



ROGUE

Villain

PAMELA O'ROURKE

ROGUE VILLAIN

ROGUES OF MANHATTAN

BOOK TWO



PAMELA O'ROURKE

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Cover Design: Lori Jackson

Cover Photographer: Rafa G Catala

Cover Model: Chema Malavia

Editing & Proofreading: Mackenzie Letson

Formatting: CPR Editing

✿ Created with Vellum

CONTENT WARNING

This book contains the following:

- Violence
- Graphic Sex Scenes
- PTSD
- Physical Assault
- On-Page Death
- Murder
- Gun Violence
- Profanities
- Kidnapping
- Stalking
- Mention of Human Trafficking
- Consensual Solicitation

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY

This one is for my readers.

*Thank you for loving Vaughn enough to see him getting his
own story.*

Buckle up and enjoy the ride.

PLAYLIST

- “What Have I Done” – Dermot Kennedy
- “Work of Art” – Benson Boone
- “Kernkraft 400 (A Better Day)” – Topic, A7S
- “River” – Bishop Briggs
- “Man or a Monster” – Sam Tinnesz feat. Zayde Wolf
- “God’s Gonna Cut You Down” – Johnny Cash
- “Way Down We Go” –KALEO
- “Work Song” – Hozier
- “White Blank Page” – Mumford & Sons
- “War of Hearts” – Ruelle
- “Breaking Me” – Topic, A7S
- “10:35” – Tiesto, Tate McRae

PROLOGUE



WREN

AGED 10

“Come with me, *mia cara*.”

My Uncle Anthony grips my elbow, steering me away from the graveside of my nonna and the handful of friends gathered to mourn her passing.

I glance back over my shoulder as my feet falter. My eyes easily find my mother’s pale blonde hair as she soundlessly echoes the words of the priest before Anthony’s body blocks her from my view.

“I told your mother the cemetery is no place for a child, but as *always*, Sara does what she wants.”

Anthony rolls his eyes as he motions toward a scattering of daisies near the tree line at the farthest edge of the graveyard. His voice has softened considerably when he speaks again. “Why don’t you pick a bunch as your Nonna Julia’s parting gift while I bring the car closer to the gate?”

I nod softly, and then move off to kneel by the flowers. Before I’ve even plucked the first one from the ground, Anthony is marching directly toward our car parked outside the sprawling burial grounds in Brooklyn.

His actions are unsurprising. My uncle has hated funerals and public displays of emotion for as long as I can remember.

I’m surprised he came with me and Mom. I suppose he felt sorry that my nonna’s only son—my father, Lorenzo—isn’t here to mourn her passing like a good Italian son should.

My brows pucker at the thought.

It’s just not fair.

It’s not the first time those exact words have crossed my mind. Having never had a father due to a tragic accident my mother doesn’t speak of, I shouldn’t feel his loss as keenly as I do.

But Nonna Julia hadn't let his memory die with him. She spoke of him often and usually in the same breath as her foster son, Vaughn, though Mom never joined in those conversations.

I smile gently, remembering the light on her face as she told me of the time that a clearly mischievous Vaughn had put chili oil in Dad's underwear when he was going on his first date with Mom.

Mom had cracked a smile as Nonna relayed how he'd sat in an ice bath for hours afterward, even if it hadn't found its way to her eyes.

Suddenly, movement to my left grabs my attention away from my handful of daisies.

I angle my neck to the side, where I spot a tall man dressed head to toe in black farther along the tree line, almost hidden from sight. He looks to be a part of the small group mourning the loss of my nonna, as his eyes are blatantly trained on each and every action by the graveside, his lips moving silently along with the other mourners, even with the distance between them.

He's so involved in the priest's homily that he doesn't notice my approach until I'm almost beside him.

"What the f—" The deep cadence of his voice is the strangest accent I've ever heard.

It's eerily soothing.

He draws back, surprise heavy on his features as I grin, delighted to have startled such an opposing man.

Now that I'm closer, I note that he's easily the tallest man I've ever met. He towers over me, his black suit and shirt molded to his body as though painted onto him. His jet-black hair is slicked back from his face, the longer strands brushing the starched collar of his shirt with each movement he makes. His dark eyes are both haunted and homely, beckoning me to step closer despite the standoffishness emanating from his frame.

"Why are you over here?" My voice comes out more confident than I am, and I feel bolstered when one side of his

mouth twitches before he catches himself.

“Didn’t your parents ever teach you not to speak to strangers?”

I purse my lips, my boldness soaring with my indignance. “Didn’t yours ever tell you if you’ve got nothing nice to say, then you should say nothing at all?”

The corners of his lips lift in a semblance of a smile before he tips his head. “Touché.”

I have no idea what he means by that, so I try again. “Why are you not with the other mourners?”

“Where else *would* I be?” He quirks an inky brow in question.

I tip my head, indicating my nonna’s graveside. “You’re dressed like you should be over there.”

He inhales deeply. “I don’t belong there.”

His expression shifts for a split second, so fast that I could have imagined it, before he shrugs and crouches to his haunches with a deep sigh that stops me in my tracks.

“See? I was just picking some flowers.” He plucks a purple flower from the many at his feet before handing it to me. Then he rises to his full considerable height once more.

“I’m visiting...a dear old friend.”

I nod, bending to pick my own one while dropping my fistful of daisies in favor of the brighter bloom. “Me too.”

He arches a brow, mirth dancing in his dark gaze. “What age are you? You don’t look old enough to have *new* friends, let alone old ones.”

I narrow my eyes even as I hide a grin. “My mom says that a gentleman should never ask a lady her age.”

He chuckles at that, matching dimples appearing on both cheeks beneath his dark facial hair that make me smile broadly in return.

“That’s very true.” Then he winks playfully before whispering in a conspiratorial tone, “But then most people would say that I’m no gentleman.”

I offer him the coneflower that I picked as I shake my head solemnly. My long brown hair swishes around either side of my face before my eyebrows draw together in confusion.

“But you look like one.”

It’s as though a veil descends over his entire being at my words, shrouding the light-heartedness of moments ago in the space of half a heartbeat. He accepts the offered bloom with a puckered brow as he regards me with a slight tilt of his head.

“Bad people come in all shapes and sizes, little one. Even the devil was once an angel.”

His dark eyes, devoid of warmth, shift from me to stare toward my nonna’s graveside. I follow his line of vision and realize that the small gathering is dispersing.

“You’d be a clever girl to remember that.”

Without another word, he turns and walks with clear purpose to the cemetery gates, the purple flower still held in his hand.

I rush after him, past the mourners and my pale-faced mom, who is talking quietly with the priest.

The stranger has reached the huge Gothic gates of the cemetery by the time I catch up. Before I can ask what he meant by his words, Anthony rounds the corner, his hazel eyes turning thunderous when he spots my tall man.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Burton?”

My brows crease at the unbridled fury in my uncle’s voice as my feet slam to a halt, and I drop to a crouch beside a looming white headstone, knowing better than to interrupt. The stranger—Burton, from the sounds of it—holds up his hands in a stalling motion, allowing the purple blossom to fall from his grasp.

“I didn’t go near her. I didn’t even *look* at either of them.” His voice is firm and assertive. Harsh and truly intimidating.

“I kept my promise, Anthony. I stayed away...I only wanted to pay my respects to Julia—”

I knew he belonged to the mourners, but my glee at being proven right is short-lived when my uncle cuts him off with a vicious snarl.

“Your respects to Julia?” Anthony steps closer even as I shrink farther away, hiding myself entirely behind the headstone. “You *disrespect* her by coming here today, or are you too fucking stupid to see that?”

Without answering, Burton retrieves the bloom at his feet before straightening his shoulders and moving past Anthony, his dark head held high.

He stops when his shoulder brushes my uncle’s, anger bristling around him like an invisible force field. “I pay for my sins, Anthony Ricci. I relive that night. That loss. *Every. Fucking. Day.*”

His words are hissed through gritted teeth, and I feel the sincerity cleave a hole in my chest as he spits, “I don’t need you trying to rub salt into a wound that will *never* heal.”

My eyes remain fixed on his broad back until he moves through the gate, coneflower still in his grasp as he eventually disappears from sight.

Then, before a red-faced Anthony can notice me and question my presence so far from where he left me, I turn away, still clutching the flower he gave me. I quickly rush back toward the safety of my mother’s waiting arms as the tall stranger’s words play on repeat in my mind.

Even the devil was once an angel.

CHAPTER 1



VAUGHN

MANHATTAN – PRESENT DAY

I sit forward in my seat at the sharp rap on my office door, not even having a second to answer before Lucia, my sharp-tongued second-in-command, storms inside.

“You’re scheduled to open the auction tonight, Vaughn.” Her palms slam onto my desk as she fixes me with a furious glare. “Get your ass over to *Ravish* right the fuck—”

She grinds to a halt when her eyes leave mine to drift lower, finally noticing my right hand that’s currently gripping a fistful of blonde hair.

I shrug when her eyes return to mine as the blonde, who’s doing a piss poor job of sucking my cock lifts her head, turns her sorrowful eyes to Lucia. “Sorry, Miss Romano. I—”

“Less talking.”

Angling her head back down, I force my cock past her lips and right to the back of her throat, making her gag as Lucia rolls her eyes with a shake of her head.

“Suck harder, Kendra.” Lucia spins to leave. “Mr. Burton needs to be downstairs in three.”

The door closes with a soft *snick* as the blonde redoubles her efforts.

That’s it.

I let my head fall back on my chair while I fuck her face for several minutes, the sound of her gagging irritating me more than anything else. Eventually, she finds a decent rhythm with the help of my guiding hand atop her head, and when I feel that telltale tingle, I pull my dick out of her warm mouth in time to empty my balls across her lips and chin.

When I untangle my fist from her hair, she looks up at me, smiling like the cat who got the cream. Internally rolling my eyes, I gingerly pat the top of her head with a smile that’s more of a grimace as I push my chair back to stand.

“Well done, Sandra.”

Her brow furrows as she tilts her head, my cum dripping from her down-turned lips as she pouts. “It’s *Kendra*, Mr. Burton.”

“Great. Awesome. Good to know.” I throw her a wink before placing extra emphasis on her name. “*Kendra*.”

I grab my suit jacket from the back of the desk chair and carefully slip it on over my black vest and shirt. Once dressed, I take a moment to straighten my black tie and smooth my hair back before passing her a box of tissues from my desk.

“And after today’s performance... I trail off, leaning closer as hope flares in her eyes before quirking a sadistic brow as I watch that same hope crash and burn on my next words. “You may call me *sir*.”

Her cum-covered chin drops comically, and I draw up to my full height, barely withholding my perverse grin as I gesture toward the door. “Once you’ve cleaned up, you’ll have another hour left on your shift, so try not to let the door hit you on your way out.”

Before she can do or say anything else, I leave my office, nodding to a waiting Jules at the foot of the stairs as I take them two at a time.

“Escort Miss Cameron back to *Rapture* as soon as she’s freshened up.”

Kendra Cameron is twenty-two, newly single, and hails from New Jersey. She’s worked for me for two years, has a degradation fetish, and her favorite color is jade green.

I’m meticulous in knowing *everything* about a woman I intend to be intimate with.

My assholery in the office is something all women get from me at one point or another. To reinforce the simple fact that I’m a cold prick who prefers blowing his load in a willing hole than his own hand.

But I do my due diligence because, in the world that I live in, and the company I’m forced to keep, you can never be too

Careful.

Jules nods stoically. “Will I join you in *Ravish* then, boss?”

“Ensure all lots have been brought over first.”

I move off through the crowded staff room floor that’s teeming with my many staff members from the various tiers of Rogue, Manhattan’s premier night club – and the most elite sex club in North America.

The first tier, *Rapture*, plays host to the various celebrities and A-listers clamoring to gain entry to a guaranteed five-star evening. Swathed in hues of blues and greens, the main floor is designed with intricate uplighting to give my guests the feeling of being underwater.

With nightly parades of gorgeous men and women and shows featuring acrobats, gymnasts, and sensual dancers, a night at *Rapture* is one that my guests pay handsomely for.

As I slip through one of the many doors that lead into a maze of corridors, I pull my simple black masquerade mask from the inside pocket of my jacket, sliding it over my face before entering the second tier, *Risqué*.

Masks are non-negotiable for *all* staff members. Not only for their own privacy, but it adds an element of mystery, which only heightens the experience for my guests.

The dimly lit labyrinth of passageways in *Risqué* is home to curtained alcoves, purpose-built for secret interludes and rendezvous. Doors into private rooms dot the hallways, where staff known as performers lay in wait to fulfill any kind of fantasy your heart desires.

All assignments are mutual, fully contracted between all parties, and entirely above board. The rooms are equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance with round-the-clock monitoring by my specialized team.

The nanosecond a guest gets inappropriate, or a performer needs to take a time out if things get too heavy, additional security is on hand to assist. It rarely, if ever, happens, but I like to be prepared.

My performers trust me with their safety, and another's trust is something I *don't* take lightly, seeing as I don't give mine freely.

Ignoring the debauchery that's ongoing in the alcoves on either side of me, I pad closer to my goal, *Ravish*, where Lucia and God only knows who awaits me.

The third and final tier is the only part of Rogue that I detest.

When I purchased this place—the club that was previously known as *Valentine's*—I swore I wouldn't sleep until I'd dismantled the crowning jewel in my deceased sperm donor's empire.

Valentine Burton, a millionaire aristocrat hailing from London, had continued to deny my existence right up until his death despite the many paternity tests my mother insisted upon. Not to mention the fact that I could have been his fucking doppelganger.

He'd told my mother that he would marry her after I was born.

That he would somehow get out of the arranged marriage that his parents had locked him into.

But it was all a damn lie.

My mother died when a taxi hit her as she walked home from a graveyard shift at the diner she worked in, but it was Valentine Burton who killed her the day she found out the love of her life had married someone else, leaving her penniless and broken-hearted with a small baby.

Placing my hand over the biometric scanner beneath the hot pink sign synonymous with the auction rooms, I take a deep breath as the door swings open into the darkened space.

The catwalk is front and center, lit up in that signature pink, awaiting its first lot.

My stomach dips when I spot the sign at the rear of the space, belatedly realizing that it's a fetish night, and I curse

Lucia for choosing tonight as the night for me to formally show my face.

I usually allow her to deal with everything on the *Ravish* side of the business. She's been here since Valentine ran the show—used to fuck him, if the rumors are to be believed—and frankly, if *Ravish* needs to remain open, then I'm happy for her to do the dirty work.

When I'd bought this place from my half-sister, Verity, I'd intended on closing this part down entirely. However, even from beyond the grave, Valentine continued to run the show.

A great number of high-powered men and women had invested heavily in *Ravish*, using it to woo new clientele or foreign diplomats.

A president here, a prince there.

Virgin auctions always garner a high return, thanks to the twisted souls who come here to prey on women down on their luck and in need of the high fee that thin barrier of innocence can fetch, though fetish auctions—a relatively new addition from Lucia—have gained traction in recent years.

Ravish is simply a means to attain power, which was precisely what Valentine had sought through this place and its sister club situated outside of London.

He'd held court here on every possible occasion, often bidding for lots if the fancy struck. I've never bid on a lot, and nor will I ever.

I might be a monster, but I'm not *that* kind of monster.

If it weren't for Lorenzo and what happened to him, I'd have burned the whole place to ash. I don't get close to people now because to do so means putting them in danger, too.

I keep to myself. Even the *very* few people who've managed to burrow beneath my defenses don't know me beyond what I let them see.

They'd be horrified if I let them find the devil lurking beneath the black suit.

The thoughts that lay beneath my carefully callous face.

As I settle into my seat at the foot of the catwalk beside a preening Lucia, I steeple my fingers over my vest and settle back against the plush seat. Only then, in the hope of blocking out my surroundings, do I allow my mind to drift.

“Return Valentine’s to its former glory, or you’ll be seeing your father sooner than you’d like.”

Lorenzo’s features are horrified when he lifts his head from the letter in his shaking hand.

“What the fuck is this?”

My hand darts out to rip the letter from him so that I can crumple it into a ball and launch it into the waste basket.

He steps closer with concern coloring his words. “That was a death threat, V. You need to do something about it!”

I shrug, walking across my newly decorated office to pour a whisky. “Nah. It’s fine. There’s been dozens of those lately.”

I twist at the waist, holding the decanter up. “You want one?”

My best friend’s forehead is creased in worry, and I silently curse myself for opening my mail in front of him today.

Nolan Fritz, a bottom feeder with a penchant for the seedier side of life, had elevated himself to a man of stature through his involvement with Valentine. And he’s been making my transition to the owner of my newly renamed Rogue much harder than it needs to be. But I’m determined to show them that I hold the power now. Not him.

And certainly not Valentine fucking Burton.

Placing the decanter back on the drinks table, I face him and try another tactic. “How’s Sara? She must be heading into her third month, right?”

His face alights, and I know I’ve derailed his inquisition for now.

“We are telling our families this weekend.” His chest puffs out in pride, making me grin at his pure fucking cheesiness. “Only six more months until I meet my son!”

I snort a laugh. “You can’t know it’s a boy at this stage, Renzo.”

“I have a feeling, my friend.” He settles himself onto the sofa farthest from me, stretching out so his feet are crossed at the ankles while a shit-eating grin plasters itself to his face.

“Lorenzo Caputo the second. Has a nice ring, doesn’t it?”

“She’s fucking exquisite, don’t you think, Burton?”

The unmistakable upper-crust British accent of Oliver Creswell pulls me from my memories, a hint of a smile still tugging at my lips as I turn to face him.

His light brown eyes are blown wide as he stares at whoever has been unfortunate enough to gain his interest.

Feigning an interest of my own, I follow his line of vision toward the curtain leading backstage. It’s slightly open, allowing us to see a petite girl in an electric blue wig, wearing a sheer white negligee that leaves nothing to the imagination.

Of course, Lucia would have ensured that I’d be seated next to the most irritating prick ever to walk the earth. Ollie Creswell, an entitled asshole from jolly old England with memberships both here and at *Valentine’s*, is the only fucker who’s ever had my additional security visit him more than once following a purchase.

There’s always one idiot who needs to take things too far, and I’m in no mood for his shit this evening. I quickly shoot a surreptitious text message to Ford Holloway, manager of my surveillance team.

ME

Creswell is in Ravish tonight. Just a heads up.

The dots flash immediately with his reply.

FORD

Still in Costa Rica. Will handle it.

Shit!

My cell almost immediately vibrates with a follow-up.

FORD

Handled.

I pocket the cell while rolling my eyes. Ford is a man of few words, but Christ, he could have elaborated.

Thankfully, I don't need to be concerned for long as a clearly alerted Jules appears beside me, his dark eyes focused intently on an oblivious Creswell.

Lucia stands and rounds the side of the stage, her low-cut emerald-green dress molded to her voluptuous curves, holding the attention of all present until she arrives at the auctioneer's podium to the right of the catwalk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to *Ravish*. As always, before the bidding may commence, we begin with the rules."

She flourishes a list, entirely for the sole purpose of being a drama whore, before running through the straightforward regulations, the only real foothold of power I've managed to retain.

"No touching or taunting." She peers in my direction, her laughing eyes landing on a rapt Oliver Creswell. "I'm looking at *you*, Ollie."

Most of the guests titter at her in-joke as Oliver howls before Lucia continues. "Only guests registered and in receipt of a paddle may bid on tonight's lots. Payment is electronic and instantaneous. And please remember, *all* sales are final."

There's a pause as she allows that to sink in before she gestures to the first lot. "With that being said, our first beauty

is Sapphire, and she is open to the list displayed on the monitor to your left.”

The blue-wigged girl emerges from behind the curtain, sashaying down the catwalk with a sway of her hips that sees more than a handful of men and women sit forward in readiness.

Lucia smiles devilishly, relishing her role as ringmaster when she spreads her arms wide in welcome. “We’ll start the bidding at seventy thousand.”

CHAPTER 2



WREN

SOUTH BROOK, LONG ISLAND

“See you tomorrow, Mrs. Porter.”

My beautiful boss smiles before reaching out to grab my hand, squeezing gently. “I’m *so* proud of you, Wren. You absolutely smashed today out of the park.”

I can’t help grinning as a sense of accomplishment flows through me. “It was wonderful, wasn’t it!”

She nods enthusiastically. “I see big things in your future.”

A purposeful cough sees her glancing over my shoulder to her waiting son, Matt, who’s tapping his foot by the front door.

With a good-natured roll of her eyes, she chuckles. “I can take a hint, Matty boy. Have fun celebrating, you guys. You’ve earned it.”

Giving her a small nod, I walk toward the open front door and step out onto the warm sidewalk outside Zephyr, the gallery where I’ve been a curatorial intern for the last eleven months.

“Bye, Mom!”

Matt closes the door behind us without waiting for a response, falling into step beside me as we make our way toward Oracle, the trendiest bar in South Brook, where we’re meeting the rest of our friends for celebratory drinks.

Art has long been a passion of mine, and once I heard that Zephyr might be hiring, I’d blown off all thoughts of going to university with my friends, instead focusing on being ready to step into the position of a lifetime.

I’m positively glowing under the praise of Delilah Porter, knowing she’s a powerhouse in the field of fine arts, and under her tutelage, I might have a gallery of my own someday.

Considering I’m a hobby artist who refuses to share my amateur doodles with anyone aside from my mother—who is *clearly* blowing smoke up my butt when she tells me it’s good

—curating and managing true talent is the only tangible option available to me if I want to work in the industry.

Today was the culmination of months of work, seeing reclusive local artist, Frederick Hanson, unveil his collection. Media and art enthusiasts from all over the world had come to Zephyr following a six-month media blast spearheaded by yours truly.

His collection had sold out in under forty-five minutes, with early reviews hailing him as another Van Gogh or the second coming of Claude Monet, my all-time favorite impressionist.

“Look at you. Oozing sheer delight.” Matt nudges me with his shoulder, a shit-eating grin on his face that I can’t help but reciprocate. “You think your shit don’t stink because you’ve made Mom and that Hanson dude a pure fortune today, that it?”

I roll my eyes as I duck into Oracle, sticking out my tongue at him before scanning the vast open bar space, my eyes landing on a waving Elodie who’s dressed like she’s just stepped off a catwalk.

“Screw you, Mr. Social Media Isn’t My Thing! It’s not mine either, which you know, but I pulled it out of the motherfucking bag today, so eat this.”

Flipping him the bird, I quickly turn and rush toward our waiting friend as Matt’s laugh rings out through the bar.

I slip in beside a grinning Elodie, letting her tug me in against her side. “I’m *so* fucking proud of you, babe. Such an accomplishment!”

Matt slides in across from us, arching a brow. “What a day, hmm.”

Levi walks through the front doors, his eyes finding us easily as Elodie leans across the table, a devilish smile on her pretty face. “And well done on your biggest achievement to date, Matty. I’m so proud of you for *finally* wiping your own ass.”

Matt tosses a menu at a cackling Elodie as Levi sits beside us, throwing his arm over my shoulder and signaling to the clearly amused bartender. “Drinks are on this rising star right here!”

He presses a kiss to my brow, tugging me close against his side. “Always knew you were made for bigger and better than what South Brook has to offer.”

I shake my head as he disentangles his arm, and we settle back beside one another as Elodie and Matt rile one another up, as usual.

“You know I love it here, Lev. I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.”

My friend’s brow furrows, clearly intent on saying something when the bartender arrives with our drinks. “Long Island iced teas all around, right?”

His eyes land on me. “And since I know you’re underage, I’ve made yours a virgin.”

My friends chuckle as I accept my mocktail with a smile that’s more like a scowl. “I hate being the youngest.”

Placing the straw between her pouty, matte red lips, Elodie takes a big sip before tossing me a wink. “Sucks to suck, Caputo.”

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

She feigns indigence, pressing her manicured hand to her chest. “Well, I *never*...suck and tell.”

Our foursome’s joint laughter fills the space, and happiness fills me as I revel in the beautiful life I’ve been gifted.

“But you picked last time! Don’t I get a choice?”

I narrow my eyes at my mother, but she just shrugs. “My house. My choice.”

With a snort, I grab a bowl for our popcorn and pass it into her waiting hands. “That’s not fair. It’s my house, too.”

It’s her turn to snort as she pours the salty snack into the bowl before dumping a box of Whoppers on top.

Salty-sweet goodness!

“It’s only your house because I can’t seem to get rid of you.” She arches a pale blonde brow. “Damn freeloader.”

I press my hand to my chest, feigning hurt. “Ouch, that really stings, Mom.”

We share a smile then, as we both know I have *zero* intention of moving out of my childhood home any time soon.

I love our life here in South Brook. It’s just Mom and me, with Uncle Anthony visiting regularly despite his hectic work schedule.

Working at the gallery and spending my free time with friends, along with my love of painting, make my life here idyllic.

Mom pulls me against her side, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “If you pick a non-subtitled one, the choice is *all* yours.”

My shoulders sag, knowing when to take the loss. “*Pan’s Labyrinth* is a masterpiece, I’ll have you know.” I arch a brow pointedly. “Can’t you see? I’m *educating* you.”

She moves off, tossing a half-melted Whopper into her mouth with a grin. “I prefer to be *entertained*, my love. You’re the only one in this house who’s ever enjoyed learning. And subtitles feel too much like hard work.”

Once I’ve grabbed the jug of Mom’s iced tea, along with two tall glasses, I follow after her, throwing myself onto the huge armchair I favor. I can’t help but grin when I pour two glasses of the sweet drink as she sets up for our weekly movie night.

My mother isn’t wrong. I excelled at academics in school, languages in particular, and I’ve always loved learning new things. Thanks to my uncanny ability to retain a wealth of

information, I can generally pick up just about anything I put my mind to.

I'm still feeling a sense of pride following the week I've had at Zephyr. Organizing such a successful event and seeing Frederick take the plunge into the spotlight is something that will stay with me for a long time.

"How are you feeling about a rewatch of *Walk the Line*?"

I perk up, tucking my feet beneath me as I settle in. "My own personal catnip. You *know* I'll never say no to a hot man in a black suit!"

Having gotten everything organized, Mom stretches out on the long sofa, shooting me a knowing wink as she does. "So... how's the love life, daughter?" Then she giggles almost girlishly. "Aside from those secret admirer letters and emails from Prince Charming that arrive every other day."

She wriggles her eyebrows at that as I shoo her away. "You know that's probably one of the guys catfishing me, right?"

"Being catfished at this stage is a step up, Wren. Your love life needs to up its game."

I roll my eyes at her ribbing as I press my lips together. "Laugh it up. Just because *mine* is not as healthy as *some* people I could mention." I narrow my eyes. "How *is* Elliott?"

Dr. Elliott Porter is Matt's uncle, who lives just a little farther down the beach. He's also the first man I've ever seen my mom even look at twice, which has been both strange and wonderful.

He's handsome, reserved, and minted enough to own several properties throughout the state, as well as a yacht he's hopeful about getting Mom onto.

But most importantly, he makes her smile. And that's all I want for her. To be happy after so long by herself.

"He's *fine*." She narrows her eyes right back as I take a sip of my tea, scrunching up my face when I realize that she didn't add enough sugar. "But I asked you first."

I snort. “Mom, I love you dearly, but you know I’m focusing on work right now. Everything else is secondary.”

She tosses a piece of popcorn at me with a pout. “Killjoy.”

Picking up the kernel from where it landed on my arm, I spin to face her as I pop it into my mouth with a wry grin, deciding to throw the poor woman a bone. “Okay, so I was at Oracle last week, and there was this guy.”

“Oh my God!” She claps her hands together, smiling broadly. “Deets, Wren. I need details *now!*”

“He gave me Caden North vibes, Mom.”

I sigh wistfully and entirely too theatrically before placing my drink beside my cell on the side table.

She sits forward eagerly, well aware of my obsession with the lead singer of one of my favorite bands of all time, and I continue with wide eyes, knowing I have her right where I want her.

“One thing led to another, and...”

I trail off, building the suspense as she literally scoots to the edge of her seat. “And...well...before I knew it, I was on my knees, sucking his d—”

A fistful of popcorn cuts me off when my open-mouthed mother launches it at me, and I throw my head back, laughing as she tuts. “That had *better* be a lie, Wren Caputo, or so help me...”

I toss her a cheeky wink. “For what it’s worth, the carpet matched the drapes—”

Another shower of popcorn joins the first as I burst out laughing. “Okay, okay. Put on my man in black before I’m buried in kernels.”

CHAPTER 3



WREN

“I’m locking up in five, Wren.”

My boss’s voice calls through the gallery and into the studio beyond. I glance at my wristwatch, disbelief coloring my features, when I realize it’s almost 9 p.m.

I pull out my cell and quickly shoot a message to my mom.

ME

Running late. You pick the movie. I’ve got snacks.

I make short work of cataloging the final sale pieces from Frederick Hanson’s show last week, my eyes running lovingly across the canvas of my favorite piece, ‘The Bay At Midnight.’

It’s a landscape he painted from the front porch of his house, looking out over Little Peconic Bay, and it’s not just a little reminiscent of Starry Night with his Van Gogh-style staccato brush strokes holding me a willing prisoner.

“You lost back there?”

Delilah Porter’s voice rouses me from my obsession as my cell chimes with a text.

I call out, “Coming, Mrs. Porter.” Then, I loop my crossbody bag over my shoulder, scanning the space one final time before making my way toward the main floor while

quickly scanning my cell. I frown when I find she's not replied.

ME

Can you pick a hot man in a black suit, though?

Grinning, I drop my cell phone into my bag and beeline for the door where my boss is texting at speed. Her pretty features are drawn into a deep frown.

“Everything okay?”

She looks up, shaking her head with clear exasperation. “Matty visited his dad today.”

I wince as she opens the door, the light breeze from outside a balm across my face when I step out into the cool spring night. “I’ll call him, Mrs. Porter.”

“Oh, would you?” Relief dashes across her face as she expels a deep sigh. “Sometimes, you and Levi are the only ones who can get through to him about this stuff.”

Once we’ve said our goodbyes, I immediately dial Matt’s cell as anxiety pools in the pit of my stomach. Matt’s dad, Lennon Porter, is a well-known, very respected surgeon living in the city with his twenty-one-year-old pregnant wife, Sloane.

Sure, the fact that he is old enough to be her father doesn’t sit well with Matt, but it’s more so the fact that Sloane met Lennon while she was dating Matt’s older brother, Marcus.

And the fact that Marcus had up and disappeared shortly after discovering his father’s intention to marry his ex-girlfriend. Not that anyone could have blamed him.

“Did she tell you to call me?”

Matt’s voice transfers from my ear to the Bluetooth car speaker. “No, but she did tell me you visited him today.”

“Asshole. He’s a *fucking* asshole, Neve.”

I pull out onto the almost empty street, heading for home with a concerned frown. He only uses that silly childhood pet

name for me when he's in a really bad way, almost like a calling card.

“You should have told me you were going to the city. I'd have taken the day to come with—”

“I have a sister now, Wren.”

My stomach dips as silence surrounds me for the space of several long minutes until he blows out a breath.

“Sloane had the baby yesterday. They called her Colbie.” Then he sighs heavily, and I can feel his barely concealed frustration over the line. “He asked me to come. I thought it might help...until—until he said Colbie has Marcus's nose. Then I fucking lost it.”

I cringe as I take the turn for my driveway, hitting the fob to open the secure gates as I do.

Fucking asshole is putting it mildly.

“Oh, Matt. I'm so sorry. Do you want me to cancel with Mom?”

The words have barely left my mouth, when my brows pucker in confusion.

Why is the house so dark? And where's Mom's car?

My car grinds to a halt in the pitch-black gravel driveway in front of a house that is usually lit up like a Christmas tree, thanks to Mom's obsession with fairy lights. But there's not a shred of light to be found.

The entire house and surrounding space in our secluded driveway are obscured in tenebrous shadows that don't exactly beckon me closer.

I kill the ignition, and the sound of Matt's voice renders the silence.

“Umm, maybe. I—”

“Stop talking.”

My words are sharper than necessary as a prickle of fear runs up my spine, and I strain to hear any kind of noise. Our

weekly movie night is *never* canceled. Never re-arranged.

This is weird.

“Matt, I’ll call you back.” My words are a mere whisper before I end the call as he tries to ask what’s wrong. I take a deep, steadying breath and open the door of my car.

As I step out onto the gravel, the sound of my feet crunching over the stones is almost as loud as the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

My cell phone starts to ring in the car, and I silently curse Matt for calling back as I crack open the front door of my house as quietly as possible.

There’s movement to my left, but before I can twist about to see who’s there, I feel a blow to my temple, and the world fades to black.

The sound of papers shuffling is the first thing I become aware of. Followed by a pager going off and muffled voices speaking words that make no sense to me.

“Miss Caputo?”

Slowly, I force myself to open my eyes, blinking several times before the bright room around me comes into focus. My heart palpitates when I realize I have no idea where I am.

A young woman, who couldn’t be much older than me, is standing to my right. My eyes move past her, haltingly taking in my surroundings.

I’m clearly in a hospital room, and judging by the skyscrapers outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, I’m somewhere in the city. With absolutely zero recollection of how I came to be here.

My breathing becomes labored, and my ears fill with a buzzing noise as my brain tries to make sense of everything.

“Miss Caputo, my name is Dr. Tessa Marshall.”

I nod as my suddenly tear-filled eyes find hers once more, panic filling me from head to toe.

“You are a patient at Brant Hamilton Memorial Hospital.” Her green orbs soften as she pauses before she gently questions, “Do you remember how you got here?”

“N—” My answer seizes in my dry throat, and she’s quick to raise a glass to my dry lips. Once I’ve taken a sip, I try again. “N-no. I...I don’t remember.”

She nods in understanding. “What’s the last thing that you *do* remember?”

My eyes flicker between hers before I allow my lashes to fall shut as my last memory replays in the depths of my mind.

“I was in the car, driving home from work.” My brain works to catch up. “I—I was talking to Matty...”

I trail off and open my eyes. “And then...there’s nothing.” My brows crease in frustrated annoyance. “Why can’t I remember?”

The kind doctor places her hand on my forearm. “You had a severe concussion, Miss Caputo. It *appears* that you sustained an extreme blow to the head during the events that took place at your home. Some memory loss is common.”

“The events...” My blood runs cold. “What events? I—I don’t understand.”

She smiles sadly. “Most memory loss like yours is mild, Miss Caputo. Your memories should return over time.”

“I want my mom. Is she here?”

Dr. Marshall’s face takes on a pained expression before she gently squeezes my arm. “There is a detective waiting who wishes to speak with you, Miss Cap—”

“A detective?” My already racing heart threatens to beat clear out of my chest.

The doctor holds up a stalling hand, her expression cautious and concerned. “Yes, Miss Caputo. He would like to speak with you. Whenever you are feeling up to it, and I

believe he will be able to answer any of your questions more capably than I could.”

“But I’m ready now.”

“You should take some—”

“No.” I push myself up in the bed despite the room beginning to spin. “I *need* to know what is going on. *Now!*”

My stomach is churning in nauseous anticipation as Dr. Marshall tips her chin silently. “I’ll send him in momentarily.”

The door closes behind her with a quiet *snick*, and I take several steadying breaths in nervous apprehension.

Keep it together, Caputo. Find your calm.

I inhale deeply, holding the breath before blowing it out heavily.

Find. Your. Calm.

Slowly, a vision forms behind my closed eyelids of me standing before an easel, paintbrush in hand. Between the images flowing through my mind and the calming deep breaths, I manage to get myself under control.

Then my heart lurches in my chest when the door opens, and a tall blonde man steps inside.

“Miss Caputo, I’m Detective Joseph Fratelli from the South Brook Police Department. We were alerted to a disturbance at your residence by your friend, Matthew Porter.” He pauses, apparently giving that a moment to sink in.

When he’s met with my unblinking silence, he continues. “Would you feel comfortable answering a couple of questions for me today?”

“Where’s my mom?”

“Dr. Marshall said you don’t recall what happened.”

I sit up straighter, frowning deeply despite the shooting pain in my temple. “Where. Is. She?”

He shuffles agitatedly at each clearly enunciated word. Somehow, I *know* that what’s about to come out of his mouth

isn't something I want to hear, so I brace myself for his next words.

“There appears to have been an intruder at your residence. Evidence at the scene, alongside your head trauma, lead us to believe foul play was involved.”

“Oh my God!” Tears fill my eyes, cresting my lashes to run down both cheeks. “Is my mother...is she okay?”

He stops and clears his throat before his next statement cleaves a hole in my chest.

“Miss Caputo, your mother is missing.”

CHAPTER 4



VAUGHN

A sharp rap on my door has me lifting my head from the ledger on my desk as I try to get ahead of myself before my scheduled intervention of sorts with Alex DeMarco and Grayson Hunter later today.

Both men work for the global entertainment giant DeMarco Holdings, and though Alex was a frequent visitor here before meeting his wife, Grayson has never set foot in the club. Only my office.

Lucia's head pops inside my slightly ajar office door. "Nolan will be in *Ravish* later."

I roll my eyes before dropping my forehead to my desk. "*Fuck me!*"

"No thanks!" She disappears with a smile in her voice at my obvious disdain.

The last fucking person I want to play nice with this evening is Nolan fucking Fritz.

My cell rings before I can get back to my ledger, and my eyebrows shoot up to my hairline when I spot the caller.

South Brook P.D. That could be only one person.

"Joseph Fratelli! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I knew Jo through Lorenzo from back in high school, and though I'd contacted him to ask that he keep an eye on Sara when she bought her house out in South Brook, we'd not exactly stayed in touch.

He doesn't preamble. "It's about Sara Ricci, V."

There's a heavy pause before he continues. "She's missing."

"What the fuck happened?"

"It appears there was a break-in. Ren was hurt and—"

"Where's Ren now?" The thought of something bad happening to Lorenzo's son is something I can't handle. I've not seen Sara since Renzo's burial, and I've stayed out of her and her child's lives, not only out of respect for her wishes, but also because contact with me usually ends up with people getting hurt.

"That's actually what I need to speak to you about."

I frown deeply, but murmur my assent. "Go on."

"Evidence at the scene leads us to believe that Ren may come to further harm. That the break-in may well have been by someone known to both Sara and Ren. And I remember after what happened with Lorenzo, you'd turned into a security freak, so..."

He trails off as realization dawns. "You want Ren to come and stay with *me*?"

"Yes. I believe it's the best call. You won't let anything happen to h—"

Alex, arriving right on time for Grayson's intervention, walks in my door as I cut Jo off. "Can't you put the kid in WITSEC or something?"

Alex stops in his tracks as Jo replies, "It doesn't work like that, Vaughn. Besides, you know you'll regret it if you don't do this. And what if something worse happens..."

I scrub my hands down my face as Jo amps up the guilt. "Renzo would want you to watch over his kid. He'd trust you to do the right thing."

Silence weighs heavily between us as I allow those words to settle deeply into my already guilt-laden conscience. I expel

a breath, straightening my spine as I respond the only way I can.

“I’ll be at work, Joseph. You’ll need to come here.”

I don’t even attempt to keep the resignation from my tone as Joseph recites the details for when he’ll drop the newly turned twenty-year-old over to me. Once I hang up the call, Alex pins me with concerned eyes.

“Everything okay?”

I inhale through my nose before voicing my aggression at the top of my lungs. “*Fuck!*”

Flopping down into my chair, I blow out a breath before checking my wristwatch, noting that Gray isn’t due to arrive for another couple of minutes.

“I’ve known you long enough now, Burton, to know you don’t lose your cool. *Ever.*” I shift my gaze to Alex as he regards me with concern. “So whatever that call was about, spit it out quickly so we can clear the air before Grayson gets here.”

I’ve never told a living soul of the guilt that I carry with me, but even so, the words spill heedlessly from my lips.

“Did I ever tell you how I could afford to buy Verity out of this place?”

He shakes his head.

“My mum died when I was twelve. We’d just moved to the States, and she was working diner shifts most nights while I was sleeping.”

I stop, realizing how he may judge her for leaving me alone while she worked nights. “We were *broke*. She couldn’t afford a sitter. It made sense, you understand? Anyway, one morning, on her way home from the graveyard shift, she was mugged by some junkie who pushed her out onto the road into heavy traffic. A cab hit her...”

I trail off, remembering those dark days. The uncertainty of where I was to go. Until the Caputos.

“There was no one to take me, and I’d have gone into the system had it not been for Julia, our neighbor—and the mother of the older boy who would become my best friend, Lorenzo. We had some good times when I moved into the Caputo’s apartment. I shared a room with Renzo, even though he was three years my senior, and we did *everything* together.”

I press my lips together in a half-smile as I watch Alex. “And when I say everything, I mean *everything*. We lost our virginity to the same girl at the same time, for fuck’s sake.”

I can’t help but laugh darkly. “I was only fourteen, but we were inseparable.”

My brows knit as I recall precisely when everything began to change. “We developed an idea together – I was in his advanced physics class, if you’d believe. I could have been *anything*. Mum always said I could.”

I snort at that.

If you could see me now, Mum...

“Renzo’s brains and my drive saw it come to fruition. All of a sudden, companies were beating down Julia’s door, trying to buy the patent for our...no, for *his* work. And well, when the US government came knocking—”

“*No way!*”

I chuckle at the same disbelief that mirrors my own. “Yeah. We sold it. Made a small fortune, and Renzo continued to work with them developing new projects while I finished high school, much to my disgust. Motherfucker *loved* it, though.”

My smile is sad as I continue. “But he loved nothing as much as he worshipped the girl next door, Sara Ricci. Christ, if she told him to jump off a skyscraper, he’d have asked which one.”

I shake my head, visions of Renzo assaulting my senses, making the empty space in my chest throb painfully. “And when she told him she was pregnant—despite the fact he hadn’t long turned twenty-one—he was over the moon. And it

was because of that...because his dreams were coming true, that he wanted to help me achieve mine.”

A heavy silence follows before Alex asks the inevitable question. “And what was your dream, Vaughn?”

I don’t miss a beat, allowing my deep-seated, often nurtured hatred to course through my veins. “To dismantle everything my piece of shit father valued. Namely, this place. And so, Renzo gave me enough money so that I could approach Verity with more money than she could say no to. The rest is history.”

“So, where is he now?”

“Dead.”

The single word echoes through the office, ringing through my ears as I keenly feel his loss all over again.

“The dispute with the scum who needed *Ravish* to remain open...well, it escalated to the point where I wasn’t able to leave the safety of the club without a threat on my life. And Renzo was caught in the crosshairs when they couldn’t get to me.”

Nolan fucking Fritz.

What I wouldn’t do to see that power-hungry sadist get what was coming to him.

“*Fuck!* I’m so sorry, Burton.”

“Don’t be sorry for me. Be sorry for Sara. A single mom before their son even arrived into the world. Be sorry for Lorenzo’s kid, growing up without his father. She named him Ren, you know.”

My smile is bittersweet as I recall how he wanted to call him Lorenzo the second. “He’d have fucking loved that shit.”

Walking to the drinks cabinet, I make short work of fixing a tumbler of whisky each.

“I’ve ensured that they have both been taken care of financially. Nice house, all the best schools for Ren, more money than they could spend in a million lifetimes...”

I return to my seat. “The only way Sara agreed to take the money was if I was removed entirely from their lives. And I’ve *always* kept to the terms...until now.”

“Why now?”

“Because Sara vanished last week, and foul play is suspected in her disappearance. There’s a very real possibility that Ren is in danger, too.”

I nod at my discarded cell on the desk between us. “That was Joseph Fratelli, the lead detective on the case and a personal friend of mine. He thinks the only place Ren will be safe is *here*. With me. But to do that means breaking my promise to his mother, and—”

The door of the office slams open to admit a disheveled Grayson Hunter.

“I’m here. What’s so important that I needed to delay my trip?”

He moves into the office, sullenly taking a seat beside Alex with a scowl on his usually happy-go-lucky face.

“How are you doing, Gray? How are the twins holding up?” Alex’s voice is brimming with concern for the man before us, who undoubtedly feels as though he’s lost everything.

I stand from my seat to fetch a tumbler of Macallan for Grayson, CFO to Alex at DeMarco Holdings.

Gray’s eyes are red-rimmed, his skin dull and lackluster. His dirty blonde hair is disheveled, and he looks nothing like his usually impeccably put-together self.

It’s not surprising that he’s a shadow of his former self, having lost his wife and childhood sweetheart, Talia, last month in a horrendous car crash. It had been touch and go with his daughter Gracie, who’d also been in the crash, which would have only added to his burden.

He sighs deeply as he accepts the drink from my hand. “We’re alive. Is that to be considered a triumph or something?”

My eyes find Alex's concerned ones before I voice the question on both our minds. "I know it's only been a month, but have you given thought to Talia's parents' request?"

He pins me with a thunderous stare. "Not fucking happening. Our kids won't be another trophy for their collection."

He takes a sip of his drink. "It's all about image to them. To my parents, too. Tali and I hated that shit. Even as kids, we agreed that we'd never put *our* future kids through what we went through. No way. They stay with me. *Always*. End of discussion."

Alex sits forward, even as Grayson's face becomes harder. His jaw is clenched so tight he's in danger of chipping a tooth. "Why are you going to Vermont, Gray? You're cutting yourself off from everyone who cares for you. Surely, that's not—"

I see the moment Gray snaps, rising to stand and hurl his tumbler across the room. It smashes to pieces as he turns on Alex.

"Have you ever lived with loss, DeMarco? Not just the loss of the woman I love and miss beyond all imagining. But the loss of what *should* have been. The loss of what will *never* be. And if traveling along the last path that she took brings Parker and Gracie a semblance of peace, then I'll continue to do it until I can't anymore."

His shoulders sag, the wind deflating from his sails as swiftly as it filled them, and he turns toward the door.

"I'll be staying in Vermont for the foreseeable. I can't give you a date for my return to the office – and being frank, I couldn't care less if I ever—"

His words are low, barely reaching my ear, but something inside them speaks to me, and so I can't help cutting him off softly.

"I've lived with loss, Grayson. Do whatever you need to do to get by, but please remember...grief is like the ocean."

I swallow past a lump in my throat as I hold the eyes of an unmoving Grayson.

“It’s vast...and it’s deep. Some days, the water is still and serene. While on other days, the waves almost drag you under in their ferocity. It’s up to *you* to learn how to swim.”

There have been days since Lorenzo’s passing when I’ve felt like giving up, and I can see the same suffering in the eyes of the man before me.

He nods once before ducking out the door, and I make a silent mental note to keep in closer contact with him.

If ever a man needed a friend, it’s Grayson Hunter right the fuck now.

CHAPTER 5



WREN

“What?”

I swing accusing eyes around to pin Detective Fratelli, the man assigned to Mom’s disappearance, in place. “What do you mean, I can’t go home?”

He swallows heavily, his grip on the steering wheel tightening considerably as I stare at his side profile. His unshaven jaw tics before he repeats himself.

“You can’t go home.”

I blink slowly in disbelief. “And you didn’t tell me this before now because...”

Having been discharged from Brant Hamilton Memorial Hospital less than an hour ago, I had planned on making my way across town to Levi at NYU, but when Detective Fratelli offered me a ride and an update on the case, I’d jumped at the chance.

The news that I can’t return to my own space puts me more than a little on edge.

Fratelli ignores me as he pulls into a parking space, shifting around in his seat to face me head-on. “Miss Caputo, I think it’s safer for you to stay with someone your parents would trust implicitly, and because of that—”

“My Uncle Anthony has a penthouse here in the city. He’ll be back in a couple of days.”

I'd made the hard call to not inform my uncle of Mom's disappearance over the phone. He'd worked long and hard on the business deal he was currently closing in Abu Dhabi, and I wouldn't be the one to mess it up for him.

