tony sputters more of his story. "I flew in late last night and worked straight through the night to stop Lisa, all while uncovering more evidence to save myself *and Mia*. I was trying —"

"Shut the fuck up!" I snap. "Don't say her name again. You should have fucking told her Lisa was after her and working for the Mafia. She'd have known about the danger, and we'd have been searching for her, not you. It's *your* fault she's been taken. And I swear to fuck, if anything happens to her, you'll have more to worry about than a broken wrist."

"I did my fucking best. I opened the door to the server for her. I put a tag on Lisa's rental car last night too. I did —"

Jonesy interrupts him this time. "What? You tagged her car?"

Tony's dumb face waxes over. "Yeah. *Shit*. I did that last night when I found out where she was staying."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell us? Are you trying to get Mia killed?" I roar, my arm poised to clock him in the jaw.

Sawyer catches my fist before it flies. "Easy, buddy. We'll save your girl. Stay calm."

If Sawyer weren't holding me back, Tony would be a dead man.

*Get it together, pal.*

Shaking it off, I face the front and force a handful of deep breaths.

I've never been blinded by rage this badly. My heart thrashes in my chest. My teeth crack under the strain of my jaw. And my knuckles are pure white.

*Must find her.*

Once Tony sees I'm under control, he rambles out his bullshit excuses. "Sorry I didn't think of it sooner. I'm seriously fucking sleep deprived, okay? And your pretty boy here broke my fucking wrist. I don't think clearly when I'm in fucking agony."

"Tomer, did you copy that?" Sawyer asks.

"Yeah, he said you're pretty, but that's not important right now. Tony, tell me how to track her location from here."

Did Tomer make a joke? *Not the fucking time to grow a personality, T. Focus on finding Mia.*

Tony rushes through instructions for Tomer so he can access the tracking system, which is thankfully a simple web-based program.

After he's locked on the location, Tomer announces, "She appears to be

parked about eight minutes from you. Sending their location to your navigation system.”

*Fight, tiger. Fight. We're coming, baby. Hold on.*

Big Al's voice comes through the comms. “Klein, I got an update for you. Henderson arrived, and everything is good at the residence.”

*My mother is safe.*

For one sweet moment, I allow relief to flutter through me. With my eyes closed, I bow my chin and utter, “Thank you, Boss.”

Tension returns with my next breath, taking root in my chest and sending branches of fear out in all directions. Until my tiger is safe, panic and rage will be my constant companions. Instead of forcing them away, I'll use them to sharpen my focus.

As the wheels propel us faster toward our destination, game faces slowly snap into place, and a tense silence fills the vehicle.

Tony's annoying voice shakes my concentration. “I'm sorry, man. About Mia. I never wanted anything bad to happen to her. I care about her too.”

Twisting in my seat, I flay him alive with my stare. “Care about her? The fuck you do. You've got a funny way of showing it. First, you threaten her sisters' lives and then do a piss-poor job of keeping Lisa away from her. You know nothing about caring for someone. She deserves so much more than the likes of you.”

I face the front again, attempting to rein in my hair-trigger temper.

“That's fair,” he responds softly, talking to the back of my head. “You're right. I didn't do enough to stop this. It's not easy when your heart is split in two.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sawyer asks him.

“I have a past with Mia *and* Lisa. I didn't want to see either of them involved in this shit. I attempted to get Lisa out from under the Mafia's thumb while keeping Mia from their crosshairs. I thought I could save them both.” His next words are barely a whisper. “But I failed.”

Sawyer shifts in his seat, getting closer to Tony. “Maybe the next time you're choosing which woman to save, go for the one who's *not* trafficking women and children. Now shut up before I let my friend beat you to a pulp for endangering his girl.”

“Team, you're four minutes out. Gear up,” Tomer informs us without a drop of unease in his tone.

“I'll get the vests and extra ammo.” Sawyer jumps the seats to get into the

cargo area.

“Get my rifle ready while you’re back there,” Jonesy tells him.

“On it,” Sawyer responds.

Although we all have a shitload of experience wielding our weapons, Jonesy’s the best sharpshooter at Redleg. I’m glad to have him with us on this op.

But if I get a clean shot, I’m taking it.

A rapid series of clicks and snaps fill the cabin as Sawyer assembles the long gun. After he’s done, he tosses bulletproof vests at us.

I’m tightening my vest when Jonesy steers the SUV into a neighborhood. “Tomer, is this right? All these houses are under construction.”

The second my sight catches on the row of homes, all in varying stages of construction, the memory of what Mia told me about her sister’s attack parades across my mind.

*Shit.*

My heart constricts painfully, and bile sloshes in my stomach.

“It’s right,” I answer in a gravelly tone.

At the same time, Tomer concurs.

Judging by the note she left on the tablet, Lisa knew about Mia’s sister’s attack. She probably figured she’d rattle Mia by bringing her to a similar locale.

That sick bitch.

Aaron points at a vehicle parked about two hundred yards down the street. “Her car is a dark blue sedan, right?”

“Yeah, that’s her rental,” Tony answers.

“Look at the front of the house,” Jonesy orders, pointing to a brown-haired woman walking alone into the house. “Tony, is that Lisa?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Where the fuck is Mia?” I growl, although no one here knows the answer.

“No clue, but we need to see what’s happening inside that house,” Aaron answers.

My forearms ache from my prolonged fist clenching, so I shake out my hands. Jonesy drives us closer to the residence.

He pulls off the street two houses away, parking on the gravel between two partially constructed homes. The position gives us cover and ensures we’ll maintain the element of surprise.

Before I open my car door, I threaten Tony's life and limbs if he attempts to get out or does anything to stop us from saving Mia.

His face beseeches me. "Try not to kill her. If you can help it. *Please.*"

I don't answer, reserving judgment until I see the state Mia is in.

The team silently exits the vehicle and gathers along the side of the house. Sawyer hands the rifle to Jonesy, who quickly inspects it to ensure that it's assembled properly.

Anxious to hurry to my girl, I take the lead role. "Aaron and I will approach from the rear of the house. Sawyer and Jonesy, you can take the front."

With weapons drawn, we quickly break into our teams and encircle the house. I hate not knowing how many people are inside or the status of Mia's condition, but we don't have time for extensive recon.

"CPD is en route," Tomer breaks in through the comms. "You're clear to engage if needed."

When the back of the house comes into sight, Aaron and I trade signals to communicate which window we'll take. Well, they're not windows yet — just holes in the block wall where windows will soon be installed.

My cut-out provides a view of a small, empty space, presumably a bedroom.

No Mia. No Lisa.

I glance at Aaron, and he gives me a shake of the head to signal he can't see anything helpful either. We move in unison to a box-shaped opening in the middle of the back of the structure; it must be for a sliding door.

"We've got eyes on them," Sawyer announces in my earpiece. "Mia's tied to a chair. *Fuck.* Lisa's going for her face with a weapon."

"If anyone has a shot, take it," I order while sprinting toward the sliding door opening.

"I've got a shot. Nobody move," Jonesy answers, his voice clipped and smooth.

Against all instincts, I plant my feet so I don't accidentally run into the line of fire. A single shot rings out a half-second later, echoing around the empty space. It's followed by the clank of something metal rattling on the concrete floor and a feminine wail of pain.

"Target's disarmed but not down. Move in," Sawyer announces.

All four of us converge on the center of the house, guns still drawn.

And then I see her. *My Mia. My love.*

She's alive.

"Mia, are you okay?" I call out, my feet launching me forward.

From my vantage point, I barely make out the collapse of Mia's shoulders. "I'm good," she chokes out. "Just get this bitch's blood off me."

Lisa's hand gushes blood, but she remains on her feet. Looks like Jonesy's shot almost literally disarmed her.

She must not appreciate Mia's snark because she dives at her, going for her throat with her good hand.

The force of her attack knocks Mia over, and they topple to the ground.

Despite only being a few feet away, my heart seizes at the sight of Lisa's hand constricting Mia's windpipe.

Aaron's a step behind me, and Sawyer advances from the other side. Jonesy trails a few feet behind him.

"Secure the room," Jonesy barks out.

Sawyer and Aaron pivot, mirroring each other. But I go straight for my girl, yanking Lisa off her with no gentleness or finesse.

Lisa hits the ground a few feet away from me with a thud, and Jonesy quickly moves in to subdue her.

"You son of a bitch," Lisa screeches, but I block her out.

She doesn't matter. The cops will be here soon to take her away.

Mia fills her lungs with a jagged swell of air, then coughs. The red marks around her neck from Lisa's sudden choke attack draw my attention, bringing my rage back to the surface. But Mia's watery eyes meet mine, and everything else fades away.

All I want to do is hold her.

Dropping to my knees, I free her wrists and ankles, then pull her off the chair and straight into my arms.

"House is clear," one of the guys yells, but I don't care who.

Because I've got her.

I stroke Mia's cheek delicately, afraid I'll hurt her if I squeeze her the way I want to. "Hey, tiger." There's a tremble in my words I can't mask. "I'm so damn glad to see your beautiful face. Are you okay?"

Her response comes out in a ragged, hoarse voice. "That takedown wasn't fun. Shoulders and elbows are a little sore. And my throat is... ugh. It's not great. But I'm fine."

"You sure? Your cheeks are red."

"She smacked me. I kind of liked it." A scratchy chuckle ekes out of her.

Relief mixes with shock at her audacity, and my laugh springs free. It makes her smile, and I swear I'll die a happy man if she keeps looking at me this way.

She quickly grows somber, her brows furrowed tight. "How's your mom?"

"She's fine, baby. Henderson is with her, and Kate will be there soon to calm her down."

"I tried to get Lisa away from her. She's probably so scared. Did the panic button work?"

"Yes. You did great, tiger. You're amazing. I love you so much."

I can't stop drooling over her like she's the biggest piece of pie I've ever seen.

Her face pinches tight, and all traces of her bravery finally slip away. Tears start streaming freely.

I cradle her close to my chest and kiss her head. "I got you, tiger. You're safe."

Through her sobs, she says softly, "I love you too. Thank you for finding me. I didn't want to be a pirate."

A relieved chuckle rocks my chest, and I adjust her position to give me access to her face. Through her tears and my misty eyes, I lock my mouth to hers.

With all I have left inside me and every hope I have for the future, I kiss her.

I just fucking kiss her.

I never want to let go. And I never will.



## CHAPTER 51

# **FORNICATION BAN**

KLEIN

I brush the loose strands of Mia's red curls away from her face and tuck them behind her ear. "You can barely see it."

She slants her neck to look past my shoulder to the mirror. "You sure?"

I grasp her cheeks and angle her face to give her a closer inspection. "You did a terrific job with your makeup. There's only a tiny bit of purple coming through here."

Thank goodness the bruises are finally fading.

We woke up this morning to a blaring alarm from the Redleg communications app on our phones and Redleg tablets. The entire company has been put on high alert. Boss called an emergency meeting at HQ this morning.

Mia was ready to return to work anyhow, but she's a little concerned her bruises will draw too much attention. She's not one for sympathy.

Batting her lashes at me, she nibbles her lower lip. No chance I'll be able to resist kissing her now.

Our mouths collide as she wraps her hands around my nape and scrapes her fingernails along the edge of my hairline. A rumble shakes my chest.

I ache for her. It's been far too long since I've had the pleasure of hearing her moans and making her back arch.

She's been in pain these last few days, so we haven't made love. It's agony to resist her, but I refuse to cause her any more discomfort. I haven't let her shower with me either. Too damn tempting.

The way her arms and legs were bound caused delayed onset muscle and joint pain, which was intensified when Lisa knocked her over backward. If only I'd have gotten to her quicker after Jonesy took the shot. But it could've been much worse.

So much worse.

Mia's fair skin shows every mark. The ligature lines on her ankles and wrists have been a daily reminder of what she went through. Each time my need for her causes my restraint to slip, the matching black eyes on her speckled ivory skin halt my progress. But the faint outline around her neck where that bitch tried to choke her is the most rage-inducing part.