"You can't stay alone, Miss Ca—"

"I'll call my friend, Matt. I can stay at his place for the next—"

"That won't work either, Miss Cap—"

I cut him off with a haughty snarl. "I'm a grown *woman* of twenty years old, Detective, and you won't—"

"Now listen here, Wren." The mild-mannered detective disappears before my very eyes as an intense Joseph Fratelli leans formidably closer. "I didn't want to frighten you, but you've left me no choice. You need to understand that there's a very real possibility that whoever hurt you might come back to finish the job."

I blink owlishly, his words taking their sweet time to sink in, and once they do, the hair on the back of my neck stands tall. All I can do is nod numbly before mumbling, "So, where do you propose I stay instead?"

"There."

He points across the street, my eyes following the motion to land on the unmistakable deep purple sign for the infamous Rogue, home of the man who had begun my fixation with black suits.

I would never have known that the owner of a rumored sex club was the man from my Nonna's funeral had I not seen Vaughn Burton featured in the gossip pages alongside the soon-to-be wife of my other massive crush, Caden North, several years ago. But once I laid eyes on the man in black, I knew immediately that they were the same person.

"I don't understand, Detective. Why would my parents trust Vaughn Burton?"

Fratelli's forehead bunches in confusion. "Have you never met him before?"

When I shake my head, he scratches his. “That’s odd. He and your father were joined at the hip. Not to mention, he was practically adopted by your nonna.”

My mind races at his words, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest.

Breath catching in my throat, I force out the question I need to ask. “Vaughn Burton is the same Vaughn that my Nonna Julia fostered?”

I blink slowly as Fratelli nods.

His being at the graveyard the day of her funeral makes complete sense now. But *why* did I not know this previously? Why would my mother keep him a secret?

Even the devil was once an angel.

Those often-pondered words wander through my thoughts once more, and as always, I’m none the wiser as to what he meant by them.

“I’ve spoken to him, and he’s in agreement to having you stay with him for a while.”

“I—I can’t. I have work. I can’t just—”

The detective’s voice is kind but firm when he cuts me off. “I’ve spoken to Delilah Porter. Your job is perfectly secure and will be waiting for you once this is all over. You need to do as I say, Miss Caputo. I promise I’ll keep in touch with you regarding the case, and in staying here, you won’t have to be alone.”

He leans closer with a self-satisfied smile. “Plus, Burton is meticulous when it comes to security. I’ve known him for a long time. You’ll be safe with him. Trust me.”

As I sit there, digesting this newfound information whilst simultaneously wondering why it’s news to me—and how disgusted I am to have spent years hero-worshipping someone who’s practically my uncle—Fratelli pulls out his cell as he slides out of the car.

“Come on. I’ll let him know we’re here.”

Ducking out of his car, I contemplate the vast building across the street that will seemingly be my home away from home for the coming days.

Its red brick façade spans the entire length of the tree-lined cobblestone street. The only indication that it's anything other than a residence is the large doors leading inside and the currently unlit spotlights dotting the walls.

When we reach the entrance, Detective Fratelli looks up at the burly staff member as he flashes his badge. "Detective Joseph Fratelli, South Brook P.D. We're here to see Vaughn Burton."

The barrel-chested man nods, gesturing us inside. "I'll have someone let him know. He's expecting you."

As we walk through the opening foyer, the detective's cell rings. He checks the screen, then lets out an expletive. "I need to take this. Go on inside."

Then he strides back out onto the cobbled street, leaving me alone to venture farther inside.

None of the cleaning staff glance up from their work as I amble past them, my eyes taking in the beauty of my surroundings.

Dozens of seating areas with loungers that look more like beds are enclosed by sheer drapes, undoubtedly giving guests the illusion of privacy. Long bars line either side of the space with unlit neon blue signs reading *Rapture* above the shelves of liquor bottles.

I can only imagine what it looks like in all its glory.

"We're closed, Miss."

A deep voice behind me makes me spin around, my hand flying to my chest in shock.

There's a tall man wearing a black cowboy hat staring down at me. His piercing blue eyes are shockingly bright against his deeply tanned face.

His lips are pressed together, and there is not a hint of emotion on his features. "Excuse me. I have an appointment to

see Mr. Burton.”

He quirks a disbelieving brow. “I doubt that.”

Squaring my shoulders, I stand taller and pop a brow of my own. “Please tell him that Wren Caputo is here to see him.”

“Wren Caputo?”

I nod sharply before thrusting my chin up in challenge.

The cowboy blinks once, then twice before a dazzling smile overtakes his features, turning him from good-looking to drop-dead gorgeous. He chuckles deeply inside his broad chest. “Oh, this will be *priceless*.”

He turns, jerking his head for me to follow. “Follow me.”

I trail after him, suddenly anxious as I glance about in search of Detective Fratelli, altogether certain that this is *not* a good idea.

I follow my companion through a hidden side door and down a maze of corridors until he leads me up a red-carpeted staircase.

Once we reach the top, I follow the cowboy into a large, very masculine office.

“Wait here, Miss Caputo. I’ll be right back with Vaughn.”

VAUGHN

“This shit is going to stop, Lucia, or I swear...”

I trail off, fists clenched almost as hard as my jaw while I stare at the uncompromising face of my second-in-command.

She arches a brow. “You swear *what*, bossman?”

Nostrils flaring, my upper lip curls in disgust at the nickname I *know* she used for *him*. Her eyes are unwavering as she crosses her arms in defiance.

My loyal bodyguard, Jules, informed me earlier today that Lucia has been skimming from the top. Short-changing lots at auction and giving herself the lion's share.

When I'd been strong-armed into keeping *Ravish* open, the one thing I'd been insistent upon was ensuring the willing women who sold themselves to those twisted souls were decently paid for their services.

I may be happy to allow Lucia to oversee *Ravish* simply because I'd rather not, but she still needs to understand who holds the power.

Before she can blink, I've crossed the space between us to grip her upper arms hard enough that she flinches openly.

Her startled eyes meet mine, and I almost smirk, my inner sadist roaring to life.

"Just because I'd prefer to wash my hands of this shit show doesn't mean I'll allow you free rein, Lucia." I increase my grip, and she grits her jaw as she furrows her brow, clearly determined to stand firm.

And so, I bridge the gap between our faces until our noses are almost touching. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly despite her otherwise cool composure.

"*Don't* forget who runs this club now, Miss Romano, because if you do..." I narrow my eyes into slits. "I can guarantee you won't like the outcome."

My cell chimes in my pocket, saving my power-hungry employee from the full force of my wrath, and I pluck it out to check the message.

JOSEPH

I'll be at Rogue in the next five minutes.

I shoot him a quick thumbs up, then with a final dark stare for Lucia, I pivot on my heel and stride from the changing rooms adjoining *Ravish*. My feet eat the ground between there and my office, needing a couple of minutes to prepare myself

for meeting with the son of the man whose death stains my conscience.

Reaching the stairs leading to my office, I take them two at a time, raking my right hand through my unusually messy black hair as my left grips the door handle.

I step inside, expecting to find the room empty, only to stop short when my dark eyes land on a woman with a warm-brown high ponytail leading down to a slender neck, her narrow shoulders covered by a simple white T-shirt.

She twists about on the seat, her mesmerizing gray eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my feet stall, and my heart freezes in my usually empty chest cavity.

“Mr. Burton.” Her words come out on an exhalation.

Her husky tone sends a jolt of desire straight to my cock, and I step closer, silently thanking whoever sent this motherfucking vision my way.

“One and the same.” My lips tug upward. “And who are you?”

She stands and closes the distance between us until our toes are almost touching. Her body is petite and slender, and I resist the urge to palm the slight curve of her hip as she stares up at me with questioning eyes.

“Who are you, my little bird?” She tilts her head to one side at my words. “*Tell me.* I need your words.”

She holds my eyes unflinchingly as she darts a pointed pink tongue out to wet her pouty lips.

Lips that are utterly perfect for sucking my dick.

Yes fucking please.

“I’m—”

The door opens behind me, and I twist about, thunder in my eyes. “Who the *fuck*—”

Joseph Fratelli steps inside, a chagrined look on his slim face. “Sorry, I’m late—”

His eyes narrow as they take in the girl before me. She blinks several times, her gray eyes hardening as she moves away to take a seat once more.

“Christ, Jo. Heard of knocking?” I step around my desk, eyes trained on the beauty before me.

“And you may *leave* now, little bird.”

My words sour in my mouth even as I speak them, and I open a drawer at my desk, pretending to mess about with paperwork that I couldn't care less for.

“Leave? *Now?*” She barks a laugh. “Believe me, I'd like nothing so much as to go home, Mr. Burton.”

The rage in her tone makes my hard cock throb, and I swallow harshly when her words hit my ears. I push aside my raging horn as I lift my head, ready to retort, only for Joseph to cut me off.

“Vaughn, meet Wren Caputo. She will be staying with you while we search for her mother.”

CHAPTER 6



VAUGHN

My temporary ward of sorts blinks those gray eyes of hers, her long black lashes fanning across the expanse of her cheekbones as I race through my spiraling thoughts.

The kid I've been expecting is most assuredly *not* a kid at all.

Wren Caputo is *all* woman.

The thought puts a frown on my face, and I feel more than a little deceived, entirely blaming the beauty before me.

The *daughter* of my dead best friend.

The *daughter* of that same friend, whose death hangs around my neck like a lead weight.

Had Renzo lived, I'd most likely be her fucking *uncle*.

I will my dick to deflate while I regard her with emotionless eyes, but the fucker has the morals of an alley cat, pressing against my suit pants, reminding me that morals are for the weak.

I waste no time in ramming my carefully crafted invisible shield into place, keeping her and everyone else at an arm's length.

"Welcome to Rogue, Wren." My cool tone matches my gaze, and her eyes narrow slightly as I continue, forcing my tone to soften ever so minutely. "I was concerned to hear of your mother's disappearance."

She inclines her head in acknowledgment as I shift my gaze to Fratelli. “Any update?”

Jo, clearly oblivious to what passed between Wren and me before he joined us, launches into a tirade about the lack of overtime funding in the force. I will myself to at least half listen, my interest piqued when he mentions a missing neighbor.

“In my rounds, I’ve found one of the neighbors didn’t show up for work the night of the break-in. I’m just—”

My eyes land on Wren’s beautifully alarmed face as she blurts out, “It wasn’t Elliott Porter, was it, Detective Fratelli?”

Jo turns his baffled eyes toward her. “How did you guess that?”

Wren shakes her head over and over. “It can’t be a coincidence. It *can’t*.” She slaps the heel of her palm off her forehead several times, making Jo reach for her as she cries out frustratedly, “Why can’t I remember?”

She looks from Jo to me and back again. “It’s not public knowledge, but Dr. Porter has been on several dates with Mom...”

Jo exchanges a glance with me before gripping Wren’s upper arm gently. “This is helpful, Wren. This could lead to something.” She smiles tremulously as he stands back. “You have my card, so contact me *any time*. I’ll check into this Dr. Porter business and get back to you ASAP.”

He moves to leave, grabbing his jacket from the back of the chair he’d been seated in, but before he gets to the door, my words stop him.

“My associate, Ford Holloway, would be more than happy to help you out with the case, Jo. No additional funding required.”

Jo grins back at me. “Give him my details.” He opens the door, nodding one last time at a blatantly shaken Wren. “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me with...*her*.

Damn it all to hell.

WREN

“Where’s your luggage?”

Vaughn’s bark makes me sit up straighter, shaking my head. “I—I don’t have any.”

He sighs heavily as Detective Fratelli closes the door, but before he can respond, it opens again to reveal the cowboy from downstairs.

“Ah. I see you found *Wren*.” He smirks at Vaughn, who only scowls in reply.

The man from my memory, the one who made me smile on a difficult day, the one I’ve watched from afar for years now, is a million miles removed from the man I’ve met today.

This Vaughn Burton isn’t just cold. He’s a motherfucking glacier. And the way he’d looked at me when he’d stepped into his office had been nothing short of predatory.

Even the devil was once an angel.

It’s beginning to make sense now.

The man my father grew up with and trusted is no longer present. Replaced by an enigma in an immaculately tailored black suit.

Despite myself, I feel my lower stomach tighten as heat flows through my entire body. My eyes greedily inhale his dark, demanding, wholly intoxicating presence as he converses lowly with the still-grinning cowboy.

Suddenly, his midnight black gaze whips around to find mine, almost as though he could feel me watching him. And rather than look away as is my initial reaction, I hold his stare with a defiant tilt of my chin.

My breathing speeds up as neither of us relinquishes, our gazes colliding like two meteors in orbit. Both set on course

and unable—or perhaps unwilling—to divert.

He looks away first, and I feel a sharp surge of victory until he speaks one final time, and this time, it's loud enough to carry to my ears.

“And set some ground rules, too.”

Vaughn's harshly spoken words make me grit my teeth as he strides out the door without a backward glance.

“I'm Ford, by the way.” The cowboy gives me an apologetic half-smile, holding the door open for me. “Come on. I'll bring you upstairs to the living quarters.”

My eyes are fixed on Ford's broad back as he leads me to my new room above Rogue.

“So, ground rules, Miss Caputo.” Ford shoots a look over his shoulder as he places his palm on a biometric scanner of sorts. The action results in the wall sliding open to reveal a hidden elevator.

“First rule. No visitors. Vaughn is *very* particular about who he associates with. Guests to the suite here at Rogue and to his townhouse in Lenox Hill are by personal invitation *only*.”

I nod as I follow him onto the elevator. “That's fine with me.”

The doors close, moving us upward as Ford moves on.

“Second rule. You are not allowed downstairs between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. When it comes to mealtimes, there's a fully stocked kitchen, or if you prefer, takeout can be arranged.”

I snort. “Full disclosure. I've managed to burn a pan of water before...”

I can feel his eyes on me as I trail off, so I turn to meet his light gaze. “I'll adjust that rule. No cooking allowed.”

The elevator doors slide open, and I stop to take in the apartment as Ford moves off down a hallway to my right.

The entire place is decorated in hues of reds, browns, and black. An open-plan living space, including an expansive kitchen and dining area, is lit up with natural light pouring in the large, arched windows at the front of the building.

Having looked my fill, I quickly follow an impatient-looking cowboy, and we pass several closed black doors.

“Third rule. Respect Vaughn’s privacy.”

He opens a door, gesturing for me to step inside the room. “This is your room while you’re in Tribeca. The other rooms are unlocked, as is Vaughn’s preference; *however*, he would prefer if you kept to your own space.”

He gestures toward the door opposite mine. “If you were to wind up in *there*, he’d just about have a shit fit. He’s ornery at the best of times.”

I crack a small smile at that. “What a perfect word for him.”

A flash of perfect white teeth makes me smile even wider before Ford sobers. “I’ll check in on you. Vaughn has asked that I liaise with the detective in regard to your case, so I’ll be sure to keep you informed.”

He tips his head before closing my door and leaving me to my thoughts.

I flop back onto my new bed, throwing my hands over my face as I settle down into the soft red comforter.

Meeting Vaughn Burton in the flesh had been surreal. The man has only gotten more handsome over time, if such a thing is possible. But Christ, he is an asshole of the highest order.

“Who are you, my little bird?”

A chill races up along my spine as I remember his words, followed by a shiver when I recall the lack of feeling in his black eyes.

Clearly, he didn’t know about me despite having agreed to house me for the interim, which makes fuck all sense.

Unless he thought Wren was a boy's name. It has happened before when clients have come to the gallery, expecting to speak with one of my male colleagues.

Either way, he's a prick. A hot, sexy, soulless-eyed prick, but a prick just the same.

"Never meet your heroes, hmm?" The words are a low murmur when the comfort of the bed beneath me, alongside the flurry of activity from today, blend together, and sleep beckons.

My eyelids close for what feels like a moment until I wake with a jolt when the crappy replacement cell Detective Fratelli provided for me vibrates in my back pocket.

The room is shrouded in darkness, and I've clearly slept the day away. I berate myself internally as I lift my hips to slide it into my hand, grinning sleepily when I see it's a message to my group chat.

ELODIE

Can you die from excessive orgasms? Asking for a friend...

I roll my eyes with a snort. Elodie has recently begun seeing someone here in the city, and despite being very hush-hush about his identity, she's an open book when it comes to their sex life.

LEVI

Rub it in. Some of us haven't gotten laid since spring break last year.

ELODIE

Have you checked for cobwebs, Lev?

LEVI

Get fucked, Ellie.

ELODIE

Will do. Heading back for round three as I type.

My grin turns bittersweet as I swipe out of the chat, thinking better of joining in with their banter. Not because I don't want to, but because I've yet to tell any of them about what's going on with me.

Instead, I open a private thread with Matt.

ME

Can you talk, Matty?

My cell rings almost instantly, and I swipe to answer the video call.

Matt's distraught face pops up on the screen. "Holy shit, Wren. I've been going out of my motherfucking mind over here, waiting—"

"I'm sorry. I needed time..." Emotion swells in my throat as tears fill my eyes and my breath hitches. "I knew that speaking with you would make everything more...*real*."

"They wouldn't let me in to visit you at the hospital. Family only or some crap." He frowns at the screen, his familiar hazel eyes filled with intensity. "I tried *so* hard, Wren. That damn detective is a prick, let me tell you."

I half snort, half chuckle at that. "He's okay. He's just... being really thorough."

Matt sighs, running his hand through his messy brown curls. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"Thanks to you calling the police department."

He deadpans. "What did you expect me to do? Sit on my thumb when you weren't answering your cell?"

We share a smile, both grateful for this friendship we've had since kindergarten.

Matt's forehead puckers. "Where are you anyway? Do you need a ride home? I'll send the chopper if you need it."

I shake my head. "No, I'm okay. I—I'm safe. In the city."

He tilts his head in question. "Where?"

My mouth quirks with a wry grin. "Rogue in Tribeca."

His eyes blow comically wide as his mouth opens and closes uselessly. I can't stop myself from giggling at his priceless reaction.

"As in 'rumored sex club to the stars' Rogue in Tribeca?"

I nod as I press my lips together. "Mmm-hmm."

Once Matt manages to recover, I am quick to reassure him that I'm okay, that I'm not in danger, and that I will meet up with him soon, along with the girls and Levi, before we say goodnight.

I stare at my cell for several long minutes after we've hung up, deciding almost on impulse to try to call Mom's number. My heart sinks when it goes straight to voicemail, and I hang up with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat.

Where are you, Mom?

My stomach growls noisily as I plug in my cell to charge, so I poke my head out of the bedroom door, finding the living quarters empty. Making my way toward the kitchen on silent feet, I shoot up a quick prayer that there's cereal to be found because I wasn't kidding before when I told the cowboy I'd burned water.

The galley-style kitchen is lit by some dim strip lighting running above the cupboards, and the only other light is from the cobblestone streets outside of Rogue. I step closer to the kitchen island, spotting a handwritten note that I quickly scan.

Takeout menus are in the third drawer. Bill everything to the club.

I found your lack of personal belongings disturbing. You'll find everything you need in the studio to the left of the kitchen.

Stay out of my room, and I foresee no issues between us.

Mr. Burton

I scowl as I drop the note onto the marble island top.

Clearly, he's a rude prick, too.

I'm bristling with anger as I slide open the third drawer and grab the first menu I see.

Luciano's Deli.

The address is a stone's throw from Rogue, meaning delivery should be relatively fast, so once I've ordered a meatball marinara sub—ensuring to use *my* credit card at the checkout—I toss the menu back into the drawer and, with a dubious look on my face, walk into the studio off the kitchen.

It's shrouded in darkness, but I find a light switch by the door, and flick it on, only for my jaw to drop.

“What the...”

There are rails of clothes covering every inch of space alongside boxes of assorted footwear stacked taller than myself.

Packages from *Victoria's Secret*, not to mention bags, belts, hats, and a host of winter wear, despite the season, occupy the farthest corner.

And directly to my left, there's a desk with an unopened MacBook, a new iPhone, and a plethora of things I'd never dream of needing. A handwritten note is stuck to the desk.

Stacey, my personal shopper at Bergdorf's, picked out some items for you upon my request.

The sizing may be off, though I doubt it. I have a knack for these things.

I crumple the note in my fist even as I glance around the space, alternately grateful for his gesture and stunned at his audacity.

"The sizing may be off." I repeat his words in a huff as I march straight for the *Victoria's Secret* packages. Pulling out a cream balconette bra, I immediately check the size, my jaw ticking in frustration when I find he's guessed right.

"He's an even bigger prick than I thought."

CHAPTER 7



WREN

Having woken up to a continental breakfast and no prick in sight, I devour the lot and wade through the mountain of clothes in the studio to find simple black cargo pants and a top.

I try Mom's cell once again, surprised when it rings once before cutting to her voicemail. Once I've given it a minute, I dial once more, and this time, it goes straight to voicemail.

In my frustration, I send her a text on the off chance that it'll get read.

ME

I need you, Mom. Where are you?

I blow out a breath, glancing around the apartment to find *nothing* to keep my mind occupied and decide impulsively to check out my temporary home.

The rules state I'm not allowed downstairs between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., which I take to mean I can explore outside of those hours.

I make short work of tossing everything I need into my crossbody bag, and just as I'm about to press the call button for the elevator, the doors open.

"Morning, Miss Caputo."

The cowboy tips his black hat that should look ridiculously out of place here, but *somehow* it suits him. "I need to go through some security details with you, if you don't mind."

He steps to one side, indicating that I should step on with him. “Umm...okay.” Then I do as he bids before he presses the button to bring us down, the car easing to a halt before the doors open.

“This way.”

He leads me through several long corridors, taking two lefts, a right, another left and two rights before he finally places his hand on a scanner of sorts in the middle of a hallway.

A secret door reveals itself at the farthest end of the space, and he leads me into a room filled with computers, screens, and an array of devices I’ve never seen in my life.

“Take a seat. This won’t take long.”

Once I’m settled, he produces some sort of scanner and deposits it on the desk to my right. “Place your right hand on the machine, please, Miss Caputo. Keep your palm flush with the scanner.” He nods while I do as he’s instructed. “Yes, that’s perfect. Now, don’t move.”

The machine scans my palm for what feels like a long time before the light beneath my hand fades, and Ford stands, retrieving the scanner to connect it to the monitor before him.

As he types, he speaks over his shoulder. “I’m adding your handprint to the security database that allows access to certain parts of Rogue that are not open to the general public. Like the living quarters, and...”

He trails off, glancing sideways at me before finishing his sentence. “And other places that you won’t have access to. If you come across a biometric scanner that doesn’t allow you to gain access, then that place is purposefully out of bounds, as per the wishes of your host and my boss. You get me?”

I pop a brow that matches my cheeky grin. “Would these restricted *places* have anything to do with the rumors about the sex club here?”

He doesn’t miss a beat, even as his lips twitch. “I have *no* idea what you’re referencing, Miss Caputo.”

Twisting about in his seat, he's regained his composure as he passes me a sealed envelope with a now familiar scrawl on the outside.

"Vaughn asked that you read this before you go about your business today."

And with that, he's ushering me up out of my seat, unceremoniously escorting me from the room before leading me back through the maze we'd taken to get here. Once we're back outside the elevator door leading to the living quarters, he stops, turning to face me with a black pager in his hand.

"Send 123 on this pager regarding your stay here, your security, or if you have any questions about the ongoing investigation by the South Brook P.D." His piercing blue eyes harden as he pauses, his brows furrowing with intent. "And 911 in case of emergency. You're not alone."

I take the proffered device from his outstretched hand with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Ford. That's very kind of you."

The cowboy straightens his shoulders and, with a sharp nod, turns and strides back the way we'd come.

I rip open the envelope and pluck a small white card from inside.

*Do not leave the premises unless
accompanied by Ford.*

*You may use the key to access the
office opposite mine.*

You're welcome.

My brow furrows as I drop an old-fashioned metal key into my hand.

You're welcome?

I clench the key in my fist before shoving it into my back pocket. If that fucking jerk thinks he's going to be thanked for

allowing me to stay here during the investigation, then he's got another thing coming.

VAUGHN

I rub my neck with a yawn as I listen to Randolph, one of the day managers, bemoan the state of the main bar in *Rapture*. I really should be paying attention, but following my night attempting to sleep on my office couch instead of the comfort of my own damn bed, I'm really not in the mood for his shit.

I follow him toward the subject of our one-sided conversation despite the mountain of work I have waiting for me upstairs as he continues to drone on.

“And that's not even the half of it, Mr. Burton. If you look here—”

Randolph's words halt suddenly, and I follow the direction of his stunned gaze, my mild irritation rapidly turning to pure annoyance.

The reason for my horrible sleep is standing behind the bar in question instead of the designated space I'd painstakingly organized last night following some digging.

“Show me again!” Her laughing demand to a grinning Jules echoes across the entire floor, setting my teeth on edge. Then he grabs a liquor bottle from the bar and tosses it with his right hand in a shadow pass behind his head to catch it with his left hand.

Her giggle fills my ears, and my cock springs to life.

Fucker!

I swiftly adjust myself, the need for the action making anger swell in the pit of my stomach, and I cross the space with nothing short of venom painted all over my face.

“Jules!”

My bark makes him fumble the bottle, barely catching it before it meets the floor. Once he's carefully placed it on the bar, his bewildered eyes meet my reproachful ones.

“Yes, boss?”

“There's an...” My eyes flit to *her*—the bane of my existence, sent here to drive me crazy—mindful of what is said in her presence regarding *Ravish*, and I rephrase my sentence as I look back to Jules. “There's an *event* this evening, and I will require your presence. Go! Get some rest.”

He nods dutifully toward me, then apologetically toward her before turning on his heel and exiting *Rapture*.

She folds her arms, arching a delicate brow. “That was *rude*.”

Ignoring her entirely, I turn back toward Randolph, only to find he's only gone and fucked off.

Silently cursing the idiot, I twist my neck to glare at the pint-sized woman behind the bar. Her soft pink lips are turned downward in distaste, and her dark brows are now furrowed almost adorably.

Adorably?

I roughly shove the thought from my brain as quickly as it formed.

“I'm going back to work. They'll be readying the floor here shortly, so I suggest you find someone else to irritate.”

“If I irritate you so much, then why agree—”

She slams to a halt as I hold out a quelling palm. “*Don't* even ask.”

Just as I turn to leave, Lucia breezes by. “You're opening tonight, bossman—”

A lightbulb goes off inside my head, even as the nickname irks the shit out of me, and I cut her off with a grin that's nothing short of wicked. “Lucia! Your *bossman* has a job for you.”

Placing my hand firmly on her lower back, I propel her toward the bar.

“Meet Wren Caputo, my...*guest*.” Wren grimaces, extending her hand for Lucia to shake in greeting. “Wren, this is Lucia Romano. My second-in-command. She’s going to take you under her wing for the remainder of the day.”

Wren’s mouth drops, and Lucia stiffens as I pin her with dark eyes. “Stay out of trouble, ladies.”

Without another word, I march from *Rapture*, relief filling my body the farther I get from the object of my displeasure. The object my cock wants nothing more than to drive himself into as hard as possible, the dumb bastard.

As I’m about to exit the space, Wren’s voice calls out behind me. “I must say, I’m no cactus expert, Lucia. But I do know a *prick* when I see one.”

The joint laughter of both women haunts me the whole way to my office, ringing through my ears on repeat as I tackle the vetting process for tonight’s auction.

Lot after lot. Application after application. Every single image joins the others who’ve sold themselves under my hand, however unwilling. Images that will stay with me for the rest of my unworthy existence.

It’s a tedious task, made even worse every time my mind flashes back to the far too-appealing house guest who’s ruining not only my sleep but my ability to fucking work now too.

As I veto yet another applicant and drop their form into the follow-up file, I come to a decision.

I punch Joseph’s number into my cell and hit dial almost violently. He answers after three rings. “Detective Fratelli.”

“Any word on this Ricci case, Jo?”

“Ah, Burton. Good day to you too, friend.”

I don’t beat around the bush. “Did you find Sara?”

He heaves a sigh. “No, unfortunately, there’s no trace of her. All lines of inquiry have been a waste of time. I’m looking

into Dr. Porter's absence and whether it lines up with our case; however, his sister seems to think he was scheduled to be on vacation at present."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, eyes flickering closed in frustration. "If there's anything I can do to expedite the process...anything!"

Anything to get her daughter out of my goddamn hair...

"I'm in touch with your associate, and he's a damn good help. Currently, he's tracking both Sara's and Wren's movements over the last three months. Where they've been, who they've been with, anything that could point us toward a reason for Sara to up and leave...or, as the scene suggests, who could want to harm either woman."

I murmur an incoherent response, sick to my stomach at how much her presence is affecting me, and it's not even been twenty-four fucking hours.

"At least Wren is safe with you, eh, Burton?"

Having bid him farewell, stipulating that he keep in constant contact with me, I scrub my palms down my tired face as I glance at the office couch. Jo's words play on repeat in my head.

At least Wren is safe with you. Safe with you. Safe.

I doubt that, but clearly, Wren Caputo isn't going anywhere any time soon, and I'm done sleeping in my fucking office.

CHAPTER 8



WREN

Sunlight streaming through a crack in the blinds wakes me when it lands on my face, and I flop over onto my back to grab my cell from the nightstand.

I check the new text thread I started with Mom yesterday, noting that the messages I sent throughout the day are still unread.

My heart sinks even as I dial her number again, only for it to jump to life when the cell rings once, twice, three times before someone answers.

“Hello? Mom? Are you there?”

The sound of a man’s deep laugh, followed by a female voice—*Mom’s* voice, I would know it anywhere—answering fills my ears.

“Mom?”

Her tinkling laughter is my only reply, and then the line goes dead.

My whole face crumples in confusion as I dial her again while I shoot off a rapid page to the cowboy, hoping he’s true to his word. This time, the call goes straight to her voicemail, and the next three times that I retry have the same outcome.

There’s a sharp rap on my bedroom door, and I jump from the bed. “Just a sec!”

I throw on an oversized black hoodie that I’d stolen from the living room last night. I’d been cold after Lucia had

dropped me upstairs before she'd started her shift. It hangs almost to my knees, hiding my sleep shorts from view, and smells entirely too sexy.

Even so, I find myself inhaling deeply as I pull it over my face. Notes of bergamot, sandalwood, and some unplaceable, fully masculine scent fill my senses, making my insides riot in the desire for more.

Despite his exterior, Ford is a great big softie, so I'm unconcerned about having my legs on display. I throw open the door, only for my stomach to flip-flop uncomfortably.

Vaughn Burton is standing there, clad in nothing more than a pair of tight black Calvins that leave precisely *nothing* to the imagination. His legs are braced apart, muscular, tanned arms folded over his spectacular, intricately tattooed chest, and my senses ignite.

I attempt to take a steadying breath, only to inhale more of the tantalizing scent from my—no, *his*—hoodie. My eyes rake across each and every exposed inch of perfect flesh until they land on his smirking lips, eventually rising to his dark, impenetrable gaze.

“Careful now, Miss Caputo. I wouldn't want to ruin you for boys your age.”

His shit-eating wink quickly douses the fire within me, and I narrow my eyes as I completely ignore his taunt. “What do you want?”

He unfolds his arms in a graceful movement, leaning closer as he rests his palms on either side of the door frame. “Ford is away on business, so I have the sheer *pleasure* of answering your page today.”

His obsidian eyes turn predatory as they drop down along my body before slowly ambling back up to my face. “So... why the page, little bird?”

One side of his mouth tugs up in a grin that makes me want to kiss it off his face before slapping him.

Hard.

“Nothing you can help me with, Cactus.”

I move to close the door, but a large palm shoots out to slam against it as his eyes flash. “Don’t play games with me, Wren.”

All signs of playfulness have disappeared as he leans almost perilously closer. His sharp jaw tics. “Why. The. Page?”

Each word is enunciated succinctly in a low tone that I intuitively *know* is designed to strike fear, and instead of answering him like I know I *should*, like I know he expects me to, some newly created inner demon takes control.

“None of your damn business.” I draw myself up to my full five foot two inches before popping a haughty brow. “And I’ll thank you to remove yourself from the space you’ve so *kindly* provided in my time of need.”

His nostrils flare dangerously, but he does as instructed, removing his hand from my door so that I can close it, all the time maintaining eye contact until the door slides into the frame.

Once he’s out of sight, I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding before grabbing my cell and calling Detective Fratelli with a racing heart and shaking hands.

“Fratelli speaking.”

Resignation weighs heavily in his tone; however, after I’ve relayed the morning’s events, he sounds renewed and promises to keep me updated.

My stomach protests as I duck into the shower, but my desire to stay as far away as possible from my roommate of sorts is stronger than my hunger. It’s not until I’ve painstakingly taken my time dressing in black leggings and an oversized beige t-shirt that sits off one shoulder that I allow my need for food to win.

I open the bedroom door, taking care to make as little noise as possible before poking my head out to check for his presence.

Finding nothing, I tiptoe gingerly into the hall and make my way toward the kitchen, but before I can get far, my ears perk up when I hear music coming from the opposite direction.

Glancing over my shoulder, I notice an open door at the very end of the hallway, Topic and A7S's "Kernkraft 400 (A Better Day)" blaring from within, getting louder and louder as my footsteps cover the space almost unknown to me.

By the time my brain has caught up with my feet, I'm standing in the doorway with electricity pumping through my veins because *right there*, in all his glory, is Vaughn Burton.

The Vaughn Burton from before. The one from my imagination.

A walking, talking, living, breathing wet fucking dream.

He's covered in a light sheen of sweat, wearing boxing shorts, gloves, and nothing else as he pummels the living shit out of a punching bag.

My mouth literally salivates even as my core stirs, desire springing to life within me in the space of a heartbeat. I watch him uninterrupted as his muscles flex deliciously with each punch he lands, and I'm so enthralled that I don't even notice when the music has ended.

It's not until the sound of his grunts of exertion hit my ears that I find myself subconsciously rubbing my thighs together with each deep-chested, scandalously sexy groan.

After landing several resounding thuds, accompanied by those almost animalistic grunts that have made me wet beyond belief, his body relaxes, and he leans forward to rest his forehead against the punching bag.

"Like what you see, little bird?"

His voice has the effect of a whip, jolting me from my unwilling voyeurism, and I spin about, almost walking into the door frame as I try to leave. His laughter reverberates down the hall, following me all the way into the elevator until the door closes, and I grit my teeth at my stupid hormones.

Digging deep as the elevator drops between floors, by the time I reach the ground floor and a waiting Lucia, no doubt sent by Mr. Cactus himself, I'm smiling from ear to ear.

Ready, willing, and *more* than able to take that prick down a peg or ten.

VAUGHN

“Thanks for the non-existent update, Jo.”

I hang up the call and lean back in my desk chair, frustration flowing through my veins. She's been here two days now.

Two long fucking days of invading my space, charming my employees, and smelling altogether too fucking tempting.

I'm not someone who denies himself what he wants. Fuck that, life is too damn short.

A knock on the door makes me blow out a tired breath before Lucia pops her head in. “You're in *Rapture* tonight. A bachelor party for Tanner Heath, remember?”

Fuck!

“No, I'd forgotten all about it, apparently.”

She smirks as I rise, following her out the door. “Glad to help.”

I jog past her on the stairs, giving her shoulder a grateful squeeze as I go. She's been less of a pain in my ass since making her shadow Wren yesterday, and I give myself a mental clap on the back for a punishment well handled.

Once I've reached the living quarters, I rapidly hit the shower, thankful that Wren seems to be sequestered within her room. I'm not in the mood to spar with her right now. I can't seem to get my dumb cock to behave around her. The sadistic fucker seems to consider our interactions as foreplay.

I throw on the clothes that I must have left out for myself earlier today and race back downstairs to a jam-packed *Rapture*.

Tanner and his A-lister friends are all half-wasted, tugging some black-masked, scantily clad, more-than-willing servers onto their laps as several other performers gyrate for them atop a raised dais.

Once I've greeted each of my high-priority guests individually, Tanner makes space for me to join him in the center of the fun. I sit back against the deep purple booth, stretching my arms out on either side of me as both Tanner and his agent, Daryl, talk shit into my ears.

Realizing that my Calvins feel a bit tight, and as such, my groin is starting to feel overheated in there, I shift surreptitiously on the seat, trying to get comfortable.

These are going straight into the motherfucking trash.

I'm only half-listening to the conversation around me until, "Perhaps you'd be interested in allowing us to film Tanner's upcoming directorial debut here at Rogue?"

My head whips around to Daryl, jaw clenched. "You're aware that this club is private. Unless you know someone, there's no getting an 'in' here."

"We'd pay anything—"

"I couldn't give less of a shit how much money you offer me. The answer now and forever will be *no*."

My tone is firm, my words final, and Daryl knows it. "Can't blame a man for trying."

I smirk as I call out to a server I recognize to bring another round. "Make sure this one is on the house, Kendra."

Her eyes widen, and she smiles genuinely before replying with a self-satisfied wink, "Yes, *sir*."

As she makes her way to the bar, my eyes are drawn to her ass as I shift about in my too-tight underwear.

Maybe fucking those pouty lips will push the thought of one off-limits little bird out of my head.

“Excuse me, gentlemen.” I rise to stand, shooting the bachelor and his friends a knowing wink as my balls begin to tingle. “Duty calls.”

I follow Kendra to the sound of their catcalls, my feet swiftly catching up with her smaller steps, and the tingle in my balls rises to new heights. “Meet me in my office.”

“Immediately, *sir*.” Then she drops her tray to the bar, her lips threatening to lift in a smug smile as I turn and stride toward the staff quarters.

I duck behind the door and stop short to inhale a sharp breath. My balls aren’t just tingling now. My entire groin is on fire.

Glancing around the teeming space, I realize I’m closer to the living quarter’s elevator than my office, so I make for there, stopping every couple of feet to breathe deeply through the suddenly vicious pain in my dick.

I make it to the biometric scanner in the corridor off of the staff quarters with a frowning Jules spotting me as I place my palm on it.

He stops as I’m about to step onto the elevator. “Everything okay, boss—”

“My cock is on fucking fire. Get out of my damn way!”

His brows hit his hairline as I frantically press the button to close the doors, needing to strip right the fuck now. As soon as I have the privacy of the car, I kick off my shoes and peel my black pants down my legs. The Calvins follow, but the burning doesn’t stop.

“What the actual *fuck*!”

I stride from the elevator, pants and Calvins bunched up to cover my burning nether regions as I bolt toward the sanctity of my room. My hand is on the door handle when movement from across the hall catches my eye.

Twisting about, I find Wren peeking out through a crack in her door. My face turns thunderous when I realize that she's clearly lying in wait.

My mind whirs as my groin burns, and I realize my flaming cock is evidently *her* doing. She's the only culprit.

“What the fuck did you do to my clothes?”

Her eyes blow wide at my tone, only for her to snort when I wince at the rising fire in my balls. “I thought your Calvins needed some...spicing up!”

She opens the door enough to stand tall in the frame, arching a brow as she looks me up and down. “You’ll remember this moment the next time you’re a jerk to me.”

And then, as though timed, my crown jewels cry out in agony, and my whole face contorts in pain. I duck into my room, slamming and locking the door before sprinting for the ensuite, where I immediately flick on the shower.

It's only when I drop the suit pants and Calvins that I take a look at myself in the mirror to find that my cock and balls are bright red and covered in...

“*Chili seeds?*”

I shuck my shirt and slip under the icy cold water, wincing as I scrub what I now realize is chili oil from my poor, unfortunate nuts.

The water eases the sting slightly, though I know from past experience that the effects of the seeds will zing for several more days.

And despite myself—despite the situation I'm in with my fiery bollocks and scorched dick—I smirk, remembering how I'd done this exact same thing to Lorenzo so many years ago.

I can respect a little revenge.

Kudos, Miss Caputo.

My expression darkens as I quickly slam those walls back into place. If she thinks she's getting away with setting my

cock on fire and making me look like a fool, she's in for a rude awakening.

CHAPTER 9



WREN

“I still can’t believe you’re staying *here*.” Levi’s face is lit up with unfettered admiration as he absorbs the decadence of the interior of *Rapture*.

Courtesy of my newfound friendship with Lucia, I’d been able to ask my friends to drop by this afternoon. Trying to keep a lid on everything that’s going on with Mom has been hard.

Our little group has always shared everything. And so, telling my closest friends has almost lessened the load in a way.

I settle back against my plush seat, lacing my fingers before resting them across my abdomen. “It’s nice, right?”

“And has there been *any* news about your mom?” Matt’s face is lined with concern on the opposite side of the low table.

“Very little. They’re running a new line of inquiry.” I shrug, leaning forward to take a drink of my iced tea. “Whatever *that* means.”

I’d spoken to Detective Fratelli first thing this morning, following my now daily ritual of calling and texting Mom’s cell. There’s been no further activity—no answer, no response to my texts—but I continue, regardless.

Detective Fratelli did not have an update to share, but had promised that as soon as he’d exhausted this new avenue, we’d know more.

“I don’t mean to be crude...” My eyes snake to my right, to an unashamed Elodie, and I can’t help my lips twitching, knowing well what’s about to come out of her mouth. “Is he as shit hot in person as he is on the internet?”

Levi rolls his eyes as Matt chokes on a laugh, and I simply can’t stop myself from chuckling at this girl and her unique ability to lift me up.

“Elodie Rivers, you’re the worst.” She pouts dramatically before I blow her a kiss. “But I love you regardless.”

Suddenly, a shiver rakes down my spine, and I glance around to see if perhaps Lucia has increased the aircon. But there’s no one behind the bar.

I look back as Levi begins telling everyone about his upcoming internship at some fancy schmancy law firm uptown when Elodie tosses her long blonde hair over one shoulder, straightening in her seat as her eyes fixate on the opposite side of the room.

My heart ricochets within my chest when I feel Vaughn Burton’s gaze on my back as keenly as a physical touch, and our foursome turns silent as footsteps slowly get louder and louder.

Closer and closer.

“It’s almost 6 p.m., Wren.” His deep voice sends a shiver through me, even knowing he’s referring to the *rules*, but before I can elaborate for my friends, Elodie stands up, hand extended.

“Hi, Mr. Burton. I’m Wren’s friend, Elodie.”

I twist about to face him, half expecting him to shoo her hand away in disgust. However, to my abhorrence, he takes her hand in his much larger one with a genuinely charming smile that I have no doubt saturates panties left and right when he deigns to utilize it.

“The pleasure is *all* mine, Elodie.”

Nausea ebbs and flows in the pit of my stomach for a hot minute as he presses a kiss to the back of her hand. Elodie’s

face lights up with a bright smile as her cheeks flush prettily, and before I know what I'm doing, I rise from my seat. "Thanks for coming, guys, but the night staff are setting up in a couple of minutes. Umm..."

As I trail off, Matt's brow furrows in blatant concern, and he begins to speak, but I cut him off, needing to escape *now*. "Thank you guys for coming today. I—I'll text you later."

I smile at each of my friends before ducking out behind Vaughn and moving swiftly toward the staff quarters. Needing to be as far from him and his panty-melting smile as possible.

Needing the sanctuary of my own space to deduce why his smiling for Elodie unsettled me so fucking much.

Sure, I can acknowledge that the man is as handsome as sin—and he damn well knows it too—but it's more than that. If I'm being entirely honest with myself, I'm pissed that I've not been on the receiving end of a smile like that.

And accepting that truth makes me mad enough to scream.

I'm so lost in my musings that I don't hear him behind me until I reach the corridor to the elevator, when his long strides catch up with my vastly shorter ones. "What's the rush, little bird? Cat got your tongue?"

I speed up, turning out of the staff quarters and toward the elevator that will give me blissful solitude, but even without looking around, I can feel his dominating presence at my back.

"Nope. I just lost track of time." I slam my hand down on the scanner, angling my face up to hold his gaze. He plants his palm on the elevator door, effectively caging me in as his unreadable charcoal eyes shine with laughter.

In fact, his whole face seems lighter than I've seen in my time here.

"Good thing I was here to remind you then."

I tilt my head to one side, my next words slipping out between my lips before my mind has processed them. "Why were you so nice to Elodie? You're usually an asshole."

To me.

The elevator doors open, and he straightens as I step on, only for him to follow me.

I watch as the door closes behind him, bristling as he steps nearer until the tips of his toes are touching mine.

“*Jealous, are we?*” His devilish half-smile is both utterly divine and absolutely nauseating.

I jut out my chin before tipping my head back to look up at his devilishly handsome face. “I couldn’t care less about you. My friend’s well-being is my only concern.”

The words echo between us, sounding hollow even to my own ears, but I hold his gaze, refusing to back down.

My whole body freezes as he slowly leans closer and closer until I’m entirely enveloped in his familiar, deliciously sensual scent. My eyes flicker closed as I feel his breath on the shell of my ear before he moves his mouth to speak.

“I’m only nice to women I want to *fuck*, little bird.”

Such naughty words spoken in that deep, husky tone of his, and I can see how the man must never be short of a bed mate or two. As it is, my own nipples tighten into pebbles beneath the material of my bra as my insides surge with desire.

“But don’t worry, Wren. She’ll get the same asshole you do as soon as I’ve taken what I want.”

My breath catches as he stands tall. I can feel my pupils are blown as his eyes hold mine for long moments until the doors open, and I squeeze out past him.

I twist about when he stays in the car, having had a second to adjust myself mentally. “Stay away from my friends, Cactus.”

“What can I say...” He shrugs as his lips lift in a fiendish grin, displaying his perfect white teeth and those dimples. The ones from my memory.

The ones I’ve not seen since arriving at Rogue, not even for Elodie earlier, and I melt ever so slightly.

Christ, he’s beautiful.

He remains silent as the doors close. His eyes are fixed on mine until just as he disappears from sight, he quips with a naughty as fuck wink, “I like a little sugar between my sheets.”

The tension in my body begins to dissipate in his absence, and by the time I’ve reached my room, I’m actually grinning at our little exchange.

“He really thinks he’s the shit.”

My words are for no one in particular, but they make me laugh before I quickly shoot a message to the group chat.

ME

Sorry for leaving so abruptly, guys. Vaughn really knows how to grind my gears.

As I strip off my clothes in preparation for showering, my cell dings with their replies.

ELODIE

He can grind me any time he likes.

LEVI

What happened to your mystery man?

ELODIE

He’s a fuck buddy. I can have more than one!

LEVI

I’d be grateful for one LOL

I can’t help chuckling at their exchange before signing off and making my way to the ensuite.

Once I’ve brushed my hair out, I grab my cleanser to remove my makeup, twisting the cap with as much strength as I can. But it won’t budge.

“That’s weird.”

I try harder, but it’s not happening. Several shakes and a close inspection later, something clicks.

“The son of a bitch glued it shut?” My disbelieving voice echoes across the tiles.

I check all of my other capped products, discovering that I can’t open a single one.

My snort of laughter rings out loudly as I shake my head at this amateur-hour nonsense of gluing my products closed.

I’m still giggling and thinking of my payback when I twist the shower knob and jump under the wonderfully warm water. Closing my eyes as I scrub my face, I’m so fully focused on my epic revenge that I’m not paying any heed to what I’m doing.

Until I look at my hands and physically recoil when I see they’re painted bright blue.

“What the…” I turn off the water and look around the usually pristine white shower to find it covered in blue splatters. My eyes move down along my body, blowing wide when I see blue everywhere.

I reach for a towel, wrapping it around myself before stepping out onto the bathroom floor. My eyes immediately land on myself in the huge mirror opposite, and my jaw drops.

“I’m a fucking Smurf!”

I twist about this way and that, noting blue streaks all over my torso and limbs, but my face is completely blue. I scrub several times with a towel, but it’s not budging.

After taking a second to sniff my arm, I swiftly come to the conclusion that the lids were only a distraction tactic. The warm-up act.

Turning me into Smurfette was the main event, and he’d flustered me so successfully in the damn elevator that I’d never even suspected.

My jaw tics as my mind whirs to life, plotting my revenge.