Mia shakes me from my morose thoughts when she breaks the kiss and pants, “Mmm. Cal, I want you. Do we have time?”

“Baby, it’s too soon. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She pouts, making the skin above the bridge of her nose wrinkle into a precious trio of short lines. “The aches and pains are gone. Plus, you said you can barely see the bruises.”

“Sweetie, I still know they are there.”

“I’m not made of glass,” she protests while trailing her seductive fingers over my shoulders. “You can make it nice and gentle if it makes you feel better. But I’d love it if you drilled me into the bed.”

My head falls back, and a frustrated groan bubbles free.

She’s killing me.

Her hands slide down my body, but I grab her wrists to stop her. If she touches me, I’ll throw caution to the wind. And then I’ll regret it.

“Baby, not now. Maybe tonight. But we need to get to the office.”

Rolling her lips into a tantalizing pout, she stomps her foot and finally concedes. “Fine. But only because I’m committed to my job and morbidly curious about what’s got Redleg on high alert.”

I wink and kiss the tip of her nose. “Good girl.”

She huffs, “Not the time to call me that if you’re not giving me your cock. That’s just plain rude.”

My laughter is cut short by the ringing of the doorbell. That must be Kate.

“See? We wouldn’t have had time anyhow,” I tease Mia while she slips on her shoes.

We greet Kate, who was glad to pick up a shift caring for my mother today. Gloria’s been spending time with her new great-grandbaby. Before we leave, I warn Kate to stay inside and keep the doors locked until we know more about what’s going on with the heightened threat level at work.

After checking the SUV for safety, Mia and I load up. Riding into work the last few days without her felt... off. With her beside me again, everything is back in balance.

She turns down the radio a few minutes into the drive. “Did you hear back from Tomer?”

“Yeah. Boss called him in early this morning, and he was too busy to talk. Told us to be careful and get our asses in fast.”

“Damn. I was hoping we’d get a heads-up about whatever is happening there. I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Same. But whatever it is, we’ll handle it.”

She sighs and clasps her hands in her lap. “In other news, I talked to Tony this morning when you were in the shower.”

My grip on the steering wheel tightens, but I keep my tone calm. “Oh?”

*Nicely done, pal.*

“He’s back in DC, and his acting director is re-examining cases left and right to gather evidence of Lisa’s tampering. They’re cautiously optimistic they can fix some of what she destroyed. Time will tell, though.”

“That’s great news. Anything else?”

It’s great news that he’s out of the state.

And also about the case thing. But mostly the first one, according to my inner caveman.

“Yes, actually,” she begins, a touch of trepidation in her voice. “I asked him if what Lisa told me was true. About his feelings for me.”

A growl starts low in my gut, but I cut it off, determined to stop being a Neanderthal.

Mia grips my forearm. “Relax, stud.”

I tap her hand and return to death gripping the wheel. “What was his response?”

She laughs softly. “He said he did have strong feelings but promises he’s absolutely over it. He came down here for Lisa, not just me. I got the sense he really cares about her. Or did. And somewhere along the line, she got it in her deranged mind that he was in love with me. But he assures me he isn’t anymore. And I believe him.”

Relief dusts over me. My tight hold on the wheel steadily reduces, letting sensation return to my fingertips. “That’s good.”

“Cal, even if he did have feelings for me, it wouldn’t matter. You know that, right?”

I bring the SUV to a stop at the red light and spare her a quick glance. One glimpse of her earnest expression gives me all the reassurance I need.

“Yes, tiger. I do.”

She leans over the console, lips first. I eagerly accept what she’s offering. When our mouths collide, all remaining apprehension over her past vanishes.

She’s mine.

And I’m irrevocably hers.

A few minutes before we arrive at the office, she starts fidgeting.

“Nervous, baby?”

“A little. Not about work, though. I got an email this morning that I need to tell you about.”

My head cricks to the side. “Your tone is off. Should I be concerned?”

Her nervous laughter fills the cab of the SUV.

My pulse spikes a little, but I force a calming breath. “Okay, now I’m definitely worried.”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s going to be fine. Just promise you won’t be mad.”

Now it’s my turn for a nervous chuckle. “Ah, fine. I promise. Spill it, baby.”

“You know how I did some... uh... research on everyone at Redleg before I started?”

Instead of answering with words, I toss a blank look at her and blink rapidly.

She exhales a shaky sigh. “Right. Stupid question. Obviously, you remember that. So I have another secret I uncovered back then, and I’m at a crossroads about how to handle it.”

“Are you telling me what it is?” I tease, feeling a touch lighter in response to her tone shift.

After a long pause, she blurts out, “Does Sawyer know anything about his birth family?”

“Oh, shit. Again, Mia? Come on!” I groan, only half-teasing. “We haven’t dealt with the first revelation yet.”

“You said you wouldn’t be mad. And it’s not my fault. I just happened to uncover the information. And it wasn’t hard to find. He could have found out himself with very little effort.”

I halt her rambly rebuttal by grabbing her hand and bringing it to my lips, kissing the backs of her knuckles. “Shh. Calm down. I’m a little shocked.”

“Okay. So does he know about them?”

My stomach swirls with worry for my friend. “Unless something has changed recently, he doesn’t. We served together in the Rangers and talked about that a few times. Most of the other guys said they’d want to know, but Sawyer never did. He stood firm that he didn’t care about his parents. They left him, and he wasn’t about to beg them for scraps.”

“Do you believe he meant that, or was he just saying it to seem tough?”

I purse my lips, hemming and hawing. “Fair question, but I tend to believe him.”

“So he wouldn’t care that he has family right here in the Tampa Bay area?”

After filling my lungs, I shake my head resolutely. “No. I don’t think he would. Besides, he’s so damn happy now. *Finally*. He didn’t have the easiest life. Would knowing help him and Sammy somehow, or would it simply cause unnecessary drama? I suspect it’s the latter. If it were me, I’d let him have his happiness.”

“Well, that complicates things.”

She taps her fingernails against her chin and stares blankly out the window.

Remembering what brought on this topic, I ask, “What email did you get?”

“In my quest to turn over a new leaf and lead with honesty, I did something I now regret.” She drags her hand along her forehead. “I emailed his mother. She replied. She’d love to meet him if he wanted to, but she won’t force it.”

“His mother lives here?”

She swings her head in a smooth arc. “No. Tennessee.”

“Who lives in the bay area?”

“One of his brothers.”

My gut swirls more fiercely. Sawyer has brothers? *Damn*. As alone as he felt all these years, I bet he’d have liked to know that before. But now? I’m not so sure. I’ve never seen him this happy in the fifteen years I’ve known him.

“Does he know about Sawyer?”

Mirth frames her features. “Believe it or not, I’m not sure.”

A dry laugh rattles my chest. “I don’t believe it. Mia knows all.”

“Believe it, stud. I could have dug further, but it didn’t seem important at the time, and I had other shit to do.”

“What was your plan? Tell Sawyer and let him decide?”

“First, I figured I’d find out if she was open to hearing from him. I didn’t want to tell him, only for him to learn that contacting her wasn’t possible. That seemed cruel.” She pauses and sighs. “So I emailed her. Now that she said yes, I considered passing on her contact info and letting him decide. But you’ve got me second-guessing that.”

“What about the brother? Doesn’t he get a say in this?”

“I wanted to give him the choice too, but I started with the mother. I

could ask her if he knows about Sawyer and go from there.”

That doesn't sit right with me. “Nah. You're already way more involved than you need to be.”

“See? This is why I need you in my life. Aside from the orgasms and hair-pulling, you're the good angel on my shoulder.”

A wide grin tugs at my lips. “That is a sad commentary on the state of your shoulders, tiger. Especially considering all the fucking devilish things I want to do to you.”

“Don't rile me up before work, stud. Tomer's back in the office, right? So no more hanky-panky in the lair. Unless we want him to watch.”

At the next traffic light, I levy a dark glare at her. “There's still my office, your office, the copy room, the file room, and a half dozen other places I could put you on your knees and make you choke on my cock. But that'll have to wait until you're not in pain.”

“Pain? What pain?”

Without breaking my stare, she fumbles for the air conditioning controls and turns it on full blast.

A smirk overtakes my entire face. “Hot, baby?”

She grins, and her expression takes on an almost maniacal quality. “Uh-huh.”

Damn, she's funny. I love her to the moon and back.

I wink. “Good. Think about that all day so you get nice and wet for me. If you still feel up to it tonight, I *might* end our fornication ban.”

Her face contorts into a series of expressions ranging from shock to disgust to suppressed laughter. Ultimately, she breaks into a fit of giggles. “Who the hell says fornication? Never mind. I no longer want to sleep with you.”

We're turning into the Redleg parking lot by the time we finally stop laughing.

“So, did we decide not to tell Sawyer?”

I shrug. “What do you want to do?”

“Maybe I'll casually ask him if he's investigated his family or if he has any desire to do so. Try to gauge his reaction. Assuming he seems genuinely set on keeping no contact, then I'll keep it to myself. I could also tell him that if he ever changes his mind, I'd be happy to help him locate them.”

I like this plan. Pulsing my hand around hers, I silently encourage her.

Decision made, she nods confidently. “It's gonna suck to carry around the



secret, but I'll do it if it's what's best for Sawyer. I can't dump this on him to assuage my guilt. That's unfair to him."

After letting go of her hand to put two on the wheel, I ease into my reserved space and shift into park. When I look at her, my heart does a drunken tango.

*Her smile.*

It's everything.

I brush an errant strand of hair behind her ear, eating up the sparkle in her eyes. "You don't need me to be the angel on your shoulder. You're doing just fine on your own."

"I had the best teacher."

## CHAPTER 52

**QUITE STUBBORN, THAT ONE**

MIA

We share a quick kiss and stride into headquarters. Two uniformed guards patrolling the parking lot catch my eye.

Interesting.

Like normal, we swipe our badges to get through the front doors. Once we enter the lobby, we freeze.

My jaw drops. “A bag check and scanners?”

“Well, this is new,” Cal mutters. “I guess they weren’t kidding about the red-level threat.”

With the lobby cordoned off with black ropes, we’re funneled into a screening line behind four other employees.

After the desk guard inspects my purse and laptop, he swabs them for explosive residue. Another guard waves a handheld metal detector up and down everyone’s body a few feet away. When he scans Cal, he pauses to check a list before letting him enter with his sidearm.

Once we’re *finally* cleared, we drift to the elevator in stunned silence.

The second the doors close, I lose it. “What the frickety truck was that about?”

Cal raises his palm in front of him. “Your guess is as good as mine. Something is up. In fact, let me text Kate to remind them to stay locked inside today.”

He taps the message on his phone and slips it into his pocket before the doors open on the top floor.

“I’m glad we’re meeting with Big Al this morning. Although my need-to-know shit might be tempered, it’s not gone. The pimp demands answers.”

Through his quiet chuckles, he wraps his arm around my shoulders and kisses my head as we stroll down the hall.

Fifteen minutes later, we gather in the conference room and wait for Boss to join us.

My sexy man takes the seat on my right. We have our laptops open, ready for whatever Boss might throw at us. Shep’s here, along with a few guys from the trafficking op — Jonesy and Junior. We’re waiting on Tomer and Aaron to round out that team. As the clock ticks on, a few other guards enter

the room and take seats along the wall. The topic of today's briefing must extend beyond the trafficking case and the fallout from my rescue.

While we wait for the meeting to begin, Shep catches my attention from across the table. "How you feeling, Ghost?"

"Good. No permanent damage."

He points at his throat in a sweeping gesture. "A little bruising around your neck, though."

Cal stiffens beside me. "If Lisa weren't already behind bars, I'd seriously consider breaking my rule about violence toward women."

I pat his thigh to calm him. "I'd have taken a crack at her, but I was emotionally spent at that point."

Shep's grin widens. "Kri's seething that she isn't back to work. She'd have had no problem breaking Lisa's face before the cops got there."

I laugh at the visual of my girl crush going off on that freaking witch. "The perks of being a kick-ass female operative are few, but having no guilt at taking out any combative is nice."

Jonesy edges closer to interject. "I was so close to making it a kill shot."