“You’re going down, motherfucker.”

VAUGHN

I press my cell up to my ear, waiting for an unsuspecting Grayson Hunter to answer as my brow creases. We’re not exactly *friends*.

Acquaintances, yes. Friends would be pushing it.

But, even so, I can’t stop myself from checking in.

“Hunter.”

His answer is so abrupt, a million miles removed from the usually mild-mannered, almost afraid of his own shadow man I’ve met many times before.

“Grayson. It’s Vaughn Burton. I wanted to follow up—”

“Ah, yes. The *waves* man.” He chuckles darkly. “Calling to discover if I’ve drowned yet, buddy?”

“I don’t know why I’m calling, to be quite frank. Loss is a deep pit to claw your way out of.”

He snorts. “A pit or an ocean. Doesn’t matter ‘cause it’s swallowed me whole, Burton.”

My chest tightens, and I find myself pressing the heel of my arm to the center, trying to offset the discomfort.

Rather than accept it for what it is, I try an alternate route. “How are the twins holding up? Parker and Gracie, right?”

“They’re going back to the city. School. Activities. *Normality*.” He exhales heavily, his voice trembling when he speaks again. “It’s important to give that to them, you know? After...well, after everything.”

His voice catches on that last word, and I shake my head silently, pressing my lips together, suddenly wishing to be anywhere but on this call.

As though in answer, Lucia pokes her head around the door. Spotting me on my cell, she points down and holds up her hand before mouthing, “Downstairs in five.”

I nod sharply as Grayson whispers so low that I need to strain to hear it. “How do you move on when everything is so messed up, Burton? Is love *ever* enough?”

“I don’t know anything about love, but for what it’s worth, I share your grief.” Images of Lorenzo’s funeral flash through my head. My final conversation with his heavily pregnant girlfriend, who’d been unable to look me in the eye as she demanded to be left to grieve alone.

Maybe I was wrong to abide by her wishes.

Maybe that’s partly why I don’t want this man to grieve alone.

Pity parties for one are not a good place to be. From experience, I know that for sure.

“When are you back in town, Gray? Have you spoken to anyone? Alex?”

There’s rustling on the other end of the cell as a small voice cries out, “Daddy!”

True emotion enters Grayson’s voice then. “Princess! I *missed* you.”

I smile despite myself before Grayson speaks again. “I appreciate the call, Burton.”

Then the line goes dead, leaving me more frustrated than I was before I fucking dialed him.

With Lucia’s reminder fresh in my head, I head for the living quarters, set on changing into clothes that are *not* laced with goddamn chili oil.

As I step onto the elevator, my lips twitch, suddenly remembering the blue food coloring paste I’d put in Wren’s shower head shortly before I’d interrupted her little gossip fest.

I wonder if she showered...

The doors slide open almost soundlessly, and I step off of the car, stopping suddenly when I spot the woman waiting before me.

She's sat on the kitchen island almost directly opposite the elevator doors. Her legs are crossed at the ankles, and she's clad in only a stained blue towel that once was white.

There are blue patches on both legs, leading all the way up and underneath the towel, starting again on the curve of her pert breasts. Long bluish-tinged hair hangs all the way to that delectable curve, mostly dried now, meaning she's waited quite a while for this confrontation.

The thought makes my dick twitch. The fucking sadist.

Her face is both bright blue and seething red as her jaw clenches in a way that makes me want to lick it. And then she hops down from the counter in a fluid movement, her feet padding across the marble surface until she's right before me.

A beguiling smile overtakes her face, making my cock stir against my black suit pants.

She places a petite hand flat against my chest, playing with my tie before her eyes—*those fucking eyes*—find mine.

Unforgettably unique gray irises anchor me to the floor as she quirks a dark brow.

“Bravo on transforming me into a Smurf, *Vaughn*.”

The way she says my name is almost my undoing.

Off-limits. Out of bounds. Can't fuck her. Won't fuck her.

The words mean diddly-fucking-squat to the hard-on straining to get out of my damn pants.

I shrug nonchalantly. “Good to see you can give credit where credit is *blue*.”

Her nostrils flare, and I can't help but smirk until she grips my tie and forcibly pulls my face down to hers.

She narrows her eyes as I watch her with laughing ones of my own.

“This means war, Cactus.” Her eyes trace the contours of my face before she steps back.

“And I fight dirty.”

Then she saunters off down the hallway, stopping at her doorway to look back at me. Mischief plays across her stunning face before she unhooks the towel *just* as she walks over the threshold, tossing it back into the hall before she slams the door.

I lean back against the now-closed elevator doors, a wicked grin plastered to my lips. “Game fucking on, little bird.”

CHAPTER 10



WREN

It's mid-morning by the time I haul my ass out of bed, following a night spent Googling how to rid myself of my new shade of blue.

I throw my legs over one side of the mattress, planting my feet on the floor before stretching my entire body. I'm not used to such a staid lifestyle, and I can almost feel my joints beginning to fuse through inactivity.

Maybe painting would help...

I try Mom's cell to no avail before the smell of food hits my nostrils. Once I've thrown on the black hoodie that may or may not be in need of refreshing at this point, I slowly amble out into the living space.

To my utter surprise, Vaughn is sitting at the kitchen island, dressed casually in jogging gear. The perspiration on his brow indicates he's just finished a workout.

"Morning, little bird." His dancing eyes encompass my still-stained face over the rim of his coffee cup before meeting my gaze. I narrow my eyes in reply before grabbing my usual iced tea from the refrigerator.

I silently take in the spread before him. French toast with syrup and fruit. Blueberry pancakes topped with whipped cream. Piles of crispy bacon, sausage, and sunny-side-up eggs just begging to be inhaled.

My stomach complains *loudly* as I pluck a single banana from the fruit bowl on the dining table.

“Help yourself.” He gestures toward the feast. “When it comes to food, I wouldn’t fuck with you.”

I slowly peel the banana, holding his gaze with a disbelieving one of my own. “Mmm-hmm. *Riiiiiiight*. There’s probably arsenic on the toast and brake fluid in the sausage links, Cactus.”

He snorts so hard into his coffee that he begins to cough, and I’m helpless from the smile that makes my lips twitch.

Once he’s composed himself, he spears me with mirth-filled obsidian eyes. “That’s dark, little bird. I guess you’re showing me your *blue* colors.”

I nibble my banana in a concentrated effort to keep my face void of my threatening laughter until he rises from the island. “But in all seriousness, *eat*. I swear it’s all perfectly delicious.”

I quirk a brow. “Swear on your life.”

His nostrils flare, and he closes the space between us until my breasts brush across the fabric of his t-shirt. He tilts his head to one side, raking his eyes across every inch of my face. His gaze is so intense that I break first, looking down at the iced tea in my hand.

Anywhere but into those impenetrable midnight eyes.

His thumb and index finger pinch my chin to tip my head back. “If my life was worth a damn, I’d swear on it.” My stomach swirls as his gaze holds mine, those ebony orbs deepening impossibly further, keeping me their willing captive. “As it is, you’ll have to make do with my word, Wren.”

My breath comes in short bursts as he stares into my eyes. His brow furrows as though in confusion, no doubt mirroring my own, and it feels as if he’s looking right down into the deepest reaches of my soul, into parts I didn’t know existed before now.

Until my cell renders the palpable silence.

I step back, not bothering to check the caller. Only needing to put distance between us.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie. Whatcha doin’?”

My stomach drops when Mom’s voice rings in my ear, and I stumble backward from the force of relief that hits me square in the chest. Vaughn catches me about the waist, setting me on the kitchen island as concern mars his face.

“Where are you, Mom?”

Vaughn immediately whips out a pager identical to the one Ford gave to me when I arrived, frowning as he punches the buttons forcefully.

Mom’s laughter comes down the line. “What do you mean, Wren? You know I’m on Elliott’s yacht. We’ve just docked after a blissful week at sea.”

I’m shaking my head as she speaks, blinking my eyes rapidly in disbelief. “No. *No, you didn’t*, Mom. I came home for movie night last week. You weren’t there, and the house was in a mess—”

“You know I’m the world’s messiest packer, sweetie.”

“And when I looked for you, an intruder hit me over the head—”

Mom’s sharp inhalation cuts me off. “Oh, sweetie. I had no idea you were hurt...” She trails off as her voice hitches on a sob. “And I wasn’t there. Oh my God, Wren. *I wasn’t there.*”

Her soft cries make my eyes well up with tears, and I silently long for the comfort of my mother’s embrace. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m okay. Truly. I’m just fine.”

“Did one of the girls come to stay with you? I hate the idea of you being alone.”

“I’m...” My eyes find Vaughn, the strength in his gaze spurring me on. “Actually, I’m in the city. I’m staying with an old friend of yours.”

I can feel his entire body freeze, and once again, I can't help but wonder why Vaughn's relationship with my parents was never disclosed to me.

"The only person I know in the city is your Uncle Anthony, Wren. Who else—"

"I'm staying with Vaughn Burton, Mom."

I'm met with a silence that I quickly try to fill. "Detective Fratelli thought it would be the safest option in the event that the...that the...intruder returned."

Mom blows out a breath. "Thank goodness you're with someone I trust, sweetie. Stay there. You're safe in the city. I'll come for you when we get back. I'll get Elliott to turn us around right now—"

"No!" She stops when I voice my dissent more loudly than required. "I'm okay, I *swear*."

My eyes fall shut, and I lower my voice. "Please don't, Mom. You never do anything for yourself. Please, don't cut your trip short. I..."

Forehead creasing, I chew on my lip, unsure of what to say next. When silence echoes between us, Vaughn gently slips the cell from my hand.

"Sara?"

I hear Mom speaking before Vaughn replies. "Yes. There's been a missing persons report filed. Clearly, there's been some confusion somewhere along the line."

His deep gaze holds mine as he silently pieces everything together. "I will handle it with the authorities and keep Wren safe here at Rogue with me. You have my word."

He passes the cell back, just as the elevator doors open for Ford to stride through. Mom is already speaking when I place the cell to my ear.

"I'll be back at sea again, Wren, so reception will be patchy. But I'll check in, and I will be home with you before you know it."

I nod, swallowing heavily and wanting nothing more than to plead with her to forget about Elliott and fly home right now. Instead, I steady my breathing and force myself to smile. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Wren.”

Once we’ve said our goodbyes, Ford has left the apartment once more, leaving me alone with Vaughn.

The enormity of what’s happened begins to sink in. “Oh my God. Will I be charged with wasting a police officer’s time?” I turn frantic eyes to Vaughn as he comes to stand opposite me. “Will I be sent to prison?”

I spiral, desperately telling myself to stop, but I can’t. I’m too far gone.

“They said it was foul play. I didn’t make the call. I don’t even know what happened to my cell. Someone *hit* me! I—I —”

Vaughn suddenly and without warning palms my cheeks, forcing me to look up at him. His forehead is furrowed, jaw clenched tightly as his eyes hold me captive. “Nothing is going to happen to you, Wren Caputo. There’s a lot at play here, but you have my *word* that I will get to the bottom of it.”

He traces his right thumb along my cheek, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s wiping away a tear. “You’re safe here.”

The ache in my chest lessens at the comfort those three words lend to me. Spoken plainly by this man who, in the short time I’ve known him, has become an important part of my life.

The safety he provides me. The distraction he gives to me, whether he knows it or not. He has single-handedly made this whole ordeal bearable, and my heart swells when I realize that, somewhere along the way, he’s gotten under my skin.

I blink heavily, allowing another tear to streak down my cheek as he steps back, arching a mischief-filled brow. Then he reaches for a plate of French toast, passing it to me with a hangdog expression.

“Now eat while this truce is in motion, because as soon as I leave this apartment and go downstairs, the gloves are off.”

I take it from him with a small smile. “Thank you.”

My gratitude is for far more than the food, and his eyes tell me he knows it when he tips his head once before returning to his own breakfast.

“Maybe try to distract yourself today, hmm?”

Chewing a mouthful of toast, I slide in across from him, immediately knowing the best way to do that. “Yeah, I think I’ll watch a movie.” I tip my head to one side in question. “Do you like foreign films?”

“Nah. If I wanted to read, I’d pick up a book.”

I snort, shoving more toast into my mouth as I feel the tension from before leaving my shoulders, and I come alive in the presence of this man who makes me feel things I have no business feeling.

“You should watch Pan’s Labyrinth. It’s so immersive, it doesn’t feel like you’re reading subtitles.”

He regards me for long moments with such intensity that I drop my eyes back to my food and keep them there until I’ve cleared the plate.

“You’re nothing like I thought you’d be, Wren Caputo.”

I lift my head, his unreadable gaze fixed on me, and I hold it, unmoving, until he’s the one to break it when he stands, padding toward the elevator without another word.

As he steps onto the car, my next words make him pause, his eyes finding mine over his shoulder.

“I could say the same about you, Vaughn Burton.”

VAUGHN

“What did you need me for?”

Lucia marches through my office door as though she owns the damn place before sitting on the edge of my desk.

I glower up at her, slamming shut the lot applications for tonight's auction. "I need you to occupy Wren today." She starts to speak, but I hold up a palm. "This will make us even for your fuckery with the auctions recently."

Indecision flashes across her face for a hot minute before she nods. "Fine. But this is the last time I play babysitter to your little bird."

She strides from the room, slipping her cell out as she does, most likely to text Wren to meet her downstairs.

As I open the applications again, Wren's face from this morning comes into focus in my mind's eye.

She was mired in such conflict; I could feel it even after years of living behind my walls. Fragile. Lost. Alone. Confused. Sad.

Resilient.

She surprises me at every turn, each newly unveiled facet allowing her to burrow slightly deeper beneath my skin. Goddamn her.

When her mother had offered to return from her trip early, my initial thought had been why she wasn't flying back immediately. But Wren, despite the trauma she's been through as of late, had insisted Sara take this time for herself.

It would have been utterly all too easy to have allowed myself to feel empathy for her. Instead, I lay down the gauntlet that will keep her mind—and my hands—occupied until Sara's return.

Whenever that may be.

Ford ducks inside my office, stirring me from my thoughts.

"Ever heard of knocking?"

He flops down into the chair on the other side of my desk. "I've ironed everything out with Fratelli and the South Brook P.D. He's going to speak to the boyfriend's family and confirm

their original assumption that he's on vacation was indeed correct. As for Wren's head wound, the police department is inclined to believe she fell, if you'd believe that horseshit..."

As I focus back on the tedious task at hand, my brows furrow, and Ford leans closer. "I still smell a rat, Burton. Might I have your permission to keep an eye on—"

"Absolutely." I raise my eyes to his. "In fact, I *insist* that you delve deeper. There's not a chance in *hell* that Sara Ricci would trust me to keep her kid safe. Not when I'm the reason that same kid grew up without her father."

Ford nods sharply before giving me his back and leaving me to the mind-numbing work at hand.

CHAPTER 11



VAUGHN

Having finally come to the end of my evening at tonight's auction in *Ravish*, I quickly finish filing everything away in my office.

As I descend the stairs into the teeming staff area, Lucia stops me. "There's a bachelorette party in *Rapture*, and they're *dying* to meet the infamous Vaughn Burton."

She runs her palm down along my black skinny tie, making a show of fixing it despite the fact that it was immaculate to begin with. "What do you say?"

I spear her with dark eyes. "I'd rather stab my eyeballs with a fork than spend more time with you than *absolutely* necessary. Goodnight, Lucia."

Her eyes crackle with rage while her nostrils flare. Her next words are spoken through gritted teeth. "I hear you, *bossman*."

And then she's gone, disappeared through the crowd of staff members before I can rebuke her on her use of that fucking nickname I despise.

By the time I reach my floor, my feet are dragging, and all I want is to fall into bed.

My black hoodie, the one that Wren has taken to wearing, catches my eye from its place on the back of the couch, and as I draw closer, I spot the woman in question. She's tucked up in a blanket, gently snoring with her long hair mussed across her slightly blue-tinged face.

Bending on one knee, I smooth several strands back from her brow, my eyes following the motion before dropping down to skim across her delicate features.

I'd meant what I'd said this morning. She really isn't anything like I'd have expected, even if I'd initially expected Lorenzo's son.

She's soft, and strong in the way only a woman can be. Her smile is infectious, her laughter painfully addictive, and my gut twists as a feeling I'm unfamiliar with barrels through me.

Get a grip, Burton.

I expel a heavy breath before tucking the cover over her more firmly. Then I pluck the hoodie from the couch and walk toward the laundry room, intent on putting it in the wash basket. Except, as I walk, I hold the hoodie in my clenched fist, allowing the scent of citrus and sunlight to tease my nostrils.

Before I know what I'm doing, I adjust my course, veering toward my waiting bed instead, not bothering with the lights.

I barely manage to shuck off my clothes and shoes before throwing back the covers to climb underneath, shoving the hoodie beneath my head as a pillow of sorts.

That citrus scent tickles my nostrils, and I inhale deeply, a content sigh rumbling from deep down in my chest.

The silky-satin sheets are cool beneath my skin, and I burrow down farther against them, intent on allowing her lingering scent to lull me off to dreams that are sweeter than I deserve.

Except sleep doesn't come. And I can't quite place the reason why. My usually comfortable bed is anything but. I flip onto my side, then onto my other side, but to no avail. The more I move, the more uncomfortable I become until I eventually can't take it anymore.

"Fuck this!"

I flip on the light, and something on the bed immediately catches my eye.

A *lot* of somethings on the bed. The closer I look, the more quickly I realize my house guest took me at my word.

The truce is well and truly over.

The reason for my irritation glints like a sky full of stars on a clear, dark night. Tiny granules of white sugar litter my black bedsheets and my torso, too, when I straighten to dust myself off.

I don't know whether to be annoyed at how her revenge is impacting my sleep or pleased that I've been able to distract her following the events of the day.

Either way, sleep is calling. And I know precisely where I'm going to lay my head.

A smirk lifts one side of my mouth as I re-dress my bed as though it's not been touched. I grab the sunshine-scented hoodie before I exit my bedroom, peeling off my Calvins as I go.

Time for revenge.

WREN

“Ouch!”

My neck screams with stiffness when I unfurl myself from the couch where I'd fallen asleep last night, waiting for my prickly Cactus of a housemate to come upstairs.

I wonder if he came back at all.

The thought makes my shoulders sag ever so slightly. His support yesterday had buoyed my spirits immensely, and as I'd layered sugar between his sheets, I'd been excited to witness his reaction.

Sitting up farther, I swing my legs over the side of the couch, reaching to cover my pajama shorts and top with the

hoodie I could have *sworn* I'd left close to hand last night.

I tip-toe lightly down the hallway, swearing softly under my breath when I notice his bedroom door is cracked slightly ajar, the exact same way I'd left it after my tinkering yesterday evening.

My stomach swoops uncomfortably low, thinking of where he'd been if not in his own bed.

Of *who* he's sleeping with.

It's none of your business where he sleeps. Or who it's with, for that matter.

Anxiety flows through me, despite my inner thoughts as I twist about and turn the handle on my door, intent on scrubbing the last remaining blue food coloring from my skin with a sea salt and lemon remedy I'd found online last night.

A man's cough breaks through my single-mindedness, making me squeal in shock. I swing my eyes around to my bed to find a bare-chested Vaughn propped against the headboard, bottom half hidden beneath my sheets.

"Morning, little bird."

His mouth lifts in a lazy smile that does things to my insides, and I can only blink for several long beats before I recover.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?"

Raking his hand through his dark hair, he holds my gaze the entire time before he shrugs indulgently. "Tit for tat. If you can fuck with my bed, then I can fuck with yours."

He leans closer, almost conspiratorially. "Nice play on my words from the other day. I *do* like some sugar in my sheets. Just..."

His eyes drop down along my body as he pops a brow, and I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly self-conscious of my nipples pebbling beneath the light material.

"Not *that* kind of sugar." His mouth parts in a wide grin.

“Your bed is really very comfortable.” He stretches his arms over his head, and the sheets fall perilously lower.

Is he wearing any—

He swings his legs over the side of the bed, answering my question before I’ve even asked it. My eyes blow wide as he stands, giving me his naked back and sculpted ass.

He’s an Adonis.

And even so, with my eyes glued to his rear, I manage to find my voice.

“I find it baffling that you stocked a studio to brimming with clothes for *me*, yet couldn’t purchase a single pair of pants for yourself.”

He grins over his shoulder, that damn dimple making me weak in the knees. “I prefer to let it all hang loose, little bird.”

My mouth goes dry as he turns to face me, and I tell myself repeatedly not to look down. He closes the gap between us, and despite my fixation on his face, my peripheral vision notes the swaying momentum of his dick between his powerful thighs.

He comes close enough to softly run the back of his hand down along the side of my face, and I breathe in his sandalwood scent as he holds my gaze.

“May the best man win!”

He saunters out the door, delectable ass on display, until he stops when I call after him. “Don’t worry. *She* will.”

Then I slam the door, ignoring the sound of his low chuckle as I peel the sheets off the bed, noting the missing hoodie in the midst of them.

I ball everything up and march down the hall to the laundry room, ignoring the fluttering of my sex when I smell his intoxicating scent wafting from the sheets as I ram them into the washing machine.

“Fucking *Cactus*.”

“I’m so glad she called, Wren.” Levi’s forehead puckers in concern. “How are you feeling?”

Once I’d ripped those sheets from my bed and replaced them with the ones I’d conveniently found outside my door, I decided to call my friends to update them. Matt was busy with at Zephyr, so it was just Levi and Elodie on our catch-up video chat.

“I’m feeling a little all over the place, Levi. Part of me just wants her home, you know?”

True to form, Elodie howls with laughter. When I shift my gaze to her screen, she’s pulling a red dress down over her svelte figure in readiness for her fuck buddy date later this afternoon.

“You mean to tell me you’d prefer to be home in boring South Brook rather than living with a veritable sex god?” Her gaze spears mine through the screen. “Are. You. *Shitting*. Me?”

I smirk, even as I roll my eyes. “Elodie, I love you, but you’re insane. The man can barely tolerate me.”

She snorts, her eyes flickering to Levi’s. “Did you see the way he looked at her?”

His big brown eyes widen as he shrugs, and it’s my turn to snort even as my stomach swoops dangerously at my best friend’s words. “Seriously, you guys. Stop fucking with me. You should have seen his face when he told Mom I’d be safe here until she came back.”

Elodie just shrugs as she slicks her hair back in a sleek low pony. “While you live in wilful ignorance in Tribeca, I’m heading uptown to live in exquisite multiple orgasmic bliss. Later, losers.”

Her screen goes black, leaving me laughing and Levi scratching his head at her signature Elodie antics.

“I know this is possibly a little bit crass considering the circumstances...” I narrow my eyes as my remaining friend trails off.

“Spit it out. What do you want?”

“Do you think we can score entry to Rogue whilst you’re staying there?”

Levi winces as I purse my lips, thinking of how I could swing it—on whether I should even *attempt* to swing it—when suddenly, I have a eureka moment.

“There *might* be a way. Leave it with me.”

Once we’ve said our goodbyes, I drop a quick text to Lucia.

ME

This is a big request, but I was wondering if my friends and I could hang out downstairs in the club one night soon.

Having hit send, I realize that I should have had one other request.

ME

Preferably when your boss is not around... He’d flip his lid!

The dots flash, and my stomach sinks slightly at the thought of what Vaughn’s reaction would be if he discovered I’d purposefully broken his trust.

LUCIA

That’s a great idea. I’ll check his calendar and let you know what night is best xx

I’m pocketing my cell when a roared profanity from the hallway grabs my attention, and as I open my door, my face splits with a self-satisfied grin.

Vaughn opens his at the same time, holding a ruined pair of black wing-tipped shoes in his right hand. His face is scrunched up in disgust as he points his free index finger at me.

“Vanilla pudding? Vanilla *fucking* pudding?! In my thousand-dollar Pradas!” His brows inch closer to his immaculately groomed hair, and I almost choke, trying to swallow my laughter. “Are you *serious* right now?”

I keep my expression as neutral as possible when I deadpan. “As a heart attack.”

He drops the shoes onto the floor, spearing me with his black gaze, and I’m helpless to stifle a snort as he squelches closer on pudding-covered feet.

“This is too far.”

My heart rate kicks up when he brings his hand to my throat, encircling my neck with his large palm before leaning closer. His mouth is mere inches from mine, and I feel his breath ghost across my lips when he lowly murmurs, “I ought to take you over my knee for a stunt like this, little bird.”

Insides flip-flopping, my breath hitches as an image of that exact scenario flashes before my eyes. I run the tip of my tongue across my top lip, his eyes dropping to follow the motion before I bite down on my bottom lip.

Unmistakable desire thickens the air between us for several long beats as his digits tighten minutely. My breathing stutters as a sound somewhere between a whimper and a moan falls from my lips. His forehead puckers, when something unreadable flickers across his face, and he immediately drops his hand, stepping back, putting distance between our bodies.

His onyx eyes stare into mine with an intensity that borders on violence until his guttural voice renders the tension pulsing between us.

“You reap what you sow.”

Then, without another word, he walks back into his bedroom, closing the door behind him, leaving me more than a little confused.

CHAPTER 12



WREN

After a long walk in Central Park with Ford, I returned to the apartment to find a text that succeeded in distracting me from Vaughn's parting words.

LUCIA

Tonight is the night. He'll be occupied elsewhere.

Once I've finalized a time with her, I dip into my group chat.

ME

Meet me in Rogue tonight at 10 pm sharp.

MATT

No fucking way!

LEVI

I can't believe you pulled it off.

I bark an openly incredulous laugh as my thumbs fly across the screen.

ME

Same, friend!

Once the furor dies down, I get started for the day, intent on grabbing something nice to wear tonight from the fully stocked studio off of the kitchen. The one I rarely visit, content with the handful of items I'd grabbed that first morning.

Don't pretend you're not dying to sift through it, Wren Caputo.

The thought of doing just that makes me grin as I loop my crossbody bag over my shoulder, dropping my credit card and cell inside. Then I slip on a simple pair of dark gray leggings and a plain white t-shirt, swearing loudly when I can't find my damn Birkenstocks.

Maybe there's a spare pair in the studio...

When I venture out into the kitchen, there's no sign of Vaughn or the breakfast I'm accustomed to at this point. My shoulders sag slightly while my stomach grumbles in protest.

Instead of giving in and searching for sustenance, I focus on finding the perfect outfit for tonight, my bare feet padding quietly toward the studio door.

My hand is poised on the door handle when my Birkenstocks catch my eye. They're sitting by the elevator, and I *know* I didn't put them there.

"If you've put pudding in my fucking Birkenstocks, I'll hurt you, Cactus!"

My words resound through the apartment with silence as my only response. I reach the elevator and peer down into the Birkenstocks, noting with surprise that they're clean and pudding-free. The sight makes me second-guess myself.

Maybe I did leave them here...

I slide one foot in, and all hell breaks loose. My Birkenstocks begin to *pop-pop-pop* loudly and repeatedly. Vibrations run up my leg and into my body, and I hop back, kicking the offending footwear down the hallway toward a laughing Vaughn, who's appeared out of nowhere. His tie is unmade—clearly having been disrupted while dressing—and his cell is angled toward me, capturing every second of his ridiculous payback.

“Fucking...priceless!”

I fold my arms over my palpitating chest as I narrow my eyes with a scowl, fully intent on ignoring how damn gorgeous he is when he smiles, let alone when he laughs.

“Har-de-har. Very funny. I almost lost a damn *toe!*”

His laughter doubles. “It was only a couple of Snappers on the soles of your shoes.” His eyes are filled with a delight I want to see more of when he arches a brow pointedly. “Be grateful it wasn’t pudding in your Prada.”

He straightens as I close the distance between us, watching him through slitted eyes. “I’m guessing this is what you meant when you said you reap what you sow, hmm?”

As his eyes twinkle with dark mischief, my lips twitch despite the twinge in my damn foot. He nods as I reach between us to knot his tie slowly. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time until I finish, smoothing my palm down along his chest before I step back.

I meet his rakish gaze and smile sweetly. “Anything you can do, I can do better, *Mr. Burton.*”

His smoldering eyes flare as we square off against one another. Neither of us willing to give an inch, both intent on winning this absurd game.

He prowls closer, and his large palm encircles my upper arm. My skin lights up beneath his touch, my heart slamming against my chest as he leans down until his mouth is by my ear.

His whisper ghosts across my skin, goosebumps rising in its wake.

“Your ass must get jealous of all the shit your mouth spews, little bird.”

Pressing my palms against his broad chest, I push him back, my skin alternately tingling from the proximity and bristling from the insult. Our gazes hold for a long beat before I narrow my eyes.

My words are a whisper and a prayer. “Screw you.”

His eyes darken as he smirks. “You fucking wish.”

He steps back, smiling widely enough to display those divine dimples; God help me. I shakily move past him, making for the sanctuary of my room as his deep laughter chases me all the way there.

I step onto the elevator, grinning when I catch sight of myself in the full-length mirror opposite me.

My hair cascades down my back in large, bouncing curls that swish as I move. The charcoal color on my lids makes my eyes appear brighter than usual, and my matte pink lips curve upward as I take in the fruits of my labor.

My legs look impossibly long, courtesy of the black Jimmy Choos I’d unearthed from the studio.

Elodie had been less than impressed on our video call and had deemed the contents of the studio too tame for her liking. But this ruched black dress hugs my curves like it was made for me, the material stopping just beneath the curve of my ass.

I tug it down self-consciously, silently cursing her for sending it to me earlier this afternoon, yet thrilled with the outcome just the same.

My brow furrows, remembering my interaction with Vaughn this morning and how he’d not been back to the living quarters like he usually would in order to change into his evening attire.

I don’t know if I’m nervous that he didn’t return or that he might catch me breaking one of his rules, but my stomach dips as the elevator doors open to reveal a smiling Lucia. She’s dressed from head to toe in red, flaming hair slicked back in a low pony.

“You look gorgeous.”

“You do too, Wren. Now, come on.” She smiles when she links her arm with mine, leading me away from the main floor.

“Your friends are waiting out here.”

Lucia had explained that we’d need to enter *Rapture* using the staff quarters, and so my friends had been admitted through a secret staff entry, far removed from the heaving main doors.

She scans her hand when we come to a large black door, and I follow behind her, stepping into a darkened courtyard where I spot my friends.

Lucia bustles past them as they turn wide eyes to me.

“Wow, Wren! You look...”

Levi’s mouth hangs open ever so slightly, and I can feel a blush stain my cheeks as Matt finishes for our suddenly speechless friend. “You look stunning, Wren.”

He winks with a smirk that makes me laugh before Elodie grips my hand, tugging me to her side as we briskly follow Lucia. “I told you that, with a body like yours, the black dress was the clear winner.”

She arches a brow pointedly. “And if our friends are dumbstruck by how hot you look tonight, *imagine* what the real men inside here will think.”

Levi throws a playful arm over her shoulder. “You saying I’m not a real man, Rivers?”

She ducks out from beneath his arm with a grin. “You are a Ken doll, Levi James. Pretty to look at, but low functioning at best.”

He snorts a laugh as Lucia pulls us up short in front of a double door. “Stay behind me. Don’t stray. Don’t draw attention. Vaughn isn’t here currently, but that’s not to say he won’t discover this little deception if you make a scene. Are we on the same page?”

We nod simultaneously, following her when she steps inside the swarming staff quarters.

“Holy *shit!*”

I don't have time to check who spoke, intent on keeping up with a fast-marching Lucia. We dip and weave our way across the floor, eventually making it to the opposite side and out into *Rapture*.

Women and men wearing next to nothing perform suggestive dances on several raised daises dotted throughout the space, and I glance back at my friends, finding Levi nodding in appreciation.

“Now, *this* is what I'm talking about.”

Elodie shoves past him, threading her arm through mine with a wry smile. “We're not in South Brook anymore, Toto.”

Lucia leads us to a private area, lit up in shades of blues and greens and surrounded by sheer drapes. There are bottles of Dom Perignon on ice alongside waiting champagne flutes, and Elodie wastes zero time filling them all.

“He's usually away until late when he...” Lucia trails off almost uncomfortably, and again, anxiety stirs in my stomach at the thought of not knowing where he is. Of not seeing him all day.

I frown then, frustrated that I care so much, and draw Lucia against me for a quick hug.

“Thank you for giving me this night.” I pull back and spear her with grateful eyes. “You have no idea how much I need to blow off some steam.”

She nods in understanding. “Don't stay down here past 1 a.m. You'll run the risk of being found if you do.”

And with that warning, she's gone.

Elodie dances up alongside me, passing me a flute filled to the brim. “If we've only got three hours, then we better get this party started!”

VAUGHN

My day did not go according to plan. At all.

And my evening is somehow managing to be even worse.

My feet eat the sidewalk, and I almost miss the mugging, even as it happens right in front of me. The elderly woman sways on her feet as the assailant races off, clearly with her belongings.

I reach for her before she can hit to ground, laying her gently on the concrete as several other bystanders step forward.

“Someone call 911.”

And without a backward glance, I peel off in pursuit, spotting the offender ducking and weaving through the evening crowds.

He’s fast, but I know I’m faster, and I push my body to the limits, catching up with him less than a block later.

I hurl myself at his back as he’s rounding a corner, knocking us both to the ground, but before he can gather his wits, I’ve knocked him out with a sharp blow to the jaw.

Once I’ve handed him over to authorities and ensured the woman is okay and in receipt of the proper medical treatment, I’m too late for my session downtown.

So, I shoot a quick text to Barbara, the organizer.

ME

I can’t make it tonight. I’ll be there for the next, okay?

Wearily, I turn back for home, pulling my black citrusy sunshine-scented hoodie higher over my head before digging my hands deep into my jogger pants pocket.

It doesn't take long before I duck in through the hidden door panel, secreted away from the main doors, making my way up to the living quarters as fast as my feet will carry me.

My lips twitch in anticipation of some more verbal sparring with my irritatingly beautiful house guest, but when I step off the elevator, the apartment is dead silent.

“Wren?”

My voice rebounds through the darkness, and with a frown, I march straight for her door, pushing it open without bothering to knock.

I clench my jaw, finding her room empty, and quickly send her a text, barely noting the thumbs-up emoji from Barbara.

ME

Where the hell are you?

My forehead creases when I hear her cell chime from her nightstand.

Fuck!

My palms begin to sweat, and my chest clenches in fear even as I dial Ford. He answers on the second ring, and I don't preamble. “Are you with Wren?”

“No. I haven't seen her all day.”

“Where are you now?”

He sighs. “Covering for Jules in *Ravish*. He's sick.”

“Is Lucia there?”

Silence as he obviously looks for her. “She's just arrived. Should I—”

“No.” I kick off my trainers. “I'm on my way to you.”

I end the call and change into a black suit as quickly as possible. As I march onto the waiting elevator, I quickly look through today's security footage on my cell, noting that she'd not left the apartment all day.

I'm about to exit the footage when she walks out of her bedroom, wearing a little black dress. Legs for days stride onto the elevator as she gently tugs the hem of the dress that barely covers her perfect ass.

I flick to the hall camera, watching as she meets a waiting Lucia, and I growl low in my chest as I step off the elevator, marching straight for *Rapture*. I curse myself for thinking the worst. For believing she might heed my rules for *her* benefit.

“Mr. Burton, might you—”

“Not now, Randolph!”

I push past waiting staff members, dead set on forcibly removing the bane of my existence from my club.

Once I've reached *Rapture*, heads turn as guests realize I've arrived, and internally I roll my eyes as I scan the floor. I find my quarry almost immediately, head thrown back in laughter as she dances between two pricks.

One has his hand on her hip while the other palms her bare upper thigh. Her arm is resting over one fucker's shoulder, an almost empty flute of champagne dangling between her fingers.

I've closed the gap in the space of a heartbeat, blood thundering through my veins as my face fills with fury.

“What's your problem, asshole?”

The guy behind Wren removes his hand from her thigh, bringing it up to, undoubtedly, push me away just as Wren turns horrified eyes to mine.

I hold her stare as his hand brushes off my lapel before I reach up and grab his fingers, twisting *hard*, all the while pinning Wren in my icy gaze. She gasps when he cries out as he yanks his hand back.

“What the fuck, man?” He turns his face to mine, but I don't shift my stare from a suddenly wide-eyed little bird. “I think you broke my hand.”

Wren stumbles backward as the other guy steps forward with balled fists. His attempted punch is blocked when Ford

steps in from behind me, catching the offending hand in his much larger one.

“Time to leave, gentlemen.”

I nod as he roughly escorts them from the premises, knowing he’ll ensure their silence before letting them go with a warning. My eyes scan the space for Wren, finding her talking with her group of friends.

“*Wren!*” My voice is like a whip, and she slowly twists about to face me, her chin tilted upward in absolute defiance. And Christ, if it doesn’t turn me on.

“Yes, *Cactus?*”

I narrow my eyes minutely before dropping them down the length of her body, taking in each and every exposed inch of flesh, every dip and curve, every ounce of perfection on display before me.

And for every other red-blooded male in this godforsaken place.

“You’ve broken my rule. And the price will be steep.” Her nostrils flare as her jaw tics, but she continues to hold my gaze unrelentingly. “Get upstairs, and wait for me.”

I turn away, intent on finding Lucia and murdering her with my bare hands, when Wren’s voice stops me in my tracks.

“*No!*”

Glancing over my shoulder, I see she’s standing there, hands on her hips, resolute in her decision, and I sigh internally. “Go upstairs. *Don’t* push my buttons, little bird...”

“I’d push your mute button right now if I could find it.”

CHAPTER 13



WREN

The words have left my mouth before I've thought them through, and my eyes widen when Vaughn twists about fully. He closes the distance between us in a nanosecond and catches me around the waist to hoist me over his shoulder. His broad palm rests on my ass, keeping my dress in place as he spins and marches swiftly toward the staff quarters.

I pound on his back and ass with my clenched fists, shouting as we cross the packed club floor. "Put me down, you Neanderthal."

Instead of acknowledging me, he swats me on my ass, making me shriek with frustration.

His feet take us across the floor as I literally kick and scream, drawing more than a little attention, judging by the laughter as we pass. He steps onto the elevator, and my mouth slams shut as my stomach dips suddenly at the thought of being alone with him.

My heart thunders in my ears as the car moves between floors, opening into the apartment all too soon. His brisk strides cover the ground until we reach my bedroom, and once inside, he tosses me onto the bed.

I bounce twice as he watches on, rage pulsating from his every pore.

"You won't break my rules again, *yes?*"

I nod repeatedly, the winds utterly depleted from my sails in the face of such fury. He smiles wickedly, making my

stomach dip.

“You reap what you sow, Wren. You remember I told you that?”

I blink owlishly, tilting my head to one side in question as he moves closer, sitting on the bed to pat his knee. “This time, I’ll show you I mean it.”

Before I realize what he’s saying, he hefts me over his legs, leaving my ass in the air.

“You can’t be fucking serious right now!”

He chuckles, feeding me my own damn words. “As a heart attack.”

And before I can hiss a reply, his hand comes down on my practically bare ass. The *thwack* fills my ears, followed by my own cry of displeasure.

“Stop it! I’m not a child—”

Thwack!

He smothers a laugh as I squirm uncomfortably. “Vaughn! I swear—”

Thwack!

His hand stills, and I scarcely move as he rests that broad palm of his atop the dress covering my remaining modesty. As his thumb dusts across the hem, he dips beneath to soothe my aching flesh with slow, circular motions.

My sharp inhalation breaks the silence as Vaughn tugs the hem higher, exposing my sheer black thong. He slips his index finger beneath the string that’s between my cheeks, tugging lightly.

The action taunts my clit, the delicate friction making me whimper shamelessly.

“You certainly were prepared for a good fucking tonight, judging by *these* pointless panties.”

His palm engulfs my ass cheek, squeezing roughly, and my eyelids flicker. I stifle a low moan, even as I buck against him.

“Is that what you wanted?” He smooths his palm back and forth across both ass cheeks, dipping lower and lower with each pass. My heart is close to beating out through my chest as desire pools between my legs.

“No, I wasn’t—”

Thwack!

“Ouch!”

“Don’t *lie* to me.” He dusts his thumb across my barely covered, throbbing core, and I arch into his touch. “You’re practically *begging* to be fucked. I can smell how wet your cunt is right now, little bird.”

My breathing is coming in short bursts, my entire body humming with electricity as I feel his cock spring to life, pressed hard against my quivering stomach.

“You like my hands on you, don’t you?”

Yes, God help me. Fuck, yes, I do.

But in complete contradiction to my innermost thoughts, I shake my head vigorously, hissing through clenched teeth, “No, Cactus. I damn well don’t—”

Thwack.

His hand connects with my bare skin, and I moan loudly, somewhere between disgust and pleasure, as he growls.

“Tell.”

Thwack.

“The.”

Thwack.

His fingers dip perilously closer to my clit, and I arch my body, needing *more*. A hunger like I’ve never felt before floods my veins, drowning all rational thought in a sea of wanton desire.

“Truth.”

Thwack.

Words tumble heedlessly from my mouth as carnal need rips through me. “Oh my God, Vaughn. Touch me, *please*.”

I’m panting when he grits through clenched teeth, “You’d need to work harder if that’s what you’re looking for.”

My cheeks heat as my body vibrates beneath his touch when he murmurs, “But I’m not into touching brats like you.”

And suddenly, I’m left open-mouthed and red-faced when I’m tossed aside as Vaughn stands, striding straight out my door with a parting shot over his shoulder. “You may not leave this apartment without my express permission.”

The door closes behind him with a harsh thud, and I listen numbly. Blood thunders through my heated veins as he crosses to his own room before silence follows.

My heart is racing, my mind is whirring, and my damn ass is throbbing. But all I can focus on are the words that fell heedlessly from my dumb mouth.

And how much I wish he had done as I’d pleaded.

I spend the next morning sequestered in my room until the hunger pangs in my stomach outweigh my desire to avoid the man who’d chased me into my dreams.

Visions of his hands on my bare skin assault me as I slowly amble to the blessedly empty kitchen, noting an envelope bearing my name on the countertop.

After I’ve poured myself an iced tea, I tear it open, eyes rolling when I read the now-familiar scrawl.

You may also avail of the designated office opposite mine.

The replacement key is enclosed.

The key, identical to the one I’d received on my first day here, falls softly onto the table as indecision flows through me.

Take his offering and acknowledge his pseudo apology or stay here, bored and alone for possibly eternity...

“Screw it.”

I quickly devour a plate of French toast and berries—whilst standing, thanks to my aching ass cheeks—and then set about dressing to check out the locked room opposite Vaughn’s office.

Once I’m ready, wearing a short summer dress courtesy of the studio, I check my Birkenstocks for booby traps before slipping them on.

Grabbing my cell from the nightstand, I note several unread texts from my friends.

MATT

Let me know you’re okay.

I send him back a thumbs-up, and move on to the next as I punch the button for the elevator.

ELODIE

I wish I could find your mute button! Girl, that shit was priceless.

I step onto the elevator with a chuckle, giving myself a self-congratulatory pat on the back. I’m not usually so easily riled, but there’s something about Vaughn *fucking* Burton that drives me insane.

The entire building is relatively quiet as I make my way across the floor of the staff quarters. I keep my head firmly down until I reach the foot of the staircase that leads to Vaughn’s office.

I quietly tiptoe past his door, ignoring the swoop in my stomach when I hear his deep baritone, and slip the key into the lock of the door opposite, as instructed. The door opens smoothly, and when I step over the threshold, my eyes blow wide with shocked delight.

The entire room is an artist’s dream. The late morning sunshine glistens through the two vast windows on the opposite wall, the light perfect for painting.

An enormous easel dominates the space, a stool and worktable set before it. Blank canvases are stacked on the floor against the wall, and various-sized pots of purple wisteria decorate the white brick walls.

My face splits in a huge smile, and before I can think about what I'm doing, I've begun mixing paints even as my mind races, questioning how on earth Vaughn knew I enjoy painting.

When my ass touches the stool, I wince at the sting even as my body hums to life at the memory.

You're practically begging to be fucked.

His words flash through my mind, heating my cheeks before I push them aside with a shake of my head.

My brush finds the canvas as I allow my heart to guide my hand, instinctively knowing what I want to see brought to life today.

The hours fly by in a blur of brushes on canvas and colors swirling, and before I realize the passing of time, daylight has already begun to fade.

Sighing as I drop my brush onto the palette, I raise my arms over my head to stretch the tight muscles of my neck and back when I hear a cough.

I pop my head around the side of the easel, finding Ford casually leaning against the jamb of the door. His hands are resting in his pockets as he takes in the room before his eyes finally land on me.

“Glad to see you finally found it.”

“How did you know...” I trail off, gesturing around the exceptionally well-stocked studio.

I can't help grinning when he winks. “Let's just say, it's my business to know.”

“Thank you.” My words are softly spoken and from the heart, and he tips the brim of his hat in acknowledgement before stepping farther into the room.

His face lights up in a smile when he comes around to check out my canvas.

“What kind of flower is that?”

I smile softly, thinking of the decade-old one that’s pressed in my old flower press at home in South Brook. “It’s a purple coneflower.”

He shakes his head with a shrug. “Never seen one of them before.”

“They grow in the soil of the cemetery where my father and my nonna are buried.” I tip my head to one side, taking in the painting before me. Silently acknowledging the significance of these flowers and the person they remind me of. “They’re...special to me.”

“It’s beautiful, Miss Caputo.”

My flushed cheeks are my only response. Never having shared my attempted painting with anyone aside from Mom before, I’m unsure of what to say.

I stand, preparing to leave, when Ford speaks again. “I’m under orders from Mr. Burton that you’re my number one priority for the foreseeable.”

My forehead puckers as I begin to pack up. “Why? Where is he?”

“I have no idea.” Ford’s face is guileless, betraying no hint of bullshit, meaning he’s either an excellent liar or he genuinely doesn’t know where his boss is.

“It’s past your curfew—” He snorts at my grimace. “I’m here to escort you upstairs.”

I loop my bag across my body, glancing around the room one last time before I follow the cowboy. My stomach growls, reminding me I’ve not eaten since breakfast.

“I’m so hungry, I could eat my own cooking!”

Ford chuckles when he side-eyes me as we cross the manic floor of the staff quarters. “Lucky for you, Luciano’s delivers quickly. And their subs are out of this world.”

My nod is enthusiastic. “I’ve had their meatball marinara a couple of times now. It’s—”

His laughing voice cuts me off. “Vaughn’s favorite, too.”

Of course, it is.

Ford hits the button for the elevator, turning to face me. “For both our sakes, no breaking curfew tonight, okay?”

The doors open, and I step on with a huff, gently patting my sore rear. “Don’t worry, cowboy. I got the message loud and clear last night.”

The apartment is emptier than usual as I quickly order a pizza from a place a couple of blocks over. Luciano’s has been forever tainted, thanks to Ford’s remark.

Nice knowing you, meatball marinara.

While I wait, I decide to check my emails for a reply from Mrs. Porter. Despite both Detective Fratelli and Matty confirming that my job will still be mine when my time in the city has come to an end, I’d still prefer to hear it from my boss.

I roll my eyes when I open my inbox. Another email from Prince Charming.

“Elodie Rivers, you are an asshole.”

I click on it, purely out of nosiness, and quickly skim it.

Sender: princecharming4u@googlemail.com

Recipient: wren_caputo11@gmail.com

Hey Princess,

I heard about your accident. I’m sure whoever laid hands on you will be properly punished. In fact, I can *guarantee* it.

This incident has only confirmed that I will need to keep an even closer eye on you. If anything were to happen to you, I couldn’t go on living. You are my whole world.

No one else matters.

All my love,

Your Prince

A shiver races up my spine as I re-read, immediately noting that while I've received emails from this sender before now—and often joked about it with Mom and my friends—the sender has never taken on such a tone before.

It's enough that I slam my laptop shut, leaving it on the kitchen counter. All desire to check the rest of the folder has disappeared, and suddenly I'm itching for a shower.

To wash away the paint that spatters my clothes, or the lingering effect of that email on my psyche, I'm not sure. All I know is that maybe it's time to take these messages seriously.

I'm sure whoever laid hands on you will be properly punished.

Nodding resolutely as I step beneath the shower head, I vow to tell Ford, and maybe he'll be able to figure out who's sending them.

Because, following a message like that, alongside the fact I've recently been assaulted at my own damn house, I'm not leaving anything to chance.

CHAPTER 14



VAUGHN

I wake with a jolt, a whisper of my dream trickling into my conscious mind as I re-live the events of the previous evening.

“You’re practically begging to be fucked. I can smell how wet your cunt is right now, little bird.”

Wren arches into my touch, and my cock throbs against her abdomen.

“You like my hands on you, don’t you?”

“No, Cactus. I damn well don’t—”

She moans as I tap her ass with the flat of my palm, taunting her and myself with each exquisite brush against her delicate skin. With every word spat through my clenched teeth, knowing that she’s fucking lying.

“Tell. The. Truth.”

The pad of my middle finger brushes over her soaked excuse for panties, and my cock strains desperately against my pants when Wren cries out.

“Oh my God, Vaughn. Touch me, please.”

Her demand almost has me throwing her to the bed and fucking her to within an inch of her life, promise or no promise. Instead, I spew venomous words designed to inflict maximum pain.

“You’d need to work harder if that’s what you’re looking for...and I’m not into touching brats like you.”

And then something makes me walk away.

Something I don’t recognize, and I’m not altogether sure I like, but whatever it is, it drives me from her room straight to mine.

I sit up in my bed, glancing around with a grimace, spotting my discarded Calvins on the floor by the ensuite door.

I sigh heavily, remembering how I’d strode from her room straight to my shower to jerk off, something I’ve not done in literally decades. The fact that I’d come in under thirty seconds like an untried teen...

Her wide gray eyes fill my vision. That citrus fragrance that’s intrinsically her hangs heavily in the air. Peals of her intoxicating laughter haunt my ears while the memory of her pale, delicate skin beneath my fingertips combine to ensnare my senses almost entirely. Leaving me hungry to know the answer to one question.

What does she taste like?

The thought makes my cock jump to attention beneath the sheets as I envision worshipping her body until she’s crying from pleasure overload.

But fuck, it’s more than that.

I’d sit contently in her mere presence—looking, not touching—for as long as she’d allow, purely to soak up every ounce of peace and happiness she brings to me. Each particle of light she shines onto my broken soul.

And that’s why she’s got to go.

I shake my head in disgust and get up, despite the obscenely early hour, knowing instinctively what I need to do today.

Something I've been subconsciously putting off for far too long now.

Getting rid of Wren.

My chest tightens, and I rub away the discomfort with my free hand as I text Ford.

ME

I'll be AWOL today. Watch Wren. Anything happens to her, and I'll put your balls in a vise-grip.

Without waiting for a reply, I quickly dress in dark jeans and a charcoal knitted sweater, grabbing the spare key for the art studio I know Wren hasn't accessed since her arrival.

I scribble a note quickly, drop it into an envelope alongside the key, and leave it on the kitchen island before ordering a huge breakfast from Luciano's. I know from my observation that Wren normally wakes around 9 a.m., so I leave instructions to have it delivered at ten minutes to the hour.

It's barely turned 7 a.m. when I slide into my black Bugatti Chiron in the parking garage below Rogue, but even so, the streets of Tribeca are bustling.

The car eats the road, arriving in South Brook just under two hours later. My first stop is Joseph Fratelli, who looks ecstatic to see me when I'm directed to his desk.

He lifts his head from the mountain of paperwork before him, a slow smile spreading across his face that I can't help but mirror.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before you came sniffing around, V."

I shrug as he takes my hand in a firm handshake. "I'd have been here sooner, but I've had my work cut out for me, reining in the house guest you saddled me with."

He barks a laugh. "She's really quite something, isn't she!"

A vision of her smile flashes before my eyes, and I squeeze my eyes shut, dispelling the image before it's even

fully formed. My noncommittal grunt garners a set of narrowed eyes as Jo rounds his desk, grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair as he goes.

“I’m assuming you’re here to check out the...” He lowers his voice as he glances around at his colleagues. “Crime scene.”

I open my mouth to reply, but he grips my upper arm. “Not here. The walls have ears.”

My strides match his as I follow him from the building. He stops, spotting my Bugatti parked by the curb. “Yours, I take it?”

I toss him the keys, and he catches them with a wide grin. “I don’t usually share my toys, Jo.” I pin him with narrowed eyes. “Treat her with the reverence she deserves, and we won’t have any issues.”

He snorts as he slips behind the wheel. “I should have stuck with you and Renzo instead of trying to make a difference.”

I slide into the passenger seat as he frowns. “Little did I know, huh?”

We make small talk as he drives east, pulling into a gated driveway that opens when Jo taps a fob. He stops by the entry, reaching into a mailbox and lobbing a handful of mail into the back seat. The gravel leads to a beautifully kept house, surrounded on either side by the pristine bay beyond.

I grit my teeth as I slam my eyes shut, forcibly chasing the images of Lorenzo from my head. Seeing the place he’d have reared his kid, the life he could have led if not for me...

“So, the house is *technically* not a crime scene anymore.”

Jo’s low voice jolts me into awareness, and I shift about in my seat, finding him gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“The minute I informed my superiors of Sara Ricci’s call, the already lackluster investigation was called off. Now—” He turns to face me, fire in his eyes. “I already knew something

was off. But dropping the case, despite *clear* evidence of an intruder at the scene...”

He reaches for the door handle as he trails off in sheer frustration. “Come on. I’ll show you what I mean.”

I follow him inside the house, immediately noting everything is as it must have been on the night Sara disappeared.

Before I step over the threshold, Jo points at the decking beneath my feet. “We found Wren there.”

There’s a red stain, undoubtedly her blood from where she’s sustained the head wound, and my own blood simmers at the sight.

“Show me everything.”

“This has been helpful, Jo. Thank you.”

My old friend grins. “I’m just glad you’re on the same page, Burton. The house, Wren’s statement, and the bullshit about Elliott Porter being on vacation when the hospital had him scheduled to work...” He trails off, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“I’ll get a team on it.” My voice is firm, wholly sure there’s a cover-up of some shape or form in place, and I need to get to the bottom of it for the sake of all involved.

He expels a deep sigh. “You have no idea what that means, Vaughn. I only wanted to...” He trails off with a shake of his head. “It doesn’t seem to matter how good your intentions are when you’re a nobody.”

“And that’s why I outsource, my friend.” We share a bemused grin before he straightens. “We’ll talk soon, Jo.”

A slightly less weary Detective Fratelli nods once before shutting the passenger door of my Bugatti, and I pull out onto the almost empty evening street.

My next stop is Zephyr, the gallery Wren works at with her friend, Matt, nephew of the elusive Dr. Porter, except when I arrive, there's no sign of him.

A tall, elegant woman is leafing through pages when I step inside the immaculate space.

"I'm afraid we're closing, sir."

I hold up my palms with what I *know* is a charming grin. "So sorry to intrude."

Her lips twitch despite herself, and she stands, walking closer with a heavily accentuated sway of her hips. "If there's something you like..." She looks up at me from beneath dark lashes. "All you need to do is say the word, Mr..."

I extend my right hand, allowing my smile to grow enough to hint at my dimples. "Burton. Vaughn Burton."

"Delilah Porter. Delighted to make your acquaintance." She gently grips my proffered hand with a purposefully shy smile. "Is there anything in particular that drew you to my gallery today?"

Bingo!

"Actually, yes. I'm looking for your brother, Elliott—"

"Eli is my brother-*in-law*, Mr. Burton." She hastily cuts me off, her cheeks heating as she tugs her hand from my grasp. "He's out of town. And now, if you'll excuse me, we're *closed*."

Then, without a word, she turns and retreats into some sort of staff area, leaving me to glance around the work area that, from what information Ford garnered, Wren adores. It's second rate at best, but she deserves something as exceptional as she is.

I make a mental note to look into spaces for her own gallery before I dial Fratelli as I exit South Brook, driving toward the city with one final stop to make. Once I've relayed my encounter with Delilah Porter, we both agree she's someone who merits looking into.

“I’ll contact Ford and have him reach out once he’s compiled a full background check of the Porters.”

By the time I’ve hung up and sent a voice note to Ford, my car idles outside the Gothic gates of Woodbury cemetery as a mixture of self-hatred and guilt roils through me.

I’d known when I’d left Rogue this morning that a visit to the Caputo’s burial place was on the cards. But fuck, being here...it’s harder than I’d anticipated.

Having spent two decades perfecting the ability to close off my emotions, I wasn’t expecting to *feel* so much. And the sensation is overwhelming.

My breathing quickens as I rake my hand through my usually immaculate hair. The long, dark strands fall forward into my stinging eyes as I slam my lids closed, willing myself to reinforce my defenses.

“Get it together, you fucking pussy.”

I propel myself from the car, striding beneath those gates and making for the side-by-side gray headstones that haunt me. Before I can get too close, I stop, eyes locked on my best friend’s final resting place.

LORENZO RAPHAEL CAPUTO

PRECIOUS SON. DEVOTED PARTNER.

BELOVED FATHER. DEAR FRIEND.

My stomach bottoms out, and I roughly swallow my rising nausea before my knees buckle. I drop down onto a patch of familiar deep purple flowers and pluck one, focusing on the large brownish-orange center. As I stare at the bloom, two decades of denied emotion bubble to the surface, and I’m helpless to allow the innermost workings of my fucked-up mind to tumble from my mouth.

“I should have listened to you. I should have done what you told me to, instead of naively believing I was untouchable.” My voice drops to a guttural whisper. “If I had, *you’d* be here. And *she’d* be safe.”

My eyes move past the almost hypnotic flower, returning to the headstone of the man whose life I stole through nothing short of sheer ignorance. An inaction I will regret until I join him six feet under.

“I couldn’t save you, Renzo. And my arrogance led to... this.”

I grit my teeth, shutting images of our last interaction firmly out of my head, lest I fall completely asunder.

Once I’ve gotten a handle on my fraying emotions, I survey the graves of my foster family—the people who *saved* me in more ways than I can count—with fresh resolution and deep-seated determination.

“I will keep her safe from all who may try to dim her light. From any who might seek to taint her perfection. From those who are unable to appreciate the pureness of her spirit...”

I trail off, visualizing the Birkenstock fiasco and the reaction I’ve rewatched more times than I can count. “Even when she’s grating on my last nerve...”

There’s a sharp pang in my breastbone when an image of her dove-gray eyes haunts my vision. Her laughter rings in my ears, illuminating the dark recesses of my damaged soul in the same way as something in her very essence called to me that first day in my office.

The same something I’ve been doing my damndest to ignore. Shielding any shred of decency I may still possess behind my usual snark.

My go-to assholery.

But every single moment existing in her orbit has left indelible chinks in the armor I’ve spent years crafting, and I’m entirely unsure how much longer I can stop myself from taking what every fiber of my being calls out to take for my own.

I stand in one fluid movement, gripping the blossom tightly in my fist as I gaze intently at the ground covering my dearest friend.

“I will do *everything*—every fucking thing—in my power to keep her from all harm; this I *vow* to you, Lorenzo Caputo.”

With that, I turn back toward the gates, my brows deeply furrowed, while my normally inactive and utterly useless heart stutters to life as I let my words soak in.

I need to keep Wren safe. And I will.

But to do that, I *know* I’ll need to hurt her along the way. To push her as far away as I can before she finds a way in beneath those cracks she’s so effortlessly made.

And while the knowledge isn’t comforting, I’m disciplined enough to know that now, with my mind made up and promises in place, she’ll at least be safe from me.

Even if I’ll need to be the worst version of myself in order to make that possible.

CHAPTER 15



VAUGHN

It's late by the time I return to Rogue. I waste no time scooping up the mail Jo tossed into the backseat, along with the single purple coneflower from the cemetery, and trudge upstairs.

Head firmly down, I lengthen my strides and ignore the din, heaving a sigh of relief when I reach my empty office.

The mail is mostly addressed to Sara, with three for Wren that I set aside to leave in the apartment for her.

After pouring a small tumbler of whisky, my ass barely touches my seat before Lucia storms through my door.

“Where the *fuck* have you been all day?” Her eyes are spitting flames almost as bright as her hair. “You never accepted the applicants for tonight’s auction, and it was a shit show in *Ravish* trying to calm the buyers, most of whom went home empty-fucking-handed, thanks to your ineptitude.”

I rub my temples wearily, letting her rant for several minutes about the fallout and how tonight has cemented her value to my enterprise before I swiftly rise. My palms land on the desk between us with enough of a resounding *smack* that she stops speaking to adopt a deer-in-the-headlights look that is so at odds with her entire over-the-top persona that I almost laugh.

Instead, I spear her with dark eyes until the force of my glare makes her look away, and I feel a surge of wicked triumph soar through my veins.

“My business is *my* business, Lucia.” My words are low as her chest rises and falls like she’s just run a marathon. “Question me again, and you’re out on your fucking ass. You’re on thin ice following the fuckups of late, namely allowing underage guests to consume alcohol on *my* property.”

She bristles with indignation, but wisely chooses to keep her lips pursed.

We’re still regarding one another when Ford knocks, sticking his head around the door, only to draw back in surprise. “Am I interrupting—”

My voice cuts him off as I bark, “Goodnight, Lucia.”

Her jaw tics, but she turns after a second, slinking out of my office with a determined set of her shoulders, and I can tell it won’t be long before something gives in our working relationship.

“Why keep her around anyway, V? She’s as nasty as a rattlesnake and about twice as venomous.”

Slumping back in my chair, I gesture for Ford to take the seat opposite. “She’s practically written in the fine print. Lucia’s place here was a stipulation Verity was adamant about when she sold me this place. Fuck knows *why*, but I’m willing to eat whatever cost it may take to be rid of her at this point.”

He nods in understanding as he sits. “I wasn’t sure how long you’d be gone, but I did what you said. She’s safe, no vise-grip necessary.”

I huff a low chuckle. “Did she...” Trailing off almost uncertainly, I tip my head toward the art studio I’d set up for her opposite my office.

“She sure did.” His eyes drop to the mail on my desk, flashing brightly as his lips twitch when he spots the flower amongst them. “And that girl can paint, let me tell you.”

“Your background check said she’s a hobby artist with a view to owning her own gallery one day, no?”

“Yeah, but I reckon she’s not shared her talent with many people. I was only able to find out through hacking her

mother's emails. Here." He plucks a heavy key from his pocket, laying it on my desk. "A spare key for whenever you want to take a look."

I slide it across the desk, dropping it into my jeans pocket. "Have you touched base with Jo?"

Ford nods. "Running those checks you requested as we speak." He stands and makes to leave, stopping by the door.

"Either Jules or myself will watch over her in the interim. You've got enough on your plate."

Once I'm alone, I pull my cell from my pocket, checking over the security footage of the day, and monitoring Wren's few movements. Once she'd entered the studio, she'd stayed for hours, and I can't help the slight smile that threatens my lips when I think of what her reaction might have been.

Perhaps it'd make up for the spanking.

The memory brings the thought of her smooth, soft skin beneath my palm to the front of my mind, and suddenly, my dick flares to life even as I curse.

Shaking my head, I stand, carefully adjusting myself before leaving the office. The key for the studio weighs heavily in my pocket, and before I know it, my feet have crossed the hall.

Light from the street outside floods the studio, bathing the darkness of the space. That unforgettable smell of an artist at work as from my teen years fills my senses with an almost overwhelming nostalgia, and I swallow past the sudden discomfort in my throat.

I round the easel, my eyebrows pulling together when I see the solitary coneflower, identical to the one on my desk, painted in a mixture of firm and light strokes. A plethora of hues keeps my eyes riveted in place, the canvas seeming to spring to life beneath my rapt gaze.

Time stands still as I take the comfort this flower brings to me—brought to me on that day so long ago—until eventually, noise in the hallway stirs my body into awareness.

I make my way upstairs with one lingering question on my almost at-peace mind.

Why would she paint that particular blossom?

WREN

Two days have passed since the unmentionable *incident*, and not a single word from my would-be guardian.

Nothing when I'd greeted him as he'd disembarked from the elevator following his day of being AWOL.

Nothing when I'd passed him in the hallway outside his office on my way to the studio, either.

He'd conveniently ensured that our paths didn't cross unless *absolutely* necessary. And when they did, he treated me as though I didn't exist.

Not a word. Not a glance.

I don't like it one fucking bit. I miss our simple interactions, even the damn pranks.

I miss the sound of his laughter. The soul-deep joy that my entire heart would feel in receipt of one of those perfect smiles.

Not the ones everyone gets. The ones that light him up from within. I *miss* them.

I miss *him*. Damn it all to hell.

When did his presence turn from an irritation to a vital part of my day?

In desperation and fed up with my confinement, I'd pleaded with Ford, my cowboy ally, to take me out for lunch today. To my utter surprise, I'd received a missive thirty minutes later, announcing that my grounding was canceled on the stipulation that I bring Jules with me.

"He's being a fucking Cactus."

Elodie squeals with laughter, drawing the attention of a perplexed-looking Jules, who's sitting at the table opposite to ours.

She'd positively crowed with delight when I'd whispered my most current news in her ear as Jules had driven the black SUV uptown.

My most no-nonsense friend was obviously my first port of call, though as she snorts in my pissed-off face, I'm beginning to rethink my choice.

"It's not funny, Rivers. You don't have to live with his mood swings. Seriously!" I huff as I drop my chopsticks onto my half-eaten sushi with a dark look. "I wasn't born with enough middle fingers to express how I feel about Vaughn *fucking* Burton."

Elodie's laughter escalates, drawing even more attention, and my face begins to heat. "I'm not being funny. I called you to commiserate; I'll have you know!"

With a final hiccupping snort, Elodie steeples her delicate fingers, resting her chin atop them with a mischievous smile. "I know, I know. And I'm *sorry*, but this shit is gold. I don't think I've ever seen mild-mannered good girl, Wren Caputo, so riled up in her pampered life."

"Hey!" I bristle with indignation. "I'm not—"

She holds up her index finger at my protest, shooting me a devilish wink as she lowers her voice. "*But*, if provocation is your game, you've come to the right friend."

Leaning closer across the table, she whispers, "Tell me more about those pranks..."

As Elodie suggested, Operation Provocation is in full swing, and I'm feeling lighter as I prep to leave the apartment to go to my studio, when a text from Mom chimes from my cell.

MOM

Service is still poor. I'm thinking of you.

ME

I miss you too, but please, try to have fun. You deserve it.

The message doesn't deliver, and I swear long and loud about the crappy cell service she has before a loud profanity from across the hall draws my attention.

My smirk is broad as I inch open my bedroom door right as Vaughn steps out of his own room with a face like a thundercloud. His furious eyes land on me for an instant before flitting away as he continues his march toward the elevator.

"You found my present, I see." I snort as his spine stiffens noticeably, but he doesn't turn; instead, he just punches the call button harshly. "Brushing your teeth in mustard adds a spicy kick to your morning, don't you agree?"

He steps onto the elevator without a word, and my shoulders droop in defeat as the doors close.

I thought for sure a prank would illicit a reaction.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I turn back into my room and march directly to the shower. Once I've checked that the water runs clear—something I've needed to do lately—I step beneath the warmth, focusing on how to make things right between us.

Even when he was being prickly, he'd still indulge me with a distraction or two. I don't like this new distance between us, and I hate that my unsolicited response to his punishment the other night is the cause of this clear divide.

My eyes fly open as the water streams down my face.

I'd started our little war by hitting him where it hurts—physically—so perhaps mustard in his toothpaste was too lowkey for us.

Maybe I need to ramp it up...

CHAPTER 16



VAUGHN

“Come in.”

I don't lift my head from my work as Jules enters my office. My lips twitch when I hear him sniffing quietly as he takes the seat on the opposite side of my desk.

“I was hoping to take this weekend off, boss...”

I grunt noncommittally, so he elaborates. “I'll ensure there's extra staff on Saturday's fetish auction. I know those can attract...”

He trails off, and I lift my head to meet his uncertain gaze. He looks so pitiful, my mouth is moving before I realize what I'm offering.

“I'll cover it. Take the weekend.”

Jules's forehead puckers as he focuses intently on my mouth, and I arch a sardonic brow before smiling broadly.

“If you're wondering why my mouth is green, you'll need to ask the imp across the hall what she put in my coffee this morning.”

His nostrils flare as he blatantly tries to conceal his laughter, and even I'm helpless from grinning.

Following my return from South Brook, I'd chosen to ignore her entirely rather than be unnecessarily cruel. But she's been relentless this week, trying to provoke me into acknowledging her. Into entering into our previously playful back-and-forth.

The mustard in my toothpaste was only the beginning. She'd filled my wardrobe with packing peanuts yesterday, and I'd arrived at my office this morning—following the green mouth dye incident—to find the whole place stinking like someone took a dump on my damn desk.

A can of fart spray and a note sat on my desk.

*Oh, the sweet, sweet smell of
revenge.*

Kudos to her, but *fuck*, ignoring her is proving difficult, especially when her citrus sunshine fragrance haunts my senses, driving me crazy.

At least it's covering the lingering smell of ass.

And though I don't so much as glance in her direction, I can feel her presence at all times, like a magnet pulling me closer.

Her easy interactions with Jules, Ford, and Lucia piss me off to no end.

I want to be the one on the receiving end of her bright smile. I want to be the reason behind her infectious laughter.

I'm not a jealous man, but there's something about Wren Caputo that makes me want to stake my claim over her. To take her and make her mine.

And that's precisely why she needs to remain safely out of arm's reach. Away from me.

"I can ask if you like."

Jules's words pull me from my musings, and I snort as I shake my head. "I'm *fairly* confident that it's just food coloring. Nothing a day or two of scrubbing won't fix."

My cell chimes with a text as I dismiss Jules.

BARBARA

I'm short a volunteer tomorrow night. Are you available?

ME

Perfect.

I could use the distraction.

I'm about to pocket my cell and return to the task at hand as my thumb hovers over the gallery icon. I expel a deep sigh before tapping it, giving in to the need for a fix of her in the privacy of my office.

I unerringly find the hidden folder and press play on the Poppers prank for the millionth time. Her cry of displeasure, followed by my own deep chuckle, fills my ears, making me grin as I recall her sheer indignation. Her absolute sense of worth. Her ability to hold her own, regardless of my power and stature.

None of that matters to her. She speaks to a part of me I didn't know existed, but I think it's always been there. Waiting to be uncovered.

Waiting for *her*.

A sharp rap on the door sees me locking my cell and almost guiltily dropping it to the desk as Ford saunters into my office.

"Full background check on all the Porters, and there's absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about any of them." He takes a seat as I frown. "The eldest son has gone off-grid since his father married his ex-girlfriend—"

He stops at my wince before nodding. "Downright cruel, if you ask me."

"Nothing on the good Dr. Porter, then?"

Ford shakes his head. "Nope. His yacht is currently sailing off the coast of the Dominican Republic, and all paperwork is

in order, too. The whole thing is pristine. Squeaky clean. And entirely too wholesome for my liking.”

I nod in agreement. “I agree. Try a new angle. Look into extended family, neighbors, friends – whatever you can think of. Something stinks here.”

“I didn’t want to be crude, Burton, but it *does*! Did you open your fucking lunchbox?”

His face contorts in comical disgust that makes me throw my head back in laughter as I reach for the can of fart spray in my drawer. When I drop it down between us, he snorts. “She’s consistent; I’ll give her that.”

As I sober, I reach back into the desk drawer, fishing out the three letters for Wren I’d gotten from Fratelli, and slide them across to Ford. “Would you mind passing these along? I’d...um...It’s best if I continue to give her a wide berth.”

Ford takes them with a grin. “I’m just about to bring her for a walk in the park, so I’ll pass them along now.”

Jealousy stabs at my gut as he walks out quietly, leaving me to my mountain of applications.

I’ve just gotten through one more before there’s yet another knock.

“Come the fuck in, if you must!”

A wide-eyed Kendra Cameron pokes her head around the door. “If it’s a bad time...”

My shoulders sag as I gesture that she may enter. “How can I help you today, Miss Cameron?”

She fidgets ever so slightly as she settles in the seat Ford just vacated. “Well...umm...I’m hoping you might consider a proposal.”

I have a feeling I know where this is going, so I sit back in my seat, ready to hear her plea. “I’m listening.”

WREN

I spend more hours in my art studio than anywhere else, and I've come to love it here.

It's made me re-evaluate where I want to be. And what I want to do.

Painting is not only a hobby, it's my passion. Maybe it's time to stop hiding behind other's creativity. Maybe it's time to shoot my shot.

My eyes glide across the dozen pieces I've either completed or almost completed since finding this treasure trove, and a sense of accomplishment fills me from head to toe.

Having tried palette knife painting several months ago, I'd quickly discovered it made the images in my head spring to life on canvas, so I've spent this time attempting different subjects.

Flowers and landscapes have always been my preference, but I've discovered a joy in portraits I'd not expected to feel.

There is an assortment of people amongst the canvases. Ford, Jules, Lucia, my friends. There is one of Mom, too, but the majority are of *him*.

A booming laugh from across the hall makes me sit up straighter, silently swearing at the owner of that glee. My tactics have amounted to a steaming pile of shit. He hasn't so much as acknowledged a single practical joke or tried to retaliate once.

I begin to pack up with a scowl in preparation for my walk with Elodie—and Ford—when my cell rings. I check it, and my mood instantly dissipates when I see it's a video call from Matt.

“Hey, handsome. Where have you been this week?”

Matt's wide grin lights up my screen, and I can't help but answer with one of my own.

“You miss me or something?”

“Or something.”

He chuckles as my smile brightens. “I’ve just been busy with work. Doing the job of two people isn’t the easiest; I’ll have you know.”

My smile dims. “I’m so sorry, Matty—”

“I’m kidding, Wren.” He snorts. “I’ve been busy with some family stuff, that’s all.”

Some family stuff is generally code for bullshit with his father.

“If there’s anything I can help you with...”

He shakes his head, blinking heavily. “It’s been handled, Neve.”

His tone is more serious than I’ve ever heard, and when paired with the use of that pet name, I know not to push it. I open my mouth to ask if he wants to join me and Elodie, when Ford walks in, appearing behind me on the screen.

“The car is ready for you, Miss Caputo.”

I glance toward him and nod in affirmation before turning back to Matt. “You know I might not be living minutes down the bay from you at present, but I’m still *here* if you need me. Okay?”

His lips lift in a pursed half-smile. “Talk soon, Wren.”

The screen goes blank, leaving me staring at my frowning reflection before Ford’s movements behind me draw my attention. I shift in my seat, finding him perusing my artistic endeavors with a small smile.

“Your ability to capture a moment and bring it to life is a true talent, Miss Caputo.”

A blush rises on my cheeks as I busy myself tidying up. “Th—Thank you.”

Once I’ve organized the space, I turn to leave as Ford hands me some mail. “These are from your house in South Brook. Vaughn has the ones for your mother in his office.”

My body stiffens when I spot the familiar layout of Prince Charming's letters, and my heart begins to race. "Ford, there's something I need your advice on, if you could keep it... between us for now."

His eyes narrow ever so slightly as he debates his reply. "It will depend on whether it affects your safety or not."

I take a beat to weigh his words as I rip open one of the letters. The words inside make my decision for me.

My dearest Princess,

I've missed seeing you go about your days. I've missed watching your smile as you work with artists at the gallery. And spend time with your friends at Oracle.

Once you return home, I'll ensure you'll never be forced to leave again.

Counting down the days.

Your Prince Charming

"There—there are emails, too."

I pass the letter to Ford with a shaky hand, along with the other two I have no desire to read. He skims the words, his face darkening thunderously until he raises electric blue eyes to mine.

"I will handle it. Ping me your email and password, too."

The sincerity in his gaze helps center me slightly while I do as he's said, and once he's received my details, I inhale a less shaky breath. "I'm ready when you are."

CHAPTER 17



VAUGHN

My cell vibrates on the desk, and I grab it eagerly, only too willing to hit pause on combing through potential auction lots. The process is a time-consuming pain in my fucking ass, but there's not a hope I'd entrust it to anyone else, least of all Lucia.

FORD

She's back at Rogue. Have some disturbing news.

I roll my eyes at his signature lack of words, dialing him as I curse him out under my breath. He answers with a smile in his voice.

“Three point seven seconds.” He chuckles. “New record.”

I scrunch up my face in a mixture of annoyance and impatience. “Could you *be* any more abstruse?”

My brows draw together as a deep belly laugh like I've never before heard from Ford fills the line.

“Christ, who are you, and what did you do to my quiet, non-assuming head of security?”

I'm shaking my head when he sobers.

“I guess she's rubbing off on me, Cactus. In all my years of knowing you, I've never seen anyone ruffle your feathers the way Wren Caputo does.”

My eyes roll of their own volition before I deadpan. “I do so love your newfound conversational skills, but do me a favor and skip to the damn point.”

Instantly, Ford’s playful demeanor switches to protector mode, and his voice deepens in genuine concern before his next words send a chill clear through my entire body.

“She’s been receiving correspondence from an unknown entity.” He expels a breath. “It’s been ongoing for over *two years*, Burton. And from the little I’ve been able to trace thus far, it seems like this person is escalating his behavior.”

Having once upon a time wrongly ignored anonymous threatening letters, combined with the simple fact that I also trust Ford with my life—and hers—I don’t question the legitimacy, instead jumping to the logical question.

“Are you sure the sender is male?”

“*Absolutely*. There’s no doubt about it.”

I inhale sharply through my nostrils as I grit my teeth. “Do we think he’s the one who attacked her?”

“Not a hope. He’s consistent in his desire to protect her. Even goes so far as to mention punishing the one who hurt her.”

“He can get in motherfucking line.” The words are murmured before I realize I’d even thought them.

A knowing silence echoes down the line as I roll my eyes. “Did I or did I not tell you to get to the point?”

“I’ve begun a tracking process to narrow down who sent the emails, and I’ve installed a whole new security system in their house on Long Island.” He takes a breath, expelling it heavily. “So far, he’s covered his tracks to perfection, *but* everyone fucks up. It’s only a matter of time.”

I nod in agreement before hanging up with a deep frown. The idea of someone clearly obsessed with Wren has me more than a little on edge, and it’s with that in mind I open the CCTV footage streaming to my cell.

I find her almost immediately as she pads slowly from the kitchen into the clothing-filled studio I'd had Ford organize within hours of her arrival. I'd guessed her sizing quite accurately, but Ford had been granted the privilege of placing everything within.

I flip the feed to the camera inside the studio as she begins to look through packages labeled *Victoria's Secret*.

With my thumb ready to swipe the footage away, I note underwear I *absolutely* did not approve of, intent on having a serious conversation with Stacey at Bergdorf's. Then Wren tugs her loose T-shirt over her head and tosses it to one side, making any and all irritations cease to exist.

My throat works uselessly when her flawless tits are exposed to my enraptured gaze before she covers them with a black satin bra. Then she stands before the mirror, twisting this way and that as she takes in the fit.

Her skin is unblemished, and my palms itch as I recall how soft it is to touch. My eyes are fixed on the curve of her waist, knowing I can easily span it with my hand.

She pouts seductively before running her palm down her chest and cupping her breast, murmuring, "Like what you see?"

Fuck yes!

Then she throws her head back, laughing at herself. "You're an idiot, Caputo."

She snorts, and then nods sharply at her reflection in the mirror. "But it'll do the job."

It's perfect, little bird.

And I want nothing more than to rip it from her body with my goddamn teeth.

As my cock strains against my pants at the image in my mind's eye, I quickly adjust myself, relishing the friction of my palm against my needy erection.

My breath hitches in my throat when she slips off her leggings and panties in one fluid movement, kicking them to

one side with a delicate sweep of her foot.

I'm treated to a flash of her bare pussy before she covers it with the matching satin panties, and my groan of disappointment fills the office.

Giving herself the once-over, she begins looking for something else, clearly to complete the ensemble for whatever reason, before her cell rings from somewhere else in the apartment.

I follow her almost silent movements through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into her bedroom, where she grins when she checks the caller.

“Hey!”

She begins to pace, giving me a spectacular view of her exquisite body as she speaks with her caller.

“Yes, Operation Provocation is being ramped up. I'm in the middle of finding the perfect one. Do you think he'd prefer me in black?”

My nostrils flare at the thought of anyone else seeing her like this, and I make a mental note to have Ford and Jules watch her even more closely.

“Okay, okay. Don't have a coronary. I'll let you know what happens. Night, Elodie.”

Then Wren leaves her room, cell in hand, but her feet come to a standstill in the hallway, her eyes fixed on my closed bedroom door. A slow smile blooms on her full lips as she closes the distance and walks right into my bedroom.

In the split second that it takes to flip the feed, she's flopped backward onto my bed, onto the silky black sheets I'd put on fresh this morning. And she's looking altogether too fucking tempting.

My heart stills in my chest when her left hand palms her breast as her right slides down along her body, disappearing beneath the black panties.

“*Fuck!*” The single expletive is torn from my chest when her fingers circle her clit, and her breath catches in her throat

as she finds a rhythm easily.

I don't think twice before I unzip my suit pants and pull out my thick cock, using the pearl of precum on top to lube the head with my thumb. My hand works in tandem with Wren's, my growl of arousal matching her low whimpers of pleasure as she begins to rock against her palm.

She thrashes her head, mussing up the sheets as her moans escalate, and my hand picks up the pace, gripping my cock just short of violently.

“Yes, that's it, little bird. Come undone for me.”

Her cheeks are flushed, her breasts begging for my attention as she throws her head back, crying out helplessly.

“Oh, *yes*. You're going to make me come, Vaughn.”

As pleasure overtakes her small body, her words are my undoing, and before I can regain control, I'm coming in hot ropes all over my hand, shirt, and Calvins.

My chest is pounding, my dick still pulsating powerfully, and I continue to watch on, heedless of the mess I've just made. Eyes glued to Wren's panting lips. As she comes back down to earth, she glances around the room almost guiltily.

Pushing herself upright, she withdraws her glistening hand from inside her panties, shaking her head with a murmur that I strain to hear. “Well, that's a new low.”

She waits a beat as she composes herself before slipping into my ensuite to wash her hands. While she stares at herself in the mirror, her forehead creases, and her eyes glint with a determination I've quickly become familiar with.

“You can do this. *Make him see you.*”

But I don't have time to question if the “him” she's referring to is me or someone else, when there's a sharp rap on the office door. It's followed by Randolph's voice asking about a delivery, which quickly puts an end to my unintentional voyeurism, and I exit the CCTV with a cough before hoarsely calling out, “Give me a minute.”

WREN

The hour is late as I sit in the oversized sheepskin lounger that I've spun to face the elevator doors. In fact, I'm on the cusp of giving up and going to bed as I settle myself for the millionth time.

My conversation with Elodie at the park had amounted to her telling me, in no uncertain terms, that men can't ignore a display of flesh.

"I'm telling you, Wren. You want his attention? Show him some skin." She smirks. "Operation Provocation, remember? It's in his basic DNA."

Then she winks suggestively. "Plus...you know you'd fuck him in a heartbeat, given half a chance."

I open my mouth to deny that accusation, but she continues. "Don't think I don't remember the obsession you had when you found those magazine images of him a couple of years ago."

I snort. "A teenage crush, Elodie. I told you – I don't have time for boys."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong." She grins devilishly. "Because Vaughn Burton is all man. I guarantee you, babe. That man fucks like a beast."

We dissolve into laughter, and Ford glances over from his perch on a park bench a little ways down the path.

"Seriously though, Wren. I've seen how he looks at you."

My stomach dips even as I ask the question. "How does he look at me?"

She smiles, almost sadly. "Like a blind man seeing the sun for the first time."

And now, here I am, wearing a black satin lingerie set with a garter belt and sheer black stockings beneath one of Vaughn's black shirts, inhaling his masculine scent like a damn junkie.

"What are you doing, idiot?"

My words reverberate through the empty living area, and I slam my eyes shut, desperately sifting through our previous interactions. Trying to find precisely when I'd begun to see this man as *more* than a pleasant distraction. As more than eye-candy.

When my feelings moved from lustful thoughts to something deeper. Something I am clearly willing to go to extreme measures to get back.

His presence alone gives me a strength I've never felt before, and a sense of peace, of safety that I could have never imagined I'd long for.

And despite his rules, I feel freer here than I ever have in my life. I feel safe to explore the woman I *want* to be, not the woman my life back in South Brook made me think I was *supposed* to be.

Whether or not Elodie is right, that he looks at me in a certain way, I know I can't continue to have him pretend I don't exist. Not when I've come to depend on him in a way that I'm unsure I can be without.

I open my eyes as I blow out a breath, mentally preparing myself for what's to come, when the elevator doors slide open to admit Vaughn.

And Ford.

I freeze when they don't immediately see me, glancing around in an attempt to find a hole in the ground that just might swallow me whole.

“I’ll keep digging, Vaughn. I’m meticulous when...”

Ford trails off when he spots me first, his eyes blowing wide before he gives me his back. “Umm, *maybe* I should come back later.”

Vaughn follows his companion’s line of sight, shooting me a venomous look before crossing the distance between us. The slightly greenish tinge to his teeth almost makes me laugh when he grits, “Give me a moment to take care of this *pest*.”

Then he scoops me into his arms, and despite the fury emanating from his body, I relax into his hold as his strides take us to my room. I close my eyes to soak up the feeling of his warm embrace, of his skin so close to mine, and how *right* it feels to be in his arms.

He tosses me onto the bed, and images of the last time he did that exact same thing dance between us as his eyes devour me.

I’m pinned in place under the intensity held within those ebony orbs. And something about the almost feral way he’s watching me gives me the confidence to open my legs ever so slightly. His nostrils flare when I trail my index finger along my inner thigh as his eyes remain glued to my movements.

I smirk darkly as I feed him his own words from that morning in his home gym.

“Like what you see?”

His face closes off at my words, walls slamming into place even as my smirk widens at *finally* having found a way to breach them. He raises stormy eyes to mine, and my mirth dies on my face at his next words.

“It’s mediocre at best, little bird.”

Then he’s gone, closing my bedroom door with a resounding slam, leaving me to my short-lived win and ongoing frustration.

“I have a sister now, Wren.”

Matt’s voice fills my ears, though I can’t see him. All I see is pitch black.

I glance around as he continues to speak.

“Sloane had the baby yesterday. They called her Colbie.”

My eyes widen as I spot a pinprick of light in the distance, and I walk toward it, my feet moving soundlessly despite feeling gravel beneath the soles of my shoes.

“He asked me to come. I thought it might help...until—until he said Colbie has Marcus’s nose. Then I fucking lost it.”

I’m almost there when my own voice fills my ears, and I falter, realizing that I’ve spoken these same words before.

“Oh, Matt. I’m so sorry. Do you want me to cancel with Mom?”

My heart is beating so fast, I’m sure it’s on the cusp of cracking through my breastbone. My feet jolt into action, running the rest of the way through the darkness.

Just as I reach the light, a man appears on my left. His face is shrouded in shadows as he advances rapidly with wildness in his bright blue eyes.

My scream pierces the darkness when he reaches me, tackling me to the ground and pinning me in place. I scream and struggle to kick him off, desperate to escape into the light...

“It’s okay, little bird. You’re okay.”

My eyes fly open, locking on the face of the man pinning me in place as another scream loosens from my petrified throat.

Vaughn’s black eyes are brimming with concern as his grip on my wrist tightens. “You’re safe, Wren. It was only a bad dream.”

Bottom lip quivering, tears fill my eyes, and I slam them closed with a shake of my head. “It wasn’t a d-d-dream.”

My voice catches on a low sob, remembering now. “It was a memory. Of...of that night.”

It’s flashing before my eyes like I’m watching a movie.

My call to Matt while driving home.

The darkness of my usually bright driveway.

The blow to my temple by the man with the bright eyes.

I suck in a breath before emotion overwhelms me, and I fall apart even as I try to fight it off.

“Let it all out, little bird.”

Vaughn releases my wrists, sitting back on the bed as he gathers me onto his lap. My tear-stained face is pressed against his broad, bare chest as he rubs soothing circles with his palm across the top of my back.

He hums tunelessly, the vibrations of his chest soothing as the even sound of his solid heartbeats thump beneath my ear, and I nestle closer, inhaling his soothing scent. Absorbing the comfort of his firm embrace.

I can feel myself relax as my mind drifts, the large palm on my back urging me back to sleep.

I’m on the cusp of wakefulness when my back meets the coolness of my sheets as Vaughn gently places me back in my bed. I feel him pull the sheets up over my body before he bends low over me, pushing my long hair back from my face.

“Sleep now. I’m here with you.”

And right before sleep overtakes me, he dusts his lips across my forehead as his voice follows me into a dreamless sleep.

“You’re safe with me.”

CHAPTER 18



WREN

It had taken me an entire morning in my studio to realize that, although his words of rejection had stung, they were the first ones he'd spoken to me in almost a week.

Combined with the fact that he'd been there last night when I needed him only reinforced my decision.

Backing down is not on the agenda. Doubling down is.

And it's with that in mind after a light lunch that I take extra special care with my appearance. My makeup is much heavier than I'd normally go for, with my hair tumbling down my back in loose waves when I pick up the short, deep purple dress I had express delivered from Saks specifically for today's assault.

It's satin with thin straps holding my perky boobs in place instead of a bra, and it stops just below my ass, similar to the dress that helped create this rift between us in the first place.

I lace the straps of my utterly over-the-top stiletto heels up along my calves before surveying myself in the mirror.

As I take in the image I present, I stop for a beat. Hesitation flows through me until I meet my own gaze, the gray of my irises deepening in determination.

I'll make him see me. He can't continue to ignore me. Not after this!

Mind made up, I grab my bag and make my way to the studio.

My outfit gains more than a handful of looks, with Ford stopping me at the foot of the stairs leading to Vaughn's office. "Page me if you need me."

He looks me up and down before his mouth lifts in a grin. "Though perhaps he'll be the one in need of help."

I'm almost at the top of the stairs when Vaughn opens the door of his office, his knowing eyes landing on me as he silently points inside. I arch a brow in question, but he just stabs the air again with his index finger.

Once I've crossed the threshold, he closes the door with a quiet *snick* and strides to the liquor cabinet by his desk to pour himself several fingers of amber liquid despite the early hour.

He downs it in one mouthful, pivoting to face me with an unrelenting stare that I match with one of my own. I'm the first to break the silence, stepping farther into the office.

"Glad to see you've gotten rid of the stench." I wave my hand exaggeratedly in front of my face. "I could barely stomach it for the thirty seconds it took to douse the place."

He watches me as I trail the tips of my fingers along his desk before sliding my ass over the edge to take a seat, one knee delicately crossed over the other.

"I'd apologize, but..." I trail off with a shrug, holding his inky stare as I inject every ounce of nonchalance I can muster into my next words. "Fucking with you is my favorite pastime, old man."

Vaughn narrows his eyes at my ribbing, his jaw clenching and unclenching as he glares at me.

"Is that what *this* is, Wren?"

He gestures to my outfit with his refilled whisky tumbler.

"You've dressed like a whore to *fuck* with me?"

I tip my chin in defiance. "Excuse you! This dress is Dolce and Gabbana."

He quirks a brow.

“A whore with expensive taste is still a whore.” Then he swirls his whisky before taking a sip and setting it down beside the decanter at his back.

I narrow my eyes at his insult, even as I revel in his attention. “I’m free to wear whatever I choose, *Mr. Burton*. Your opinion has no—”

I slam to a halt when he crosses the space between us in two brisk strides, sliding his hand along my cheekbone to roughly grip a fistful of hair at the back of my neck.

He tugs forcefully, making me tip my head back so that he can pierce me beneath his dark stare. His eyes flit between mine as blood thunders through my veins, pooling heavily in my core.

“You see, little bird. If you walk around a place like *this* —” He moves my head to the side, forcing my eyes to land on a blueprint map of Rogue that I’ve never seen before.

I rapidly note three distinctively separate areas broken down into the main club, *Rapture*, with two equally large main areas, *Risqué* and *Ravish*, confined farther inside the heart of the building.

He forces my gaze back to his, drawing his free hand along my breasts and down my waist before settling on the curve of my ass as a shiver runs through me. “And you’re dressed like *this*...”

Sliding his hands down along my bare thigh, he pushes my knees apart to fit his waist between my shamelessly parted legs. Then he tugs my hair as he places the flat of his palm over my breastbone, urging me back until I’m spread flat on the table.

He leans over me, his breathing matching mine in short pants as he disentangles his large palm from my hair to fit it around my exposed neck.

I can’t stop the wanton cry that spills from my lips as he squeezes lightly, his eyes darkening as they hold mine as their willing captive. My thighs tighten around his waist, and he pumps his hips, his obvious hardness hitting my aching clit

deliciously. His free hand snakes up beneath my dress as the pressure around my throat increases enough that I know he'll leave a mark.

The thought sends a thrill of delight through me, making my skin hum with anticipation, and I lift my hips, seeking more of that blissful friction. He palms my ass roughly, pumping against me once, twice, and my eyes roll back in my head as I whimper.

He leans over my body until his broad frame covers me entirely. My back arches, pressing my pebbled nipples against his broad chest, making me gasp at the sensations zinging through my whole body.

Mouth opening by my ear with a growl, he thrusts forward roughly. "Then you'll be treated like *this*."

His tongue snakes out to skate over my earlobe as his cock hits my pulsing clit. I moan in sheer ecstasy as he repeats the motion, pulling back just enough so that his eyes are fixed firmly on mine.

Our breathing mingles as I force myself to hold his gaze. To meet his body, thrust for thrust. To savor the breach in the fortress that he's built around himself, even if just for a fleeting moment.

"You wanted to tempt me into fucking you like a whore, is that it, little bird?"

He straightens to loom over me, even as his hips continue their exquisite thrusts, and I nod minutely, just as much as his hand locked around my throat will allow. His eyes are pitch black as he pierces me with them, as though he can see all the way inside of me. To places I had no idea were there before this moment.

Places that come to life under his touch. In his sheer dominating presence.

He circles his hips, and I whimper again, my eyelids flickering closed, only for him to shatter me with his next words.

“I have no doubt you’d be such a good little whore.” He steps away, leaving me spread-eagled and gasping for air.

I rise onto my elbows as he holds open the door of the office. “It’s an A for effort, little bird. Unfortunately for you... you just don’t quite do it for me.”

Pain lances through me as he coolly glances back from his place by the door. I grit my teeth, willing myself to hold it together as I hold my head high, refusing to break.

“Being a dick won’t make yours any bigger.”

Tears sting the backs of my eyes as I close my legs and slide from the desk to rush past him in a flurry of purple satin and red-hot embarrassment. I fall from his office and in the door of my studio as the first onslaught of tears slips down my flushed cheeks.

Before I can turn inward, I grab a sketch pad along with a stick of charcoal, intent on expressing everything that’s in my yearning heart and racing mind. I sketch until my hand is sore and my tears have dried, stepping back to survey my handiwork with a hint of a smile.

A small bird sits in a gilded cage that’s cracked open on one side by a plume of dark smoke. To an onlooker, it might seem that the smoke is trying to hurt the bird, but I know that’s not the case.

He’s here to set her free. To allow her to fly. To become who she’s meant to be outside of the restrictions society has placed her in.

She’s me.

His little bird.

Feeling lighter, I note the time and realize it’s almost curfew. Jules arrives as I’m packing to go upstairs. “I’ll escort you before heading home for the weekend, Miss Caputo.”

I shoot him a grateful smile, extra thankful that he doesn’t even glance below my face at my paint-spattered Dolce and Gabbana.