"You did the right thing, big guy," I reassure him. "I doubt the cops would buy that one of the best sharpshooters to ever wear the SEAL Trident wasn't able to take out a stationary target at fifty feet in perfect lighting and wind conditions without using lethal force."

A smirk teases his mouth. "It wasn't that. I just didn't want to get on the FBI's shit list. It's bad enough I'm on Big Al's."

Tomer shuffles in, takes the seat on my left, and opens his laptop. My grin fades as I catch the vibes coming off him. It's tension galore.

"Hey, Tomer. How are you?"

"Fine," he snaps without looking up from his laptop. He's not working on anything. It's just the home screen displaying the Redleg logo. His fingers rap silently on the conference room table.

Rather than ask about the threat, which obviously has him tense, I try for a safer topic. "How's Lettie doing?" I ask.

His tense demeanor sags, and regret wafts from him.

Uh-oh.

"She decided to stay with some of the other girls we rescued at the house the Langley Foundation provided."

A sad lump settles in my chest. Reaching out, I squeeze his shoulder. He slams his eyes shut, attempting to mask his emotions.

“Did you ever tell her about... you know?”

He nods slowly and blinks his eyes open. “That’s what sent her packing.”

“Wow. Tomer, I’m so sorry. Give her time. She’s been through a lot. Maybe once she calms down, she’ll realize you were only looking out for her. Be patient.”

He shrugs my hand off his shoulder and schools his emotions. “Nah. It’s over, but that’s for the best. She’s safer without me. And it wasn’t serious anyhow.”

Flat. Emotionless.

The robot has returned.

And he’s lying to me *and* to himself.

I won’t challenge him on this now. We’ve got other issues.

Aaron takes the empty seat on Cal’s other side and grips him by the shoulder in a brotherly gesture. “How’s our mama, Klein?”

My heart squeezes.

The other night in bed, Cal told me about the conversation he had with the guys the other day and how good it felt to come clean. Throughout the week, he’s told a few others about his mother’s condition when he’s seen them.

“She’s okay. The day after everything happened was rough, but she seems to have steadied again.”

“That’s good to hear. My *abuelito* had dementia. Although I was a kid, I could tell it was hard on my folks. If you need a night out, let me know. I’ll come by and play cards with her or something. Whenever you need a break, just say so. I could also take her to breakfast or brunch if that’s better. I’d say dinner, but I read the nights are usually harder.”

He read about it. Probably recently.

*I’m not gonna cry. I’m not gonna cry.*

“Thanks, man,” Cal replies with a barely noticeable wobble in his voice.

I knew he would have all the support in the world if he told them about what he was dealing with at home. Big Al called him into his office yesterday, and they had a *come-to-Jesus* about it. As you’d expect, he offered everything he could to assist, right down to extended leave time and extra personal days.

Shep slopes his head to one side. “What did I miss? What’s going on with your mom?”

“She’s, uh, she’s got Alzheimer’s. I told the guys about it the other day

during the op. Sorry I didn't tell you, but it wasn't easy to talk about."

"No need to apologize. We all deal with our shit the best way we can. But ditto what Aaron said. Anything you need, we're there for you."

"Me too, man," Junior chimes in.

Before Cal has a chance to respond, all faces whip toward the doorway. Sue comes in with Lionheart. Sawyer and Boss file in behind.

Stoic faces and furrowed brows on all of them. Hostility radiates in a heavy fog, settling around us all.

Even the perpetually jovial Sawyer struggles to mask his rage.

"Thanks for waiting, everyone." Big Al places his coffee and tablet at the head of the table but doesn't take a seat. I've never seen him this disheveled, with his hair unkempt and shirt untucked.

He puts his fists on his hips and stares us down through bloodshot eyes. "I'm sure you're all wondering what's up with the extra security downstairs and the increased safety protocol. It's not that I don't trust you, but we've got to be vigilant as fuck until further notice."

No one speaks while we wait for further elaboration.

Across the table, Leo's entire frame is coated in a mix of pain and fury. He's practically vibrating.

Without any additional preamble, Boss announces, "Lenkov is out for Redleg blood."

"What happened, Boss?" Cal asks.

"An attempt was made on my life last night. In the process, Madeline Mason, Leo's mother..." He trails off and shakes his head. My pulse slams in my neck. "Madeline was shot."

Shocked gasps reverberate around the room.

Holding out his palms, Big Al continues without taking a breath, "She's fine. Thankfully, it was only a graze on her arm. She was treated and released from the hospital last night. I brought her into HQ today for her protection and my sanity."

"Mine too," Leo adds in a low grumble. His eyes remain shut, and he wrings his hands in front of him. There's a wobble in his jaw from how thoroughly he's grinding his teeth.

Sue wipes a tear from her cheek, drawing my attention. The typical rosy hue to her complexion is missing. Her eyes are red-rimmed and weary.

Shep's the first to speak. "We're all glad to hear she's all right." He tips his head in Leo's direction as a show of respect, then returns his focus to

Boss. “How sure are we that Lenkov ordered the hit?”

“One hundred percent,” he replies with certainty. “I returned fire and took out the shooter. My picture was on him, along with one of Savin. I assume he was his other target.”

Jonesy drags his palm over his face. “Doesn’t necessarily implicate Lenkov. Could be someone else in the trafficking ring.”

Boss’s jaw clenches impossibly tighter. “The man I killed was one of Lenkov’s hired guns. He’s the same man who kidnapped Valerie Franco and Kri from the mathletes shit a few months ago. He was there when Valerie’s parents were murdered. The Russian with the silver-tipped cowboy boots.”

A grunted huff comes from Shep. He makes a fist and slams it into the arm of his chair. Not sure if it’s a celebration or an angry gesture.

Given his love for Kri and Valerie, perhaps it’s a little of both. Relief that one of the men who harmed his girls is at the morgue, but also frustration, because he wasn’t the one to fire the shot.

Cal lifts his hand to get Boss’s attention. “I assume you heightened the protocol for Savin and Tasha. Lenkov won’t stop.”

“They’re being transferred into federal witness protection this morning. They’ve agreed to testify against Lenkov, and now that the mole has been exposed at the bureau, I’m assuming they can get a case together that’ll stick. From what I heard, the fraud and laundering case against Lenkov is fizzling out. But he’s not getting away with what he’s done to those girls. And what he did to Maddie last night. Not this time. He wants a war? He’s got one.”

Fuck. To. The. Yes.

Unable to contain my furor, I slap my hand on the table and bolt upright, drawing everyone’s attention, but I don’t give them a second glance. I meet Big Al’s determined scowl head-on. “One hundred damn percent yes, Boss. I’ve been waiting for this for years. I swear I’ll dig up every skeleton in his closet. We’ll gather every shred of evidence so they can throw the fucking book at him. And the whole damn family too. Redleg is taking them down.”

One side of his face lifts in a barely perceptible grin. And he raises his pointer finger at me.

Then he winks.

It’s probably the closest thing to a hug he’s ever given. I’ll take it.

“Fuck yes!” Shep hollers.

Head nods and hoots of agreement sweep around the room.

As I slide down into my seat, trying to calm my racing heart, Sue cups her



mouth and dashes out of the room at a speed that would rival an Olympic sprinter.

“Son of a bitch. Not again,” Leo grumbles.

He stands to follow her but pauses a foot away from the table. Glancing over his shoulder at me, he tips his chin toward the door.

Unsure of what he needs, I follow him out of the conference room.

In a hushed tone, he explains, “Can you follow her into the ladies’ room and make sure she’s okay? I can’t go in there, or else I would. I hate not being able to comfort her when she’s sick.”

He’s wrecked. Poor softie.

I squeeze his arm. *Fuck*. That’s a giant bicep.

“Of course. Tell Big Al I’ll be right back.”

My feet carry me swiftly toward the restroom, where sure enough, Sue is doubled over in the first stall, tossing her cookies.

“It’s Mia. I’m here.” I pat her shoulders and hold her hair. “You let it all out.”

She heaves again, and a putrid smell wafts toward me. The words fly out before I can stop them. “Is that peanut butter? Gah.”

She nods and wails in pain.

Once she’s done, her eyes are damp, and her lips are downturned in a heartbreaking frown. I hand her a paper towel and then return to the sink to get her a few more, wetting one for her brow.

She drags herself from the stall, her feet barely trudging the four steps to the counter.

“I can’t have peanut butter anymore,” she sobs into the paper towels, tears streaming freely. “It’s one of my four favorite things on earth, and I can’t have it. Every time I eat peanut butter, I throw up. Now I have only three favorite things, and I hate that number. If I’d have known I’d lose my ability to put peanut butter on everything,” she sniffles and wipes a tear, “I’d have never gotten pregnant.”

Her face freezes, her eyes like turquoise saucers. She covers her mouth with one hand, then the other, creating a double-popping sound.

The smile beaming across my face tugs my cheeks so wide it’s slightly uncomfortable. Not only is she preciously pregnant — which is fantastic news — but I didn’t know she was pregnant. *Old Mia* would never be caught off guard by something like this. *New Mia* is pleasantly surprised.

*Take that, pimp.*

I rub my palms along her upper arms soothingly. “I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“You promise?”

Grinning softly, I attempt to reassure her. “I’m great at keeping secrets. I have loads of them.”

“Thank you.”

“Although, after running out of the meeting like that, your secret might not be safe for long. If anyone asks, we’ll tell them you had some bad sushi.”

“Bad sushi. Let’s go with that. I’m a terrible liar, though. But I’ll try.”

She washes her face and rinses her mouth again.

When she’s done, I ask, “Is Leo happy about it?”

Her face warms into a dopey smile, and my heart melts. “Yeah. He cried when I showed him the positive test.”

Another look of dread ices over her face. Recognizing it immediately, I halt her panic in its tracks. “I promise I won’t tell anyone he cried either.”

“Two secrets for you to keep. That’s a good number.” She facepalms. “I’m so weird. Ignore the number stuff.”

“You’re not weird. And if you are, then I like weird.”

“Leo says that too.”

“I have a confession to make since we’re sharing secrets.”

She leans against the sink and crosses her arms. Instead of speaking, she patiently waits for me to come clean.

“Before I came to Redleg, I sort of... uh... spied on everyone who works here. Including you. I’m so sorry for invading your privacy.”

She squints her cunning eyes at me, but she doesn’t respond.

“I worked for the CIA before coming here — don’t tell anyone that — but digging up intel on everyone around me has been a necessity to stay safe.”

Her face and lack of response give nothing away.

But I continue with my freeing confession. A few pounds of pressure float away with every sentence. “Not only that, but I’ve been snooping ever since something tragic happened to my sister when I was young.”

“Is she okay? Your sister?”

*Sweet woman.*

“She is now. She wasn’t at the time. But back to you and this incredibly long apology.” My shoulders rise and fall with my giant breath. “I knew your family called you Susie Q, which is why I accidentally called you that on my

first day. I'm so sorry. I won't ever do anything so shitty again. I've given up all the snooping. I'm a changed woman."

"Do you promise?" Her voice is flat and monotone, making her sound a bit like Tomer.

"Yes. I do."

She nods, lips pressed in a thin line. "Okay. I'll trust you. You get one free pass."

That was easy.

*Too easy.*

"You sure you're okay? I really like you, Sue. I'd hate for this to interfere with our friendship. I'd understand if you didn't want to talk to me for a while."

The slightest curl of her lip draws my focus. "We're friends?"

"I hope so."

"Cool. I'd like that."

I spread my arms tentatively. "Hug it out?"

She cringes. "Oh, no fucking way."

My hands fall to my sides.

She snort-laughs. "Not to be rude, but clearly, your intel wasn't complete if you thought a hug was a good idea."

Simple as that, the tension breaks.

We head toward the door, but she pauses before opening it and faces me. "I'm not mad. Truthfully, I figured it out already."

"You did?"

Her gaze sinks, landing on her shoes. "I might have profiled you. And everyone else here too."

"Sue, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Her answering grin is sunny and bright, warming my heart.

She starts to go, but this time I stop her. "You know what?"