As I search my bag for the key to lock up, I spot a scantily clad, exceptionally pretty woman walking up the stairs in my peripheral vision. She smiles in my direction as she lifts her hand to knock on Vaughn's door.

Jules stiffens slightly beside me when the door is yanked open. A hand snakes out to grip her by the wrist and pull her inside.

My stomach dips as I slide the key into the lock, twisting more harshly than required.

Jules leads me past the office, his fidgeting putting me even more on edge until an unmistakable cry peels from within the office, and I'm left in *no* doubt as to the reason for her presence right now.

Vaughn's deep growl follows, and my chest tightens as my feet pick up the pace until I'm running across the busy open space. I don't stop until I reach the elevator, slamming my palm onto the scanner as my gut roils, threatening to expel the small lunch I'd eaten hours ago.

Jules catches up as the doors begin to close, and he steps between them, a sorrowful look on his darkly handsome face.

"He's a good man, I swear to you."

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest, feeling more than a little inferior, thanks to the prick upstairs.

His stare deepens in fervency. "Vaughn Burton is one of the best men I've ever met. His words and his actions are two vastly different things. He just...he's complicated, that's all."

I shake my head with a sigh, but Jules edges closer. "I can show you if you don't think you can take my word for it. Meet me back here at 9 p.m."

My eyes blow wide. "That's past curfew. He'd have a shit fit if he caught me. And you'd lose your job..."

He grins easily, tossing me a wink as he steps back, allowing the elevator doors to close. "Best not get caught, then, kid."

CHAPTER 19



VAUGHN

I slam the door behind Wren, driving the point home entirely too well. My throat feels dry, like I can't swallow past the sudden lump lodged in there, and I make short work of draining the half-full tumbler on the side table.

Once I've refilled for a third time, I fall into my seat and throw myself into a pile of paperwork that I absolutely *don't* need to do, but I'd rather do anything other than address what just happened.

Her face.

I rest my head against the ledger on the desk as a crystal-clear vision fills my mind's eye. Wren's exquisite face crumbling at the harshness of my deceitful words sends a pang of regret through me, even as I know it was all I could do in the face of such temptation.

When I'd seen her on the CCTV—alerted by a laughing Ford—I'd been mesmerized. That dress fitted her like it had been made for her. The confidence in her stride as she neared my office, intent on her prey, had been a thing of beauty.

I'd not intended on laying so much as a finger on her, but once I did, things escalated *fast*. I was a hair's breadth from ripping off her panties and fucking her like the whore I was making her out to be.

And it was that thought that had centered me.

You'll never be deserving of her, no matter how much you want her, Burton.

Wren Caputo is funny, and kind, thoughtful, and talented. Determined as fuck, and sexy as hell, but tempered by a softness that a prick like me would ruin in a heartbeat.

Those eyes of hers see right down into the very deepest parts of me. Eyes I could quite happily drown in. Eyes that reflect a different man to the one I see in the mirror every day.

And I want *more* for her. Better than anything I could ever offer her.

She's the epitome of everything *good* in this miserable world, and I won't see her ruined like everyone else who's ever meant a damn to me.

I pound my head off the desk once, twice, a third time before a sharp rap on the door freezes in place until Lucia's voice fills my ears. "What the hell are you doing?"

I lift cold eyes to her laughing ones. "None of your concern." I sigh heavily. "What do you want? I'm busy."

Popping a brow, she takes in my slumped posture, sarcasm heavy in her tone. "I'm sure."

She takes a seat as a wide smile overtakes her face. "I want you to reconsider bringing me on board as a co-owner. I have some big ideas for expansion, Vaughn. I truly think that if we ___"

I hold up a quelling palm, massaging my throbbing temple with the index finger of my free hand. "No, on all fronts." I sigh in frustration. "The answer remains the same as it did six months ago when you first broached this ridiculous topic. *Don't* mention it again."

She opens her mouth to counteract, but I raise my voice, in no mood for her shit. "And there's no *we* here, Lucia. This is *my* club. You're *my* employee. So go do your job and prep tomorrow night's auction like a good little pain in my ass."

Her nostrils flare as she blatantly grits her teeth to stop from spewing whatever vitriol is currently residing on the tip of her tongue. Her eyes are on mine as she rises to stand.

"Yes, *bossman*."

Her lips lift in a smirk at the blatant slight before she turns to sashay from the room.

“Oh, and Lucia?”

She glances over her shoulder. “Please note, Kendra Cameron from *Rapture* will feature as the top lot for tomorrow night’s fetish auction.”

She pivots fully around to face me, steam almost coming from her ears. “There’s an application process, Vaughn. Lots take months to vet through careful interviews and background checks...”

I nod when she trails off. “And Kendra is skipping the queue. Call it a personal favor.”

It’s my turn to smirk as irritation bristles from each and every pore of my second. She treats *Ravish* as though it’s her own exclusive playground. Allowing Kendra to skip the queue will be seen as a personal affront.

And I’m internally hoping it’s the straw that breaks the camel’s back, because I’m done with Lucia and her overbearing presence, regardless of Verity’s insistence that she remains.

Surprisingly, she leaves without another word, but I instinctively *know* this won’t go unanswered.

I manage to get through my work, successfully distracting myself over the next several hours until Jules knocks on my door. “Ford asked me to escort Wren upstairs before I leave for the weekend.”

He steps inside. “Is there anything you need me to do, boss?”

I check the time on my watch, realizing Kendra will be here in a scant ten minutes to hear if I’ve accepted her application or not, and a new plan forms in my mind.

When she’d come to me yesterday, explaining how her ex had cleared her savings account, leaving her virtually destitute, I’d offered her an interest-free, no-strings-attached loan,

whereby her monthly salary would be reduced minimally to cover the repayments.

She'd taken me by surprise when she'd turned me down flat, explaining that she knew about the fetish auctions in *Ravish* and would prefer to explore that side of herself while being paid for the privilege.

I'd seen Miss Cameron with a whole new level of respect, though I'd needed twenty-four hours to have Ford check that her story lined up. When he confirmed her ex was indeed a piece of shit, I'd had my answer.

“If you could wait precisely—” I check my watch again. “Eight minutes before you knock for Miss Caputo, I'd be in your debt.”

Jules frowns in confusion, but nods anyway. “Consider it done.”

I spend the next eight minutes pacing the floor of my office, rubbing at a tightness in my chest that feels terribly like a stroke coming on, until Jules raps loudly on the studio door.

Another minute passes before there's a small knock on my own door. I open it without hesitation, tugging Kendra inside before pinning her to the door, my large palm over her mouth.

“You have a deal on *one* condition.” She nods at my whisper with pupils blown wide. “When I remove my hand from your mouth, I need you to cry out as though in unbearable pleasure.”

Her brow creases before she slowly nods, and I lean closer to the door, listening for Wren to pass. When she does, I lift my hand away, and Kendra's husky keen breaks the silence.

I drive my point home entirely too well with a low growl as I step away from Kendra in frustrated self-loathing. “Take a seat, Miss Cameron. We have an application to process.”

Having slipped into a spare change of black denim jeans and a dark gray hoodie, I lock up my office for the evening. The thought of doing something worthwhile and feeling like less of a horrible fucking person for even just a handful of hours buoys me when all I want to do is go upstairs to beg Wren's forgiveness.

Stop it, you pussy!

I make my way out onto the bustling Tribeca sidewalk, and it's less than fifteen minutes before I reach Haven.

Barbara is waiting by the door, surrounded by several regulars who greet me with wide smiles and all-round happy faces.

"Vinny!" He high-fives me with a grin. "Good to see you back, man."

I grin at Daryl's welcome, pulling him into a side hug. "Work's been busy, friend. How've you guys been?"

"Well, since finding Haven, the nights haven't been too bad. And I met these guys, so my days aren't too bad either."

His three other companions smile less hauntedly at one another than the last time I saw them.

I move inside the wide-open space of Haven, heading directly for the food service line with Daryl on my tail, regaling me with the similarities between him and his newfound friends.

"I don't want to think about where I'd be if I hadn't discovered this place. Haven saved our lives..." He trails off as I drop an apron over my head, Barbara silently gesturing to take up the freshly vacated spot by the grill.

My eyes find Daryl's as his hand clasps mine. "People like *you* saved our lives, Vinny. You're a walking saint."

"I'm no saint, more like a devil." He looks a little confused before I follow it up with a self-deprecatory grin. "Though Saint Vinny of Tribeca sounds good, doesn't it?"

I retreat behind the grill with my grin still firmly in place as Daryl's laugh follows me while I focus on the men and a

handful of women queuing for their dinner.

Something so basic. Three square meals a day. A place to lay your head. A friendly smile and a helping hand when you feel lost.

And for forgotten war veterans like Daryl, Jon, Finnegan, and Peter—the men who embraced me at the door—it's places like this that give them a whole new take on life.

I'm not a saint.

Just a man with a guilty conscience, deep pockets, and the need to repent.

If I can help these forgotten souls along the way, then maybe I'll at least feel better about myself in the afterlife.

Not that you deserve it.

Three hours pass in the blink of an eye as the shelter reaches overnight capacity far sooner than I'd like.

“Call surrounding hotels, Barbara. Check if you can house the overflow there. And please...” I trail off, pinning her with a serious look. “House them all. Every night. The cost doesn't matter.”

“Of course, Mr. Burton.” She nods sadly as she moves off to do as I bid.

Barbara Liesmann is the widow of a retired Army sergeant who'd taken his own life. Her devotion to Haven knows no bounds, and so, she is the only one here who knows the true identity of the man who bankrolls the place.

Everyone else knows me as Vinny, the volunteer who gives extra servings of dessert when Barbara's not looking.

I strip off the now filthy apron, toss it into the wash basket by the door, and move to leave, only to be stopped by Daryl. He's alone and smiling as he heads toward the overnight quarters.

“You're no devil.” He shoots me a wink. “You're an angel, and I'll hear no more on the subject, Vin.”

I snort as my next words tumble easily from my mouth despite not having spoken them in over a decade now.

“Even the devil was once an angel.”

Those words take me back to the day that I last spoke them. To a little girl with big gray eyes and a cheeky grin who took my mind away from the hurt I’d caused the ones I loved the most.

And suddenly, it makes sense. My stomach dips as my breathing falters at the realization.

Wren is the girl from the cemetery.

The little girl, whose pure non-judgment on a very tough day, stopped me from breaking all vows of staying away and pleading for forgiveness from all parties involved.

The girl whose purple coneflower gave me comfort when all other avenues had been exhausted. When no one else cared.

When *I* didn’t care.

The *woman* I’ve been inexplicably drawn to, unable to stop my walls from crumbling to dust in the merest whisper of her presence.

The *woman* I hurt today. Deeply.

My jaw tics as frustration flows through me before I slip out onto the dark Tribeca street and jog all the way home to Rogue.

To her.

My feet take me straight to the closed door of her bedroom. Sweat beads my brow as I loiter outside, eventually pressing my ear to the wood, needing just a taste of her presence.

A bare acknowledgment. A moment to breathe the same air as the woman who’s slowly woven a spell over me.

And it’s with that thought I’m unable to stop myself from pulling down the handle gently, peeking around the door to allow my eyes to land on her innocently sleeping form.

She's on her side, hand tucked beneath her cheek as she snores lightly.

My smile is hesitant but genuine as I watch her, drawing purpose from each breath she inhales. From each moment she exists.

From the knowledge that she's safe, under my roof, and I'll continue to keep her safe for as long as she needs.

Especially from my toxic self.

WREN

Jules kills the engine, pointing down the street to a large building with a huge red placard out front.

“What's Haven?”

I twist to a pensive Jules, whose eyes are fixed on the four men standing out front alongside an elderly lady. “I met Vaughn here.”

The words hang between us until Jules twists about to face me. Indescribable sadness paints his face as his eyes take on a distant look. When he speaks, his voice is rough with emotion.

“I was on my second tour in Iraq. Driving one of the two HMMV gun trucks sent ahead of a large convoy to check for IEDs when we were attacked.”

My stomach dips when the scene he's relaying plays openly in his darkened eyes.

I clasp his shoulder when his voice hitches. “I—I was the only one who made it out.” I squeeze my hand, and he sends me a grateful look.

“I was medically discharged, thanks to losing seventy percent of my hearing in my left ear. Coming home would have been easier had I not lost the three people I cared for most in Iraq. I—I was adrift. Sleep was non-existent. Couldn't

hold down a job. Couldn't maintain a conversation. Could barely make eye contact, to be honest."

He gestures toward Haven. "And one night, when I couldn't sleep, I was randomly walking through the city when I came upon a man leaving this building. He ran into me in his preoccupation, and I fell over." He taps his hairline. "He brought me to the hospital, and three stitches later, he knew enough to know that I was *struggling*. So, he brought me home to his place in Lenox Hill that night and took me under his wing. In the coming days, he got me to open up more, and I spoke about...everything for the first time since coming home. He was so disgusted that there was such a lack of help for War Veterans that he ended up founding Haven, though no one knows it."

Tears fill my eyes as my heart breaks for this gentle giant and his savior.

The same savior who had stepped up in my own time of need, no questions asked. The same man who draws me inexplicably closer, only to push me away for reasons I'm just now beginning to fathom.

Could he think he's saving me from himself?

"There he is now."

I whip my head around, spotting Vaughn's imposing frame as he approaches the group outside the building.

A man with a slight limp steps forward to give him a high-five, and Vaughn's face lights up in one of those rare, genuine smiles as he pulls the stranger in against his side.

"They love him here – though they obviously don't know his real identity." I keep my gaze fixed on Vaughn as he easily converses with the men before heading inside.

"Where's he going?"

"Inside to serve dinner." My jaw almost drops when I face a smiling Jules. "He would love to be more hands-on, but Rogue saps most of his time. Especially *Ravish*."

My forehead creases, remembering the map in Vaughn's office. "What's *Ravish*?"

Jules's cheeks redden suspiciously as he starts the engine and ignores my question. "You've seen and heard firsthand now, kid. I'll let you make your own conclusion. But for what it's worth, Vaughn Burton is one of the best people I've ever known."

CHAPTER 20



WREN

“Ouch!”

I reach down, rubbing my big toe where my cell had landed when I dropped it, and I curse myself for my sheer ineptitude this morning.

Confusion mires my brain as I’ve tried and failed to focus on anything aside from the revelations of last night. My mind brims with a plethora of questions that simply begs for answers.

And the one at the forefront plays on a near-constant loop.

Why play the villain when he’s clearly not?

I despise that he won’t allow me to breach those walls he’s surrounded himself with, but somehow, I can’t bring myself to despise *him*.

I’m in too deep.

My cell vibrates with a text from Matt as I’m stepping onto the elevator, intent on finding those answers come hell or high water.

MATT

How does dinner at Cherry Blossom sound?

ME

Maybe next week? I’ll check when Lev and Elodie are free. Make it a group thing.

The dots flicker with a reply for a long beat as I descend to the ground floor before a simple thumbs-up emoji appears on my screen.

I drop my cell into my bag before I catch Ford on his way out of his little hidey-hole high-tech office as he's slinging a backpack over his shoulder.

“Hey!”

My greeting catches him by surprise, and he hesitates slightly before looping an arm over my shoulder to steer me back the way I'd come.

“I'm afraid I'm on my way out, Miss Caputo. How can I help you?”

I waste no time. “What are the other areas of Rogue? And why can I not access them?”

The real unspoken question hangs in the air between us.

What's Vaughn hiding?

Ford's face gives nothing away as he shrugs. “I told you before. There are areas out of bounds to you—”

“So, they're the *secret* sex club, right?”

He's saved from answering when we step out onto the staff quarters to find Vaughn and Lucia at each other's throats.

“It's *my* club, Miss Romano.” Vaughn takes a foreboding step closer to a furious Lucia, even as she tilts her chin tauntingly. “*Know. Your. Place.*”

He pivots to leave, only to halt suddenly when Lucia hisses with quiet venom, “You don't deserve it.”

His shoulders rise and fall several times as he tries to rein himself in before continuing his march upstairs. The sound of his office door slamming echoes through the whole floor.

Ford sighs before looking down at me. “I'll be away on business for a little while today, but if you need me, remember your pager.”

I narrow my eyes. “Last time you said that, you sent *him* to answer.”

Laughter dances in the cowboy’s big blue eyes. “Stay out of his way, and you’ll be just fine and dandy, Miss Caputo. I’ll be back by curfew.”

Then he moves off toward Vaughn’s office just as Lucia breezes past me, barking orders at unsuspecting staff members who jump to do her bidding. Her expression lightens when her eyes land on me, a bright smile softening her face.

“Oh, Wren.” She tugs me into a quick embrace before pulling back and grasping my hands in hers. “Just the person I wanted to speak to. Come on in here.”

I follow her when she ducks into her office just off the main floor, closing the door softly behind me. She takes a seat on a massive red sofa, gesturing for me to sit by her. “There’s an auction taking place this evening to raise funds for a foster home charity uptown. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but it’s cause very dear to Vaughn’s heart.”

She winks exaggeratedly. “He does have one, despite popular opinion.”

We chuckle together before I sit forward, interest painted clearly on my features. I have no doubt that Vaughn’s own experience of almost being dropped into the system would be the driving factor for wanting to help out.

“What kind of auction, Lucia?”

She taps her chin with her index finger thoughtfully. “A... *date* auction. Bidders will have paddles allowing them to bid for a *special* date with the man or woman on stage. It’s *all* entirely above board and in good, wholesome fun.”

A wide smile graces her pretty features. “Who knows? Maybe your presence on stage will entice Vaughn to bid.”

My cheeks flush bright pink as I shake my head. “I highly doubt—”

Lucia’s hand lands on my knee, cutting me off when she squeezes lightly. “I’m not blind, Wren. I can see the way he

looks at you.”

Her eyes are brimming with sincerity as I smile sadly. “He’s not interested. In fact, he made a point of not only *telling* me yesterday, but he arranged for some hot model-type to come to his office right at the time he *knows* I leave my studio, so...”

My friend shakes her head with a knowing smile. “I have it on good authority that he’s not been *with* anyone since you arrived—”

My gasp of shock cuts her off, and her smile grows as she continues. “And, excuse my crassness, but that’s unheard of for Vaughn.”

A desperate hope fills my chest at her words.

“Do—do I need to speak to Vaughn about curfew, or—”

“And spoil the fun?” Her giggle is high-pitched as she stands, tugging me along with her. “No way. His face will be priceless.”

She loops her arm through mine, steering me out into the staff quarters and through a door I know I don’t have access to.

“Where are we going?”

Even as I question her, my eyes greedily drink in parts of Rogue I’ve never seen before. We enter a maze of hallways with dimly lit alcoves, some secluded, others not. All of them are littered with people in various states of undress, in any number of compromising positions.

On my left, a masked blonde is sandwiched between two men, her mouth open in ecstasy or agony as they plow into her. A gathered crowd of onlookers watches eagerly, several of them openly touching themselves.

My eyes move to my right as we walk farther into the maze, and my jaw drops when I spot a well-known unmasked A-lister, Tanner Heath, railing his agent. His teeth are clenched, sweat dripping from his brow as the other man’s groans fill the air.

I quickly avert my gaze, unsure if I'm weirded out or turned on.

My wide eyes find Lucia's grinning ones. "The rumors surrounding Rogue are true, as you can see."

The maze continues, and I'm entirely amazed at both the sheer scope of Rogue and the sights I'm witnessing.

A woman in a catsuit lapping milk from between another woman's legs.

A man blindfolded and spreadeagled on a long table while two women take turns whipping him, shouting obscene profanities with each lash.

Bystanders touching one another and themselves, the whole place seeming like one giant, never-ending orgy.

"The *real* kinky shit happens behind those closed doors."

Lucia gestures toward doors lining the walls at staggered intervals just as one opens, and I snap my eyes forward to focus solely on Lucia's back until we reach a large door with another biometric scanner.

The pink neon sign above reads *Ravish*. Lucia scans her hand and leads me inside.

"I'll show you *precisely* what you'll be required to do, and then you can decide if you'd like to help out this worthwhile cause. The choice will be *entirely* yours."

I glance down at myself, swallowing heavily as I take in the red latex painted onto my slender frame.

The skintight dress with thin straps zips up the front and stops just below my knees. My poker-straight hair is slicked back into a high pony, and my make-up is heavy beneath the black masquerade mask that Lucia had insisted I wear.

I hug my arms around my waist as a ripple of fear snakes up my spine. Having agreed to Lucia's simple request, I'd not

anticipated the process of going through with it.

Of dressing like this.

Of parading down a catwalk as Vaughn-approved donors bid for a date with me.

There's only one person I want to bid on me.

My eyes deepen in color and intensity as everything boils down to one simple fact.

I don't know what's holding him back, but I'm willing to play dirty to find out.

And it's with that thought that I stand tall, tipping my chin higher as I embrace whatever the evening will bring.

Movement behind me makes me turn around to find the girl from the hallway yesterday—the one who'd gone into Vaughn's office—smiling hesitantly. She's dressed in a sheer black dress that leaves *nothing* to the imagination. Her nipples and her pussy are covered with thin strips of black tape and nothing else.

My cheeks heat while her smile widens. "Sorry. I'm a bit dramatic." She pouts playfully. "I like to make an entrance."

Her smile is contagious. "I'm Kendra. I'm so glad I could meet you before...well...this."

She giggles adorably, extending her hand, which I take. "I'm Wren."

"Sorry about yesterday." My eyes widen as she shrugs delicately. "Mr. Burton is...truly one of a kind. Though his interest doesn't lie with me...if you get my drift."

Her eyes drift down along my latex-covered form, giving me an openly approving once-over. "He's got impeccable taste, I'll give him that."

Lucia enters behind Kendra as my cheeks flush yet again.

"Kendra." My companion's name is an angry bark, totally at odds with how I usually see Lucia – unless she's arguing with Vaughn.

Kendra jumps to attention as Lucia gives her a dark stare. “You’re up first, per Mr. Burton’s wishes. Let’s go.”

Her eyes shift to mine, softening as she grips my arm comfortingly. “You’re to be second, Wren.”

“He’ll be so mad I broke curfew.”

My cheeks flush as she wiggles her eyebrows mischievously. “That’ll all be forgotten when he sees you. Just you wait and see.”

My stomach dips, remembering his indifferent features as he’d stepped onto the elevator before going downstairs in his impeccable black suit for his evening shift at Rogue.

I feel like shit for keeping my involvement in tonight’s event a secret, and despite Lucia’s reassurances, I can’t stop my rising anxiety.

“Stay here until I come for you.”

She smiles encouragingly, and I nod once before she leaves with Kendra in tow. The noise from the stage area assaults my ears with a mixture of music and loud voices before the door closes with heavy finality.

Too late to back down now, little bird.

VAUGHN

I can feel Wren’s eyes on me the entire time, right up until the doors of the elevator close, and it’s only then that I expel the breath I’ve been holding.

As I strode from my room, I was a hair’s breadth away from falling to my knees and begging forgiveness for my harsh treatment of her yesterday. I’d barely managed to catch myself, knowing that to do that would lead me down a road from which there would be no coming back.

To do that would mean admitting to feeling something I have *no* business feeling.

I will do everything—every fucking thing—in my power to keep her from all harm.

The vow I'd made at Renzo's graveside runs through my head, reminding me beyond reasonable doubt that I need to keep her at an arm's length. Because of all the things that could harm her right now, being within my reach is the most harmful of all.

Breathing deeply, I step off the elevator to find Lucia waiting. I barely stifle an eye roll.

“What?”

She stands tall, pushing her chest forward. “Reconsider my offer to buy into Rogue.”

I brush past her with a brusque shake of my head. “Jesus fucking Christ, Lucia. Not this shit again.”

She follows me, hot on my heels, as I scan the staff quarters for Randolph and Chloe, floor managers for *Rapture* and *Risqué* tonight.

“I'm giving you one last chance, Vaughn. You'll be sorry if you don't take me up—”

I whirl about with a growl, cutting her off when I hear her tone is even more malicious than usual.

“Is that a threat, Miss Romano?”

I tower over her menacingly, but to her credit, she doesn't cower. She simply shrugs before stepping back.

“No, of course not.” Her smile is overly sweet as she moves to leave. “I only wanted to try one last time. To be sure that the right decision is being made, that's all.”

I narrow my eyes as she walks toward the open side door to *Risqué*, calling over her shoulder. “Drop by *Ravish* tonight, won't you?”

“Actually, I'm covering Jules's shift.”

And beginning to wish I hadn't given him the night off.

She stops in her tracks, slowly pivoting on her heel, a wide smile on her face. “How serendipitous. We’ll see you then.”

“Who’s *we*?”

She shrugs flippantly. “Ollie Creswell is in town tonight. You know he can’t say no to a good fetish night.” My shoulders openly drop as she laughs. “And tonight’s is promising to be one that won’t soon be forgotten.”

She holds my stare for a beat before turning and weaving through the crowd without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 21



WREN

My stomach dips as Lucia slides in the door, her face glowing as her body hums with energy.

“We’re off to an excellent start. Vaughn will be *so* impressed if you can keep it up.”

I swallow heavily as I step closer to her. “Okay, I can do this.”

She grips my upper arms, rubbing gently. Encouragingly. “You can. You will.” She smiles then, her pupils dilating as she smooths her palm across my temple almost reverently. “And it will be nothing less than spectacular.”

Her eyes find mine as she steps back, taking in her handiwork. “You truly have no idea how much your involvement tonight means to me.”

I blow out a breath as I nod, allowing my eyelids to close softly.

Find your calm, Wren.

I focus on how I felt when Vaughn’s arms were wrapped around me the night I’d worn the lingerie. How serene. At peace.

Whole.

And when I open my eyes, I stand taller, resolute in my participation. “Let’s do this.”

Lucia grins easily as she tucks her arm into mine, leading me out into the backstage area that’s much quieter than it was

before Kendra's appearance.

There are fewer people than I'd have expected, so I turn to Lucia with questioning eyes. "Where is everyone?"

She continues to draw me closer to the curtain leading onto the stage. "It gets quieter during the auction process. Only one lot at a time, remember?"

I furrow my brow as uncertainty trickles through my veins, my feet faltering slightly as we reach the curtain. "M—maybe I *should* speak to Vaughn first—"

"No." Her tone is harsh, like when she'd spoken to Kendra earlier, and a chill of unease races up my spine. She smooths her palms down along the front of her dress before facing me with a soft smile.

"What I meant to say is, it's too late now, Wren. He's already in the crowd with his paddle in hand. If he doesn't bid for you, he'll bid for someone else..." She trails off with a knowing shrug. "And then, who knows? Maybe she'll break his dry spell..."

I blink rapidly, glancing around aimlessly until my eyes land on a tiny split in the curtain to Lucia's rear. I step past her, peering through the gap for my eyes to land unerringly on Vaughn, standing tall and silent behind an elegantly dressed mixture of men and women.

I nod to Lucia as I draw strength from Vaughn's presence. "Okay. I'm okay."

She gently pats my shoulder before moving off. "I'll be MC-ing. Just follow my lead, and you'll do great."

Then she's gone, though I don't have long to wait before her voice echoes through the space, and the mild hum of conversation dies instantly.

"Ladies and gentlemen of *Ravish*, thank you for your patience. Just a quick reminder of the rules before we move along with our second lot tonight. Touching is off-limits. *Only* registered bidders in receipt of a paddle may bid. Your bid amount will be electronic and instantaneous. And, as always, all sales are final."

Touching is off-limits? All sales are final?

“With that said, our second lot of the evening is Scarlet, and you’ll find her dos and don’ts on the screens by you.”

“River” by Bishop Briggs blares as the curtains open without any prior warning, leaving me feeling more than a little like a deer caught in the headlights when every single head swivels toward me.

Lucia had told me that approximately fifty people would be in attendance, but it feels more like five hundred as every eye in the place lands on me.

All except Vaughn, who is doing something on his cell.

I straighten my spine, keeping my eyes focused on him as I slowly step onto the stage, ready to make him see me. To make him admit to wanting me just as much as I want him.

Lucia’s voice is far away as she begins the bidding process, though I can’t hear her over the sound of my blood coursing through my veins, willing him to look up.

Needing him to look at me.

See me, Vaughn.

And then, as though he’s heard my silent plea, he does.

He raises his surprised eyes to mine before what can only be described as abject horror overtakes his sinfully handsome face.

His forehead is creased, his lips set in a flat, thin line, and his dark eyes are murderous as my smile freezes on my face, realizing what’s missing here.

There’s no bidder’s paddle in his hand.

I halt in the middle of the catwalk, and all the air in my body whooshes out when a light-haired man stands up, holding his paddle aloft.

His British accent is strong as his eyes rake across my body like he can see what lies beneath my clothes.

“Five hundred thousand.” A low murmur flows through the gathering before he smirks smugly. And downright nauseatingly. “In British Pounds.”

Vaughn’s stare is the only thing holding me upright as Lucia begins her countdown.

“Going once—”

“One million.”

Vaughn steps toward the Brit bidder with a dark look. “In whatever currency you desire, Creswell.”

Lucia’s unkind laugh resounds in the deathly silence of *Ravish*. “I’m afraid that’s against the rules, Mr. Burton. No paddle, no bid.”

Then she winks, making my stomach dip. “Going twice—”

“Not a fucking hope.” Vaughn strides closer to the foot of the stage, the gathered crowd parting like the Red Sea. “It’s my goddamn club. I’ll bid if I fucking well want to, and I dare any of you cunts to even *try* stopping me.”

As he speaks, his dark gaze travels across each and every face present, finally landing on the Brit, Cheswell. “Retract your bid.”

Cheswell stands a little taller. “Rules are rules, Burton. You made them; you live by them, just like the rest of us.”

Then he nods toward Lucia, whose smile widens impossibly, raising the gavel in her right hand.

I cringe, waiting for it to fall as she opens her mouth almost in slow motion.

“Sol—”

But, before she can confirm the bid and whatever that entails, all hell breaks loose.

Vaughn’s hand reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket, slowly withdrawing a small, sleek handgun and leveling it at Creswell’s temple.

My gasp of shock joins several others, alongside a shrill cry toward the back of the space, as Vaughn calmly states, “I *said*: Retract. Your. Bid.”

Creswell swallows roughly, clearly attempting to save face. “But the *rules*—”

Vaughn drags the gun across Creswell’s temple with cool indifference before he presses it against the Brit’s perspiration-dotted forehead. Then he tilts his head to one side, his brow puckered in genuine confusion. “Do you have a preference?”

“For what?”

My savior blinks lazily before drawling, “For where this bullet goes, *obviously*.”

The other man pales, and Vaughn chuckles as he exaggeratedly whispers, “The back of your head would make for less mess in my experience.”

Creswell’s mouth drops open as sweat openly drips down his temples. A telltale stain appears on the front of his beige dress pants, and his cheeks heat in the knowledge that he’s just pissed himself.

Vaughn watches on, his face utterly void of emotion as his eyes unerringly land on a pasty-faced Lucia.

“I’m fully ready to face all consequences in order to stop you from getting your hands on her.” He stops, glancing up at me, and I *swear*, something in his eyes softens for the barest moment before he looks to Creswell, his jaw set like granite.

“This woman is off limits to everyone.” His voice drops to a low timbre as his eyes find and hold mine. Those onyx pools set my heart racing ever faster, and I step closer to the edge of the stage where he’s waiting, my feet propelling me closer without thought.

“She’s *mine*.”

My stomach flip-flops at the sheer fervency in those eyes fixed firmly on mine, even as my whole body vibrates with raw emotion like I’ve never experienced before.

Then, with the handgun firmly in his right hand, he reaches onto the stage to drape me across his left shoulder, ass in the air, head dangling as his long strides cover the ground between us and the exit.

“Auction’s over, folks. Now get the fuck out of my house.”

VAUGHN

A scant two weeks ago, before Wren Caputo came barrelling into my carefully bland life, I’d have bet every cent I possess on the fact that I have no heart.

It died twenty years ago, making emotions something that I just don’t *do*.

Except the pounding beneath my breastbone is evidence that I’ve been mistaken.

My heart has simply been in hibernation, waiting for the one person who could jolt it back to life.

And right at this moment, I’m wholly sure that same person is about to give that same heart a motherfucking coronary, despite the fact that Ford’s team has undoubtedly begun cleaning the mess downstairs.

“Are you fucking insane or just stupid?”

I toss Wren onto her bed, having not spoken a word the entire time since I stole her from *Ravish*.

I have no doubt that there’ll be consequences, but right now, I’m too wound up to think beyond what almost happened.

What absolutely *would* have happened had I not covered Jules’s shift.

My eyes glaze over, and my breath stutters in my throat as I recall how rough Creswell likes it. How he’d have undoubtedly ruined my little bird had he gotten his hands on her.

“*Don’t* you fucking dare speak to me like that.”

I grit my teeth, willing the pounding in my chest to ease so that I can regain some level of control. But it seems my willpower has vanished along with my restraint, because before I know what I’m doing, I’ve snaked a hand out to grab her ankle, tugging her closer to the edge of the bed as she squeals.

Before she can say or do anything other than cry out, I’m kneeling over her, straddling her latex-covered hips as I pin her wrists to the mattress. Leaning closer, our noses are almost touching when I hiss, “Do you realize what could have happened to you? What he would have *done* had I not stepped in?”

“I didn’t know—”

I increase my grip on her wrists, pressing my forehead to hers. “You *knew* those areas were off-limits. You *knew* your actions were against the rules, and you did it anyway.”

She bucks her hips, crying out in frustration when she can’t throw me off.

“Why did you do it, little bird?”

“Get the fuck off me, asshole.”

She jerks her hips once more before attempting to tug her wrists from my iron hold.

“*Get. Off.*” She hisses her demand through gritted teeth, only encouraging me to increase my grip.

Until suddenly, realizing that I’m not going anywhere, she goes deathly still, her glistening eyes spearing mine as I lean even closer.

“*Why, Wren?*” My question is a bare whisper across her lips.

“Because...” She swallows roughly, her eyes fixed on mine. A plethora of emotion assaults my body as I await her next words, scarcely daring to breathe until she murmurs, “I wanted you to finally *see* me. The way I see you.”

Her breath hitches, and her eyes pierce me as she continues. “To want me the way I want you.”

Her admission hangs between us for long moments as I weigh the raw honesty in her words. In those eyes that spear me down to my very marrow.

Our breaths mingle as we both pant heavily, Wren’s chest rising and falling beneath the red latex dress. “I *see* you, Vaughn. *All* of you. And I *want* you because of how you make me feel. Safe, empowered, sexy, *free* to be who I want to be.”

My forehead furrows as my eyes flick between hers, her brave, vulnerable words just about cleaving a hole in my chest. “I want you to lower those walls enough for me to slip through. Enough to take what we both want. What we both need.”

She gently dusts her soft lips across mine, and I stiffen as she pulls back, piercing me with wise eyes. “I *need* you so fucking much, I think I’ll die if I can’t have you.”

I can’t think clearly. I can’t see past anything other than this moment.

This woman.

And the desire to take her for my very own.

Her eyes widen when I hoarsely growl, “Fuck it.”

And it’s with her beautiful words echoing in my ears that I slam my lips to hers, invading the warm depths of her mouth when she gasps at my invasion.

I slide my tongue against hers, making her whimper, and she arches against me, wriggling helplessly beneath my attentions.

Our tongues undulate against one another in a fast rhythm that makes me pump my hips into her quivering stomach, earning me another blissful cry.

We kiss for long minutes, working each other into a frenzy. I release her wrists to palm her cheeks, pulling back for a beat to find her pleasure-hazy, heavy-lidded eyes before taking her mouth once more.

I run my tongue along the seam of her lips, coaxing them open to take her mouth in a far more leisurely kiss, as though we have all the time in the world. My dick thumps against my suit pants as my tongue dips into Wren's soft mouth.

Arms wrapping around my neck, she holds me close as she sighs blissfully when I deepen the kiss, taking things slower and driving us both to new heights.

Until my cell ringing in my pocket shatters the moment, and I forcibly pull myself away, stumbling to a stand to answer roughly.

“What the fuck is wrong?”

Ford's deep tone finds my ears. “Everything is taken care of down here. And extra security will be in place in case of backlash.”

I slowly expel a heavy breath as reality comes crashing back in. “Thank you, Ford.”

Having dropped my cell into my pocket, I look back at a very disheveled Wren, who's watching me with knowing eyes.

“This is the part where you run away, isn't it?”

“It's not as simple as that, Wren.”

She sits up straight before pushing herself to stand and close the distance between us. Her hand reaches up to pinch the zipper on the front of her dress, slowly inching it down until her pale, bare breasts are exposed to my ravenous gaze.

“I think you're overcomplicating it, Vaughn.”

She gently grabs my hand, bringing it up to rest on her breast, right over her racing heart. “I want you. You want me. What's so difficult about that?”

My thumb dusts across her pebbled nipple of its own volition, making her gasp as I step closer, choosing to lay all my fucking cards on the table.

“If you want *this*, little bird, you need to know that I won't be gentle. I don't know how to *make love*. I fuck, and I fuck hard. I'll take what I want from your sweet body. I'll give you

more pleasure than you can handle. Your body will be my playground, and mine will be your shield. *Always.*”

She swallows roughly as I brush my thumb back and forth across her nipple, her nostrils flaring as her body arches closer to my touch.

“But just know that when I drive my cock home into your sweet pussy, it will become *mine*. Just like every other part of you. Mine and only mine until *I* decide otherwise.”

And even as I utter those words, I *know* that’s all they are.

Just words.

Because if this woman is mine, *nothing* will ever come between us.

Then I pinch her chin between my thumb and index finger, peering deep into her eyes, giving her my honesty and praying she’ll take me anyway, the selfish prick that I am.

“And though you deserve it, I can *never* love you, Wren Caputo. I’m not built like that. Even if it feels like love to you, it’s just sex to me.” Her eyes flicker between mine, unflinching despite my painful honesty, and hope rises in the pit of my stomach. “If you can live with that, say yes, and I’ll make you mine here and now.”

CHAPTER 22



WREN

Vaughn's statement means nothing compared to the intensity in his eyes, and I reach between us to place my hand on his belt buckle, my mind made up before he'd even spoken.

His jaw tics as I wet my lips. My words are a softly spoken promise.

"I was born to be yours, Vaughn Burton."

His gaze darkens before he roughly cups my cheeks, his mouth claiming mine in a brutal kiss.

A kiss that marks me down to my very soul. A branding kiss that makes me *his*, just as he said he would.

And I revel in it as my hands fumble with the buckle underneath my fingertips, when suddenly he falls to his knees, tugging the zipper of my dress as he goes, leaving me bared to his hungry eyes.

Eyes that rake across each contour of my skin with a medley of approval and desire written plainly on his aching handsome face.

I peel the stretchy material from my body, leaving me naked but for the heels on my feet.

"Leave them on."

His low, gravelly command makes my stomach dip in anticipation as he gently grasps my ankle. Both our eyes follow his movements as he trails his fingers along the inside of my leg, inching higher and higher, taunting me.

“So *fucking* soft.” He leans closer, pressing a kiss, first on one knee and then the other. On my right thigh, then my left, before he looks up with desire-drunk eyes as he nudges his nose against my bare sex. He inhales deeply, sending a flood of arousal to my already wet core.

“So *fucking* perfect.”

Then he presses a chaste kiss in the same spot, making me gasp as my knees almost buckle from beneath me.

“*Vaughn!*”

He rises in a fluid motion, his eyes spearing me as a dark smirk grows on his mouth before he walks me backward toward the bed. When the back of my knees hit the mattress, he grasps my hip and urges me to turn around so that my back is flush with his indecently broad chest.

Then he tips my head to one side, exposing my neck. He draws his tongue along the seam of my ear, making my eyelids flutter closed as sensations take flight in every inch of my humming body. “Do you trust me?”

His hand grips my high ponytail, tugging sharply to display the other side of my neck for his attention, and I cry out as he latches his mouth onto the curve of my neck.

“*Yes!* I trust you.”

He nips my earlobe before crooning, “That’s my good girl.”

His tone makes me melt as he palms my hip with his free hand before sliding his arm around my waist, cupping a heavy breast in his palm. I whimper and squirm against him when he dusts his thumb across my pointed nipple.

“Such a *fucking* good girl.” His lips hover by my ear as he whispers, “Now show me that pussy so I can worship her the way she deserves.”

I moan at his words as he tracks his tongue from my ear all the way down along the sensitive skin where my neck meets my shoulder, and only his strong arm looping around my waist stops me from falling.

He nips the flesh with his teeth, making me squirm against him before his lips rest by my ear. “Knees on the mattress, little bird.”

VAUGHN

Wren gasps when I lift her from the floor, urging her face down onto the bed.

“Ass up, beautiful. Let me see that pretty pussy.”

Her knees quiver as her cheeks flush. “I feel so... exposed.”

I growl low in my chest as I take in the view before me. Her tight pink cunt is glistening with her arousal, just begging to be tasted.

“You’re beyond perfect, Wren.”

Smoothing my hands along the expanse of silky skin before me, my fingers ghost across her leaking slit before I dip my index finger ever so slightly inside. She inhales sharply through her nose, and the tight walls of her pussy constrict even more, sending a shiver of anticipation through me, settling in my balls.

“Holy fuck. This tight little cunt is going to choke my cock *so damn good.*”

“Oh God.” Wren’s moan becomes a whimper when I slowly edge my finger all the way inside, thrusting in and out, coating it in her before adding a second digit.

She cries out when I roughly plunge them inside, hitting deeper than before, and a pool of arousal coats my entire hand. The sight makes my head spin with desire, and her groans of pleasure fill the air around us, making me hungry for *more*.

Before I make a conscious decision, I drop to my knees and run the tip of my tongue through her soft, wet folds. She cries out as I repeat the process several more times, humming

my approval as I use the pad of my thumbs to spread her wider.

“Oh *fuck*. Oh *shit*. That feels *so* good. Don’t stop, Vaughn. *Please* don’t stop.”

She pushes her hips back against me, searching for more, and I groan against her slick sex.

“*Fuck*, little bird, I don’t ever want to stop.”

I circle her swollen clit with my pointed tongue, flicking hard as the unique scent of her arousal fills my senses.

“I could eat this sweet pussy for the rest of my life, and I’d still never get enough.”

Then I flatten my tongue and lick from bottom to top before dipping inside her tight core.

She squirms and whimpers as I lap up her sweetness, and when I suck her engorged clit into my warm mouth, her cries of delight are music to my ears.

She’s right on the edge, about to fall, when I pull back.

“Not yet, beautiful.”

As she moans in disappointment, I shrug out of my jacket and kiss the globe of her ass cheek one last time before lifting her fully from the bed, flipping her over.

“Soon.”

She scoots backward into the middle of the bed, her desire-laden eyes holding mine as I tug off my shoes and socks.

My hand rests on my half-opened belt buckle, arching a taunting brow with a smirk. “Want me to show you how it’s done?”

She narrows those gray eyes before rising onto all fours and crawling slowly closer, those heels making her legs seem endless. Her eyes are dancing with devilment as she kneels, tugging my tie off smoothly and tossing it aside.

“I think I can figure it out.”

I press my lips together, stifling a grin as she holds my gaze while unbuttoning my shirt and then slowly pushing the material back off my shoulders. I let it drop behind me as she smooths her petite hands across my tattooed chest.

She traces the intricate artwork almost reverently, her eyes following the path of her fingertips, trailing over the long-healed bullet wound the piece was inked to hide.

“It’s so beautiful.”

I nod in agreement, swallowing past the sudden lump in my throat. “The artist who produced it also created the most beautiful masterpiece I’ve ever seen.”

Her eyes lift to mine, her inner artist awakening at my words. “Where can I see it?”

I tilt my head to one side, my chest tightening as I absorb her otherworldly beauty. Then I ever so gently slip my hand around her neck, tugging her closer until our brows rest against one another.

“You’ve already seen it.”

I can feel more than see her forehead crease as she splays her hands over my chest, easing that encroaching tightness. “I’d surely remember if—”

“You see it every time you look at your reflection, Wren.”

She inhales sharply as she realizes what I’m saying. “My—my father...”

I nod as she trails off. “He wasn’t as good as you are, but he loved to sketch.”

Silence surrounds us as she blinks rapidly before she leans down and kisses the complex inking. My breath catches in my throat when she turns wide, gray eyes up to mine.

“I need to see all of you.”

Then she unbuckles my belt, popping a pointed brow before slipping it from the loops and tossing it aside. The top fastening opens a moment later, and she lowers the zipper

agonizingly slowly, pushing the material down over my ass, letting it pool at my feet.

I clench my jaw when she palms my raging hard-on through my Calvins.

She smirks, knowing she's got the upper hand. Then she snakes her hand beneath the material, and I groan as my eyes close in bliss when her fingers wrap around my shaft.

"You feel like silk on steel."

I hook my thumbs in the waistband, shoving it roughly down my legs, before Wren experimentally pumps her hand on my cock.

Precum leaks from the tip, and she gathers it on her thumb before popping it into her mouth. She hums her approval as she sucks, the sight making my breath catch.

"You taste so salty sweet."

And then she shocks me when she bends her head, taking me into the warmth of her mouth all the way to the root.

"Oh *shit*, that's it, beautiful. Work my cock." I groan deeply as she slides back up to the tip, swirling her tongue around the head before taking me right into her tight little throat. "Yes! You're such a good girl for me, little bird."

She moans around my dick as her hand drops down between her legs, her fingers sliding between those dripping wet lips. Picking up the pace, she takes my dick faster and faster as my hips pump in tandem with her movements until I'm right on the cusp of finishing *way* too fucking soon.

I rip my drenched cock from her mouth and wrap my palm around her slender throat, urging her into the middle of the bed. Her cheeks are flushed, her chin coated with saliva while her eyes gleam with a blend of desire and excitement as I reach down to pluck my belt from the bedroom floor.

"Arms above your head."

Her instant submission makes my chest swell with pride, and my cock jerk in anticipation while I loop the leather

around both wrists once, twice, three times before tugging hard.

“Too tight?”

She shakes her head, nibbling on her bottom lip. “It feels good.”

I allow my lips to curl up in a devilish smile, taking in the veritable feast laid out before me.

“You’re about to feel a whole lot better.”

CHAPTER 23



WREN

A delicious burn fills my upper arms as Vaughn covers my body with his. I open my legs, wrapping them around his waist to feel his big, beautiful cock pressed right up to my slippery core.

He thrusts forward, grinding his hardness against my clit until I'm squirming beneath him.

I sigh as he slips his tongue between my teeth, lazily caressing my tongue with his. Then he alternates, first circling, and then pumping his hips, working me into a frenzy of erotic sensation.

I can taste myself on him as I desperately lift my hips, longing for the moment when his body is held within mine.

Vaughn rips his mouth away, continuing to taunt me mercilessly with his hard cock, driving me closer and closer to bliss as he peppers kisses across my cheek and down my neck. He nips, sucks, and soothes my delicate skin until I'm thrashing beneath him, a puddle of wanton desire.

“Arch your back.”

I obey his growled request immediately, only to cry out as he takes my breast into the depths of his hot mouth.

He palms my other breast, tweaking my erect nipple between his thumb and index finger. His eyes are hooded when he finds and holds my gaze as he laves open-mouthed kisses all over my chest.

I'm on sensory overload, every nerve ending in my entire body vibrating. Ready to explode when he slips his hand between us, sliding two fingers deep inside me as his thumb finds my clit to rub rough, rhythmic circles over it.

I'm right on the precipice, ready to fall, when he raises wild eyes to mine.

“Now, Wren. Come for me, beautiful.”

And then he hooks his fingers, hitting something deep inside me as he latches onto my nipple, sucking hard, his eyes piercing me. I throw my head back with a hoarse cry as my orgasm barrels through me, the sheer force leaving me breathless.