"What?" she asks.

"You still have four favorite things."

Her expression grows serious. "How?"

I point at her tummy. "You've got the fourth growing in there."

Her nostrils twitch, and her chin trembles as she fights off the emotions.

"Good point. Thanks, Mia. For being honest with me and helping take my mind off what happened to my mother-in-law."

We quickly pad down the hall to return to the meeting but come to a

sharp stop by Peggy's desk.

"What are you two doing here?" Sue asks, hands going to her hips. "And how did you get in here with the increased security measures?"

"The front desk guard called me, and I approved them. We go way back," Peggy offers.

The couple in front of us looks familiar, but I'm struggling to place them.

A cotton-candy pink-haired, extremely pregnant woman smiles warmly at Sue. Flanking her is a strikingly attractive Theo James doppelganger.

And a few steps behind him is Lettie Holt.

Her makeup is flawless. Her hair is soft and luxurious. And her clothes are pressed and clean. It's a stark contrast to the last time I saw her.

"Hey, Sue. She wanted to come to see someone here." The mom-to-be glances at Lettie and smiles warmly. "And Violet's not one to back down once she's made up her mind about something."

I know where she gets that trait.

The doppelganger folds Sue in a hug she clearly doesn't want, but she shoves him away wearing a slightly irritated smile. "Get off me, you dingus."

"Dingus? Is that any way to talk to your favorite Amos-hole?"

Sue rolls her eyes. "You're not my favorite, Cort. You're not even in the top three."

Cort Amos. That's who that is. I remember from the research I did on Sue. That would make the woman with him his wife, Amber, the Co-CEO of Langley S&D.

"Wow, Sue. That hurts." He slaps his hand to his chest like he's taken a shot to the heart, then he shakes his wrist dramatically. "Ouch. Dammit. Now my hand is wounded from my impossibly ripped pecs. You've done me dirty, Mrs. Mason."

"Calm down, Cort. Read the room. Now's not the time for your dramatics," his wife chastises him before facing me. "Hi, I'm Amber Amos. Maiden name is Langley." She waddles closer and offers me her hand. "I'm in charge of the Langley Foundation. This lovable scamp is my husband, Cort Amos. Are you Mia?"

"Yes."

"The red hair was a giveaway. I've heard a little bit about you from Lettie. The girls you helped save are grateful."

She fans her face rapidly with her fingertips. "Dammit. Crying again. Get this baby out so I can get through a conversation without blubbing."

Sue's head whips to face me. Her lower lip juts in a pout, her eyes pleading.

I stifle my grin and ask Amber, "Are CEOs always this hands-on with the girls their foundation sponsors?"

"We were asked to take special care of this one." She leans forward and whispers, "Tomer." She takes a step back. "Plus, I'm on maternity leave, and Cort's my chauffeur since I'm about to pop."

"Thanks for making room for the girls. Are they doing okay?"

"Some better than others, but we're getting them all the help we can. They're all strong as hell and will get through this."

She tears up again, and Cort's there to tuck her against his side. He kisses the top of her head and wipes her tears.

They're achingly sweet together.

"Well, we should go," Sue announces. "I guess I'll see you guys at the next game night."

"Bring your A-game, Susie Q. Not that it will help. You and that over-tatted beast man are going down."

Amber smacks him in the abs. "Didn't I tell you to simmer down?"

We say our goodbyes and travel the rest of the way down the hall to the conference room.

Boss has finally taken his seat. He and Shep appear to be bickering about how to handle Yuri.

After I'm seated, Cal grabs my hand and gets right by my ear. "Sue okay?"

"Yeah. She had some spoiled sushi." I wink at him, but the hint goes right over his head. I'll need to ask Sue later if I can tell Cal. I don't want any secrets between us, but I did promise her.

Ugh. Being a grown-up is hard.

"We heard you guys talking out there," Cal whispers. "Everything okay?"

"Amber and Cort Amos are out there with Peggy. They have Lettie with them."

On my other side, Tomer stiffens. He must have heard me.

*Dammit.*

A second later, he races out the door, slamming it behind him.

Cal rests his forehead in his palm. "Shit. Here we go."

The rumble from outside the conference room starts low but builds until the shouts ring through the office. All side conversations around the room

cease, and everyone faces the closed door.

“This isn’t the time,” Tomer bellows.

“It’s not up to you!” Lettie fires back.

“Lettie, I said no. Not here and definitely not now.”

“Who are you to decide?” she snaps at him. “In fact, who the hell are you? I don’t even know you!”

*Ouch.* That’s gotta hurt.

His initial reply is too quiet to hear, but it’s loud and clear when Peggy opens the door to rush inside.

“Lettie, you know me better than anyone else. Don’t do this, sugar bear,” Tomer begs.

“Don’t call me that!”

Peggy closes the door behind her, but it does very little to muffle the heated discussion.

“Is he in there? Let me see him,” Lettie demands.

Peggy flings her thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the door where Tomer and Lettie are seconds away from a knock-down, drag-out fight. “Boss, I’m sorry. Not sure what you want me to do about that.”

Big Al stands. “What the hell is happening, Peg?”

“There’s a young lady named Lettie Holt here to see you. She said it’s very important, and she’ll wait all day if she has to. Come hell or high water, she’s not leaving until she sees you. Quite a stubborn little thing.” Peg swings her hands in frustration. “And now Tomer is out there bickering with her like we’re on the damn Springer show.”

“Clearly,” Boss mutters, taking two steps toward the door. “I’ll break it up and see what she wants. Wrong fucking day for this kind of shit show.”

Lettie’s voice sails through the walls, berating poor Tomer. “You want to lie to everyone? Go right ahead. But I’m done with all your bullshit.”

Her next sentence sucks the oxygen out of the room and brings Boss to a dead stop. “He’s *my* father, not yours, and it’s time someone tells him.”

With Big Al’s back to us, the only reactions we see are the jerk of his shoulders, his spine stiffening, and his fists clenching at his sides.

Tension crackles around the room.

“Move aside!” Lettie yells while throwing open the door and barreling past Tomer.

*Tough kid. Just like her father.*

After taking a large step into the room, she goes stock still when she

scans the rather large audience she obviously didn't expect. She gulps and stutters a step backward.

Having followed her, Tomer stands frozen behind her. A silent conversation seems to flow between him and Boss.

Lettie catches my eye, and I give her a chin tip of encouragement. Might as well get it over with.

Her gaze fixes on Big Al.

At her father.

“Alan Lancaster?”

He stoically nods once, then quickly stills, resembling a statue.

She boldly strides to him, squares her shoulders, and extends her hand. “My name is Violet Holt. I go by Lettie. I'm your daughter.”

With an aching slowness, he shakes her hand, but it's so timid and unsure that it nearly breaks my heart for her. He's not rejecting her, but he's also not buying in straight away.

No one speaks.

Not Big Al or Lettie or even Tomer.

Until the loosest tongue in the room breaks the tense silence like only he can.

In an oddly British voice, Sawyer singsongs, “Congratulations! It's a girl!”

## CHAPTER 53



# THE SWEETEST REWARD

KLEIN

“Good night, Ma,” I whisper before closing her door and engaging the alarm sensor.

After brushing my teeth, I join Mia in the bedroom. With my first glimpse of her, my jaw hits the floor, and my dick reaches for the ceiling.

“Heaven.”

Who said that? I think it was me.

She’s lying face down on the bed, her chin perched on her joined hands. With her knees bent, she kicks her lower legs back and forth, as if trying to convey innocence.

But she’s not.

This woman is temptation incarnate.

Especially in nothing but a lacy emerald green bra and panties set.

Wait, no. A thong.

She’s wearing a fucking thong, and something sparkles between the luscious globes of her ass.

Fuck me running. It’s a butt plug.

Yeah, the fornication ban is officially lifted.

“I thought we could use a little distraction tonight.”

Isn’t that the truth?

I’m frozen in place, staring at her while deciding how to sink inside her body without hurting her. She rises seductively and strolls toward me. I grab her waist and tug her close, reveling in the feel of her silky skin under my palms.

“You *are* quite distracting.”

“With everything swirling at Redleg, can we take tonight just for ourselves?”

“You make a compelling case with all that flesh on display.”

After sliding her hands from my shoulder to my pecs, she rises to her tiptoes, pausing her lips in front of mine. “I did some online shopping the other day while you were at work. Do you like what I bought for you?”

Unable to resist tasting her, I kiss her, slow and sweet.

When I pull back, her lips glisten. “Why’d you get a gift for me? It’s not

my birthday.”

“After you refused to make love to me the other night, I thought you might need a little persuasion.”

One side of my mouth quirks. “Oh, so it’s a bribe, then?”

“Something like that.”

She looks at me from under those thick lashes, extra dark with the mascara she wore to work today. She doesn’t need makeup, but something about seeing her all dolled up does things to me. Perhaps it reminds me of that night I fucked her throat so completely she had black streaks running down her cheeks.

I kiss her again and quickly get lost in the taste of her lips and the swirl of her tongue.

“Are you wearing my present?”

Nodding, a hint of mischievousness twinkles in her eyes. “Yes.”

I skim the back of my hand along the side of her torso, tracing the curve of her upper waist, and bring it around to the underside of her breasts, brushing faintly across the lacy fabric of her bra. “Is it this?”

“That’s part of it,” she rasps.

Moving the same hand down her body, I dance my knuckles along the crests of her hips where the thin strap of her panties rests. “Is this the other part?” I sneak a finger under the elastic and give it a little pop.

Her breath hitches. “Yes, that’s another part of the gift.”

“Is there more, tiger?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where is the rest?” I ask, knowing damn well she’s got a new toy inside her.

“You’ll need to find it,” she simpers.

Between us, her arms drift lower.

*Naughty girl.*

Instead of groping the growing bulge in my pants — which is what I expect, considering her hands are down there — her face pinches tight, and her mouth parts with a faint gasp. A tiny whimper escapes her rounded lips.

I glance between us, and the vixen has slipped her fingers into her panties.

My next words come out in a husky timbre. “Tiger, what are you doing?”

She removes her hand. “Reminding you of what you’ve been turning down all week.”

Her fingertips, glistening with her arousal, skim along my lips. “Open for your dirty girl, Cal.”

Powerless to deny her, I open wide, desperately craving what she’s offering. She thrusts two fingers into my mouth. Her delicious nectar explodes on my tongue as I suck them in heartily. A warble of ecstasy erupts from deep in my chest, vibrating around her fingers.

She tugs her hand free, but I grab her wrist to stop her. I’m not done savoring her. Everything inside me is screaming *more, more, more*.

Then a vision pops into my mind of those pink grooves on her pale flesh from the restraints, causing me to quickly release her.

“Baby, we shouldn’t do this until you’re fully healed.”

Sadness and disappointment battle it out on her face. “Cal, I’m begging you. I promise I don’t hurt anymore.”

I swipe at my lips to gather her lingering taste.

“*Please*,” she pleads with me, heartache seeping into her tone. “I need you. Please don’t deprive us anymore. Don’t you want me like I want you?”

I love it when she begs.

“On the bed. Face up. Knees raised and legs spread wide. And you tell me if anything hurts.”

She shudders at my commanding tone, and her eyes flash with a feral need. Without delay, she shoots toward the bed, giving me a glimpse of her delicious backside.

*Look at that ass.*

I divest myself of my clothes and prowl to the edge of the bed, ready to devour my prey.

With a hand fisting my erection, I pump a few times and swirl a bead of precum around the tip.

“Can I have a taste?” she asks, meek and submissive.

“Tiger, I don’t have the restraint to fuck your mouth nice and easy. The next time your lips surround my cock, I’m plunging it down your throat.”

She opens her mouth and sticks out her tongue.

No way. I refuse to hurt her.

“Not this time, baby.”

She’s not fragile, but seeing the woman you love attacked by a maniac does something to a man. Before I’m rough with her again, I need to remind her how precious she is to me.

She rests her weight on her elbows and positions her legs exactly like I

told her.

“Take those panties off. Slowly.”