As I come back to earth, Vaughn rises between my legs, grabbing a pillow from beside my head.

“Hips up.”

When I do as he says, he wedges the pillow between the bed and my ass, sitting back to rub his fingers through my quivering pussy lips, dipping a finger inside and covering it with my climax.

“I've never been inside a woman without protection.”

His words are husky as his eyes remain transfixed on the space between my legs. His cum-lubricated finger moves to rub against my hyper-sensitive clit, making me spasm with a low gasp.

“A fuck is a fuck, with or without a condom.”

His deeply intense eyes rise to mine, and the ferocity held within makes my stomach dip as I wait for his next words.

“Until now.” He swallows harshly, shaking his head slightly as though in disbelief. “I want to feel every inch of you when we come together. I *need* to feel you take me inside your sweet body. To feel your tightness ripple around me when you come undone.”

I blink slowly, warmth spreading through every part of me as his eyes turn pleading. “Say yes, little bird. Be mine *completely*.”

VAUGHN

My request is absolutely off-script, and entirely uncharacteristic, but even so, I need for there to be nothing between us.

I need to leave my cum inside her, to mark her, to make her know who owns her.

Because as much as I deny it, she's owned me since the day she walked into this place.

Her eyes are filled with that same longing I feel deep inside my bones when she whispers, "I want that too, Vaughn...I'm on birth control and I've been tested—"

I cut her off, sliding my arousal-soaked finger between her parted lips. She swirls her tongue around the digit, sucking her sweetness into her mouth with a surprised moan.

"We're both clean, little bird." She arches a questioning brow. "I do my homework."

Then I kneel between her parted legs, drawing the tip of my cock along her glistening pussy lips, covering him in her slickness. Her eyes and mine are glued to my actions, and I groan when a pearl of precum leaks onto her wet pussy, mixing with the evidence of her own desire.

Once I've run my dick through her folds three, four, five more times, both of us are panting heavily. I'm coated in her slickness as much as she's dripping with my own arousal, and the sight only takes us both soaring even higher.

She raises passion-glazed eyes to mine, whispering, "Do it, Vaughn."

Then she lifts her hips even more, pressing against me as she attempts to pull me closer, using her heels.

"*Take me.* Fill me until your cum is dripping down my ass, and—"

It's those filthy fucking words spilling from her sweet mouth that spur me to move, and I draw back slightly before thrusting forward. My rock-hard cock fills her entirely in one fluid motion that makes her arch her back as she cries out.

Once I'm seated within her heat, I grasp her hips, holding her firmly in place, needing to get a handle on myself before I come way too fucking soon.

My breathing is coming in short bursts as the heart I could have sworn I didn't possess is hammering against my chest with such force I think I might pass out.

My teeth are gritted, and my jaw is tightly clenched as sweat beads on my brow. My eyes are glued to the place we're joined, on the sight of her wet pink pussy lips parted to take my bare cock makes my balls draw up dangerously.

"Holy fuck, beautiful," I pant heavily, striving for my usual ironclad control, but it seems to have deserted me.

Wren's eyes meet mine, a mixture of pain and pleasure written across her perfect features, and I bend over her body, one hand reaching up to tug the belt around her wrists, pinning her in place as I press a light kiss to her forehead. I draw back and press our foreheads together, my breath ghosting over her panting mouth. "You're spectacular."

I circle my hips with a deep groan as she whimpers beneath me. "You're taking me so well, little bird. *So* fucking well."

Then I plunge my tongue inside her mouth with a low growl as I move in slow, short thrusts. Her pussy clenches my dick, sucking me in deeper, making my hips falter as my orgasm builds.

Her ankles lock at my ass, holding me impossibly closer, driving me even deeper as her moans fill my mouth. She takes the lead, deepening the kiss, pulling me fully inside of her, and I lose what small shred of control I have remaining.

I rip my mouth from hers, and she cries out at the loss as I place her feet on either side of my head. Her eyes hold mine as

I grab her hips hard enough to leave my mark, just as promised.

I jerk my cock from her satiny heat and run the slick head through her wetness with a guttural growl.

“If I’m too rough, you’ll need to tell me.”

And without waiting another second, I drive my cock back inside her sweet tightness, pounding relentlessly as the pressure of my hands on her hips increases.

Wren’s eyes are fixed firmly on mine, taking everything I’m giving her and still lifting her hips to take more.

Arms held above her head, a light sheen of sweat covers her swaying tits. Her hair has come mostly undone, falling across the pillows at her back like a ream of silk.

Those mesmerizing eyes don’t falter from mine, and I feel a pang in my chest that almost drives the breath from my body as I continue to thrust mindlessly.

“My good girl. My beautiful, good girl.” My words are hoarse, spoken between pants, and wholly fucking meant.

This woman was *made* for me.

“Come for me, Wren. Come *with* me.”

I’m right on the edge, unable to stop myself from falling into the most powerful orgasm my body has ever felt as her pussy quakes around me.

“Oh *shit*, I’m coming.”

Her tight cunt clenches almost painfully as she milks my cock, and I erupt deep inside her, flooding her pussy with a stream of hot cum, painting her core with all of me.

Making her *my* Wren.

As I come down from my high, I reach over her head and quickly tug the belt from her wrists, gently easing her abused arms down by her sides.

Our lips meet in a kiss entirely at odds with how hard I’ve just taken her, and she sighs into my mouth as her tongue

indolently mates with mine.

I break apart, pulling back just enough to peer into those gray eyes I'd wage a war to glimpse one last time. Eyes that shine with something I'm not able to name, but I know instinctively that I want to see more of it.

And often.

Her chest is flushed and covered in perspiration when I let her legs fall on either side of my hips. I lean closer to her, resting my head over her galloping heart, gathering her as close to my body as I can.

She presses a gentle kiss to my forehead, and I listen to the slowing cadence of her heart beneath my ear as I massage her right bicep.

“Are you okay?”

She snorts softly. “A little sore...but that feels good.”

I lift my head, and she meets my gaze. “Was I too rough?”

Lips twitching, she arches a brow. “It was perfect.” Her right hand shakily palms my cheek. “*You* were perfect.”

I sit up with a preening grin and withdraw my softening cock from her slick core. My lips falter when she sucks in a sharp breath. “Ouch, that stings.”

My brow furrows in concern as I prop her hips higher on the pillow, dropping between her legs to check her well-fucked pussy. It's dripping with a combination of both our orgasms, looking more than a little tender.

And it's quite literally the hottest thing I've ever seen in my fucking life, but even so, remorse floods me at the thought of taking things too far.

“I hurt you.”

She starts to shake her head. “No—*oh!*”

I cut her off when I press an open-mouthed kiss to her inner thigh, my eyes fixed on hers as her nostrils flare with unmistakable desire.

“There’s no way *I’m* ready for round two—”

She opens her mouth, clearly to dissent, but her words die in her throat when I press a kiss to her slick clit before I slide my middle finger deep inside her flooded core, pushing *us* back inside her.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t apologize to your aching pussy, little bird.”

Another finger joins the first as I push more inside, suddenly altogether consumed with the thought of not only leaving my mark *on* her, but of leaving part of myself *inside* her.

“*Fuck!* I’ll never tire of worshipping your body.”

I lean closer, flicking my tongue across her clit before sucking it into my mouth.

Her hands—practically useless since being restrained—tangle in my mussed hair as she comes to life beneath me once more.

Despite having just come harder than ever before, I feel a telltale pressure in my balls, and I settle more firmly between her smooth legs.

“Now, wrap those pretty thighs around my ears, beautiful girl. I’m far from finished with you.”

CHAPTER 24



WREN

My body aches in the most delicious way as I turn over in bed, my heart fluttering wildly in my chest when my eyes land on a sleeping Vaughn.

His cheek rests on the pillow beside me as he breathes softly. His black lashes sit on his sculpted cheeks, and his face is relaxed in his slumber.

I'm filled with a happiness that almost overwhelms me, recalling how we'd come together last night. How *perfect* it had been.

How perfect *he* is.

And as though he's heard my thoughts, his lashes flutter, parting to reveal those midnight eyes I've become thoroughly obsessed with.

His gaze is soft, almost dreamy, before a tender, dimpled smile grows on his face.

"It wasn't a dream."

A smile emerges on my own lips. "Appears that way."

His own smile broadens, making my heart take flight, and right here, in this very moment, I know I'm falling for him.

Or maybe I'm just now realizing that I've been falling for a while now.

I don't have time to process my revelatory thoughts before I'm scooped from the bed into a bridal carry with a squeal. "What are you doing?"

Vaughn chuckles as he rounds the foot of the bed and marches straight into the hall, crossing swiftly into his room. He lays me gently on his bed before giving me his back—and that ridiculously perfect ass—as he calls over his shoulder.

“The tub in here is bigger.”

“Why do you need a bigger tub?”

He disappears from view, and the sound of water running hits my ears as he returns with a wry grin. “To clean your body...” He quirks a devilish brow. “So I can dirty you up again.”

My eyes rake across every perfect inch of him. Broad, tanned shoulders lead to the inked masterpiece on his pectorals, tapering down to a slim waist rippling with muscles that point straight to his semi-hard, entirely flawless dick.

I’m practically salivating, completely in a world of my own, when Vaughn’s voice rouses me.

“Like what you see?”

That question again, except this time, I can answer it.

I slip from the bed, feet silent as I cross the floor, and press my entire body against his spectacular nakedness. My arms encircle his neck as we share the same bright smile.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited to say hell fucking *yes*, I do?”

He wraps his arms around me, lifting me off the floor with a chuckle. “I have an idea, alright.”

I lock my thighs around his waist, pressing my lips to his as he slowly pads across the bathroom tiles. He pulls back, his eyes assuredly seeing all the way inside my soul.

“About as long as I have, little bird.”

His sincerity electrifies me as he sets me down by the almost full tub, twisting the knobs off before checking the water temperature with his elbow with a nod. “Perfect—”

Whatever he’s about to say is cut off when my cell starts to ring from the nightstand in my bedroom. I slip past him,

rushing to grab it, hoping it's Mom, and when I see the caller, my heart accelerates.

"It's my mother!" Delight colors my tone when I call out to Vaughn.

I swipe to answer just as he steps into the room, handing me a towel to match the one looped around his waist.

"Hello?" I pop the call onto speakerphone, donning the towel as Vaughn winks mischievously, mouthing, "*Later.*"

"Baby?" Mom's voice is *off*, and I'm instantly sobered, standing up straighter with concern coloring my features. Vaughn's frown is deep as he crosses the room to pluck his own cell from his discarded pants pocket.

"What's wrong, Mom? Are you okay?"

"Oh, Wren. I'm...I'm fine. It's just that...well, Elliott's been in an accident."

A shiver tracks down my spine as Vaughn's dark gaze finds mine. "Is—is he okay?"

She hums an affirmative. "He tore his ACL yesterday. The surgery to repair went well, thankfully, but we're stuck here for the foreseeable."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, thankful it was nothing worse.

"How long?"

"At minimum...maybe four to six weeks?"

As my mouth drops open, she rushes on. "I've looked into flying home, but Elliott doesn't want to leave the boat, and I'd hate to leave him here alone with just the staff for company. You're *safe* where you are...so..."

My shoulders sag as the longing for my mother increases astronomically, and Vaughn steps closer, tugging me back against his chest.

His touch buoys me, lifting my flagging spirits, and I'm attempting to gather enough enthusiasm as I can muster to

give my mother the response she needs, when Vaughn's deep baritone rumbles over my shoulder.

“Wren is not going anywhere, Sara.”

I twist my head about as his gaze flicks from the cell to mine. His eyes darken, making my heart thrash wildly while my breathing quickens.

“She knows where she belongs.”

And who she belongs to.

The words are unspoken but hang in the air between us until the moment is shattered when Mom speaks. “Umm... thank you for keeping her safe, V.”

Vaughn's hand cups a breast through the towel covering me, and I stifle a sharp inhale as anticipation heats my blood.

“It's my pleasure, Sara.”

My eyes blow wide while my core tingles at the blatant double entendre in his tone, but Mom is blissfully unaware, ignoring Vaughn's words entirely. “Stay in the city, my love. I'll be in touch as soon as I know more.”

“But what will I do about Zephyr, Mom? Mrs. Porter won't hold my internship forever, regardless of my friendship —”

“*Stay. There,*” Mom cuts me off, using a fervent tone I've never heard from her before, and I jolt in Vaughn's arms, a frown marring my brow.

Pressing closer, he leans toward the cell. “I have connections. We could look into finding a new gallery.” He shifts his gaze to mine. “Think about it, hmm?”

Then he runs the back of his index finger along my smiling cheek as time comes to a standstill, and I just *pray* that my newly discovered feelings are not reflected in my eyes.

And though you deserve it, I can never love you, Wren Caputo.

His statement from last night echoes in my mind as Vaughn's eyes dance with a light I've not seen in him before,

and my smile grows, knowing it's *me* who's put it there.

“It's not a bad idea to stay away...I mean, umm...to stay *there* a while longer, my love.”

The light in Vaughn's eyes dies as Mom's voice jars us to awareness, and he presses a soft kiss to my brow. Then he steps back to type a text on his cell as I bid Mom farewell, making her promise to update me on Elliott's health every day.

When I make my way back into Vaughn's room, concern is plainly etched across my face, and I have more than a handful of questions that need answering bouncing around in my mind.

Until I step into his ensuite, finding him ensconced in an almost overflowing bubble bath. His head is tipped back, arms spread over the sides as he luxuriates.

“What are you doing?”

He sits forward, his eyes lightening when they land on me loitering in the doorway.

“Waiting for you, beautiful.” He holds his hand out to me. “Get your gorgeous ass in here. I've got some dirtying up to do before work.”

I wake up on Vaughn's sheets to a handwritten note and a menu from Luciano's.

My grin is wide as I tug the sheets up over my nakedness, and I begin to read.

*Good morning, beautiful girl.
I didn't want to wake you. You'll
need your strength for later.*

My nostrils flare as my body hums in remembrance of how Vaughn had worshipped me all morning, making me see stars

five times before I'd practically passed out in his bed.

You'll need sustenance, too. Their meatball marinara is messy, but excellent.

Text me when you wake. I'll be cleaning up Lucia's mess downstairs if you need me.

The sight of you freshly fucked, dripping with my cum, and spreadeagled on my sheets will see me through today, my little bird. I'm hard as granite thinking of all the ways I'll make you shatter for me tonight.

The question is, do you want my fingers, my tongue, or my cock first?

I bite my lip roughly before throwing back the sheet and ducking into a much-required shower. Vaughn had been true to his word, dirtying me up good and proper. He'd come all over my tits when I'd made him lose control whilst on my knees for him, and that had only been the start of our early morning antics.

Visions of the past eighteen hours flicker through my head like a movie reel, and I'm smiling to myself as I finish rinsing my body, taking care to be gentle with my well-loved nether region.

Once I've toweled off, I return to my own room, pluck my cell from the nightstand, and flop backward onto my bed to

send that text Vaughn requested. I grin mischievously as I type.

ME

I'm all clean again.

The dots bounce instantly, as though he's been waiting for me.

VAUGHN

I'll need to see proof.

I choke on a giggle as I flip on the camera in selfie mode, tugging my towel open to snap a topless pic, but his name flashes on the screen before I can hit send.

“Lie back on the bed.”

His words are a growled order and one I readily obey.

“Place the cell beside you, and open your towel fully.”

“How did you know...” I glance around the room, wondering how he can see me, but find nothing.

“Above the bookcase, little bird.”

My head twists to the shelves opposite me, squinting slightly until I spot a tiny red dot, realization dawning plainly on my face.

“Are there cameras everywhere?”

My cheeks heat, suddenly guilty as I recall the evening when madness overtook me enough that I'd gotten myself off in Vaughn's bed. His deep chuckle tells me he already knows all about that, and he confirms my suspicions when he murmurs, “You're even more exquisite in the flesh, beautiful girl.”

I tug my bottom lip into my mouth as he whispers, “And your tight cunt is a million times better than my hand.”

My breathing is coming in short pants at the thought of him watching me get off, and I'm voracious for him all over

again despite this morning's activities.

"Open those pretty thighs for me."

My legs fall open of their own volition, something deep inside of me wanting nothing more than to please this man.

"Mmm." His deep growl of displeasure sends a ripple of desire skittering down my spine, pooling between my legs. "She's way too clean for my liking."

His tone is playful, and I smile brightly directly at the watching camera. "I can't wait for you to fill her up again."

He inhales sharply, but a voice in the background—Ford's, I think—puts an end to our banter.

"I'll be home as soon as I get this mess sorted. Don't forget to eat." His tone deepens. "You'll need it."

When we hang up, I click on my unread messages, seeing a handful from Elodie, all questioning how the night went, but as I begin to type a reply, she video calls.

I hit answer with a cheesy grin, holding the cell back enough that she can see my freshly washed state.

"Operation Provocation was—"

My words die in my throat when I take in the screen before me, split in two with both Elodie and Levi watching on.

Elodie's eyes blow wide as Levi frowns. "What's Operation Provocation?"

His frown deepens as he peers closer to his screen. "And are those *bruises* on your neck?"

Elodie chokes on her laughter as my cheeks give Levi his answer. He throws his hands up in the air in sheer exasperation.

"First Elodie, then Matt, now—"

"*Matt?*"

Both mine and Elodie's voices chime simultaneously, and Levi slams his palm over his mouth, mumbling, "Forget I said anything."

“Matt Porter is getting laid? Are you for real?”

I shake my head at Elodie’s disbelief as Levi buries his face in his hands. “For fuck’s sake.”

“You *need* to give us the deets, Lev.” Elodie laces her fingers together, not above begging, and I snort a laugh at her desperation before she shoots me a quelling look.

“I can’t—”

“I’m not asking for your firstborn here. Come on. Spill the damn tea.”

“I *can’t*, Rivers—”

“Just gimme the who then, *jeez*.” Elodie crosses her arms over her chest belligerently.

Levi rolls his eyes. “As I was saying, I physically *can’t* tell you anything other than he’s met someone. I don’t know who, only that he’s spending all his time with her out on Abrams Island.”

The private island off the coast of South Brook is left mostly unattended, not even housing a staff of any sort. It’s been in the Parker family for several generations, and though gorgeous and brimming with memories of teenage stupidity, our foursome hadn’t spent time there since I was fourteen.

“Good for him.” My smile is genuine. “Life’s too short not to seize happiness when it presents itself.”

“Well, it’s not so much the happiness I begrudge, Wren.” Levi shrugs self-deprecatorily. “It’s the simple fact that I’d have more chance of getting laid if I crawled inside a fucking chicken...”

His remark has the three of us dissolving into floods of laughter until Levi needs to get to class, leaving just Elodie and me. The second he signs off, she’s straight into it.

“Well, was I right?” Her lips are upturned in a barely suppressed smile.

My brow creases. “About what?”

A filthy grin blooms on her cheeks. “Does he fuck like a beast?”

CHAPTER 25



VAUGHN

It takes a full week to unravel the mess with Lucia fucking Romano, but at the end of those seven days, I can rest assured that I won't need to see her face or deal with her shit ever again.

She'd been the very picture of sorrow as she'd packed up her office, and I'd relished the sight.

Good fucking riddance.

Now, everything is in motion to ensure *Ravish* never returns to Rogue.

And the meeting with Nolan Fritz had gone *precisely* as planned. The cogs of his downfall were turning. Time and patience would see that prick getting his just fucking desserts.

“Security is in place for this evening, V. Everything is good to go.”

Ford meets my eyes, nodding sharply before exiting my office. I grab my cell and call Jo Fratelli before I do the same. He answers on the second ring, cutting right to the chase.

“I've deduced that Elliott Porter's yacht *is* where it's supposed to be, in Puerto Rico. *However*, there are zero hospital records, meaning one thing—”

“Sara Ricci is lying.”

Jo hums his agreement, then voices the same question rattling around in my own head.

“For what reason, though? I’m genuinely confused here, but I’m working on it as best I can.”

“Ford is, too, now that this business with my ex-employee is resolved. Have you looked into the other Porters?”

“I’m keeping tabs, but nothing out of the ordinary. I’ve requested to meet with Lennon Porter, who would be Delilah’s ex-husband and Dr. Porter’s brother. I’m thinking if anyone knows what’s going on, it’s him. I’m still waiting to hear back.”

“Okay, keep me posted.”

Once I’ve hung up, I throw on my suit jacket and make my way across the hall to Wren’s studio, as I’ve done every evening this past week.

She’s so involved in the painting before her that she doesn’t notice my entry, and rather than interrupt her, I stand back, absorbing her beauty from afar.

Something I should have continued to do despite her willingness to enter into this arrangement with me, but somehow, I can’t find it in me to give one single shit.

This time with her is worth burning in hell for all eternity.

But would she still look at you with her heart in her eyes if she knew who was responsible for her father’s death?

I shake off the thought before it can begin to fester in the depths of my brain, instead focusing on the picture before me.

My chest constricts when I realize the piece she’s working on is a still life. An image undoubtedly from her memory.

An image of *us*, bodies entwined, souls consumed in one other.

The constellation of tattoos on my upper torso is uncannily similar to the actual piece Lorenzo commissioned for me over twenty years ago. Each and every brush stroke is a symphony in and of itself.

Masterpieces from a masterpiece. Her talent is indubitable; her humility is humbling, and that she chooses to be *mine* is

truly awe-inducing.

Slowly, I edge closer until I'm right at her back to press a light kiss atop her head. She spins in her seat, eyes filled with delight as she makes to throw her arms around me, stopping when she remembers she's covered in paint.

She looks up at me, laughter in her eyes. "Don't worry. I won't ruin your suit like I ruined those wingtips."

Laughter rumbles in my chest, recalling the feeling of sliding my feet into pudding-filled shoes, and before I have a conscious thought, I wrap my arms around her, tugging her close despite her cry of dissent.

"Your suit—"

"Doesn't matter. Now shut up and rest your cheek against my chest. We need to talk."

Like the good girl that I know her to be, she does as she's told, wrapping her arms around my waist while she molds her small frame to my much larger one.

"A special dress has been delivered upstairs, little bird. I need you to wear it for an event we'll be attending this evening."

She angles her neck up, surprise apparent on her paint-marked face. "What event?"

"It's a secret." When she narrows her eyes skeptically, my chest grumbles with a deep chuckle. "And I *promise* you'll like it."

My lips twitch before I peck her nose. She wrinkles it, slipping from my embrace and walking to the door.

"I'm not altogether fond of surprises, Mr. Burton, but I'll make the exception this one time, seeing as you've promised I'll like it."

I follow her with a wry grin, anticipation filling me at the thought of what awaits us.

"You won't regret it."

WREN

I can hear Vaughn's footsteps pacing the hallway right outside my door as I fidget with the necklace that had been in the package left for me.

"Gimme a sec."

I'm met with an impatient growl. "*One* second, and then I'm coming in. Like it or not, little bird."

I huff in frustration, finally managing to tie the clasp. "Fine. Come in then."

The door opens immediately, and Vaughn steps into my room, looking far too handsome to be real.

He's donned a four-piece tailored black suit, but he's changed it up by wearing a white shirt instead of his usual black, with a black vest underneath his impeccable black jacket. His dark hair is slicked back from his face, curling against the shirt collar.

He looks like he's stepped off a catwalk.

I step closer, but his command halts me.

"Don't move, beautiful." He inhales a deep breath, his eyes slowly ambling over every inch of me, my skin coming to life under the caress of his gaze. "I need to commit this moment to memory."

My cheeks flush as he continues his perusal.

The dress is dark navy satin covered in sparkling beads, giving the effect of a starry night. It's a strapless bodice that cinches at the waist and falls to the floor. A thigh-high split showcases my legs and the stunning pale gold heels that complement the dress.

I've pinned my hair up in loose curls, letting several sit on my nape to soften the look, and my makeup is a simple smoky eye paired with nude lips.

I twirl about with a giggle as Vaughn continues to watch before he strides closer, determination set on his face. He slams his mouth to mine, groaning as his tongue slides past my ever-ready lips, tangling with my own in a fierce kiss.

Clinging to his lapels, I moan into his mouth, feeding him every morsel of the desire he stokes to life within me.

He breaks the kiss, panting heavily as a broad, dimpled grin appears on his kiss-stained lips. “Your mouth makes me forget my own goddamn name, Wren Caputo.”

When he holds his hand out, I immediately take it, stepping closer to his side with a grin of my own as we make our way to the elevator. “I could say the same, Vaughn Burton.”

He side-eyes me with a suppressed grin before ushering me into the waiting elevator, his hand taking mine as we descend to the basement.

“Where are we going anyway?”

He simply shrugs as we arrive in his garage, where he proceeds to unlock a car that’s *almost* as sexy as he is. Once he helps me get settled, he’s sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Where are we going?”

He revs the car and tosses me a wink before peeling out of the garage and onto the lively Tribeca street.

As we zip through uptown traffic, my repeated question lands on deaf ears, much to my annoyance and Vaughn’s blatant delight.

My jaw drops when Vaughn pulls up in his utterly over-the-top supercar right outside The Met. There’s a hoard of photographers and even a handful of celebrities on those iconic steps.

“Why are we here?”

“We’re attending the exhibition for a hot new artist. And I want you to meet the curator concerning...a collaboration of sorts.”

My mouth goes dry at the thought of meeting Harold Dickinson, curator at The Met. The possibility of interning *here* makes me nervous beyond words.

I twist to face Vaughn, horror flowing through my veins, but he grips my hand before I can say a word.

His thumb strokes the back of my hand, his touch centering me instantaneously. He moves closer, pressing his brow to mine, his calming words whispering across my skin.

“Do you trust me?”

My answer is immediate. “Implicitly.”

His index finger twists around a curl falling over my shoulder as his lips lift. “Good girl.”

I raise wide eyes to his, swallowing roughly. “Don’t leave me.”

His lips dust over mine in the lightest of touches. “Not even the hounds of hell could tear me away, little bird.”

Those words lift me as he steps out of the car, rounding it to open my door as a smiling valet approaches, his eyes filled with unmistakable glee at being chosen as the lucky driver of Vaughn’s Bugatti.

His eyes rake over me as I step from the car, taking Vaughn’s waiting hand.

The same hand that tightens minutely before he rounds on the unsuspecting valet.

“If you wish to keep your eyes in your damn head, I suggest you remove them from *my Wren*.”

The valet’s eyes blow wide, snapping to Vaughn’s as his mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water.

Cameras snap behind us as the media notice Vaughn’s presence when he leans closer, passing over his car keys with a low snarl. “And if there’s so much as a *hint* of scratch on my baby, I’ll track you down, snap your neck, and ensure it looks like a motherfucking accident.”

The valet takes the keys with trembling hands even as I suppress a grin before Vaughn takes my arm and leads me closer to the waiting media.

“No one else has figured it out yet, have they?”

He looks down at me with questioning eyes, and I allow my threatening smile to split my face. “You’re all bark and no bite.”

Arching a brow, he leans closer with mischief in his eyes. “The marks on your sweet ass would beg to differ, my little bird.”

I inhale sharply as he slides his hand over those marks he’s referring to. The ones he’d put there just this morning.

My retort gets swallowed by cries from media outlets as we’re suddenly inundated with requests to pose.

Vaughn ignores every one of them, climbing The Met steps with single-minded purpose, only stopping when we reach a tall, smiling man with very distinct amber eyes.

I immediately recognize him as Alex DeMarco, the pretty boy face of his family’s entertainment company, DeMarco Holdings. He’s accompanied by a beautiful woman who’s smiling right back at him, apparently oblivious to the paparazzi snapping pictures left and right.

“Newlyweds make me sick.”

Alex laughs infectiously at Vaughn’s remark as the couple pivots about to face us.

“Good to see you, too, Burton.” He moves his attention to me, extending a hand. “I’m Alex, supposed friend to the asshole on your left.”

I snort, taking his hand as Vaughn rolls his eyes, ever the cactus. “I’m Wren. I’m...” I trail off, unsure how to respond, only for Vaughn to tug me close to his side.

“She’s my Wren.”

His words are a statement, his tone matter of fact, and my heart soars despite myself.

And though you deserve it, I can never love you, Wren Caputo.

I forcibly push those words from my thoughts, instead focusing on now. And how this man makes me feel.

Maybe I can love enough for both of us.

My lips lift at that as Alex's questioning eyes flit between us for a brief moment before he nods, clearly accepting his friend's declaration.

"And this is my wife, Reyna." We exchange a shy smile as Alex continues. "Big crowd, Wren. I can't wait to see your—"

"And with that done, let's go inside."

Vaughn cuts off his friend, practically pulling me past him and inside the enormous doors of The Met.

We follow the signs simply labeled 'Illuminations' with Alex and Reyna on our heels.

"I haven't been in a gallery in so long." I look up at Vaughn. "Thank you for this."

My smile is genuine, and my own pace hastens as delight flows through me. "Who's the up-and-comer then? Might I have heard of them?"

We round a corner, and my feet slam to a halt.

"What...what's going on?"

People are milling around the exhibit, conversation is buzzing through the air, and my name is splashed across the sign welcoming guests.

ILLUMINATIONS BY WREN CAPUTO

My lips part uselessly before a wild giggle erupts from my throat.

"How...I...What...Seriously?"

"It's everything you've created during your time at Rogue."

Vaughn steps around to my rear, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his head on my shoulder as my eyes

travel across the exhibit. His words are for my ears only.

“Your talent is exceptional, little bird. It deserves to be seen. *You* deserve to be seen.”

His hold tightens, and my breath catches. “Don’t you realize how fucking perfect you are? The whole world needs to witness it.”

My chest tightens as my throat constricts painfully, and I twist about in Vaughn’s arms, pulling his head down to mine to press a soft kiss onto his waiting mouth.

Tears fill my eyes when our gazes meet and hold for an untold length of time. Until words that I can’t suppress break the silence between us. “I love you, Vaughn Burton.”

CHAPTER 26



VAUGHN

My reaction to Wren's admission is forced to take a backseat when the curator of The Met appears at Wren's shoulder, tapping it gently.

"Miss Caputo!" She twists about, her face priceless when she realizes who's talking to her. "I'm Harold Dickinson. Curator here, and may I just say, it is an *honor* to host your first exhibit."

He extends a hand, and a smile beams on Wren's face as she takes it. "The honor is *all* mine, Mr. Dickinson. Thank you for having me."

Harold flicks his eyes to mine, nodding minutely at the unspoken threat in my gaze before he takes Wren's arm in his. "Come along, my dear. There are some people who are simply *dying* to meet you."

Her eyes flit between me and Harold with uncertainty.

"I'll be right behind you, Wren."

She shoots me a nervous smile over her shoulder as Harold steers her to the waiting group on our right. Jules moves forward to stand at Wren's side, seeming to appear out of nowhere to send me a nod of acknowledgment.

Without taking my eyes off Wren, I take a step closer to Alex, intent on needing a question answered. "Did Grayson get the invite?"

"He's not coming, if that's what you're asking. *However*, he did return to work this past week. I'm keeping a close

watch.”

I nod, frustrated by my inability to let the grieving man be.

Alex places his palm on my shoulder, squeezing lightly. “You can’t fix everyone, Vaughn.”

My eyes find his as my brows draw together. “I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. What do you think you’re doing right now?”

I deadpan. “Attending an art exhibition.”

“For *your* Wren, hmm?”

A smirking Alex nudges me as his wife hides a smile behind her delicate hand, and I shoot him a withering look, shaking my head.

“Would you have rathered I introduce her as my pseudo-ward? My almost niece? The woman I’m screwing? Take your pick, DeMarco.”

He shrugs casually as my eyes follow Wren’s movements. She’s loosening up after her initial surprise, as I knew she would, and when she smiles at something Harold says, my own mouth twitches in response.

“I’d rather you admit she’s more than any of those things, Burton.”

I rip my eyes away from Wren, pinning my friend with a deep frown. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

His lazy shrug just about grates on my last nerve. “I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t hire out The Met for an art exhibition for just anyone.” He turns to a smiling Reyna. “Grand gestures are only reserved for the one I love.”

I roll my eyes. “Hold on so I can check my receipt.”

Both Alex and Reyna’s faces crumple in confusion as I begin to walk away, calling over my departing shoulder. “Oh yeah, that’s right. I didn’t buy any of your bullshit.”

His deep laughter follows me as I make my way to Wren’s side, drawing her into the crook of my arm as she continues to talk animatedly with several guests. I don’t understand a damn

word they're saying, but none of it matters as I bask in the light of Wren's palpable euphoria.

I love you, Vaughn Burton.

My chest feels tight as I recall Wren's words, and it takes a beat before I can push down the swirling anxiety in the pit of my stomach. Anxiety at the reminder that I'm so utterly undeserving of her and the love she so freely gives.

Anxiety that threatens to choke me, because by loving me, she places herself at risk. Just like Lorenzo.

Then she turns those gray eyes up to mine, and I wilfully drown in their depths. Pushing all thoughts of everything aside in my utter selfishness to keep the one thing that puts air in my lungs.

The one thing that makes life worth living.

The one thing I'm entirely sure I can never be without.

And it's as I press a kiss of ownership to her waiting lips that I'm almost sure that I can feel the flames of hell licking at the soles of my feet.

Holding her closer, despite the crowd watching us, I have one thought that centers me.

The devil can have me in the next life, so long as I get to spend this one with her.

WREN

“There's been rather a lot of interest concerning the piece that was added at the last minute, Mr. Burton. Are you *quite* sure it's not for sale?”

My brows pucker at Harold's question. “People want to *buy* my work? Are you for real?”

Harold and Vaughn exchange a look before both men chuckle. Vaughn draws me even closer, pressing a soft kiss

atop my head. “Oh, my naïve little bird. The entire show had sold out before we’d even topped the steps outside.”

My jaw just about lands on the floor as pure astonishment fills me to brimming. I blink owlshly, at a complete loss for words, as I shake my head in disbelief.

Vaughn looks back to Harold. “And the answer is yes, I’m sure. In fact, that piece has already been sold.”

It’s Harold’s turn to frown. “To whom?”

“Me.”

My sharp inhalation makes Vaughn grin wickedly. “As if I’d allow that piece to belong to another soul.”

“What piece?”

“Us, little bird.” He arches a brow as he gestures toward the farthest corner of the gallery, where a crowd is still milling.

My eyes find the portrait I’ve been working on recently, and had just finished today. An intimate scene between Vaughn and me as we worshipped one another’s bodies. It’s not one particular moment. More so an amalgamation of our time together, but I’d poured my entire self into the process, and I was more than a little proud of it.

The thought that Vaughn can appreciate the feeling behind the piece—the *meaning* behind it—fills me almost to bursting.

I look back at my lover. His gaze is on me, and it’s so intense that it instantly heats my blood to boiling.

“I’m ready to go home now.”

Harold shuffles uncomfortably at my declaration, the reason behind my sudden desire to depart *more* than obvious. And clearly, Vaughn is rubbing off on me because I have precisely *zero* fucks to give.

“I bid you farewell, Miss Caputo.” Poor Harold nods swiftly, turning his gaze to Vaughn. “Thank you once again for your patronage, Mr. Burton.”

And then he’s gone, leaving Vaughn to sweep through the remaining crowd with me glued to his side. We exit the Great

Hall and almost jog down the steps toward the waiting Bugatti.

Vaughn plucks the keys from the outstretched hand of a sheepish-looking valet, taking care to tip him generously despite his words from before, and then he helps me into the passenger seat. He rounds the car, slips into the driver's seat, and pulls out in the flow of traffic.

Rogue suddenly seems much too far away, and I feel like I'm almost having an out-of-body experience when I slide my hand into Vaughn's lap.

He jolts, keeping his eyes fixed on the traffic around us as his free hand rests over mine.

“What are you doing?”

I smirk as I push his hand away, quickly unbuckling his belt, popping the button of his pants, and sliding down the zipper. I rub his cock through the material of his Calvins, and he raises his hips, pushing against my hand with a low groan.

“Looking after the man I love.”

His eyes leave the road for one split second, some unknown emotion dancing across his face before it's replaced with a smile that instantly drenches my panties.

“I'll see you're well rewarded at home, little bird. But for now, open those lips. I need to fuck your throat raw.”

I unbuckle my belt as a shiver of anticipation skitters down my spine. Then I tug out his beautifully veined cock, bending to take him inside my mouth in one seamless motion. His moan fills my ears, making my nipples pebble in the confines of the lacy lingerie beneath my dress.

“Oh fuck, beautiful. You feel amazing.”

His breath hitches when I cup his balls and begin to move my mouth up and down his rock-hard shaft.

I pop off the head, lapping at the precum beading his slit, humming my own pleasure at the salty-sweet taste of him. “Mmm, you taste so fucking good.”

He groans as he laces his fingers through my hair. “Ugh, *fuck*, you’re killing me here.”

Smiling, I swirl my tongue around his leaky head before sliding back down, softly tickling the underside of his heavy sack with the tips of my fingers as I go. His breathing is heavy when his grip on my hair tightens, his hand pushing me farther down onto his cock until I gag.

“*Oh yeah*. That’s it. Choke for me, Wren.” He takes control, his hips rising to repeatedly hit his cock against the back of my throat. “Take what I give you, little bird. Take all of it.”

Tears fill my eyes, and arousal pools in my core as Vaughn fucks my throat. My whole body is vibrating, edging toward my peak without his hands even touching me. I’m so fucking turned on that I know a bare fingertip brushing over my throbbing clit would set me on fire.

Vaughn growls as he slams on the brakes, forcibly ripping his cock out of my mouth, and suddenly I’m being hoisted across the console between us to straddle his lap.

He gathers my dress at the waist and slips my panties to one side with his index finger before pulling me down on his saliva-soaked shaft.

His eyes spear mine as we moan in unison. My pussy clenches around him when his thumb harshly circles my clit, and I unravel.

My cries fill the air as I continue to work my hips, moving up and down on Vaughn’s length, milking every last ounce of my soul-shattering orgasm.

I’m beginning to come back down to earth when Vaughn slips his index finger inside my core right alongside his pistoning cock. The additional friction is fucking delicious, and I can feel another orgasm beginning to build on the heels of the first.

When he removes the finger, I shoot him a glare that quickly turns to wide eyes when his slick digit circles my puckered ass. My eyelids slam closed as he holds me in place

when I instinctively shy away from his touch. His hips don't stop as his dick continues to fuck my pussy slowly, edging me higher.

“Relax, beautiful. Relax for me.” I open my eyes, finding his midnight gaze fixed on mine as my body inherently obeys his command. He groans deep inside his chest. “Oh yes, that's it. That's my good girl.”

His smirk is nothing less than shit-eating as his finger strokes a little more firmly, making me jerk against him. “This finger in your tight little ass will make this even better for you. *Trust me.*”

I inhale shakily, nodding as he skates that finger over and back, over and back, repeating the movement for long minutes until soon, I'm pushing back against him, searching for more.

His hips increase the pace right as the tip of his finger dips slightly inside, and I cry out. “More, give me more.”

Reaching between us, Vaughn easily finds my clit again, circling it roughly as his dick pounds into me. He's panting, barely hanging by a thread, when his finger begins to move in tandem with his cock, and my eyes roll back in my head.

“Oh yeah, little bird. You love my cock pounding this sweet pussy while my finger fucks your ass, don't you?”

His dirty talk takes things to another level, and my movements become stilted as my orgasm builds.

“Oh my *God*, don't stop. I'm gonna come.”

And right as I'm on the cusp, Vaughn's mouth lands on the curve of my neck. When his teeth clamp down, marking my skin, I reach my peak, exploding all over his length, all over his hands as he holds himself deep inside me. Filling me with stream after stream of creamy cum.

His cock is still pulsating when my body falls forward over his, my arms encircling his neck as he enfolds my waist. His brow rests on my heaving breastbone while I press my cheek to the top of his mussed hair.

Long minutes pass as we cling to one another, the sweat on my brow long since cooled, his cock slowly softening inside me, yet neither of us move. I'm the one to break the beautiful silence with a soft murmur.

"I want all the proceeds from the exhibition to go towards Haven."

Vaughn's body stiffens before he slowly angles his gaze up to mine, his eyes still hazy from the force of his climax. "How do you know about that?"

I grin broadly, only too happy to feed him his own words. "I do *my* homework."

His eyes lighten, then he drops a kiss to the tip of my nose. I sit up straighter, palming his cheeks and willing him to hear the truth in my next words. "And in doing that homework, it's just confirmed what I already knew."

"What's that?" His voice is rough. Raw. And it physically pains my heart that he sees himself as some big, bad villain, undeserving of anything meaningful that life might offer him.

"That you are a *good* man."

I press my hand over his chest, feeling his heart beating beneath my palm. "To the world, you're Vaughn Burton. Owner of notorious sex club, Rogue. Billionaire recluse. Prickly cactus..."

He narrows his eyes at the last, and my lips twitch as I increase the pressure of my palm over his heart. "But I know the man you are in *here*. The man you let me see when we're alone."

His brows pucker as I softly brush my lips across his, my words escaping on a low breath. "And I love you in all your forms."

CHAPTER 27



VAUGHN

“No! Please, don’t hurt me.”

My eyes fly open as the woman in my arms sobs uncontrollably. Her eyes are closed, sweat drips from her furrowed brow as she shudders.

I smooth her hair back from her face, gently attempting to soothe her. “You’re safe, Wren. No one can hurt you.”

I press a kiss on her forehead. “I will never let anything happen to you. I swear.”

Her body softens at my voice, her breathing becoming less erratic before she curls closer to me.

Those nightmares have been recurring more and more in the week since her exhibition, with this one marking the third one in as many days.

My jaw clenches, feeling helpless as I hold her until her breathing evens out and her pulse returns to normal, my mind racing with possible ways she *might* be in danger. And despite the wheels in motion to see Nolan Fritz finally pay for his hand in Lorenzo’s death, there’s the whole issue with Sara and the intruder that needs resolving.

Easing out of the bed, careful not to disturb Wren, I slip into the ensuite, flicking on the light as I dial Ford’s number. He answers sleepily on the fourth ring, right as I’m cursing him under my breath.

“It’s four-thirty in the goddamn morning, Vaughn. What the fuck?”

“I need you to get me an in with Elliott Porter’s brother, Lennon. I need to get to the bottom of this thing with Wren’s mother once and for all, and he’s all we’ve got.”

“This could have waited. You realize I didn’t get to bed until three, thanks to some rich punk getting handsy with the girls in *Rapture*.”

“Boo-fucking-hoo. You’ll survive.” He snorts before I continue. “Has there been any movement regarding that Prince Charming communication?”

Ford perks up, and I can hear him moving around his apartment. Papers rustle loudly.

“Okay, here it is.” He clears his throat. “Now, my software keeps coming up against dead ends when I try tracking the IP, *but* I did note something in one of the letters that was a bit odd. The writer refers to being at a birthday party with Wren. A little digging told me that it was her friend Elodie’s party, and it was invite-only. I’m working on getting a guest list.”

“So he knows her, or at least moves in the same circles as her.”

Ford hums his agreement. “I’ll let you know what I find, and once I’ve been able to find a way for you to get into Lennon Porter’s presence. He’s declined my request. But maybe a meeting is too formal. *Maybe* we need to corner him at an event.”

I nod quickly, fully on board with Ford’s lightbulb moment. “*Yes*, that’s ideal. Go through his schedule, and then get me an invite to blindside him. ASAP, Ford.”

I hang up as I swallow harshly, the smallest pinch of worry leaving the knot in my chest now that there’s a plan in motion. Walking back to the bed, I perch on the side as I watch Wren sleep softly.

My eyes track each and every perfect curve of her face, committing them to memory before I slip back in beside her, tugging her close. I bury my nose in her citrus-scented hair, the soothing fragrance lulling me back to sleep in the space of a heartbeat.

“It’s a comedy club, Ford. I can manage myself.”

My head of security spears me with a look, clearly pissed at how his investigation into Lennon Porter has gone. When I’d asked him to look into Porter’s schedule, I’d thought it would take him at least several days to find a place to get close to the man.

In actual fact, I’d woken up mere hours after asking Ford to do some digging to find he’d acquired tickets for me to attend a comedy club.

The same comedy club Porter is set to attend tonight.

The only issue is that I’ve had to do an almost complete overhaul of my security staff in the wake of Lucia’s canning. Only a handful of staff and Ford’s own team remain, so I need Ford to stay behind, keeping everything kosher here.

Attending this comedy club is the only event Porter’s attending for the next month, so it just means we’re stretched a little thin.

Bringing in outsiders is not an option. Trust isn’t bought, it’s earned.

“That’s not the damn point. You should have Jules with you. Have Wren meet her friends here—”

I hold my hand up, palm facing him. “*No*. Her life has been displaced enough recently. She’s meeting her friends at Cherry Blossom. Jules is going with *her*.”

My forehead creases as my voice cracks ever so slightly, but it’s enough that Ford’s face dawns with awareness.

“I need her to be safe so I can do what I need to do.”

He nods even as he purses his lips. “You’re wearing a wire, so I can hear you at all times.” His eyebrows lift, as though surprised at his genius idea, and I bark a laugh, content to have gotten around our temporary impasse.

I nod with a grin, only for Ford's eyes to widen farther with another epiphany. "And I'm calling in a favor with Fratelli."

"Okay, now *that* I can work with."

WREN

"It's fine, guys. You're *ill*. Focus on feeling better." I press my lips together to subdue my desire to grin. "And don't come anywhere near me until you're back to full health."

On my cell screen, Elodie lifts her head from Levi's lap. Her eyes are glazed as she nods ever so slightly.

Levi's moan fills the SUV, making Jules glance around from the driver's seat with a frown. "I'm telling you. It was that motherfucking chicken."

He sits forward, suddenly very green at the gills. "I'm gonna spew. Move, Rivers. *Move!*"

Elodie moves faster than Usain Bolt, rolling off the sofa right onto the floor with a soft thud as Levi jumps to stand, racing out of view before I hear a door slamming.

My friend's disheveled head slowly appears from beneath the coffee table her screen is propped on, and she looks around slowly before facing the screen with wide eyes.

"It was *totally* the motherfucking chicken."

Her own face goes green, and she heaves, covering her mouth with her palm. Her eyes are brimming with self-pity as she hits the end call button.

"Holy shit, that sounds like a nasty night ahead for your friends."

Jules catches my eye in the rearview mirror as I hang up. "They'll live. The two of them are notorious for trying the craziest foods. God only knows what kind of *chicken* they mean."

As Jules chuckles, I drop Matt a quick text.

ME

Just me and you, Boo. Lev and Elodie are sick.

As Jules regales with a story about his own brush with food poisoning, my cell vibrates with a new text. My smile widens impossibly while butterflies swarm in my stomach when I see Vaughn's name pop up.

VAUGHN

Have fun with your friends, my Wren. Stay with Jules.

My heart sings at the way he calls me *his* Wren as I type my reply.

ME

I won't be late. It's just me and Matt now.

"We're here."

Jules pulls up at Cherry Blossom, and I drop my cell into my bag as he rounds the car to open the rear driver-side door for me. A handful of paparazzi are by the door, rushing to snap my picture as Jules escorts me inside.

"Can you pose for us, Wren?"

"Where's Vaughn?"

"Over here, Miss Caputo!"

Jules pushes past them, shielding me with his body until we make it safely inside the door of the restaurant.

"What the hell was that about?"

Jules shrugs with a smirk. "That was your first social outing since announcing your relationship with one of New York's most eligible bachelors."

I frown heavily. "But we're not *in* a relationship."

His face freezes before he throws his head back, laughter erupting from his mouth and making more than a handful of eyes shoot us a look.

“Oh, come on, kid. You hardly thought the media crawling at your exhibit last week were there for anything other than to show the world that you belong to Vaughn Burton. Even if the man himself would *never* admit that.”