Her tongue sneaks out to swipe her lips, and her throat bobs as she complies.

I hold my hand out. “Give them to me.”

A wicked grin affixes itself to her sweet face when she hands me the thong.

While running one hand over the silk and lace, I stroke myself languidly with the other. “Spread your legs again.”

She does, giving me a glimpse of an amber-colored jewel plug nestled inside her.

“Is that my other present?”

“Yes. Do you like it?”

“Nice color. Reminds me of a tiger.”

“That’s why I picked it.”

*Fucking perfect.*

“I love it. Now touch yourself for me. I want to see how you get yourself off.”

She holds my gaze while one palm slides past her belly and over her mound, then cups her pussy. Her hips gently sway as she grinds the heel of her palm against her clit.

“Will you guide me? I love following your commands.”

*I love this woman.*

Kneeling on the edge of the bed, I lower myself for a better view of the show.

“Play with your clit,” I order. “Use two fingers.”

Her fingers delve through her slick pink flesh and find her clit. As she swirls the sensitive bud, her breasts heave with quickening breaths.

“Like this?” she asks meekly.

“Yes, tiger.”

Admiring her voluptuous body, I bring the thong to my face and inhale deeply. Her scent sends another surge of arousal through me, and I strangle my cock harder with my fist.

“Leave the bra on but pull your breasts out of the cups. Then go back to teasing your clit.”

She nibbles her lower lip while following my instructions unwaveringly.

“That’s my perfect fucking girl. Arch your back. Stick those tits out for

me.”

Her obedience is the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. The rise and fall of her full breasts beckon me closer. So I move smack dab between her spread thighs. Heaven forbid I lose sight of this immaculate view.

“You’re so damn sexy. Now fuck your pussy with your finger. Just one to start.”

“Mmm,” she moans and complies.

“Faster,” I husk out.

She moves her middle finger faster, thrusting it in and out at a tantalizing pace. I’m hypnotized.

“Add a second finger.”

I stifle a groan when she impales herself with her index finger. “Yes, tiger. That’s perfect. You’re so sexy. Tell me how it feels.”

“It’s nice, but I need more.” A soft grunt falls from her lips as she fucks herself harder with her fingers.

“Go back to teasing your clit.”

She complies but utters a sound that’s a mix between a whine of protest and her trademark tiger purr. If I don’t touch her soon, I might die.

“Have you ever fingered your ass?”

She scrunches her eyes and lips shut, shyness taking root. Funny, since she has no problem presenting her ass for me with that plug in it.

I deepen my voice and tap the base of the plug twice, getting her attention. “I asked you a question, Mia. Have you ever put your finger in this tight hole?”

I tap it again, drawing a mewl from her.

She nods, keeping her eyes closed. “Yes. I needed to stretch it to get ready for the plug.”

“Look at me. Don’t be shy.”

Her eyes spring open.

“Such a dirty girl, putting things in your ass.”

“I’m sorry, *sir*.”

*Fucking hell. She finally said it.*

A primal growl sprints up my throat and out of my mouth. My hand works my cock harder, and my balls draw up. I need to settle down before I spill myself all over her body.

*Oh, wrong thought to have.* That brings me closer to coming.

Hissing through my teeth, I release my cock, enjoying how her eyes are

drawn to it bobbing between my legs.

“Don’t be sorry. I think it’s sexy as hell. Ever since you showed me how you insert the plug, I’ve dreamed about fucking you there. Would you like me to claim your ass? Be honest.”

Revealing how she feels about the idea, her fingers flick her clit faster, and her hips buck. “Oh, fuck yes.”

“Good. We’ll do that. Not tonight, though. Let’s save it for when you can be as loud as you want.”

She sighs, holding my gaze. “Okay.”

“And once you’re fully healed, I’m going to spank your ass with that plug inside you.”

“Yes, *please*.”

“Move your hand, baby. No more touching your pussy. It’s all mine now.”

“I love it when you boss me around like this. I’m soaked for you. Every time you demand something from me, I get wetter.”

She lifts her hand in front of me, wiggling her fingers to show me her slickness. Grabbing her wrist with one hand, I bend forward and drag my flattened tongue up her palm to her fingertips in one long stroke. “Fucking delicious. Now squeeze your nipples.”

Once she complies, I run my fingertips along the inside of her supple thighs and tease the waxed outer skin of her pussy, dragging my knuckles up and down. Some of her wetness spreads to my fingers as I pass by her center. It’s the last straw, and my restraint snaps.

Fuck the teasing. Dropping the thong on the bed, I hold her open with one hand and dive in face-first. I lick from her opening up to her clit, then slip back down and twirl the pointed tip of my tongue around her entrance like a cyclone.

Her hands find their way to my hair.

I rear back, denying her my mouth. “Did I tell you to stop playing with your nipples? I’m touching you right now, not the other way around. Put those naughty hands back on your nipples before I smack your clit until you cry.”

*If cock smacks are a thing, clit smacks are too, right?*

“So hot,” she drawls as she immediately resumes groping herself as I demanded.

*Shit.* That wild animal inside me is clawing to escape. But this isn’t the

time for that. She's been through a lot.

My tongue returns to her sweet spot, and I ease my way to her clit. Latching on to her sensitive bundle, I apply pulsating suction and dance my tongue over it.

She cries out in pleasure. "Yes, yes, yes."

*Oh, we can't have that.*

Pulling away from her pussy, I grab the thong, ball it up, and tuck the fabric between her lips. "Shh. Keep quiet, tiger."

She tenses, and her eyes shoot wide, but her features quickly soften. After nodding her agreement, she flexes her hips to return my attention to her delicious pussy.

I work my hands under her ass and resume sucking her clit. The wad of silky green material she holds in her mouth suppresses her moans. Her obedience and willingness to keep it there is sexy as hell.

When I break for air, I catch her staring at me over the swell of her breasts, cupped by her graceful white hands. "Buck up against me, tiger. Fuck my face from underneath. Keep squeezing those nipples the way I would. Let's see how fast you can come. Then I'm going to sink deep inside you while you're still clenching and fluttering so I can feel you strangle my cock."

As my mouth returns to her center, I impale her drenched entrance with two fingers. Without preamble, I suck on her swollen clit like a man on a mission and crick my fingers, reaching deep until I find her G-spot.

Like a greedy girl, she drives her hips into my face. Adding a swirling motion at the top of each thrust, she drags her pussy all over my mouth.

My fingers bump into the plug a few times when I stroke her from the inside, giving me a preview of what my dick will soon experience.

I moan my approval, loving how she bucks and wiggles herself against me. Once her climax strikes, her silky channel squeezes the life out of my fingers.

Withdrawing them from her slick heat, I replace my tongue with my fingers on her clit while quickly lining up my cock. She reaches for the headboard, utterly awash in pleasure as she rides it out.

I thrust inside her, pausing after I'm fully seated to revel in the delicious trembles of her waning climax.

Somewhere along the line, the thong fell out of her mouth. Her face is serene, aside from her trembling lip.



“Cal.” Her voice is a lover’s caress.

Just my name.

But it means everything.

“I know, baby. I feel it too.”

Moving close, I rest my weight on my forearms on both sides of her head and keep my eyes locked on hers. “Mia, I’m going to make love to you until you come all over my dick. Then I’m going to roll to my back, and you’re going to ride me until your wetness drips all the way down to my balls. If you can’t be quiet for that, tell me, and I’ll shove those panties into your mouth.”

She lifts up to give me a quick peck. “I’ll be quiet. Kiss me if I get too loud.”

Instead of answering with words, I kiss her reverently, diving my tongue past her lips. And then I start moving inside her, remembering to be gentle. Instead of fucking her with abandon, I pulse in slow, powerful thrusts. I catch her keens in my mouth as we fall into a delicious rhythm.

Fuck, it’s heaven to be inside her again.

The pressure from the plug is exquisite torture. Alternating between kissing her sweetly and getting swept away in her hypnotizing eyes, I grind against her so damn hard I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s an indentation in the mattress when we’re done. I can’t get close enough to her.

Every so often, a wave of fear rocks through me if I notice the mark on her neck or the glint of purple on her cheekbone. It helps keep me in check so I don’t get too rough. She must be keyed into me because, at those exact moments, she digs her fingers into my ass and rocks herself harder against me. She’s telling me she’s good. Reminding me that she’s not fragile.

Her gasps and moans come louder and faster, signaling her approaching climax.

“Give it to me, tiger. Come for me. Stay quiet, though.”

“Cal, I’m coming. Shit, shit. *Ahh!*” She chants beautifully for me, miraculously keeping her volume down.

Despite the death grip her pussy has on my cock, I resist my release out of sheer stubbornness. Bringing her with me, I roll to my back. She takes a moment to catch her breath and adjust her position.

Her hips undulate slowly at first. Her pace increases until she glides, slippery and fast, over me with her hands braced on my chest. I sit up to suck one of her breasts into my mouth, twirling my tongue around one nipple and then the other. Before I return to my back, I unclasp her bra so her breasts can

sway and bounce in time with her pace.

Right before she comes for the third time, she leans down and buries her face in my neck. “I love you, Cal. So damn much.”

Holding her close, I lock my hands around her upper back. “I know you do, Mia. And I love you too.”

Closing my eyes, I memorize everything about this moment. It’s heaven to reconnect like this, especially after almost losing her. And knowing she was willing to sacrifice herself to save my mother makes my appreciation of her multiply tenfold.

I could never love another woman the way I love Mia.

Her thrusts grow frantic as she brings us to the precipice. Chasing my own release, I drive my hips upward, reveling in the grip she keeps on my hips with her supple thighs. I bring us both to a sitting position and wrap my hands around her hips to drag her back and forth along my dick. She loves when I guide her strokes this way.

When her eyes roll back, her pussy flutters around my shaft, making my balls tighten and pulse with my impending release.

Between desperate kisses, she grits out, “Cal, oh my god. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop. I’m coming.”

“Good girl. Take me with you. *Fuck.*”

I swallow her cries of pleasure as her climax sends shock waves through us both. I join her eagerly, tumbling off the cliff into a pool of ecstasy. My release must prolong hers, because she unleashes another wave of frantic thrusts, and her keens pitch higher.

She squirms and writhes on my lap, and lights flash behind my eyelids. My legs stiffen, and my toes point in all directions as pleasure skates through me. All the while, we stay blissfully locked in each other’s arms. After my last surge of release fills her, I collapse to the bed, bringing her with me.

Recovering, we breathe heavily, touching and kissing for a precious few minutes. All the while, I stay inside her and keep her wrapped in my tight embrace.

She sounds sleepy and sated when she whispers, “I’m glad you liked your gift. That was exactly what I needed.”

Grinning wide, I trail my palm up her spine and kiss her. “Oh, I aim to please.”

“Mission accomplished, sir. Not once or twice, but three times.”

*Sir.*

She said it again.

Twisting to put her beneath me, I kiss her, letting a gruff rumble flow from my mouth to hers.

She giggles when I let her out of my possessive kiss, and it makes my heart smile.

Her fingertips rake through my hair, desperately in need of a cut. “How do you do that so well?”

“Do what?”

“Switch from sweet and doting one minute to bossy Dom the next. Are you sure it’s new for you?”

This is the perfect segue to what we need to discuss.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you about that. Yes, I *am* new to this. The way I was with you our first night is all I’ve ever been. Until you. But I *love* when you shift from your normal snarky independent attitude to demure and submissive. It’s so fucking hot when you let me take control. You’re good at it too. So it begs the same question. Are you experienced with that type of dynamic?”

She slices her head vehemently. “I’ve *never* allowed a man to talk to me the way you do, and I damn sure haven’t called anyone *sir*. Not outside of a business setting, anyhow. Not to mention all the other filthy stuff you say to me, the degradation. Never would have stood for that. But I *adore* it from you.”

“Why?”

“It makes me feel wanton, desired, and a little dirty. There’s something freeing about being at your mercy. It’s like living out a fantasy where I’m someone you can’t resist. A sexual being, solely here to please you. It’s powerful and hot. And I know you enjoy it too, which makes me even more aroused. I love pleasing you.”

I place my finger against her mouth to silence her. “Shh, before I get hard again.”

Her muted laughs brighten the room, shining light in every direction.

Pressing a quick peck to her rosy lips, I attempt to refocus. “Sounds like we’re on the same page, then.”

“Yeah, I think we are.”

“We may have stumbled onto this dynamic by accident, and it might not have been for the right reasons, so I want to make sure you’re not craving it out of guilt or shame. I’ve forgiven you. Honestly, I have. And I’m not

dominating you out of anger or a need to punish you for hurting me. Neither reason is healthy. It's amazing that we can play with this, but I don't want the wrong things driving our actions. Does that make sense?"

She caresses my cheek, trailing her thumb across my jaw tenderly. "It makes perfect sense, stud."

"How would you feel about being in charge sometimes? Like that one night when you told me exactly what you wanted. That was hot too."

She shimmies under me. "It sure as fuck was."

"Next time we play, we might need a safe word. Shep sent me a link to a book that goes over the basics for safety. I thought we could read it together."

Her eyes widen as big as a hoot owl's. "You guys talked about that shit at dinner the other night, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Sorry. Hope that doesn't embarrass you, but I needed some guidance."

The apples of her cheeks bulge with her huge smile. "We talked about it too. Same reason. And damn, Sammy and Sawyer are freaks. Especially her." She shakes her head and taps the side of it with the heel of her palm, like she's trying to force the mental images from her mind.

I join her in laughter. "Well, the topic of pegging did come up."

She cups her mouth. "No way. She didn't mention *that*."

"No, no. Sorry to mislead. He said they don't do that. But he did talk about a few other surprising things." I slant my head to the side and flick my gaze to the ceiling. "Actually, it shouldn't be surprising. I overheard them talking in the elevator before they came out as a couple. They must have forgotten there are cameras in there that also capture audio. I didn't listen to the whole conversation, but it was shocking at the time. Plus, he's been in love with her since Afghanistan. So it makes sense he'd do anything she asked of him."

"Aw. That's so sweet." Pausing, she offers her lips, and I give her another kiss before she says, "Thanks for lifting the fornication ban. Told you I wouldn't break."

My breath hitches, my chest constricting at the memory her words incite. "Mia, I was so fucking scared you were going to be hurt or worse. I can't imagine my life without you in it."

Her playful expression fades, and her chin quivers. "Oh, Cal. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Baby, I didn't know it, but I've been waiting for you all my life. Not

someone *like* you, but you. We're probably moving too fast, but I don't want you to go back to your house. Not unless you take me with you. Or we can live at my place if you prefer. I don't care where we go as long as you're there." My windpipe tightens. "After we get my mom placed, that is."

"You want to live together?"

Unable to speak, I simply nod and wait.

"I'd like that. Let's do it."

"Really?"

"Love doesn't operate on a set timeline. What we have is real. I know a good thing when I see it. And you, sir, are the best damn thing I've ever seen. I love you."

Like we're made of magnets, unable to resist the pull, our lips collide once more. We don't rush our kiss, simply settling into it and allowing love to flow between us.

Sometimes it's the hardest challenges in life that give us the biggest reward. Forgiving her wasn't easy, but it was the best damn decision I've ever made.

All this time, she thought she was earning me. But in truth? I had to earn her with my forgiveness. And she's so damn worth it.

She's the sweetest reward.

# EPILOGUE

## A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER

KLEIN

Caroline elbows me in the ribs so hard I nearly double over.  
“Oof. Dammit, sis. What the hell was that for?”

Instead of answering, she gestures to the dining table where Mia and my mom work together on a puzzle. We’re creeping on them from the edge of the kitchen.

“Just wondering how you landed her. She’s *way* out of your league.”

I nudge her back, but with less force because I’m a gentleman. “Excuse me, but I am a catch. If not for the baking alone, have you seen these biceps?” I flex just to rile her up.

She rolls her eyes and makes a gagging motion.

“Don’t be fooled by Mia’s brilliant mind, vivacious personality, gorgeous hair, smokin’ body, radiant smile, selflessness, heart of gold, quick wit, and horrible laugh. She has one fatal flaw. And it’s a doozie.”

My sister quirks her head at me and pinches her brows so fiercely you can almost hear them creak under the pressure. “By all means, look your beautiful gift horse in the mouth.”

“She may seem perfect, and I admit, she’s damn close to it. But...” I pause for dramatic effect. “Despite loving every pie I’ve made for her, she insists that cake is superior.” To sell my disappointment, I add a tsk and wag of my head.

Caroline grumbles, “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

She blows me off to join them at the table, and I saunter behind, having already put the finishing touches on dessert. It’s Italian night, and I made my orgasmic cannoli pie to accompany Mia’s chicken parmigiana.

My sister came to town this morning, despite concerns over her safety, given the heightened threat against Redleg. Caroline isn’t one to shy away from anything. And she promised to stay close to me and follow all my safety instructions. She wouldn’t let us delay making a decision about our mother any longer.

Personally, I think she wanted a few days away from her kids and

husband. Not that anyone would blame her for that.

Tomorrow, I'm supposed to take Caroline to visit various memory care facilities in the area. But if all goes well, that won't be necessary.

Seated at the table with the smell of garlic wafting through the house from the oven, I take a moment to study my family. My mother is perfectly content tonight, and Mia and Caroline are hitting it off, which doesn't surprise me. I can't imagine anyone not liking either of them, least of all each other.

Mia's hair is tied in a low braid, and she's got on the cutest green romper. I can't wait to peel it off her later.

She's been nervous these last few days. First, about meeting Caroline, but also because she has a three-way video call scheduled tonight with her sisters.

Mia and Portia have talked on the phone several times during the last few weeks. They're slowly rebuilding their relationship. Apparently, Claire needed some warming to the idea of speaking to Mia. Portia finally convinced her, and tonight's the night.

Claire had a hard time forgiving Mia for blowing off the family when they needed her most, not for *causing* the attack. I told Mia no one in their right mind would blame her for that, but her guilt lingers. With time, she'll let that go. Once she gets her sisters back in her life, the healing can finally begin.

No matter how the call goes tonight, I'll stand by her. Not that she'll need me for much. She's tough.

I exhale and blink away from my thoughtful daze.

Mia catches my eye and raises her brows encouragingly.

*Deep breath. Here we go.*

"Well, ladies, I've got something I'd like to discuss before dinner."

All three women face me expectantly. My chest tightens, and my pulse accelerates. I've played out this conversation in my mind repeatedly during the last week. I debated whether to tell my sister and mother separately. Then I considered not discussing it with mom at all so I wouldn't upset her.

But in the end, I'm simply putting it out there.

Mia must notice my trepidation. She threads her fingers with mine. The gesture helps calm me enough to get going.

"We've talked quite a bit about the future living situation for Ma as things progress, and it's time to make a decision."

"Cal," Caroline warns, her tone apprehensive.



“Just listen, sis.”

Caroline tips her chin and offers a flat-lipped grin.

My mother’s face saddens, and all her features slowly sag. She hates the topic as much as I do. Probably more.

I’m not sure whether it’s good or bad that she’s relatively lucid. It could be upsetting to her or confusing. Or she might be fine. But isn’t that how everything is lately?

On the bright side, despite being the latter part of the day, she’s less agitated tonight than most evenings. Seeing her daughter perked her up.

“Mom, what if money wasn’t an issue? Would your decision about where you will live change?”

While the seconds tick by, my mother’s eyes glaze over, and a haze of confusion settles in. She’s unable to follow my question.

Keeping my tone calm and steady, I continue, “Ma, focus on me, okay? I’ll ask again. Nice and slow.”

She nods and blinks, struggling to maintain concentration.

I slow my pace and try to be as clear as I can be. “If you had enough money to afford an in-home caregiver, would you still want to sell the house and move into a facility?”

Caroline leans close and whisper-shouts at me, “Cal, why would you ask that? Money *is* an issue. It’s not fair to get her hopes up.”

“It’s too much. To stay. I can’t,” my mother warbles, a slight head quiver that matches her voice.

Her sentences have gotten shorter lately, another sign of her mental decline. So it’s all the more important to get her input on this before it’s too late for her to have a say in her situation.

She’ll always be my mother, but she won’t always be able to communicate in the same way.

I face my sister. “We found enough money to cover it, Caroline. I need to know what she’d choose if cost wasn’t a factor.”

My sister thrusts her arms across the table to clasp my hands. “What? Where? *How?*”

“A few sources. One is an old investment account of Dad’s that we didn’t know about; it’s been accruing interest for twenty years. I doubt Dad even remembered opening it. Another is a modest whole-life policy he took out when he was fresh from the fire academy. It wasn’t included in the records Mom gave us after his death.”

The more I speak, the more Caroline's eyes pop out of her face.

Finishing my explanation, I add, "There's also a long-term care grant for surviving spouses of first responders funded by a local foundation."

The Langley foundation.

Mia taps me on the leg. "Don't forget about the unclaimed property thing."

*I love my tiger.*

"Oh, Mia also located a little over eight thousand dollars' worth of unclaimed property owed to his estate from a few different sources. In fact, Mia found all the money."

Caroline spins the bangle bracelets on her wrist slowly, her gaze swooping between Mia and me. "How much money are we talking about here?"

"It's a little under three hundred fifty thousand."

My sister pulls out her phone and opens the calculator app. Chuckling, I cover it with my hands. "We already did the math, sis."

"And?"

"We got an estimate from Kate, the woman caring for her part-time the last few weeks. She agreed to a reduced salary in exchange for room and board. She hates the apartment she's in now. I was thinking she could take your old room."

"So she'll care for her twenty-four hours a day without a break? That's too much to ask, even if she's being paid."

My sister doesn't take anything at face value and never makes rash decisions. It's part of what makes her an excellent mother and human.

"We already discussed a schedule for regular time off. She has recommendations of people in the caregiver community to help during those times."

Caroline returns to fiddling with her bracelets. "So we'd what? Just let... a stranger move in with her? Unregulated? Is that safer than a facility?"

"Well, she wouldn't be alone. Not all the time," I explain.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Mia and I would continue living here. Full-time at first, but once everyone is settled, we'd alternate half the week here and half the week at Mia's place. That way, we have some privacy as a couple and time with Mom. The best of both worlds."

"And when we're not here, we can check in through the surveillance

system like Cal's been doing," Mia adds, giving my sister the extra reassurance she needs.

My sister's grin spreads slowly, widening until it reaches her eyes.

I glance at Mia, who's smiling warmly at us. She holds my mother's hand in her right and mine in her left. Literally keeping us together.

If she had a third hand, she'd probably be holding Caroline's too.

"How long?" Caroline swallows audibly and whispers, "How long would the money last?"

"About four years."

According to the doctor on our last visit, four years is an overly-generous estimate. While we don't know how much longer we'll have her, the speed of her decline has increased and will likely continue, which is often how it goes with early-onset cases like hers.

"Excuse me." The three of us twist quickly toward the meek voice coming from the end of the table. "I'm here," my mom says, her chin raised proudly.

*Son of a bitch.* We're talking about Ma like she's not here.

But she is still here.

A heavy brick of guilt presses against my chest. "Sorry, Ma."

"Explain it to me. Please."

Caroline and I break down the money situation and her options, but she keeps getting hung up on certain words. When she can't find what she wants to say or ask, she gets irritated. As the conversation goes on, her agitation grows.

"Let's take a break for dinner," Mia suggests, popping from her seat. "Who's helping bring everything to the table?"

My sister goes with her. I'll join them in a minute. "I'm going to clean up the puzzle so we can eat. Okay, Ma?"

When I start to pick up the puzzle pieces, my mother stops me with both hands on the board. "We have the money?" she asks timidly. "I can stay?"

"Yes. If you want to."

"But you—you don't—you wouldn't..." Trailing off because she can't find the words, she mashes her eyes closed and wags her head. "Would you \_\_\_"

"Are you worried about me taking care of you? Changing you, bathing you, and things like that? Is that what you're asking?"