A thrill of hope zaps through me, and I open my mouth to ask if he truly believes that, when Matt calls my name from a table toward the back of the space.

“Wren!”

Jules escorts me with his hand hovering over my lower back protectively. One of the diners proclaims the salmon is the best she’s ever tasted, and I’m instantly hungry, knowing exactly what I’m having now.

Once I’m seated, he moves away to take a seat by the bar as I smile broadly for my friend. “Long time no see, Matty. What gives?”

His smile mirrors mine as warmth fills his familiar features. “Been busy with family stuff and the gallery. Mom’s been ill, so I’ve—”

“Oh my God, I didn’t know. Is she okay? What’s wrong?”

My voice is filled with concern as guilt roils in my stomach. I would have gone back to South Brook and been able to help had I not explicitly promised Mom that I’d stay in the city with Vaughn.

But even so, that feels like an excuse cause the simple truth is I never want to leave. My life in South Brook feels like a million years ago.

I don’t know who that sheltered girl was, but I’m not her anymore.

“She’s been struggling with some stuff. Mostly to do with Marcus.”

His forehead creases for a moment before he shakes his head.

“Enough about that.” His smile returns. “I saw your exhibit all over the internet. Wren Caputo is the new hot commodity in the art world.”

My cheeks heat, and I shrug. “It’s all still so surreal.”

“In all the years I’ve known you, you kept your talent under lock and key. I knew you liked to sketch, but you never said how good you were.”

Matt shakes his head in amazement. “Seriously, I had *no* idea. And I thought I knew everything there was to know about the girl at the end of the bay.”

“*Practically* everything, Matty.”

He arches a teasing brow. “Your time in the city is most definitely life-changing in more ways than one.”

At the blank look on my face, he leans closer with a wink. “You’ve developed an interest in older men, from the looks of things.”

He laughs when my cheeks flush bright red. “Good thing I know you’re not interested in settling down, ‘cause Vaughn Burton is the heartbreaker type, that’s for sure.”

My stomach dips as Matt continues with a chuckle. “But there’s nothing wrong with a little fling, am I right?”

I’m interrupted from answering when our server appears.

“May I take your order?”

Matt turns his now smiling face up toward the pretty server, his handsome grin making her cheeks pinken. “We’ll share the lobster tacos and edamame dumplings.”

His gaze drops to mine. “You want to get the tempura shrimp too?”

“Actually, I wanted to try the salmon entrée.”

Matt’s brow furrows in genuine confusion. “But we always share, Neve.”

His voice is small, plucking at the strings of my conscience, and I chew my bottom lip as indecision rolls

through me as Matt's cell begins to ring.

His cheeks flame when he sees the caller, and he mumbles an expletive before turning his gaze to mine.

"I've gotta take this, Wren."

Then he flicks a glance at the server. "I'll have whatever she's having."

He rises swiftly and makes for the bar area, answering the call as he goes with a sharp, "*What?*"

Our server looks at me with wide eyes. "The salmon, yes?"

I nod with a wilted smile on my mouth. "For both of us, thank you."

"And to drink?"

"Two sparkling waters, please."

She leaves with a small nod as my cell vibrates with a text.

VAUGHN

I won't be long. Leave those heels on.

I shake my head as my lips raise in an utterly shit-eating grin, willing the food to come faster.

Matt returns to the table with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Wren. Like I said... Mom isn't doing the greatest."

I tilt my head in sympathy, reaching my hand across the table to squeeze his. "I'm so sorry, Matt. I kinda get what you mean, though."

His brows furrow. "What do you mean? Your mom is on vacation. Feels like mine has..." He trails off, and his lips curl down. "It feels like she's checked out entirely."

I chew my bottom lip, debating whether to voice my miffed feelings or not, before realizing it's *Matty*, and who better to talk about this with?

"I *do* understand, though. Mom could have returned home at *any* time, but she didn't. She's *choosing* to stay away, you

know?”

I shrug, suddenly feeling hugely vulnerable. “I just miss her, that’s all.”

Matt brings our joined hands to his lips to press a kiss onto the back of my hand, his eyes sorrowful. “You have *no* idea how fucking sorry I am that this is happening to you, but you can believe me when I say your mom would love *nothing* more than to be home with *you*.”

My smile is tremulous before dropping from my lips when a diner drops a fork with a loud *clang*, the sound jolting me back to reality. I gently tug my hand from his grasp, sitting up straight. “You know exactly the right things to say, Matty.”

CHAPTER 28



VAUGHN

“Can you hear me?”

I roll my eyes for the millionth time as I slip my arms into the sleeves of my jacket.

“*Yes*, Ford. Your glorious dulcet tones are music to my ears. Now, if you wouldn’t mind fucking off, please, and thanks.”

He chuckles quietly, obviously still in my damn head, before blissful silence prevails, thank Christ.

I grab my cell to pocket it, my face softening when I spot a reply from Wren.

WREN

I won’t be late. It’s just me and Matt now.

Matt, clean-as-a-motherfucking-whistle, Porter.

My eyes roll heavily, more than a little put out at the thought of the Porter kid having my Wren to himself for the next couple of hours.

Gritting my teeth, I focus on getting this inquiry with Porter Senior out of the way, intent on leaving with answers. On keeping Wren safe.

I smirk as I send her a reply that’s sure to make her smile.

I won't be long. Leave those heels on.

The following thirty minutes are spent reading through the background check Ford had completed on the entire Porter family, familiarizing myself with Lennon, and figuring out the best plan of attack.

Once I'm content with my knowledge, I'm ready.

The elevator takes me down to the basement, where I slide into my Bugatti and zip out into the Tribeca evening. The comedy club, Oscar's, is uptown, a couple of blocks from Cherry Blossom, and I'm contemplating calling Wren to check in, when Ford pops up in my ear again.

"Jo is running a few minutes late. Got caught in traffic on the way in."

I check the time, seeing that I'm plenty early anyway. "The doors don't open until 8 p.m. I'll wait in the car. I could use the peace and quiet."

Ford chuckles lowly at my pointed remark, going silent again.

A mere ten minutes later, I pull in half a block from Oscar's and dial Jo's cell.

"I hear you're running late."

He sighs. "A little. I'm out of the worst of the jam now. Should be there in...no more than fifteen."

"That's still plenty of time, Jo. I'm waiting in my car outside a place called..." I glance out the passenger window, barking a laugh when I realize where I am. "I'm outside a lingerie store by the name of Angel Lace."

He chuckles. "Of course you are. Would expect nothing less. I'll be passing by soon. I'm sure to spot you in that hot little car of yours."

"I'll keep an eye out."

When Jo hangs up, my eyes drift back toward the storefront. My interest is instantly piqued when I spot the sexiest fucking lingerie on a mannequin in the window, and before I know what I'm even doing, I'm on the sidewalk, locking my car.

Am I really about to buy that for the woman I'm... screwing?

I shake my head at how fucking absurd I am, but keep going regardless, noting that as it's almost time for the store to close, I'm the only customer.

A blonde saleswoman approaches me with a wide smile. "Is there anything I can help you with today, sir?"

"Yes, I would like to purchase some lingerie for my Wren."

Her smile remains plastered to her face, even as her eyes blink a few too many times before she haltingly enquires, "And do you have anything in particular in mind?"

"The black one in the window display."

She walks farther inside the store, gesturing for me to follow after her. "Oh yes, our bondage bodysuits are a firm favorite."

I press my lips together in an attempt to subdue the cat-who-got-the-cream grin that threatens to overtake my face as visions of Wren assail me. Her hands bound with my belt, her heel-clad feet on either side of my head, at my complete mercy on the night I took her for my own.

"And do you know the size of your...umm, your Wren?"

I open my mouth to answer, my face falling into a frown, shoulders slumping when I realize I can't quite recall.

Shit!

I hold my hands out in front of my chest, cupping my fake tits with a hangdog expression. "Maybe a little over a handful."

She raises an eyebrow, as if to say, *are you shitting me right now*, but her words belie the skepticism in her eyes. “Okay, I can absolutely help you.”

Ford’s voice murmurs in my ear, “She’s a 34D, idiot.”

“How the *fuck* do you know that?”

The sales assistant’s brows almost hit her hairline. “I’m sorry, but *what* did you say to me?”

Fucking Ford.

My smile of apology is more like a grimace. “I’m terribly sorry. What I meant to say was, I think she’s a 34D.”

She purses her lips suspiciously before giving me her back, clearly intent on finding the required item and getting the fuck rid of me.

“It’s my job to know everything. And besides, I’m the idiot who set up that damn studio because you don’t trust anyone else in your apartment.” Ford’s whisper is filled with barely contained laughter. “But that shit was absolutely priceless.”

Once she’s rang me up and I’ve paid, I leave the store with a slightly throbbing temple, ready to give my head of security a piece of my goddamn mind.

“You cock-sucking son of a—”

My insult is cut short when there’s a sudden blow to the back of my head, and I stumble forward, somehow managing to keep upright.

“What the—”

A second blow lands on the heels of the first, and I pitch forward, knocking my head off the curb before sprawling face-down on the pavement.

I manage to glance up as sticky blood clouds my vision, finding four men in black ski masks bearing down on me. Despite my ringing head in the aftermath of not one but *two* sucker punches, I manage to kick out, hitting one assailant square in the nuts.

Ford's voice is in my ears, frantically asking what's wrong as one of my attackers falls to the pavement with a heavy thud. But the other three continue their assault.

I can make out muffled shouting as a passerby tries to stop the insanity, but the hits keep on coming.

Blows land on my head as I attempt to cover it with my arms. Kicks rain down on my torso, and I curl in on myself, trying desperately to shield myself from the worst of the assault. The world is spinning round and round as I clench my eyes and grit my teeth.

And then, there's only the numbness of blessed darkness.

WREN

"Do you have time for a walk?"

I nibble my lip, not wanting to disappoint my friend, but also desperate to be back home.

Home.

Not in South Brook. Not even in Tribeca. Home has rapidly become the arms of the man I've fallen helplessly in love with.

"Raincheck, okay?"

Matt's smile is askew even as he nods. "I suppose a fling is all about the sex, right?"

I'm about to retort that it's not a fling—even if I don't know exactly *what* it is—when Jules appears at my elbow.

"Ford called. We need to leave. *Now.*" His eyes are frantic, his body tense as he whispers hoarsely. "It's Vaughn."

I don't ask questions, simply rising from my seat and following Jules out of the restaurant. I'm barely aware of Matt tossing some cash at the server before he's hot on our heels.

The SUV is waiting outside the restaurant, and the three of us jump in silently before Jules pulls a U-turn as he peels out into traffic.

Ducking through several lanes, he runs a red light as I cling to the door handle in muted fear. Then, two blocks later, he suddenly slams to a halt.

He leaves the SUV running when he leaps from the driver's side, sprinting for the sidewalk where there appears to be an ongoing scuffle.

I'm right on his tail as he dives past the handful of dissenting bystanders before slamming his fist into the face of a masked man. My eyes find two others who turn on Jules.

The tallest one grumbles, "Take a hike, or you're up next."

A low murmur runs through the gathering, yet not one person moves to stop them, palpable fear written across their faces. It's then my eyes drift down, my heart ceasing to beat, when I immediately recognize an unmoving Vaughn.

My shrill cry as I drop to my knees to press my palm over the gash on his forehead sees everyone stiffen, all eyes shifting to me.

"Help us!"

Jules uses the distraction to body slam one of the assailants, knocking him onto the sidewalk, where I spot a prone fourth man cradling between his legs.

One of the other attackers rushes to tackle Jules, who's getting the better of his opponent, while the other advances on me.

On Vaughn.

I raise my chin, watching him in utter disdain as I spread my arms over Vaughn's still body. "You'll have to kill me before I'll let you hurt him again."

The crowd murmurs malcontentedly, several of them moving to step forward at last when Matt throws himself at the back of the advancing masked man, tackling him to the ground and smashing his covered face against the sidewalk roughly.

He grimaces at the sound as I wince alongside him.

And it's then that Detective Fratelli appears like an avenging angel, pulling his gun from beneath his suit jacket. "Everyone freeze."

All four of the attackers do exactly that as Fratelli—completely at odds with the mild-mannered detective I'm used to seeing—snarls viciously. "Hands up, or I'll shoot first and ask questions later."

Then Fratelli's gaze lands on me and Vaughn, concern marring his brow as he slips his cell from his pocket. "Don't worry, Miss Caputo. Help is on the way."

CHAPTER 29



VAUGHN

The room swims into focus around me until I fixate on the beauty before me, her eyes glistening with tears as she palms my cheeks.

Wren closes the gap between us to press a soft kiss to my brow, pulling back enough to engulf me with her gray gaze. “I’ve never been as scared in my life, Vaughn.” Her voice cracks. “I thought you were dead.”

I huff a laugh, wincing in pain when my ribs protest harshly. “The devil can’t have me quite yet, my little bird.”

She regards me with a quizzical brow for a beat before Jules’s voice breaks the moment.

“I can’t believe your luck, boss.”

My eyes shift past Wren as she straightens, landing on my smirking employee.

“You call *this* luck?”

His lips twitch at the clear incredulity in my tone. “A concussion, three stitches in your hairline, and a handful of cuts and bruises in the wake of being attacked by four assholes...um, *yeah*, I do call that luck.”

I shrug gingerly as my own lips lift slightly. “When you put it like that...”

Jules chuckles as he steps closer. “You’re being kept in for observation for the next twenty-four hours, but rest assured, Ford has Rogue running smoothly in your absence.”

“What happened?”

Jules flicks a glance at Wren, unsure whether to speak plainly in her presence, and I nod almost imperceptibly, indicating he can say what he needs to say.

“All four men are in custody at present. But not before...” He clears his throat uncomfortably as Wren regards him with innocent eyes. “Umm, not before Ford and Jo *questioned* them separately.”

Wren’s eyes widen, her brows almost hitting her hairline when the innuendo in his words becomes clear.

“And what did they gauge? It *couldn’t* have been Fritz. He’s under surveillance.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t Fritz. Those guys were sent by Oliver fucking Creswell...” He trails off with a grimace before murmuring, “And Lucia.”

I grit my jaw tightly enough that my ribs ache. “That toxic *bitch*.”

A soft gasp sees me shift my gaze back to Wren’s distressed face. “I—I trusted her.” She raises her eyes to mine. “She meant to have you *killed*, Vaughn. Who *does* something like that? I—I don’t understand...”

I reach out a hand, clasping hers in mine and squeezing lightly. “I don’t either, but once I’m back on my feet, we’ll get to the bottom of everything.”

My eyelids feel heavy, and I blink slowly, attempting to pull her closer, but my strength seems to have waned suddenly.

I blink, trying to dispel the onset of weariness before Wren sits on the bedside, holding my hand between both of hers. She draws her thumb back and forth, soothing me as I try to fight sleep.

“The doctors said you need to rest. Sleepiness is common.” She raises my hand to her lips, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles as she smiles gently.

“Let go, Vaughn. Rest. I’m not going anywhere.”

WREN

I take one last look at the beautiful man sleeping peacefully in his own bed before I drop my heavier-than-usual bag over my head and walk to the elevator.

Vaughn had been discharged from the hospital earlier this morning, but as the concussion wears off, he's mostly sleeping.

It was during one of those times of half-awareness that I'd asked if meeting Elodie for lunch would be okay. Vaughn had looked a little wary, but he'd gone along with it, stipulating Jules must accompany me at all times and that, for my own safety, I was *not* to deviate from the plan.

To the restaurant and back.

No stop-offs. No detours.

Drive there, eat, chat, and drive back.

Two hours maximum, he said.

I watch myself in the elevator mirror, a mix of anger and guilt rolling around in my stomach.

My mind flashes back to seeing Vaughn helpless on the sidewalk. Back to pleading with strangers to help us. Back to the frantic trip to the hospital, not knowing if he was going to be okay.

Of washing his blood from my hands as I cried useless tears.

And I tip my chin up, sticking with my decision to see this through.

Jules is waiting in the basement garage when the elevator doors open. He walks me to the waiting SUV, helping me into the rear passenger seat before rounding the car to slip into the driver's seat.

"Where to, kid?"

“Take me to Lucia Romano’s apartment.”

His eyes find mine in the rearview as disbelief takes center stage on his tanned face.

“That’s not funny.”

Without dropping his gaze, I deadpan. “It’s not meant to be, Jules. Now, are you going to take me...” I trail off to pop a threatening brow. “Or should I find someone else who will?”

He shakes his head silently. “You know I can’t—”

“Fine.” I unbuckle my seatbelt and place my hand on the door handle. Right before I tug it open, Jules’s agitated voice stops me.

“*Don’t!*” I pan around to find his panic-stricken eyes on me. “I’ll take you. But this stays between the two of us.”

I press my lips together to suppress the grin that threatens my mouth, nodding solemnly. “Of course.”

He lets out a heavy breath as he spins in his seat, muttering low under his breath. “Damn women.”

Streets zip past as we close in on our destination, and less than ten minutes later, Jules pulls over on a tree-lined street in the West Village.

“That’s her brownstone over there.”

I follow the line of his sight, noting steps leading up to a beautiful townhouse.

“Let’s go then.”

With a heavy sigh, Jules slips out of the door, and I make my way onto the sidewalk alongside him. He walks beside me as we close the distance, climb the steps, and winces openly when I ring the bell.

I take a second to start a voice recording on my cell, dropping it into my ass pocket right as she answers abruptly, a sleek eyebrow arched at the sight of us—mainly *me*—on her doorstep.

“I can’t believe you hired those men to kill Vaughn Burton.”

She smirks sadistically with a shrug. “My only regret is that they didn’t end his sad little life.”

I swallow a retort, needing this to play out perfectly. Instead, I simply ask, “Can we come in? Just to talk.”

She snorts at my request and looks me up and down as though finding me lacking, before giving me her back, inviting me in.

Just as I’d known you would, bitch.

My lips lift in a savage smile as I follow her, palming the heavy bag that rests on my hip.

She leads us to a wide-open living space, gesturing that we sit.

“I’d rather stand.” My voice is firm, and I feel myself stand taller. “We won’t be here for long.”

She sits, casually crossing her legs at the knees. “Have it your way, *little bird*.”

The emphasis on my nickname makes me snort a dark laugh. “Still sour over your canning?”

Her eyes spear through me. “Just sour that Ollie didn’t get to finalize his bid on you.”

“Vaughn was there. Surely, you knew he wouldn’t let you ___”

Her malice-filled voice cuts me off. “He broke his own fucking rules. He stole you from that damn auction. You were meant to be sold, dammit.”

“But *why*?” I try to keep my voice neutral, knowing that I need answers just as much as I need revenge on her.

“Because then I’d have had leverage over Vaughn.” Her words are spat as she rises in a fluid motion, her body bristling with rage. “I would have appeased Ollie with another lot and taken you off the block. A simple trade, Wren. Your honor, in exchange for the club.”

I shake my head with a deep frown. “That was never going to happen. Even if Vaughn hadn’t ended the auction, he’d never have given up Rogue.”

She arches a dubious brow. “You really are blind, aren’t you?”

“Rogue is Vaughn’s life. He would never—”

“It was supposed to be mine, you know. Valentine *swore* it.” Her eyes glaze over as her tone softens. “I loved him with everything inside of me. When I accidentally fell pregnant, he begged me to terminate because the timing wasn’t right, and like the lovestruck, stupid girl that I was, I listened to him.”

She sighs heavily. “But the clinic botched it—or so he *claimed*—and as a result, I can’t...”

Her eyes harden. “His compromise was to leave me the club in his will. I poured my *whole* life into that place, and then he fucked me over, leaving it to his *darling* daughter, Verity, who sold it to Vaughn, the unwanted bastard child, at the first opportunity.”

Jules turns wide eyes to me, shaking his head in disbelief, but all I feel is anger at her, referring to Vaughn as an unwanted bastard. My blood boils, and my fingers itch with the need to take action.

She rolls her eyes dramatically. “Now you know. Cut to the chase. Why are you—”

“You really do think you’re champagne in a tall glass, don’t you, Lucia?”

She opens her mouth to retort, but freezes when I open my bag, pulling out the small handgun that I’d taken from Vaughn’s room. Her face is paralyzed in horror as I flick off the safety and point it at her with a steady hand.

“When really you’re just lukewarm piss in a plastic cup.”

“Christ, kid!” Jules sounds panicked at my back. “What are you *doing*?”

Both of us ignore Jules as Lucia’s eyes flick from the barrel of the gun up to my cold, steely gaze, and I stare her

down without mercy.

“The thugs you and that motherfucker hired could have *killed* the man I love.”

My feet bring me closer to her as she tries to edge backward, but she has nowhere to go when the back of her knees hits the couch. She sits heavily, fear dripping from every pore.

I can feel Jules at my back, ensuring my safety should something go awry, when I achingly slowly bring the gun closer and closer to her perspiration-slick temple.

She cries out when the cool metal touches her skin, her eyes slamming shut as she shivers uncontrollably.

“Are you scared, Lucia? Like I was on the auction block.” My voice drops to a dangerous murmur. “Like I was on that fucking sidewalk, hmm?”

My smile is venomous when her throat works uselessly. I press the barrel more forcefully, making her whimper.

“I—I—I...”

I chuckle darkly.

“You should be.” I twist the handle, angling the gun sideways, and she begins to cry.

“I—I’m sorry. P-please. I’ll s-s-stop. Just don’t k-k-kill me.”

My finger tightens on the trigger. “You don’t deserve my empathy. Only my wrath.”

“Wren.”

Jules takes a warning step closer as Lucia stares up at me pitifully, tears staining her flushed face. I narrow my eyes, and I grit, “This is going to hurt.”

Lucia screams and slams her eyes closed as I pull the trigger of my unloaded gun.

“*Bang*, you’re dead.”

She opens her tear-filled eyes in incredulity, gaze flicking from me to the gun and back again. “W-w-why?”

As I drop the gun back into my bag, I regard Lucia with nothing less than undiluted disgust. “Because I’m not you. I won’t allow the poor decisions of others to change who I am. I’m *stronger* than that.”

Then I pivot and stride toward the door, stopping to look back one final time to pin her with a dark look. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t play dirty to get what I want. Breathe a word of today to another living soul, and you’ll live to regret my kindness.”

I slide my still-recording cell from my back pocket, holding it up for her to see. “Your full confession to sending those men to attack Vaughn, alongside confessing to your part in sex auctions.” I pop a brow and pair it with a half-smirk. “Come at anyone I care for *ever* again, and I’ll see that you spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

Her face fills with an almost comedic horror before I leave her speechless, exiting the brownstone and swiftly crossing the street to slide into the SUV.

Jules jumps into the driver’s seat, twisting about to take me in with new eyes.

“If I hadn’t witnessed it with my own eyes, I’d never believe it.” He shakes his head as an unbelieving smile graces his lips. “I’m actually disappointed that we need to keep this between us, because you were fucking amazing!”

CHAPTER 30



VAUGHN

“We need to talk.”

Ford steps inside my bedroom, his voice low even as his tone is firm. “I don’t know how you’re going to take it, to be honest. But it’s important that you know.”

Interest sufficiently piqued, I sit higher with my back against the headboard, gesturing that he comes closer. He takes a seat in the bedside chair on my left, spearing me with piercing eyes.

“It’s about Wren.”

I sit forward immediately. “What about Wren?”

My chest tightens as my lungs constrict. “I knew I shouldn’t have agreed to let her meet Elodie for lunch. Tell me she’s okay.”

He nods as a smile blooms on his face, reaching his eyes and making them sparkle with mirth. “She’s *better* than okay, but that’s my own *personal* opinion.” He shrugs with a slight grimace. “You might not think so ‘cause you’re an ornery so-and-so.”

I narrow my eyes at the insult. “Spit it the hell out, Holloway, or so help me—”

“Jules took Wren to Lucia’s townhouse today.”

My jaw unhinges. “Jules did *what?*” I move to throw my legs over the side of the bed, but Ford jumps to stand, palms pressing my shoulders down.

I'm taller, almost as broad, and on a regular day, I'd kick his fucking ass, but today isn't a run-of-the-mill day. And as such, I can't shrug him off.

"Stay. Put." His words are soft but deadly. "You'll do more harm than good if you exert yourself too much."

I raise my hands, palms up in a motion of surrender, and after a beat, Ford relinquishes his hold, sinking back into his seat.

"Now, if you'd let me finish, you'd know that she came out on top."

My brows pucker. "What do you mean by that? She hasn't even come home from her non-lunch with Elodie yet. How could you..."

I trail off, realizing precisely how Ford knows what's gone on today. "You tapped her house, didn't you?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that, V. Either way, I know what went down, and I think you'll be very interested to hear all about it."

Wren flops onto the couch beside me, rubbing her stomach. "Ugh, I'm so full."

I lift a brow. "Are you really?"

She twists about at the sarcasm in my tone. "Yes, I am."

"So, where did you go for lunch?"

"Dante. In the West Village."

Her answer almost makes me smirk. She's clearly done her homework.

"It's good, right?" She nods enthusiastically. "What did you have?"

"Their chicken alla diavola." She pats her stomach with wide, gray eyes, the very picture of innocence. "It was *too*

good.”

I regard her with a tilt of my head. “The West Village, hmm?”

She smiles with a hum of assent before I continue laying my trap. “Not your usual style. Did you happen to run into Lucia on your travels?”

Her face pales as she sucks in a sharp breath. She swallows harshly, and I lean closer, sliding my palm around her slender throat, dusting my thumb over and back across her wildly fluttering pulse. “You deliberately disobeyed me, little bird.”

I shake my head with a tut. “You put yourself in danger, and for what? To confront that waste of space? Why would you do that?”

Her eyes flicker between mine for a long beat, the gray slowly darkening in intensity until I’m drowning in her stormy gaze. She reaches a hand up between us as her jaw tics, gripping the hand encircling her neck and slowly pushing me away.

She straddles me, legs on either side of mine, as she cups my cheeks.

“*Why* would I do it?” Her sigh is filled with frustration as she gently brushes my cheeks with the pads of her thumbs. “Because she *hurt* you. She could have *killed* you had Jules gotten there even seconds later. Don’t I deserve to protect the man I love?”

Her words hit me square in the chest. But even so, she needs to see my point. “You can’t run off half-cocked, Wren. You need to let me keep you safe.”

She sits back with an affronted grimace. “And don’t I deserve to be allowed to keep *you* safe? To look out for *your* best interests.”

She quirks a haughty brow. “I’m not *less* than you, Vaughn. I’m your equal. And it’s about time you recognized that.”

“Don’t you see? It’s *me* who’s less than *you*, Wren.” I groan as I sit forward, cupping her flushed cheeks between my hands. My eyes are pleading when I look up into hers. “I don’t want to *ruin* you. I can’t have my darkness infecting you. I *won’t* have it.”

Wren presses a soft, fleeting kiss to my lips, pulling back just enough to whisper, “There was a time when you told me that even the devil was once an angel. Do you remember that day? That little girl?”

My chest warms as she feeds me the words I spoke so long ago, and I nod just once, swallowing awkwardly past the sudden lump in my throat.

Her eyes glisten as her lips lift. “You see, Vaughn. That’s where you’re wrong. We all have light *and* dark, good *and* bad within ourselves. Angel *and* devil.”

My forehead crinkles at her words, and I wince as the movement pulls at the stitches by my hairline. She softly smooths the pad of her thumb over the evidence of my assault before her eyes find mine.

“Today, I let a little more of my devil show. And that’s okay when it comes to protecting the ones we love.”

Our gazes hold as her words imbed themselves in my mind until her eyes narrow. “And for your information, I *did* have the chicken alla diavola at Dante.”

She arches a brow paired with a smug grin. “Jules was an *excellent* lunch companion.”

I shake my head with a low chuckle. “So, did you visit Lucia *before* or *after* lunch?”

Her lips twitch. “Before. Lunch was half celebratory, half apology. I felt so bad for forcing Jules to bring me.”

“His face when you pulled the gun was priceless.”

Her expression is the epitome of confusion. “But how did you...”

She trails off, clearly connecting the dots as her eyes lighten in comprehension. “Hidden cameras! Genius.”

“I was particularly impressed with you recording her confession. Nice touch.”

We share a grin before she slides off my lap, snuggling against my side in the crook of my arm.

“What’ll happen to Oliver Creswell?” She angles her face up to mine, popping a devilish brow. “I could pay him a visit, too.”

I throw my head back as a booming laugh spills from my throat. When I look back at her, she’s smiling broadly, light dancing in her eyes, and I take a mental picture of her right at this moment, committing it to memory alongside all the other moments I’ve stolen.

“I have absolutely no doubt that you could, but I think by the time you get there, you’d find he’s already been dealt with.

Her brows crease. “What do you mean?”

“Jules and Jo are handling it as we speak. Ford is very put out that he was needed to manage downstairs and couldn’t join them.”

Her jaw drops, and she blinks rapidly in disbelief before she settles more firmly in against my side. “I still think I’d have been the better choice.”

WREN

A short two days after my visit to Lucia, Vaughn announces that he feels it’s time to be back at the helm, much to Ford’s—and my—delight.

“How does it feel to be back where you belong?”

His forehead puckers as he deadpans.

“I’m running inventory in *Rapture* this morning. *Solo*, because Randolph has the stomach flu or some crap, so I’d say it feels just as shit as usual.”

“You realize you could just hire someone else to do it, right?”

He looks at me in muted horror as though the thought has never occurred to him, and I shake my head as I wrap my arms around his waist. I *know* my heart is in my eyes as I take him in, all six feet five inches of my hot man in his impeccable black suit.

“Let me help you.”

A chuckle rumbles through his chest. “It’s *boring* as fuck, beautiful girl.” He peers down at me as he pinches my chin gently between his thumb and index finger. “You’re welcome to join, but I promise you won’t enjoy it.”

My smile is wide and genuine. “If it’s time spent with you, then I can promise you I’ll love it.”

Those two dimples appear, making my heart sing. “Come on then.”

We make our way downstairs, hand in hand. The staff area is practically empty at this time of the morning, though we get several smiles as we venture into an empty *Rapture*.

“We’ll start over here.” He makes his way behind the long bar, grabbing an iPad as he goes before turning to me, looking me up and down.

“How I’ll get through any inventory when you’re looking at me like that is a damn mystery.”

My grin is utterly shit-eating as my eyes dance with mirth. “Looking at you like what, *Mr. Burton?*”

“Like you want me to rail you against the bar.” He prowls closer, his gaze darkening as a shiver runs through me. “Like you want me to fuck your tight little throat until you’re choking on my cum. Like you—”

He’s cut off when my cell begins to ring, and my shoulders sag in deflation. We’ve not been intimate since the attack, and my *God*, his filthy words have made me wetter than a tsunami.

I yank my cell out of my back pocket with a grumble that turns into a grin as I angle the screen toward Vaughn.

His whole demeanor shifts. “Answer it.”

I swipe the screen, answering with a cheery, “Hi, Mom!”

“I’m so happy to hear your voice, my love. Just a quick call to say I miss you.”

My brow furrows as I place the call on speakerphone. “I miss you, too, Mom. *So damn much.* Any news on Elliott’s recovery?”

“Elliott?” Her voice trembles slightly on his name before she swallows and clears her throat. “He’s *fine*. Umm...on the mend.”

Silence follows, and I frown, shifting my eyes to Vaughn, finding his brow mirroring my own. “Mom...are you okay?”

“I need to go, my love. I’ll check in again soon. Stay with Vau—”

The line goes dead as I shake my head. “That was so weird. She didn’t sound like herself at all.”

Vaughn’s jaw tics as he pulls his cell from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. “I need another meeting arranged, Ford.”

Whatever Ford responds with has Vaughn slamming his fist on the bar with a resounding echo. “I don’t care if Oscar’s was his only scheduled event this month. *Dig. Deeper.* I need answers, and I need them yesterday.”

He hangs up, breathing heavily as he grips the bar. I move closer and slide my arm around his waist. “Come on. You’re not ready to be back here today. We’ll try again tomorrow, okay?”

His head lifts, and his eyes find mine. Dark eyebrows are tightly drawn, those onyx orbs unwavering in their intensity. Our gazes lock for a long moment until he nods slowly, allowing me to lead him back upstairs.

Not another word is spoken as we lie on his bed, his arm snaking around my waist to tug me close against his chest, and within moments, his deep, even breathing lulls me into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 31



VAUGHN

“I can do the inventory, if you’d like?”

“I’ve been informed that Randolph is back today, so you can rest easy. No inventory.”

“Are you *sure* you should be back to work so soon?”

Wren regards me with worried gray eyes, and I tug her close, pressing a kiss to her brow before palming her smooth cheeks. “I’m *fine*. I just got a little over-enthusiastic yesterday, that’s all.”

When she still doesn’t look convinced, I pinch her chin between my thumb and index finger. “I’ll be in my office all day. I won’t move from my desk unless it’s to visit that sexy little artist who works across the hall...”

I trail off, arching a pointed brow. “Maybe she’ll paint some more of those intimate scenes to match the one hanging in my office.”

She shrugs as she steps back out of my reach. “She *could*...if she wasn’t feeling so uninspired right now.”

She gives me her back, her lush ass swaying seductively as she strides toward the elevator. I follow after her, not bothering with a tie or jacket, too enthralled in the swish of those hips.

As she presses the button, she looks up at me, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth before letting it pop free. “She’s going through a particularly dry spell, you see.”

The elevator opens, and she steps on with me hot on her heels. I press the button for the ground floor as she watches me with wide, gray fuck-me eyes.

“She might just need to sort herself out, if you catch my meaning.”

My hand flies up to grip her throat, pinning her against the mirror at her back right as the doors open behind me.

“Your perfect body is mine.” I slide my free hand underneath her skirt, settling between her legs to cup her sex with my palm. “Your sweet cunt is mine. And every single one of your orgasms is *mine*, little bird. Don’t ever forget who owns you.”

Her nostrils flare as her lips turn up in a smirk. “*There* you are. I’d begun to think you’d gone soft on me.”

I close the distance between our mouths to run the tip of my tongue along the seam of her lips, and she opens instantly, inviting me inside. Our tongues spar and dance for long minutes as she squirms against the palm between her legs until I break the kiss, take my hands off her, and step off the elevator.

I swiftly adjust my dick with a raised brow. “There’s nothing *soft* about me, Wren. And I’ll prove it. Later.”

Her groan of frustration makes me chuckle all the way to my office, and when I hear her studio door slam moments later, I can’t stop the belly laugh that reverberates through my office.

I’ve created a sex fiend.

And I’m not one bit sorry.

“Wake up, V.”

Ford’s demand makes me jump to awareness as I sit forward in my desk chair, taking a hot minute to remember where I am and what I’m *supposed* to be doing.

“I was just resting my eyes.”

Ford simply shakes his head before taking a seat opposite me. “You’ll be pleased to know that I have the issue with security dealt with.”

I perk up, rising to fix us a tumbler of Macallan each. Ford takes a sip of his and then places it on the desk between us as I return to my seat.

“How did you manage that?” I swirl my untouched Macallan with a frown. “Good security is hard to come by. You know that more than most.”

Ford bristles at my insinuation. His father, head of the now defunct private security network Holloway Security Detail, is serving life behind bars for his part in covering the ass of his bankroller. Including covering up a murder.

Not to mention, invading the privacy of his high-profile clients in order to blackmail them, using their deepest, darkest secrets.

The whole thing was as shady as fuck, and despite knowing that Ford has left that part of his life firmly in his rearview mirror, I also know how much it still stings to have discovered that his father—his idol—was capable of such terrible things.

“You know what I mean, Holloway. Cut to the chase.”

“I’ve hired the ex-military from Haven.”

My jaw unhinges as he plows ahead. “Once I told them who *Vinny* truly is, they were more than happy to help. In fact, some of them wanted to volunteer for free...”

He trails off with a low chuckle before shrugging. “Who better to secure your club than the men whose lives you’ve helped to give new meaning? Men you already trust. Men who trust *you*. Their loyalty will be unparalleled.”

I take a moment to digest the news, relief filling my chest, followed rapidly by reality, and I lean forward with a carefully neutral expression on my face.

“What does this mean for you?”

Ford has stayed with me out of some crazy sense of loyalty for far longer than he'd anticipated. When he first moved to New York, I was the only person he knew. I needed heavier security, and he had a background that was going to waste.

When he'd stepped into his role here, it became a safety net. It's past time for him to step outside his comfort zone.

He shrugs with a small smile. "I'm more than ready to begin booking private details. My team, as you know, is in place—though obviously unneeded since *Ravish* has been shut down—so I think it's now a matter of taking a leap of faith."

"You're plenty ready, Holloway. Mark my words, you'll be the cream of the crop for private security in no time."

I smirk as he shakes his head with his signature humility.

Then he glances around my office before huffing a laugh. "Who would have thought the sheltered cowboy from Texas would find a home in a sex club in Manhattan?"

We share a smile as a bittersweet blend of sadness and joy flows through me, and I realize, with a shock, that somehow, somewhere along the way, Ford has earned the title of *friend*.

"You always have a home here." I stand, holding out my hand to the man before me. He clasps it with his own as he rises, facing me as I squeeze his fingers pointedly.

"You know you're not going anywhere until you've trained your replacement, right?"

Ford's face lights up. "While we're on that topic, I know *exactly* who you should ask."

My brow quirks in silent question, and Ford leans forward with a self-satisfied grin. "Jo Fratelli!"

WREN

A sea of purple coneflowers as far as the eye can see. A dark-haired couple nestled amid the purple and orangey-brown,

their eyes fixed on one another, brows touching. Their connection coming alive on the canvas...

I'm so absorbed in the scene before me that I don't hear the door open. I don't hear the light footsteps cross the floor of my studio.

I don't even feel his presence at my back until he whispers, "It's your best work yet."

The brush falls from my paint-flecked fingers, landing on the floor beneath my stool.

"*Jesus Christ*, Vaughn, you scared the living shit out of me."

I twist about on my seat, facing my smiling lover, and reach out swiftly with my thumb and index finger to grab his nipple through his black shirt.

"*Ouch!*" he yelps comically when I twist, and I'm laughing as he comes closer with a threatening look on his face. "How would you like it if I did that to you?"

I simply raise one brow and shrug indifferently, making him chuckle. "Ah, yes. You'd probably enjoy it."

He leans closer until his lips brush off mine, and his words whisper across my lips. "My *deviant* little bird."

I reach up, encircling his neck with my arms, and plant my lips on his. An aching moan builds in my chest as he takes my mouth lazily, his tongue sliding past mine as he slowly tastes me.

Pushing my suddenly heavy breasts against him, I rise to stand so that we're flush against one another. I palm his chest and tear my mouth from his before pushing lightly, encouraging him to step backward. He moves until his knees meet the side of the cushion-covered day lounger and, in a fluid motion, yanks me closer to spin me around to lower me down, effectively pinning me beneath him.

"Do you feel what you do to me?" He grinds his pelvis against me, his blatantly rock-hard cock telling me *exactly* what I do to him.

He slides his thigh between mine, brushing the firm muscle against my pussy, and my body instantly soars to life.

“Are you wet, Wren?”

I nod with a gasp when he hits my clit deliciously. “Mm-hmm, I’m fucking *soaked*.”

His nostrils flare as he grinds against me, circling his hips as he searches for friction.

“Let’s see then.” He pulls back, pushing the hem of my skirt until it pools around my waist. His approving eyes rise to meet mine with a shit-eating grin plastered to his face.

“And no panties. *Fuck*, beautiful, you really were made for me.” His chuckle of approval at finding me bare and ready makes me smile.

“I ditched them after the elevator this morning. They were...*wet*.”

He lifts his head, his pupils blown wide. “As wet as you are right now?”

“How wet am I—oh *fuck!*”

My question dies in my throat when Vaughn parts my folds with his thumbs and drags his flattened tongue through my wetness. He repeats the action a handful more times until I’m writhing against him, my hand buried in his thick, dark hair.

Raising midnight eyes to mine, his face glistens with my arousal. “Holy shit, you’re *so* damn wet, beautiful girl.” He licks his full lips before grinning devilishly. “And you taste like *mine*.”

Then he runs the tip of his finger along my slit before dipping inside. He slides deep as his mouth latches onto my clit, sucking hard.

I cry out, my body clenching around that single digit before he adds a second finger. The burn as he stretches me out is exquisite ecstasy, and I find myself squirming against his mouth, holding him in place as I lift my hips, increasing his tempo.

“Yes, there, lick *harder*.” His eyes fly open, pupils blown as he feasts on me, swirling his tongue around my pulsating clit. He groans against me, the sound sending a shiver of desire through my body, and I feel my pussy soak those two fingers.

The sound of his mouth on me, of his fingers fucking me, fills the air around us, and I cry out when he stretches me even more with a third finger.

I thrash my head on the pillows as I swear loudly. “Oh, shit, shit, shit! That feels *amazing*.”

I look back at him as he slowly pumps into me, easing the brutal pounding pace, and I whimper as he curves the tips of his finger, hitting something deep inside.

“Oh, oh, oh yes. *Yes!*”

My breath is coming in short pants as Vaughn takes his mouth off of me for a second, his obsidian eyes spearing me as sweat beads across his brow. “Do you trust me?”

My answer is instinctual. “Always.”

“Then relax. Let go. Your body knows what to do, little bird.”

He flicks my clit with his pointed tongue, driving his long, thick fingers inside to slide against my inner walls, massaging them with each pass, and I feel my orgasm building steadily. Edging higher and higher still.

I’m reaching, my neck strained as I try to get there. My hands grapple with his wet locks when he sucks my clit between his lips right as he hits that soft spot deep within me.

“Yes, yes, *yes!* I’m coming, don’t stop!”

His fingers increase their pace, hitting deep with each rough pass as I come so hard, I see stars, and when Vaughn pulls his fingers from my pussy, right as I hit my peak, I’m both shocked and embarrassed when my orgasm visibly floods the lounge beneath me.

I can’t stop myself as I come harder than I ever have, my body arching as I convulse under my lover’s hot stare.

“Fuck *yeah*, that’s so damn hot, little bird. Your sweet cunt squirting just for me...*fuck me*. You’re so beautiful...so fucking beautiful...” He trails off to lick me from slit to clit, my body quivering as I attempt to descend from my pinnacle.

“Christ, you taste even sweeter.” His low moan of enjoyment as he continues to lick me turns me on mercilessly, and I fist his hair, suddenly fixated on making it as good for him as he did for me.

I use his hair to pull him away from my throbbing pussy, making him stand tall while ignoring the wetness pooling on the cushions. Then I drop to my knees, making short work of his belt, button, and zipper to pull his raging hard-on out into my waiting palm, my eyes never leaving his.

I press a kiss to his dripping slit, gently cupping his heavy sack as I draw him inside my mouth, working his dick with my mouth and my free hand. He rests his palm atop my head as his head falls back, and he pumps his hips roughly until I gag around his length.

“Take my cock, beauty. Take everything.”

His head tilts forward, pupils blown as he holds my gaze. “Own me, little bird. Take what’s yours.”

His words send a fresh flood of wetness to my pussy as I keep up the momentum for several more minutes. Groans fill the air as I pop my mouth off and stand, pressing my palms against his chest with a devilishly arched eyebrow.

“Sit your ass down, *Mr. Burton*. I’m taking you for a ride.”

CHAPTER 32



VAUGHN

I lie back on the lounge as Wren shrugs out of her dress, letting it pool on the floor at her feet before she straddles my lap.

Reaching up, I slide my hand around the nape of her neck to pull her lips down to mine, taking her mouth with a building urgency, our tongues warring decadently.

Her small hands, still mostly covered in paint, grip the front of my shirt, foregoing any attempt to unbutton it, choosing to rip it open instead. My small growl of approval turns to a groan of pleasure when her slippery wet pussy slides along my aching hard cock.

As her nails rake down along my pectorals, I growl deep inside her mouth, pulling her even closer to me.

She continues to move against me, driving me higher until I tear my mouth from hers to press open-mouthed kisses down her neck and chest. When I take a nipple into the warmth of my mouth, she whimpers against me, increasing the teasing thrusts of her hips as I worship first one perfect tit, then the other.

Her moans of pleasure fill my ears, already driving me higher before she raises herself over me to grip my length in one hand. My eyes lift to find her watching her actions with a slightly slack jaw.

I watch on as she slowly sinks onto my dick, my own jaw dropping open as the silky walls of her pussy grip me like a vise.

“Fuck!”

The single word is ripped from my chest when our pelvises are finally flush, and Wren circles her hips, adding another exquisite layer of sensation to our joining.

I sit back to grip her hips, my eyes taking in the sweet as fuck sight before me as Wren takes her pleasure. Her perky tits sway as she rides me slowly, her moans mixing with the sound of her wetness enveloping my cock, and my balls tingle as my orgasm slowly encroaches.

Unable to take the torturous momentum one moment longer, I slide my right hand up her abdomen, between the valley of her breasts, and wrap my palm around her slender throat.

Then I urge her back until her palms land on my knees, her tits arching up as her head drops back, displaying her body as a visual feast for my eyes.

I grind my cock up into her slick cunt, taking over the speed with deep, measured thrusts, and her cries of pleasure fill the room. “So fucking *deep.*” I push even deeper, and she groans raggedly, “Faster, fuck me faster. Harder. Give me *more.*”

My hips thrust harder. Faster, just as she’s demanded, and my balls draw up, getting closer to filling her sweet, sweet pussy.

I reach my free hand between us, tightening my hold on her neck as I circle her clit with the pad of my thumb.

“That’s it, beautiful girl. Milk my fucking cock. Shatter for me.”

Her pussy clenches around me, and her movements falter as her orgasm rips through her body.

Cries of completion surround me as I take back full control, pulling my dick from her dripping cunt to stand and spin her around.

Her body falls forward, flushed cheek down on the cushions, and I yank her ass up to drive my shaft back inside

her.

She cries out, eyes slamming shut as I begin to fuck her savagely. I loom over her to grip her wrists at the base of her spine, making her take everything I have to give.

“Fuck, yes!”

The sight of her submission is a thing of motherfucking beauty.

My eyes fall down to where we’re joined, her pink folds spread wide, taking a relentless pounding as my cock pistons in and out. Her muffled cries become frenzied, and she bucks against me as much as my hand imprisoning her wrists will allow.

“Your pussy looks so fucking hot taking my cock. Such a tight little cunt taking me like the best fucking girl.”

Sweat drips down my brow, landing on her rounded ass, the sight drawing my attention to her virgin hole. My cock throbs at the sight, and I brush the middle finger of my free hand lightly across, making Wren jerk against me before pushing back onto me in silent assent.

I break my punishing rhythm to begin circling my hips, stretching her more as I gather saliva in my mouth. Then I slowly spit down onto the curve of her ass, using my fingers to collect it and paint her puckered hole before spitting again.

I take time to lube my middle finger generously before slipping the tip inside her ass. Her whimpers of pleasure sing in my ears as I work her hard and fast until I’m knuckle deep.

Two knuckles deep.

Sliding my cock from her wetness, I draw out entirely before driving back inside and setting a ferocious pace, all while fucking her ass deeper and deeper with my saliva-slick finger.

“Such a good little whore,” I groan as I feel my balls slap against her clit. “Just like I knew you would be.”

Her pussy clenches around me, gripping my dick almost painfully when Wren cries out.

“Make me take it like a whore. Fill me up, Vaughn. I want your cum dripping down my thighs.”

Her eyes find mine over her shoulder; her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is plastered across the side of her head as she bites down on her lip so hard it draws blood.

“I love being your whore. Your good girl. Only yours. Always *yours*.”

My vision blurs as my dick unleashes hot, thick cum deep inside her pussy, her words throwing both of us right off the edge. I come so hard my entire body shakes from the force as my roar of completion drowns out Wren’s cries of pleasure, and I fall forward over her perspiration-drenched back.