She wipes the corner of her eyes, where tears are gathering. "Yes."

“Mom, would it be okay for Kate to take care of that personal stuff for you?”

“And Mia?”

My smile spreads. It’s impossible for me to hear her name and *not* smile. And the fact that my mom remembers Mia’s name is a shot of warmth straight to my soul.

“Mia and I would live here with you. Kate would too. We’d all care for you, but Kate would help you with your private things. Personal stuff. Is that okay?”

She taps her forehead a few times. Lately, she’s started using signals to tell us she’s having processing trouble. Pretty sure that’s her signal for saying she needs to think.

“Relax, Ma. You don’t need to decide now. Let’s have a nice dinner. Okay?”

I put away the puzzle while Caroline takes our mother to her bathroom to get her washed for dinner. Sometimes she forgets to use the restroom, so we’ve learned to be proactive.

Once Mia and I finish setting the table, I follow her into the kitchen to pour drinks. Before she opens the kitchen cabinet, I wrap my arms around her waist and yank her back to my front.

Her hands rest on mine, and she leans to the side, giving me room to nuzzle her neck. “You okay, stud?”

“Yeah. That was hard. I think she wanted to say yes, but something is confusing her.”

“She’ll get there, babe. Be patient. I felt it too. It was on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to agree.”

“It wasn’t all in my mind? Just seeing what I wanted to see?”

She shakes her head and gives me a peck. “No. I saw it, and your sister did too. And I asked her what she thought when we got in here to get dinner out of the oven.”

I kiss her pulse point and mumble over her soft skin. “What did she say?”

She twists in my arms, and her hands land on my biceps. “She said in her conversation with your mother a few years ago that the money and you sacrificing everything were her concerns. This solution fixes both of those things. Your sister still supports her going into a facility, but she’ll also support this plan.”

Relief socks me in the gut, and my head nods like it has springs, rocking

faster and faster.

Mia squeezes my cheeks to halt my head bobbing. “Are you okay?”

I kiss her because I can’t do anything else.

*Yes, I’m okay*, the kiss says. *It’s going to be okay. Better than okay.*

I’ll have Mia by my side, in my bed, and in my heart. We’ll have time to spend together as a new couple while still being there for my mother.

Ma can live her final months or years in the house her husband built — the house holding all the memories of her life. So even when she can’t remember what matters, memories of her happy, love-filled life will surround her. We’ll be there for her too. All without compromising her dignity or making her feel like a burden.

Because she’s not.

I pull out of the kiss and press my forehead to Mia’s. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being you. For being compassionate, understanding, and so damn resourceful. And most of all, thank you for thinking I’m worth loving.”

Her breath catches as she raises on her tiptoes and presses her mouth to mine. Our kiss is tender and passionate, just like our love.

She trails her fingertips all over my arms and shoulders, then laces her hands at my nape. “You’re not only worth loving. You’re worth everything.”

Our lips fuse again while visions of all the ways I want to love her for the rest of my life dance through my mind.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her smile turns devilish. “Did you save some of the pie filling like I asked?”

My hands slip to her ass, and I arch a brow. “I did. Are you going to tell me why?”

“Has the plan changed for tonight?”

“Nope. We’re staying at your house tonight. Caroline insists we take a night to ourselves.”

“Good. So bring the pie filling and see what happens.”

“Tiger, are you teasing me with pie?”

“Well, it’s the least I can do for all the times you’ve teased me with your cake.”

She winks and pulls away, but I hold her close, refusing to let her escape.

“Tell me what you’re planning with the filling.”

“Make me.”

She's either planning to paint her body or mine with the cannoli cream filling. My money is on her frosting my ass or cock with it. Either way, it's going to be a hell of a night.

You might even say it'll be pretty damn *sweet*.

Sorry about the terrible pun. What else did you expect?

"If you don't tell me what you're planning with the filling, then I'm slipping that plug inside you when we get to your house and spanking your ass until you can't sit down tomorrow."

"Promise?"

*Hell yes, I do.*

"Last chance to tell me to avoid a punishment."

Her eyes narrow, and she brings her mouth to my ear. In a feathery wisp, she purrs, "Don't threaten me with a good time, sir."

After flashing a sexy wink, she slinks from my grasp and sashays out of the room to join my mother and my sister. Smirking, I follow her and take a seat at the table.

For the first time, I share a meal with the three most important people in my life in the house where I was raised. The house where I learned to crawl, talk, and walk. It's where I learned to grieve and learned to hope.

And where I learned to forgive.

Looking at the smiling faces of my mother, my sister, and Mia, I realize it's also where I learned to love.

And with a little hope, Mia and I will teach our kids the same lessons in this same house.

Most of all... we'll teach them to love.



*Thanks for reading Klein and Mia's story. I hope you loved it.*

[Click here to see what Mia does with the pie filling](#) Caution: this bonus scene is scorchingly hot (and sweet). Read at your discretion.

Bossy Hero is up next ([pre-order now](#)).

**Scroll down for a sneak peek to see what happened the night Madeline was shot.**

Oh, and yes, Tomer and Lettie are getting a book. [Unexpected Hero is also up for pre-order now.](#)

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), and/or [BookBub](#).



## AND NOW... A SNEAK PEEK AT REDLEG SECURITY BOOK 5: BOSSY HERO

### MADLINE “MADDIE” MASON

ALAN LANCASTER IS TEMPTATION INCARNATE.

Or, as my daughter would call him, a total smoke show.

He’s devastating when he trains his hungry eyes on me. That covetous gaze always leaves me feeling like a slice of banana bread, which is his favorite treat. Only when I make it, of course.

But Alan is absolutely lethal when he smiles.

And for some reason, he saves his smiles only for me.

It’s been that way since we met years ago. Even when I was married to another man — may he burn in hell — Alan’s smiles made me melt. Of course, we were only casual acquaintances back then. Unlike now.

I’m not entirely sure what we are these days. Certainly not committed or destined for the altar. I’ll never get married again, and Alan knows that. Now that my children are grown and will soon be parents themselves, I’m eager to spend all my time doting on my grandbabies. I crave freedom after living under the thumb of my abusive ex-husband for decades.

Are Alan and I romantically involved? Yes. Dating? Sure. Sleeping together? Obviously. I’m no fool. I may be old, but I’m not dead.

But are we something more? I’m not sure.

He flays me with one of those killer smiles from across the table at our favorite restaurant, Mystic Fish. For the last three years, we’ve come here at least once a month.

Eyeing me over the rim of his frosty beer mug, he says, “I think I’ll ask for this table from now on.”

Reflexively, I scan the area. An aquarium over the back of our crescent-shaped booth. Cutouts in the recessed ceiling in flowing shapes, resembling waves. Stained glass window squares outline the front of the restaurant. I love it here.

“Why?”

“The reflection from the fish tank brings out the blue in your eyes.”



I give my head a shake and click my tongue. “Flattery isn’t going to change my mind.”

“That’s not why I was…” He trails off, and his smile falls, dragging my spirits down with it.

Damn. I should say something before the mood totally tanks.

I’m saved from having to sputter another useless apology when the server appears with our entrées.

I toss him a grateful look. “Thank you, Jeremy. This looks delicious.”

The young man flashes a genuine smile and bows his head slightly. “Enjoy.”

We’re silent as we begin eating. When I glance at Alan, his eyes won’t meet mine. Instead, he studiously surveys the room, gaze sweeping from side to side in an arc. Alan always cautiously evaluates everyone around us. Searching for threats.

He makes me feel safe. That’s probably the reason I’m so drawn to him. Unlike my ex-husband, I know without a doubt that Alan would *never* hurt me. Nor would he let anyone else.

And yet, I always seem to hurt him.

Unfortunately, I can’t give him what he wants. No matter how tempting his offer becomes.

Time for a subject change.

I take a sip of my chardonnay. “Have you heard from Kri lately? How’s she doing in her recovery?”

“She’s been cleared for increased physical activity by her physician, so she started training in the gym at HQ this week. Gun range too.”

“That’s fantastic news. She’s a tough cookie, that one.”

He nods, then silently cuts his steak.

“When do you think she’ll be ready to return to duty?”

He tips his head from side to side. “Another month or two.”

Tension pulls up a chair and joins us at the table.

“And Mia? How’s she doing after her fiasco?”

“Fine. A little banged up. She’ll be back tomorrow, I think.”

“More good news.”

And more silence.

If he cuts his steak any harder, he’s going to crack through the plate *and* the table.

“Alan, stop. Look at me, please.”

His hands freeze for three seconds before gently setting his fork and knife down beside his plate. Leaning back in his chair, he swallows tightly and gradually fixes his eyes on mine.

It's not an angry glare or a heated gaze of desire. There's nothing playful or cocky in his expression, not that I was expecting it now. All traces of his earlier smile have disappeared, leaving behind only sadness and longing.

I know he wants more than I can give him.

"What, Maddie?"

My chin lowers, shielding my neck in that maddening way that's somehow been hard-wired into my docile personality. Years of abuse will do that to a woman.

*But I'm not that woman anymore.*

Forcing my spine to straighten and head to tilt upward, I earnestly tell him, "I'm sorry for what I said."

"It's fine."

"Clearly, it's not."

After glancing at the ceiling, he licks his lips and closes his eyes. "Do you want me to pretend I'm okay with it?"

"No, of course not. I want you to actually *be* okay with it."

"You know I hate disappointing you, but this is one thing I can't give you. I'm not built that way."

"What's the big deal? Everyone already knows."

"No. They suspect it. That's not the same thing to me. More importantly, you won't let me come clean to Leo about us. You haven't told Sammy either. Are you ashamed of me?"

"Alan, come on. You know I could never be —"

He cuts me off. "You're content playing this little game, but I want more. I'll keep being patient because the alternative is shit, but don't expect me to ever be *okay* with it."

Is that what I'm doing? Playing a little game?

If I am, it's not intentional.

At first, it was fun to keep everyone guessing. All the *are they or aren't they* questions and glances were quite entertaining.

But three years later? Maybe he's right.

Somewhere during his pain-laden speech, my eyes closed and my shoulders slumped. My heart thuds wildly, clenching uncomfortably beneath my ribs.

When my eyes flutter open, he extends his hand toward me. It sits face up on the table between us.

It strikes me as an interesting metaphor for our situation. He's always reaching out to me. And I'm always reluctant to accept what he's offering.

But I can't resist his touch for long, so I grant his unspoken request. His hand, calloused and weathered, dwarfs mine. A sense of contentment slowly creeps back into my soul with each tender caress of his thumb over my knuckles.

Why am I still denying him?

Three years and he's never raised a hand to me. Never raised his voice or punched a hole through the wall. Never thrown anything at or near me. Never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do. Never made me feel cheap or disposable.

And yet... something holds me back.

"Come here, babe," he orders softly with a crook of his finger.

He scoots toward the middle of the booth to get closer to me. Unable to deny him, I do the same, meeting him halfway.

As soon as I'm within his reach, he wraps one big arm around me and cups my cheek tenderly with his free hand. "I'm sorry, Maddie. I told you I'd stop pressuring you, and that's not what this is. It just hit me harder than normal tonight."

"I'm sorry I'm not what you need."

*Whoa, horsey.* Where did *that* come from?

I meant to apologize, tell him I understand, and assure him I wasn't mad at his repeated broaching of this topic. After all, he's entitled to his feelings.

But what came out was a truth bomb I didn't realize I'd been carrying.

Perhaps I shouldn't have ordered the wine. But it's like they say, *in vino veritas* — in wine, there is truth.

Tears pool, obscuring my vision, so I mash my eyes closed and try to gather my composure.

His grip on me tightens, and he rests his forehead against mine. "Easy, babe. It's okay. You're everything I need. Everything."

I keep my eyes fastened shut, knowing if I open them, the tears will fall. Haven't I already ruined this evening enough without making a crying spectacle of myself?

He gives me a tiny nudge after a few moments. "Hey, how about we take our dinner to go?"

Pulling back a few inches, I stiffen and look around the restaurant. “Sorry for causing a scene. I’m okay.”

Instead of letting me withdraw from his arms, he gives me just enough space so I don’t feel trapped. “You’re not causing a scene. And even if you were, I wouldn’t give a damn.”

I offer him a tight-lipped smile.

He must assume I don’t believe him because he adds, “I’m serious, Maddie. I wasn’t suggesting we leave for any reason besides wanting to be alone with you to talk it out.”

One corner of my mouth curves. “You had me at *getting me alone*. But you lost me at *talking it out*.”

His lethal smile returns, sending a shot of warmth through my body. “You know I always reward you for opening up to me.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach and someplace slightly lower. “Fair point. Let’s get to-go boxes.”

After placing a quick peck on my lips, he waves down Jeremy, gets the boxes, and pays the bill. As per tradition, he refuses to let me pay or even cover the tip.

A few minutes later, we leave the restaurant hand in hand.

See? I’m not ashamed of him.

What an absurd notion.

If anything, he should be ashamed to be seen with me. A frumpy fifty-six-year-old with a bad back and a mortgage she’ll never pay off. While he’s every bit the successful business owner and former special ops soldier. He’s got more money in his bank account than I’d make in a year, works out every day, has biceps that could open a jar of spaghetti sauce and a jawline that probably could too.

What the hell does he see in me?

As we pass by the hostess, I wave at her. “Take care, Jean. We’ll see you next time.”

She waves back. “Bye, Maddie. Have a great night.”

Such a sweet kid. I hope she does well at college next semester.

Alan arches a brow at me, and his grin spreads.

Once we’re out the front door, I ask him, “What’s that look for?”

Instead of answering, he scans the parking lot, then quickly ducks me behind a large brick post on the sidewalk in front of a vacant hair salon.

And in relative privacy, he presses me against the wall and joins our

mouths in a sudden kiss. His velvety tongue swipes against the seam of my lips, coaxing them open.

A small gasp of surprise escapes as I open for him. His strong hands roam over my body, settling on my hips. Almost instantly, I get lost in the moment. Lost in him.

When he kisses me, arousal and euphoria bloom to life. I thought those sensations died years ago. I never thought I'd desire another man.

But one taste of *this* man is all it took for me to become famished. And that's exactly what's happening now. My core tightens, and my pulse spikes wildly.

I'm unable to stifle a moan, but he captures it in his mouth. And damn if it doesn't make him kiss me harder.

I break away, reluctantly needing oxygen. He literally kissed me breathless.

"What was that for?" I rasp, my chest heaving.

"Because you're amazing, and I couldn't keep my lips off you for another second."

I'm quick to deny his praise with a head shake and a hearty eye roll. "Oh, please."

"I mean it, Maddie. You're so damn kind to everyone. You know the names of half the kids working in that place, their parents' names, if they have siblings, and their college plans. Everyone loves you. *I* —"

He chokes off the rest of his sentence. His face waxes over, tension quickly setting in his jaw. "I think you're incredible, is all."

"You're being a little over the top, but I'll allow it if it means more kisses like that."

"Oh, I'm going to do more than kiss you tonight. That's a promise. Are we going to your place or mine?"

Momentarily lost in his cocoa eyes, I forget to answer.

*Good heavens.* I'm too old to be all gaga like this over a man.

He arches a brow and leans closer. "Well? What's it going to be?"

"Your place is fine."

"Okay, but no leaving in the middle of the night this time."

"I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to wake you."

He narrows his eyes like he doesn't believe me.

Was it a lie?

Technically, it was more like a fib.

But you can kiss my grits if you think you're getting more than that out of me. Those worms are staying in their can.

A gruff rumble sneaks out of his chest, but he grabs me by the hand and walks me around the post.

And that's when everything goes to shit.

Chaos.

A series of popping sounds louder than anything I've heard crackles through the night air. The glass windows behind us shatters. Alan shoves me to the ground and kneels beside me.

My hands cup my ears instinctively, and I ball my knees up to protect my midsection.

"Get down!" someone yells.

More loud pops in rapid succession rattle my eardrums, but these are so close.

Too close.

Forcing my eyes open, I see Alan's holding a gun, extended toward the parking lot. Somewhere in the commotion, he must have retrieved his handgun and started firing back.

*He's. Firing. Back.*

Oh my god. Someone is shooting at us.

My eyes snap shut of their own accord, and I fold myself into a tighter ball as terror seizes my entire being.

A burning sensation in my upper arm tries to break through my panic. But I can't focus on anything other than the ringing in my ears and pounding heartbeat.

And fear for my life.

It's a feeling I know all too well, but I hoped it was behind me.

"Call the police!" another voice yells.

Or is that the same voice?

The pain in my arm becomes so intense I can no longer ignore it. A groan escapes me, but I mash my lips closed so another doesn't break free.

*I need to be quiet. Hide.*

"Babe, are you okay?" a male says from far away. "Son of a bitch!"

*Stay quiet. Just hide. It's safer.*

There are no more gunshots. I think they've stopped.

No more glass breaking.

But I stay curled up, pretending this is all one of my nightmares. Nothing

more.

Any minute, my alarm will go off, and I'll get ready for work. Same as always.

*It's cold.*

Instead of the alarm, police sirens ring out.

"Maddie, baby, look at me. Open your eyes," a voice urges.

I cover my ears harder, shaking my head.

*Must hide.*

A feminine voice says, "I think she's in shock."

Then a beeping sound.

"Dispatch, we need a 10-71 on scene for a GSW."

"Maddie, baby, can you talk to me?"

*Just hide.*

*He'll go away. He always does.*

**Pre-order [Bossy Hero](#) now.**



**Are you new to the Redleg Security Series?  
Curious about the other couples mentioned in Rival Hero?**

- Leo & Sue - [Heartbreak Hero \(Redleg Security Book 1\)](#)
- Sawyer & Sammy - [Forbidden Hero \(Redleg Security Book 2\)](#)
- Shep & Kri - [Comeback Hero \(Redleg Security Book 3\)](#)
- Cort (the Theo James doppelganger) & Amber (the pink-haired, pregnant CEO) - [Love & Other Lies](#) (from the Amos-holes series, Love and Laughs Book 3)
- The rest of the Amos-holes books are in the [Love & Laughs Series \(steamy romantic comedy series following the sarcastic Amos siblings\)](#)



All my books are available in regular and discreet cover paperbacks on  
Amazon.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader,

Thanks for making it to the end of this epic story! I hope you loved it and didn't cry too much about Klein's mom. That was hard to write, but I wanted it to be authentic.

Speaking of Klein, I may never get over him. *Swoon*. He's giving my special guy, Sawyer, a run for his money.

This story was fun to write. I loved exploring Mia's vibrant personality and quick wit. And Calvin Klein made me fall in love so many times over that I'm considering a support group or some type of detox program. I can't wait to start on Bossy Hero and then Tomer and Lettie's book.

Speaking of them... Tomer was a total surprise to me. I don't know always know what's going to happen beyond vague ideas, and Tomer and Lettie are a perfect example of that. I was so shocked when he barged into Mia's house demanding to know about Lettie. SHOCKED! I can't wait to explore their dynamic more. Are you excited too? But Boss and Madeline come first, and I'm eager AF to learn what's holding them back from going public with their relationship (I think I know, but we'll see how it plays out).

But I digress.

A special thanks to Allie and Paula for their incredibly helpful feedback during the beta reading process. You helped make this story so fulfilling and better than it would have been without your input and guidance.

I'm also thrilled to give a special shout out to Erin — white hat hacker extraordinaire and my new technical adviser. She said she's sticking around to help me with Tomer's book, and I'm sure I'll need her for Boss's book too. She's stuck with me! Did you hear that, Erin? You're never getting rid of me (*evil laugh*). Good luck belly dancing your way out of this pickle.

As expected, my editor/BB Mindy took up residence in my brain once more as we worked frantically to get this baby ready in time. I couldn't do any of this shit without her. Not only does she keep me sane most days, she's

also got great feedback and knows my characters better than I do. Thank you for being a friend (in the style of the *Golden Girls* theme song).

Before I go, I also want to thank Kate for designing such a gorgeous discreet cover. Kim did a terrific job on my sexy man cover, as per usual. Love you both! Oh, and the model is Johnny Kane, and I might be stalking him without regret. Thanks to Eric for taking such a terrific photo and being a joy to work with.

To my amazing PA Deb and my new social media guru Rose — you ladies are making me look like I have my shit together. I hope you never try to leave me. It'll get awkward if you do. Seriously, I can't thank you enough for being on my team. All the hugs to you both!

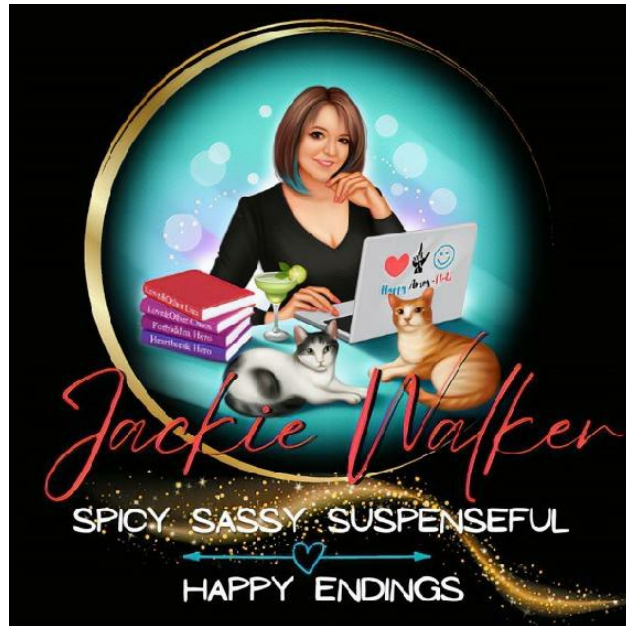
And last but not least, a big fat thank you to my newly expanded ARC and street teams. I'm so lucky to have you. Your support means so much to me.

Hugs and margarita kisses,

Jackie

xoxo

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jackie is a fresh face on the romance scene destined to shake things up with her signature blend of comedy, spice, suspense, multi-faceted characters, and romantic, heartwarming moments. A voracious romance reader herself, Jackie writes stories featuring the four Ss: Snark, Swoons, Steam, and Sarcasm. Her heroines are badass, and her heroes are easy on the eyes and heavy on the charm.

When she is not writing funny stories about swoony heroes and the women who get to play with them, she is reading all types of romance novels or taking care of her army of cats and her teenage son (who also speaks fluent sarcasm).

## Connect with Jackie

Website: [www.authorjackiewalker.com](http://www.authorjackiewalker.com)

Facebook Reader Group: [Jackie's Junkies](#)

All my social media links are on my link tree: [www.linktr.ee/authorjackiewalker](http://www.linktr.ee/authorjackiewalker)  
(Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, BookBub, Goodreads, Newsletter Sign-up, and Spotify playlists for each book)

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# CONTENT - TRIGGER WARNINGS & KINKS

Because this is a spicy romantic suspense novel with action themes, there may be some topics mentioned that some readers may wish to know about ahead of time. I'd like to keep this page as spoiler-free as possible but realize that it's not always possible.

I'm providing a high-level explanation below regarding common reader triggers and kinks. You may also contact me via email ([authorjackiewalker@gmail.com](mailto:authorjackiewalker@gmail.com)) if you have specific concerns.

**On Page Stuff:** This book contains profanity, sexually explicit scenes (all consensual), Alzheimer's/Dementia (side character), action-packed scenes including abduction, fighting, gun usage, and suspenseful elements. No violence of any kind occurs **between** the main characters.

**Off Page Stuff:** There are light to moderate references to side characters who have experienced abduction via date rape drugs for the purposes of human trafficking, sexual assault, physical violence, and attempted murder.

**Kinks include:** Dom awakening with mild degradation (think: good boy goes bad), praise, consensual punishments, hair pulling, throat fucking, office sex, and butt stuff.

**I've done my best to present these items as sensitively as possible for my readers.**

Ready to read? [Click here to return to the front of the book](#) or use the menu feature.