Barely finding the energy to twist to the side, I leave the quivering heat of her pulsating center, gathering her close against my side. My chest is rising and falling, blood pounding through my veins so loud, I can’t hear anything else until Wren’s voice breaks through.

“Are you okay?”

I angle my head down to look into her concerned eyes as her fingertips trace over the cuts and bruises from the attack, and my chest fills with something unfamiliar as I bend closer, taking her lips in a leisurely kiss.

She’s warm and pliant in my arms, and I’m wholly sure I could stay like this forever, when she breaks the kiss, pulling back to grab a box of tissues from the shelves behind us.

When she meets my questioning gaze, she indicates her slick thighs. “You really dirtied me up this time.” She pops a brow as she moves to clean up the mess with the tissue in her hand, but I place a palm on her shoulder.

“Allow me.”

Then I slide to the floor, trailing my fingers along her well-fucked folds to gather the blend of our mutual pleasure from her inner thighs. I smirk as I hold them out between us.

Her nostrils flare before she leans forward and closes her mouth around my index finger, humming her pleasure as she

cleans the digit before moving on to the next.

The sight sets my cock twitching all over again, and when she pulls back to lick her lips, I wedge my torso between her legs, taking her mouth roughly with mine, growling when I taste both of us on her delicate tongue.

I break the kiss, gathering her close against me in a warm embrace. Her brow is against my chest, my cheek resting atop her head when her words whisper through the studio.

“You’ve opened places in my heart I didn’t know existed.” Her sigh of contentment makes me inhale slowly, filling my lungs with her. Filling my mind with thoughts I didn’t know I had. “There is no me without you. You own me, Vaughn Burton. For as long as you’ll keep me, I’m yours.”

My chest constricts as my arms crush my little bird ever closer.

If I could steal forever...

WREN

“Look at the *state* of you.”

Vaughn’s eyes travel the length of his body, taking in his paint-ruined suit and torn shirt with a wry grin.

“Have you seen yourself?”

His thumb reaches up to trace the bright pink finger marks encircling my neck, the ones I know will be bruises later on my pale skin, and my eyelids flutter closed, basking in the softness of his touch.

When I open my eyes, his brow is deeply drawn. “I fucking love seeing my mark on your body, but Wren...” He trails off, his eyes holding mine intently. “If I’m too much...if I ever hurt you, just say the word, and I can...”

He shakes his head, clearly unsure of his next words, even as my heartbeat pounds against my breastbone. His swallow is

harsh before he murmurs so low that I strain to hear. “I can try to be gentle...for *you*.”

A kaleidoscope of butterflies swarms in the depths of my stomach, alighting me from within, and I throw myself against his chest, wrapping my arms tight around his waist.

His own arms hesitantly enfold me before I angle my head up, chin pressed against his chest, to find his confusion-filled gaze. “You can never love me, Vaughn Burton.”

He flinches at the honesty, and I plow ahead heedlessly.

“And I get that. I knew that going into this, but please... don’t dim the force of your passion for me. The way you make me feel. How it feels when we come together. You may never be able to love me, but when you’re inside of me, it feels like *more* than that. Don’t take that away. Give me everything you *can* give, and I can live without the rest.”

He blinks slowly several times before pressing a kiss to my forehead, just as there’s a knock on the door. “Randolf is looking for you, boss.”

I extricate myself from Vaughn’s hold, swiftly yanking the door open to find a sheepish Jules. “Sorry to interrupt... umm...”

Vaughn steps up behind me, the sight of him making Jules’s eyes blow wide in his head.

“As you can see, I’ll need to change before I can deal with Randolf and his ineptitude.”

Jules nods profusely as Vaughn tucks me in against the side of his body. “Tell him I’ll be back down in twenty.”

With a wide-eyed nod, poor Jules almost flies back downstairs, and we follow slowly after him.

As we crest the top of the stairs, several sets of eyes rise to watch our ascent, more joining them the closer we get to the staff floor.

“What are they looking at?”

My question is a bare whisper, seeing Vaughn look down at me with mirth in his dark eyes. “Clearly, we’re both covered in paint. My shirt is ripped open, your hair is in *desperate* need of a hairbrush, and there are finger marks around your throat.”

I stand taller, owning it, and his deep chuckle of approval warms my insides as we walk toward the elevator leading upstairs.

“Don’t forget the marks *I* left on *your* chest.”

I arch a brow, sliding my gaze down along his exposed torso.

He barks a laugh as he takes in the sight of my nail indentations on his muscular chest before we step onto the elevator. Once inside, his gaze darkens as his eyes meet mine, and he gathers me close.

“Made me for me, little bird.” He brushes his mouth across mine. “Like I was made for you.”

CHAPTER 33



WREN

A blissful week of normality has passed following our impromptu studio session, when my cell's ringtone rips me from a deep, dreamless sleep.

I scramble for the nightstand on my side of Vaughn's bed, where I've spent every night for the last three weeks, narrowly getting to it before the caller decides to hang up.

"Hello?"

My voice is breathless and sleep-addled, as my blurred vision takes in the mess around me.

We'd had Luciano's meatball marinara subs for dinner last night, and things had gotten more than a little messy when I'd thrown a sauce-covered meatball at the back of Vaughn's head after he'd wound me up about subtitled movies being crap.

My smile is broad, remembering the disgust on his face when he'd turned to face me, finding a second meatball hot on the heels of the first. It hit him square between the eyes, and then we descended into chaos.

A bedroom food fight that ended between the sheets.

The remnants of that fight cover the floor beneath my feet as I jump to stand when the person on the other end of the line speaks. "Good day, Miss Caputo. Harold Dickinson here, curator at—"

"The Met. Hi, yes, I know who you are. How are you, Mr. Dickinson?"

“I hope I’ve not caught you at a bad time...”

I glance around once more, idly wondering what time it is and where Vaughn has gone to before I answer. “Not at all. How may I help you?”

“Your exhibition here was a roaring success. Congratulations.”

The honest delight in his voice makes me smile as I murmur a low thanks.

“To be blunt, there has been such a demand for your work that I’m blue in the face fielding calls, and I’m hoping you might have some other pieces up your very creative sleeves. Or perhaps a timeline on when we might expect a repeat production?”

My jaw unhinges, my lips opening and closing several times before I find the words. “A repeat? As in, you want me to come *back*?”

“Very much, Miss Caputo.” He chuckles softly. “You sound surprised.”

I can’t help my snort of disbelief as I shake my head in wonderment. “I—I never dreamed I would be good enough to share my hobby with another living soul...”

Tears fill my eyes before Mr. Dickinson’s sincere voice echoes in my ear. “Your talent is exceptional, Miss Caputo. Kudos to Mr. Burton for his relentless pursuit. He’s been adamant that I wouldn’t regret taking a chance on your work. And he was right.”

My heart fills to bursting as I promise to get back to the curator of The Met as soon as possible, and once I’ve hung up, I fly from the bedroom in search of the only person I want to experience my joy alongside.

The apartment is empty but for a short handwritten note on the kitchen island.

*There’s a fresh platter of fruit
and bagels in the pantry.*

*You looked too tired to wake. I'm
afraid I'm running you ragged,
beautiful girl.*

Eat. Sleep. I'll be back soon.

Yours always, V

My chest warms at how he's signed off the note, even as hunger roars in the depths of my stomach. I'm too excited to share my news, so I push down thoughts of food while I dress swiftly in a simple dark green button-down dress and flip-flops.

Feet flying across the floor of the staff quarters and up the waiting staircase, I come to a violent halt, hand poised to knock, when Vaughn's voice bellows from behind the slightly ajar office door.

"I'm *done* being patient. He needs to pay for his part in all of this. I pay too steep a price every time I look into Wren's eyes, dammit."

The blood in my veins turns to ice as the flutters in my stomach wither and evaporate. Vaughn's voice lowers, and he continues in less agitation. "I lie by omission every fucking day. I need to make him pay so that when I tell her the truth about her father's murder, I can at least say the bastard paid for his part."

My brow is heavily furrowed as I stand stock still, my thoughts racing as I try to quell the rising nausea.

My father was murdered?

My breaths are coming in short bursts, the air in my lungs seeming to suffocate me as another voice—Ford's—responds quietly.

"I have one other thing we can try. I'll let you—"

His voice cuts off when he yanks open the door, finding me standing on the other side. Vaughn's eyes look past Ford,

finding mine as horror dawns on his handsome face.

“My—my father was murdered...” I trail off uselessly, my eyes, filled with confusion, still holding Vaughn’s. Ford steps around past me, urging me inside to close the door firmly behind me, leaving us alone.

I step farther inside, tilting my head to one side with a deep frown. “Lying by omission? Paying a steep price?” My voice rises an octave with each accusation as my feet carry me closer to the man I love.

My whole entire world feels like it’s been ripped from me as Vaughn continues to stare right into my soul, as though he’s drinking his fill before being sent out into the desert.

“*Say something!*” My shrill cry fills the space, and Vaughn blinks heavily once, then twice before gesturing toward the sofa.

“Sit, Wren. It’s past time you knew everything.”

VAUGHN

Following an enigmatic text from Ford, I’d agreed to meet him in my office, leaving Wren fast asleep in what has rapidly become *our* bed.

He’s already in my office when I arrive. “Sit down. You’re not going to like this.”

My stomach churns at his words, and I march around my desk, taking a seat as instructed.

“Nolan Fritz is forming his own sex club.”

“He’ll be behind bars before he can get it off the ground.”

Ford shakes his head firmly. “You don’t understand, V. He’s offering complimentary lifetime memberships to men and women in places of obscene power. Members he met in his time at *Ravish*. And worse, he’s bringing Lucia on board to head it up.”

“*Shit.*” I pound my hand onto the desk. “We need to move faster. Have him prosecuted before he can become untouchable.”

“I’m trying everything I know. You’ve just gotta be patient a little—”

I cut him off with a wall-shaking bellow. “I’m *done* being patient. He needs to pay for his part in all of this. I pay too steep a price every time I look into Wren’s eyes, dammit.”

I drop my head, guilt rolling through me in waves. “I lie by omission every fucking day. I need to make him pay so that when I tell her the truth about her father’s murder, I can at least say the bastard paid for his part.”

There’s a buzzing in my ears as images of my time with Wren fly through my head. Time that I’ve stolen. That I’ve taken for myself despite my absolute unworthiness.

And what’s worse is, she’s fallen in love with you, you selfish prick.

Ford is leaving when I lift my eyes, only for them to blow wide, finding the object of my thoughts standing outside my office door.

“My—my father was murdered...”

I fixate on the curve of her jaw, the way it meets her pert chin, flowing down to that slender neck that I’m so fond of marking. The movement of her full lips as she speaks words I can’t hear because of the blood thundering in my ears.

Those big gray eyes surrounded by long black lashes, usually so filled with emotion, are now devoid of anything aside from mistrust, and I feel the loss like a knife to my gut.

“Say something!”

I’m slowly bleeding out, frozen in time, when her agonized voice breaks through the haze, making me blink owlishly as my mind races through ways to make this right.

But there’s only one thing that can fix this or make any of it right.

Only one thing I can do to show her that our time together was real.

“Sit, Wren. It’s past time you knew everything.”

She moves to sit on the sofa I’ve indicated, her eyes never once leaving mine, and once her ass hits the cushion, she exhales heavily.

“My father was murdered.”

It’s a statement, not a question, and all I can do is nod.

“Why would Mom keep it from me? Why would *you*? I don’t understand...” She trails off, frustration plain on her face before she sits back. “Start at the beginning.”

I take a deep breath and dive straight in before I can think too much about it.

“Lorenzo Caputo was my brother in every sense of the word. He was three years older, and I thought he hung the fucking moon. He and your Nonna Julia were *everything* to me when my mum was killed.”

I swallow roughly before rising to fix a Macallan, swirling the liquid around the tumbler as my eyes regard Wren. “When he met your mother, he wanted to help me buy this place from the man who wouldn’t acknowledge me as his bastard. He knew it was my dream to destroy it, to make it mine instead of *his*. And your father helped me to achieve that goal.”

My face lightens with a smile then. “And then he found out Sara was pregnant. Oh man, I don’t think he was ever as happy in his damn life.”

Wren’s eyes fill with tears, her bottom lip quivering dangerously, and when my chest pangs in agony, I step forward to comfort her, only to meet with a stalling palm.

“No. Don’t come too close. I—I can’t think properly when you’re near me.”

I retreat, my shoulders sagging as I continue. “He found that I was in receipt of threatening letters.”

Her head flies up, concern marring her brow as she undoubtedly draws a parallel between my letters and the ones she's been receiving from the elusive Prince Charming.

“And it was those letters and my ignorance of them that ultimately cost you your father and me my best friend.”

“Did you get another damn letter, V?”

*I nod enthusiastically as I pop a sushi roll into my mouth.
“Mm-hmm.”*

Renzo's tanned brow furrows deeply before he slaps my sashimi out of my chopsticks.

“What the—”

*He grips my collar, dragging me to my feet with a snarl.
“This is fucking serious, asshole. I don't think you realize the men you're dealing with. Closing down the sexual side of this club could have serious repercussions if you don't handle it the right way.”*

*“And what way would that be, pray tell me, oh wise one?”
I yank my shirt from his grasp, shooting him a sour look.
“These fuckers have everyone in their back pocket. If I lie low and don't give them cause to carry out their threats, they'll just find someplace else to have these disgusting little virgin auctions, because they will not control me in my own fucking club.”*

My best friend inhales deeply, watching me with wary eyes until I twist around to my desk, where my half-eaten sushi awaits. I pluck a California roll from the platter with my chopsticks and hold it out with a hangdog expression.

“Eat takeout with me before you go home to your pregnant soon-to-be wife, and stop concerning yourself with dick measuring contests, 'cause we both know mine's the biggest.”

A slow smile grows on his stubbled face, and he drags a hand through his longer-than-usual hair before his eyes find

mine. “It always comes down to the bigger dick with you, V. Don’t you know it’s the motion in the ocean that counts?”

I bark a laugh, relief unfurling in my stomach as he accepts the California roll, alongside my wilful ignorance. “Only dudes with small peckers say shit like that, Caputo.”

“That was the last conversation we had.” My stomach roils, remembering the last time I saw him later that same day.

I knock my Macallan back in one, the burn easing the pain caused by these unbearable memories.

“What happened after that?” Wren’s voice is small, and I keep my eyes fixed firmly on the now-empty tumbler clasped between my hands.

“It wasn’t until hours later that I realized the death threat letter was missing from my office.”

“He’d taken it, hadn’t he?”

I nod slowly, my attention drawn to a single droplet of whisky in the bottom of the tumbler.

“The letter stated that unless I meet at the designated time and place to discuss negotiations, there would be dire repercussions...” I trail off, needing to swallow down my self-loathing so as to be able to continue.

“I ignored it, just like I’d done with the twenty others I’d received. But Renzo...”

My jaw clenches as Wren’s quiet sob fills my ears and drowns the very soul her presence has brought back to life.

“He went in your place.”

I slam my eyes shut, an unwilling conduit for a memory I’d rather forget. A memory that haunts me every day.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 34



VAUGHN

“Have you spoken to Renzo this evening, Sara?”

“Hi to you too, V.”

I grit my teeth as I slide into the car, revving the engine before peeling out into the Tribeca night.

“Sara. Listen to me closely. Where is Lorenzo?”

Hesitance colors her voice as she slowly replies, “He said he had a meeting tonight with some of your business assoc—”

I hang up, blow out a heavy breath, and floor it.

Intent on reaching Times Square and the shit hole venue that Nolan Fritz, the brawn behind my deceased father’s sex-selling business, had marked for each of our previously scheduled, never attended meetings.

My car reaches my destination, Saturn, a peep show club with a seedier reputation than most, in record time. Chills race down my spine when I spot Lorenzo’s white Ferrari F355 outside. It’s unmistakable with those custom license plates Sara had gifted him recently, reading Dad 2 Be.

I dump my car behind his, and race through the wide-open doors into the blackness beyond.

Almost immediately, I’m flanked by two heavily built men dressed from head to toe in black. I glance around, noting there’s a third at my back, so I train my eyes ahead of me, allowing them to become accustomed to the dark.

It's a literal dive, brimming with clientele that other establishments—my newly minted Rogue, included—would find entirely unacceptable.

Doors line a long wall, doubtlessly leading to the peep shows this part of Times Square is infamous for, and my stomach tightens, remembering the rumors of human trafficking surrounding Saturn.

My hands itch with the desire to shut this place, and all others like it, down for good.

Instead, I keep quiet, following the goons who surround me deeper inside Saturn, manifesting that someday I'll have not only the financial means to see that desire come to fruition, but also the power.

The goon on my right steps forward, leading us to a door that he opens slowly to display a tall, thin, exceptionally pale man with curly blonde hair. He's wearing an impeccably tailored light blue suit as he converses with someone out of my view.

"He's here, Mr. Fritz." That's the goon at my rear. His words see Fritz pivot to face me with a sickeningly saccharine smile on his face. He'd be considered classically handsome if it weren't for the utter lack of emotion behind his eyes.

"Ah, the elusive Mr. Burton." He twists his head to one side, looking me up and down. "Younger than I'd have anticipated. Though you seem to have inherited your father's balls of steel."

I stand tall and silent, something inside of me telling me to bite back the retort that dangles on the tip of my tongue, and he steps closer.

"In this instance, you'd have been wise to meet with me on my first request. Your friend here—"

My stomach lurches when a fourth goon hauls my bound and gagged best friend out into view. Renzo's eyes are frantic and filled with apology, and it takes everything inside of me to keep my feet rooted to this spot.

“Mr. Caputo here has given us the perfect opportunity to open negotiations. Wouldn’t you agree?”

My teeth are tightly clenched when I nod sharply, giving him the barest grunt of assent.

Fritz’s face flushes as he clasps his hands in barely contained glee. “Let’s not beat around the bush. I want those auction rooms reopened immediately.”

I grit my teeth as my nostrils flare. “Why not do it yourself, Fritz? Why my club, I don’t—”

“All you need to understand is that there’s power in information. Power that I’ve become accustomed to having, and those auctions are the key.”

He arches a pale blonde brow. “Tell me, what is that you want, and let’s be done?”

Handing over power to the man before me is not something I’m keen on doing, but given the circumstances, I’m left without a choice.

“Give me my brother back in one piece.” My eyes find Lorenzo’s, silently promising him that it will all be okay before I shift my gaze back to Fritz, finding his hand outstretched.

“You have yourself a deal, Mr. Burton.”

His goon begins to untie Renzo as I take Fritz’s waiting hand, only for Fritz to jerk me closer, snarling into my face.

“And the next time you’re summoned, you’ll do as you’re told. After all...” His grimace morphs into a malevolent smirk. “Pets come when called.”

I swallow as I nod, forcing myself to make eye contact until Fritz tugs his hand from mine, clicking his fingers for his man to bring Renzo closer.

“Thank you for finally answering my calling card, Mr. Caputo. You could teach your friend here a thing or two about obedience. You may come in useful when it comes to keeping him in line.”

Renzo's jaw tics before the goon handling him pushes him forward with such momentum that he lands on his knees with a thud.

I quickly pluck him from the floor, nodding at a stock-still Fritz before turning and making for the door, back the way I'd come.

Renzo turns his wide blue eyes to me. "I'm sorry, V. I never meant to—"

"Oh, and Burton..."

Fritz's words cut off Lorenzo, and we both spin slowly around to find several handguns leveled right at us. I immediately put my body in front of Renzo's.

"You said I could have him back in one piece."

Fritz smiles sadistically. "And you got him back in one piece, if I'm not mistaken."

My heart hammers against my chest as my mind races, trying to find a way out of this.

"Allow us to leave or kill me. But let this man go free."

"You should have answered your summons, Burton. Threats need to be answered...and what kind of man would I be if I allowed your rudeness to go unpunished, hmm?"

"I'll do whatever you want." I stand firm, shielding Renzo with my taller body. "Let this man go. He's done nothing wrong here."

Fritz's mouth tugs up on one side before there's a sharp pop, followed by a burning sensation in my chest. I fall to my knees as though in slow motion, my hand rising to press my palm to my wound.

My eyes drop down, barely registering the blood pooling between my fingers where they're covering the hole made from the bullet I've just taken. When I look back at Fritz, he's watching me with a dark smile that chills me to my marrow.

Renzo kneels beside me, his face filled with helplessness as he takes in the blood staining my white shirt. "You'll be okay,

V. I'm here. I've got you."

My voice is jagged as I grip his arm with as much strength as I can gather. "Run. Go, now!"

"I'm not leaving—"

He grinds to a halt when he feels Fritz holding the barrel of a small handgun to his temple.

"Please...don't, I'll do anything..."

Fritz holds my pleading gaze with a cool, uncaring stare, and I know deep inside my heart that this is the final time my best friend and I will share the same air.

My eyes shoot to Renzo's even as breathing becomes difficult.

"Brother."

That final word catches on a sob that cleaves my chest in half.

Lorenzo's eyes glisten with tears, his brow beading with sweat, even as his lips lift in a glorious smile, and he murmurs softly, "It's been an honor—"

I slam my eyes closed as Fritz pulls the trigger, the warmth of my best friend's life force hitting me sharply, and I pray to a god that couldn't possibly exist to please take me instead of this man.

The man with so much to live for. So much to give. The man who knows the very best, and the very worst of me.

And it's when Renzo's body falls forward that my eyes fly open, and I spear Fritz with a fiery stare as I gather my friend close, all while vowing that if I make it out alive, this will never happen again.

Love is too painful. If this is how love tastes when it's torn from you, then I want no part of it.

And that's my last thought before I fall forward, desperately holding the body of the only person who'd ever meant shit to me.

WREN

I blink heavily, tears cresting my bottom lashes as I absorb the pain in Vaughn's voice. As I relive the excruciating loss right alongside him.

As I finally hear the burning truth that I've been denied my whole entire life.

"I woke up in a hospital bed. Your *Nonna* Julia was asleep in the bedside chair. I took one look at her and fell to pieces. They sedated me for another couple of hours—"

His words break off before he lifts his hands, his palms covering his face for long moments, and I swallow down a sob of agony, wishing I could comfort him, but knowing I need time to process what I've just discovered.

When he removes his hands from his face, his glistening eyes unerringly find mine.

"Fritz had kept me within inches of death, shooting me here—" He rubs the scar I've noticed just beneath his collarbone. "But when Sara told me to stay away, it was the killing blow. I lost every single thing of meaning until you came into my life."

He rises and walks around the desk, keeping his distance as I'd asked, only to lower himself to his knees and regard me with pleading eyes.

"I fought the pull between us with *everything* I had because I know I don't deserve you. I don't deserve your love, Wren. And selfishly, I've known that all along. But *please*—"

His voice cracks, and he swallows slowly, as though he's holding himself together by a thread.

I dash away the tears streaming down my cheeks, using the back of my hands, my chest rising and falling rapidly as his yearning midnight eyes hold mine. "Don't take your love away. I'll do anything to be worthy of it. Of *you*."

He swallows heavily, his head falling forward in defeat. “Please, don’t leave me.”

Pushing myself to stand, my feet slowly close the distance between us before I place a shaking palm on the top of his dark head. He shifts closer, molding his body to mine when he wraps his arms around my waist, pressing his head to my abdomen.

I run my fingers through the black silken strands whilst waging a war internally. Part of me wants nothing more than to fall to the floor and gather him close. The need to comfort him is almost visceral.

But a small part of me—undoubtedly the strength I’ve acquired in my time here with this beautiful man—knows I need *time* to come to terms with my newfound knowledge.

Time to adjust to the new dynamic between us. Time to sort through the chaos inside my head.

Just time to think.

But that’s something I simply can’t do here, in Vaughn’s presence, when my whole self is screaming that I ease his pain and forget about my own.

And it’s with that in mind, I gently loosen his hold around my midriff and take a step back, looking down into beseeching black eyes that almost break my resolve in their sincerity.

“I need time, Vaughn. Time to digest everything. To work through how *I* feel about the circumstances of my father’s death. About my mother keeping the truth from me.”

He exhales slowly with a soft nod, defeat rolling off of him in waves, and at that, I cup his cheeks between my palms, needing him to hear me.

“You’re not responsible for his murder. Nolan Fritz is. He killed my father in cold blood to prove a point to you.” His brows furrow as he shakes his head, and I draw my thumbs across his sharp, emotion-slick cheekbones. “*It’s not your fault.*”

Our eyes hold for long moments as my words permeate the fortress deep inside that he's spent decades perfecting, and it's when fresh tears fill his eyes that I drop my hands from his face.

My feet find their way to the door as Vaughn exhales raggedly at my back. My own breath is shallow as I place my hand on the handle, my eyes filling with tears as my words fill the room.

"I love you, Vaughn Burton. But right now, I need some room to breathe."

CHAPTER 35



VAUGHN

Silence surrounds us as we take the elevator to the basement. Internally, I'm screaming, begging, and pleading for her not to go. The fear that she'll never return seeps into the deepest, darkest reaches of my newly restored soul.

I'm toxic, but maybe she's the antidote.

The elevator doors open to reveal a waiting Jules. His face is the very picture of dismay as he takes Wren's bags from my hands, leaving them dangling uselessly at my sides.

Wren wrings her hands together as we both follow Jules, silence still prevailing until I open the back passenger door of the waiting SUV.

"I *will* come back to you, Vaughn."

Finally, I allow myself to look down into her tear-stained face, the sight putting a fresh lump in my throat, and I simply nod once, too fearful to attempt words at this moment.

I help her into her seat, my eyes raking across every adored feature, committing every line, every curve to memory before slowly closing the door.

I catch Jules's eyes over the hood. "Stay with her. Her safety is paramount."

He nods sharply, a frown marring his usually smiling face, and then he ducks inside, driving the SUV and my Wren from my life for what feels like the last time.

Once the SUV has disappeared from sight, I march back to the elevator, intent on visiting Ford in his little security cave on the ground floor.

When I open the door using the biometric scanner, he regards me with unfathomable eyes for a beat before shaking his head. “Didn’t think you’d let her go, if I’m being honest.”

“She deserves to make her own choices.” I step farther inside, taking a seat beside him with a shrug. “She was made to be with me, but it means nothing if I force her hand.”

His face gives nothing away as he watches me for a long beat before shifting his body to the screen before him.

“Right, here’s what I’ve found.” The screen lights up when he taps a key, displaying a map of the offices of one Dr. Conn Tyrell.

“A pediatrician’s office?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, right?”

I nod slowly, still not connecting the dots.

“This map shows you the private offices of Dr. Tyrell, pediatrician to Lennon Porter’s baby daughter, Colbie.” He quirks a brow as his lips lift on one side. “The offices both Mr. and Mrs. Porter will be visiting tomorrow for Colbie’s six-week wellness check.”

“I’m still not getting it. It’s *private*, and I have no reason to be there—”

He cuts me off with a full-blown smirk. “I’ve paid off Tyrell’s secretary. She’s told him the appointment is postponed until 12:30 p.m. instead of the scheduled 11:45 a.m.”

“You’re a fucking genius, Holloway.”

The ache in my chest lessens at the thought of getting some answers at last. Of hopefully bringing Sara home to her daughter and giving something to the woman who owns me when all I’ve done is take, take, take.

WREN

“Come in, come in!”

Elodie greets me at the door of her apartment, pulling me into her embrace before drawing back to fix me with a concerned gaze. “What did the Cactus do now?”

I snort a pained laugh, moving farther inside to admit an uncomfortable-looking Jules.

“He didn’t do anything. I just need some time...to think, that’s all.”

Elodie smiles softly, knowing me long enough to know when I’m in avoidance mode, but giving me space, regardless.

“I’ve got popcorn and a big box of Whoppers with your name on them.” She moves toward her open-plan living area, indicating that Jules and I sit on the two huge couches that dwarf everything else.

“I do have to pop out for work in a little bit, but aside from that, I’m all yours, Wren.”

When I walk toward them, Jules stops me with a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I’m just...I’ll wait in the car for a while. Best I touch base with Ford anyway.”

I force a smile, weary down to my very bones, before I reach up and squeeze his hand reassuringly. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere. I’m safe here. You can go home and come back in—”

He cuts me off with a firm but sympathetic, “*No*. I stay with you. That’s the deal, kid.” Then he presses the familiar pager into my hands. “I’ll be downstairs.”

As he leaves, I lower myself into the couch with a deep sigh of relief. “Jesus, these couches are made of clouds. When did you get them?”

Elodie shrugs nonchalantly as she comes back into view. “Little while ago.”

She passes me a tall glass of iced tea, my beverage of choice. Once I’ve taken a sip, she sets it on the side table for me before returning to the kitchen. I can hear her turning on the microwave, her feet shuffling across the floor as she hums softly to herself.

My eyes feel heavy as I snuggle deeper into the couch of clouds, and before I realize it, my chin lands on my chest as I fall into a deep sleep filled with images of Vaughn’s sorrowful eyes.

When I wake, the apartment is shrouded in shadows from the city lights outside, and there’s no sign of Elodie, only a short note on the table by the door.

I'll be back by 9 p.m.

Kisses, E

I check the clock on the wall, noting it’s almost ten. Shaking my head with a smile at how utterly predictable she is, I grab my cell from the handbag I’d dropped on the table when I arrived.

There are two texts and an email waiting.

I click the email first, my stomach lurching uncomfortably when I see the sender.

Sender: princecharming4u@googlemail.com

Recipient: wren_caputo11@gmail.com

Hey Princess,

You looked divine at The Met. I watched you all night. Your smile lit up the entire galaxy, but I knew it was meant only for me.

Soon, we can begin our lives together.

Everything is *almost* in place.

With love,

Forever your Prince Charming

My heart races as I quickly forward the email to Ford, receiving an immediate text.

FORD

Already on it. And I might have a lead. Stay safe, Wren.

I send him back a quick thumbs up, exiting our thread to check the other texts that came in whilst I was sleeping.

The first text is from Elodie.

ELODIE

Got caught at work. Will bring home pizza.

My stomach rumbles at the thought, and I shoot her back a quick reply.

ME

I'll take peppers, pineapple, sweetcorn, and pepperoni. Extra cheese, too!

I'm practically licking my lips when I open the next text, frowning heavily when I do.

MATT

I heard you've left him. I'm here if you need me, Neve.

My frown deepens, anger flowing through me when I realize the only person who knows anything about my current situation is Elodie.

Fucking Elodie!

I shake my head, trying to dispel the mood threatening to overtake me, and toss my cell into my bag, ignoring Matt entirely.

The thought of Elodie's pizza sours at the thought of the conversation I need to have with her. So I make short work of grabbing a bowl of cereal from her well-stocked kitchen before making my way to the guest bedroom to call it a night.

As I move into the hall, I feel a familiar twinge in my lower abdomen and curse the world for sending me my period when I'm at my lowest.

I duck into Elodie's room and through to her ensuite, intent on grabbing some sanitary products just in case.

My jaw hits the floor when I open her bathroom cabinet to find it stocked to bursting with boxes of condoms and a handful of pregnancy tests.

Head shaking in a mixture of disbelief and confusion, I wonder what kind of fuck buddy she's involved with, when my body freezes, my mind going completely blank.

I take a minute to do the mental tally of just how long Mom has been gone, arriving at just over *five weeks*.

I don't have my old cell to check my app, but I'm reasonably sure I would have been due to get a Depo shot before I'd arrived at Rogue. Surely, sometime in the week that I'd spent in the hospital.

But with everything that's gone on, I forgot to make a new appointment.

I'm blinking like crazy, my brain on overdrive as I grab a pregnancy test from the stock in my best friend's cabinet, knocking the rest before I stride uncaringly from the room.

My feet take me to the spare room where I vaguely note my luggage at the foot of the bed as I close the door behind me. My heart is palpitating when I enter the ensuite to rip open the box containing the test with shaking hands.

“Oh God, oh shit.”

The words are on repeat as I rip open the wrapper and slide the white stick into my hand.

Before I can question myself and my sanity, I tug down my leggings and panties to hover over the toilet seat, the stick poised between my quaking thighs.

When I'm done, I cap the test and set it face down on the side of the sink.

I look up to find my eyes in the mirror as I wash my hands and watch myself for what feels like long minutes as a host of thoughts fly around my mind.

How long does it take the Depo to leave your system?

What are the chances of conception in the three weeks we've been intimate?

What would Vaughn say if I was pregnant?

But the resounding one is, do I *want* to be pregnant?

I turn off the tap, dry my hands, and read the instructions on the box.

Two lines mean I'm pregnant. And why do I suddenly feel disappointed at the thought of there only being one?

I expel a breath as I flip over the little white stick.

Time to find out.

My brow puckers, and my shoulders sag to find one pale blue line. I swallow down my disappointment as I drop the negative test back onto the counter and make my way to the bedroom, more confused than ever before.

CHAPTER 36



WREN

Elodie's door is closed when I pass her room on my way to the kitchen. It's not even 8 a.m., but I can't sleep, my mind too full of thoughts.

I grab an iced tea from the refrigerator and slide onto a stool at the kitchen island as the early morning sunshine peeks through the blinds.

The sound of the city below fills my ears, and I smile, thinking it's something I've grown to love in my time here. Something I don't want to take for granted.

Something I want to listen to every morning.

My mind wanders to Vaughn's revelations from yesterday, tears prickling my eyes as I relive the horror of his words. The devastation of my father's final breath.

The horrible twist of fate that tore a good man from both our lives.

The needless guilt Vaughn has carried inside of himself for twenty *years*. Believing himself to be some kind of villain because of circumstances beyond his control.

My heart breaks for him, having lived such a lonely life all this time.

And I simply can't imagine how my mother must have felt. Pregnant and alone. Her soulmate ripped from her at what should have been the happiest time of her life.

I want nothing so much as to talk to her now, face to face. To comfort her. To have her comfort me.

“I need you, Mom.”

The longing for my mother is a palpable need that fills me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes until it’s all that I can focus on.

Movement down the hallway jolts me from my thoughts, and the sound of a deep male voice speaking lowly fills my ears. A heavily tattooed man in an impeccably tailored suit rounds the corner. He comes to a halt when he notices me, looking me up and down with an appreciative smile.

“Buongiorno, bellissima signora.”

I arch a brow before Elodie barrels around the corner, her smile freezing on her beautiful face as she hands the dark-eyed man a cufflink.

He takes it and presses a kiss to one of her cheeks, then, with a tap on her ass, lets himself out of the apartment.

Elodie and I square off as I cross my arms over my chest. “Why did you tell Matt I *left* Vaughn? That’s not even true—”

“I haven’t spoken to Porter in over a week, Wren, so keep your accusations to yourself.”

Her brow creases as genuine hurt flashes through her bright blue eyes. She nibbles her bottom lip when her gaze drops to her feet before she murmurs, “Sorry about last night.”

“I thought you had to work.”

There’s no judgment in my tone; just hurt that yet another person has lied to me.

She stands taller, her eyes hardening as she mirrors my stance with her chin tipped defiantly before she shocks me to hell. “That *was* work, Wren.”

It takes me a moment to realize what she’s saying, and all I can come up with is, “Why?”

“Because Dad made some dodgy investments, the bank was going to take everything, and the only thing we had left to

sell was...” She trails off pointedly, leaving no doubt as to what she means, and I struggle to draw a breath, disgust and pity filling me in equal measure.

My stomach churns as she shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ear. “It’s not exactly a hardship. Did you *see* Domenico?”

Her lips twitch with a smile, even as I grit my teeth at the unfairness of it all. “I mean, if a hot Italian wants to pay to fuck me, then I’m not about to say no, am I!”

My frown deepens, and I step closer. “Why didn’t you tell me? I could have helped. You didn’t *need* to do this—”

Her expression flips to one of frustration as she looks me up and down. “*Don’t* do that, Wren. Don’t pity me. I *chose* this. Just as I chose not to tell you. Leave me my *pride*, at least.”

She gives me her back, and I let her go, giving her what she’s asking for. Time to heal her wounded pride.

I follow after her, intent on my own room, when something stops me. Right as Elodie steps over her threshold, I call out softly, “I love you.”

Her eyes find and hold mine. “Love you, too.”

The door closes gently, and I continue on to my room, flopping onto my bed right as my cell chimes with a text.

MOM

Surprise! I arrived at Abrams Island this morning by chopper. Can’t wait to see you.

A sudden lump fills my throat. It’s like the universe heard my heart call out for my mother and sent her to me.

ME

I’m on my way.

I quickly call Matt, and he answers on the second ring. “Are you on your way? Your mom is so excited to see you.”

A thrill runs through me, even as I debate the rightness of doing what I'm about to do, but I know Vaughn will want me to wait, and I simply *can't* wait any longer. I need to see her *now*.

"Would you mind sending the chopper to the helipad on the roof of Elodie's building? I can't wait the four-plus hours it will take to drive and then sail to Abrams."

Once he's confirmed that the chopper will collect me at midday, I text Vaughn.

ME

I slept terribly.

VAUGHN

I didn't sleep at all. Your side of the bed was cold.

My heart stalls, torn between wanting to tell him what I'm about to do, and fearful he won't allow it. Instead, I leave the text unanswered, moving to the ensuite to get ready to leave.

The sight of the pregnancy test on the edge of the sink frustrates me, and I pick it up to toss it in the waste basket, when I freeze, noticing two glaringly obvious bright blue lines, the second of which was *not* there last night.

A quick internet search tells me it may be something called an evaporation line, and my spirits flag in defeat.

"Fuck this."

My eyes land on the torn test box, spotting the second unused test inside, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm peeing on a stick for the second time in as many days, feeling more than a little desperate.

Except this time, when my eyes land on the result, there's no room for doubt.

Two lines stare back at me as my lips lift in a smile, more pumped than ever to see my mother so I can wade through the mess in my head and get home to the man I love.

VAUGHN

The blonde-haired secretary of Dr. Tyrell gives me the once-over as she leads me toward the empty examination room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Porter will be arriving shortly.” She twists the handle, letting me inside with a smug grin. “You’ll have thirty minutes before my boss arrives. Use your time wisely, because he’s nothing if not punctual.”

The door closes with a *snick*, and I slide into the doctor’s plush desk chair to await my quarry.

“They’ve pulled up outside.”

Ford’s gravelly voice fills my ears. “You good to go?”

“Just want to get this over with now.”

Ford remains blessedly silent as I straighten myself in the seat and steeple my fingers beneath my chin with my eyes fixed on the door, ready for their arrival.

The door opens inward, admitting Mr. Porter, who’s carrying his daughter’s car seat, as he turns to hold the door for his wife.

The couple smile at one another, sending a pang of longing through my breastbone before they turn to face me, their expressions changing to shock immediately.

“Who the hell are you?”

Lennon Porter places his considerable frame between me and his wife, and internally, I take my hat off to the man as I stand to hold my hand out to him.

“I’m Vaughn Burton. And you’re a hard man to meet with, Mr. Porter.”

He raises a light brown eyebrow. “That’s the way I like it. What I *don’t* like is being ambushed at my daughter’s check-up, Mr. Burton. Now, if you could—”

I drop my hand, stepping around the desk as he steps farther from reach. “I mean you no harm. I’m simply here because I have some questions regarding your brother’s well-being, and I’d hoped—”

His forehead creases heavily. “Elliott? His well-being is none of my concern.”

“I’m sure South Brook P.D. has been in touch regarding his involvement in a recent case.”

He shakes his head slowly, genuine concern dancing in his eyes. “I’m thankfully estranged from my sociopathic brother. I’d be the last person to be contacted, especially by the crooks in South Brook.”

I perk up at that, recalling Jo’s mention of the walls having ears while I’d visited.

“Why would you say that?”

He shoots a glance at his wife, and she shrugs a delicate shoulder. “It’s your story, Len.”

Then he expels a heavy sigh, pulling out a seat for his wife before taking one beside her to meet my cool gaze. “The entire fucking town is insane. There’s no law, no reasoning. Only money. The highest bidder runs the show, and since our parents died almost two decades ago, that’s been Elliott. Every law enforcement officer is in my brother’s deep back pockets, looking the other way for every infraction he wants brushed under the carpet.”

Well, that explains a lot.

“Are you familiar with a local resident, Sara Ricci? Her daughter—”

“Wren, yes, I know the family. And Elliott’s long-time fixation on Sara. I’ve lost count of the number of times he’s asked her out.”

“It’s my belief that they were dating at the time of her disappearance.”

“Her *disappearance*?”

Porter pales at my nod before he reaches for his wife's hand.

"Elliott has been known to develop...an attachment from time to time. When we were teenagers, he held a girl from our school captive over on Abrams Island because she didn't want to go to prom with him."

Chills race up my spine as Sloane squeezes Lennon's hand reassuringly.

"Well, we've looked into Elliott, but he's squeaky clean."

"I can categorically confirm that's not true. It's all buried. So deep, you'll never find it."

I nod, realizing the scope of what we're dealing with. "Your sons are—"

"They're *not* my sons, Mr. Burton."

My face freezes at the vehemence in his tone. His face is set like stone, jaw clenched, knuckles white.

"My ex-wife liked to fuck around. Namely with my brother, and so I refused to sleep with her. I can't prove it, but I *know* neither of those boys are my biological sons. They couldn't be. There's no doubt in my mind that Marcus and Matt are Elliott's."

"And they're both as insane as their father, if you ask me."

Sloane Porter's voice is firm when I meet her steely gaze. Lennon smooths his thumb across the back of her hand. "Let's not get into that, baby."

"Actually, if you'd be willing to elaborate, I'm all ears."

Sloane shoots me a pained smile while her husband sighs heavily.

"If you've looked into the Porters, then you've undoubtedly heard that I was Marcus's *girlfriend* before I hooked up with his dad, right?"

At my nod, she continues. "Well, that's another one of Elliott's bullshit lies. Marcus Porter *stalked me* for close to three years. He'd let himself into my house and follow me and

my friends everywhere. If another boy so much as glanced in my direction, something bad would happen to him. A broken bone here or there, a failed test, being benched in their sport. Everyone knew Marcus was behind it. And when he began referring to himself as my boyfriend...”

She trails off with a look of despair before Lennon hugs her against the crook of his arm.

“I was begrudgingly back in South Brook for Marcus’s graduation when I happened upon Sloane jogging on the beach. We began meeting every morning *just* to work out together. She had no idea who I was, nor I her, but by the time I went back to the city, I knew I needed to see more of her.”

They share a small smile. “Sloane’s parents were unapproving initially, but once they saw us together, I think they realized we were the real deal.”

“I moved to the city to be with Len immediately, and the rumors spread through South Brook that he’d *stolen* me from his son.”

“When Sloane’s parents’ house was vandalized for the third time, I spoke to Elliott, asking him to put a stop to it. To get the P.D. involved to protect innocent people, but he just laughed and said it showed the level of Marcus’s *devotion* that he was unwilling to let Sloane go without a fight.”

Lennon shakes his head with a deep frown, his words *more* than a little unsettling.

“My in-laws have moved to the city, and we have cut all ties with that cesspit. Though initially, Matt claimed he wanted to continue having a relationship with me. I was willing to try until I came home from work early one day to find he’d let Marcus into our apartment to *talk* to Sloane, and that was the end of playing nice for me.”

Sloane slams her eyes closed, clearly remembering something horrible from that day, as Lennon presses a kiss to her brow. “That’s not to say they haven’t pretty much stalked us since.”

His eyes hold mine intensely. “You can *see* why I’m a hard man to pin down, Mr. Burton. I’m simply protecting my family from the crazy that follows us.”

Once we’ve exchanged details, I quickly wish the couple well and tell them I’ll be in touch with an update before I slip from the office.

“Right on time, V. The good doctor just arrived downstairs.”

I nod toward the smiling secretary before embarking on the elevator. “Did you hear that, Ford? They’re all fucking crazy. I think it’s time we paid them a visit, don’t you?”

It’s at that moment my cell rings. When I see it’s Jules, my stomach dips nauseatingly, and I answer with a harsh, “What’s wrong?”

“She just flew out in a chopper.” My jaw clenches tightly, but before I can respond, his next words are a stab to my gut. “I’m almost sure it was Porter’s.”

Ford’s voice fills my ear and truly twists the knife. “And I’ve just received data that confirms Abrams Island as the location from which the Prince Charming emails were sent.”

My blood whooshes through my ears as I place my head against the elevator mirror, banging my forehead sharply just once, but enough to snap me back into the game.

“Someone get me in the air right the fuck now.”

CHAPTER 37



WREN

Once I've explained the situation to a still-prickly Elodie, she promised to text Jules twenty minutes after my departure in the Porter's chopper, but it was unnecessary. His eagle eyes had spotted me embarking onto the helipad, and my cell had chimed with a text moments later.

JULES

He'll murder us both, kid. Don't do it.

I turn off my cell, too absorbed with the thought of seeing my mother within the hour that I don't care about the repercussions of later.

My eyes follow the path of the helicopter, perking up as we fly over South Brook, past my house, and out onto the sound. Abrams Island quickly comes into view, with Matt waiting by the shore to the south of the helipad.

Once we've landed, Matt comes closer, helping me down to give me a tight hug before pulling back to palm my cheeks. "You're finally here. It's *finally* happening, Neve."

I'm too fixated on seeing my mother to give his words more than a passing thought, and when he grabs my hand in his, presumably to take me to Mom, I let him.

We pass the beach with the small dock through the landscaped gardens, and within minutes, we're stepping inside the vast mansion I vaguely recall from my teen years.

"Wow, this place brings back memories."

Matt squeezes my hand. “It sure does. We can make a whole host of new memories now, my *Biancaneve*.”

I chuckle. “That sounds familiar. Wasn’t that the name of the end-of-year play in our drama class back in, like, seventh grade? Snow White, right?”

He nods with a bright smile. “*Yes*. It’s where I got Neve from. It means snow.” My brow creases when he trails the back of his knuckles down along my cheek. “Your skin is as white as snow.”

His eyes are fixed on the motion of his hand when I break whatever spell he’s under as I step back out of his reach.

“Where’s Mom?”

Matt blinks several times before shaking his head. He gestures noncommittally. “Oh, she’s around here somewhere.”

He walks away when his cell rings in his back pocket. As he takes it out, he notes the caller with a heavy eye roll. “I’ve gotta take this. You can wait in the living room. You remember where it is, right?”

I nod an assent, even though I have *no* recollection of where *anything* is here, and he answers just as he’s stepping into a den of sorts.

“I’m busy, Marc. Make it quick.”

I’m internally questioning whether that was Matt’s reclusive brother, Marcus, on the other end of the line, when a twinge in my lower abdomen makes me recoil in pain. Fear that something is wrong with my newly discovered stowaway follows rapidly.

I quickly spend a couple of minutes looking inside each room on the ground floor in search of a bathroom, but come up fruitless in my endeavors. My feet fly up the dark walnut stairs, vaguely remembering that Matt’s bedroom is on the first floor.

I take a left at the top of the staircase, then a right, bringing me down a long corridor that feels slightly familiar.

I'm beginning to doubt myself, when I spot an open door ahead, relieved to find it's a bathroom at last.

"With all the rooms in this monstrosity, what's with the lack of facilities?"

My question echoes off the lonely cladding-covered walls, loud even to my own ears in the silence, before I enter the bathroom.

I'm still grumbling as I do my business, grateful nothing is amiss with my little secret, but when I'm washing my hands, I hear a loud bang that makes me stop dead in my tracks.

As I stand there quietly, I hear it a second time, and it's with a frown on my face that I step back into the hallway, hearing it again for a third time. My feet take me toward the sound, even as the rhythmical pounding of my thundering heart fills my ears.

A fourth thud sees me coming to a stop outside the room the sounds seem to have come from. I'm scarcely breathing when I turn the handle, pushing open the door, only for my world to careen utterly off-kilter as my eyes adjust to the darkness within.

Finally, I focus on the horror before me, and my legs almost buckle.

It's *me*. They're *all* me.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of images of me adorn the walls, covering every available surface. From my teen years right up to the present day.

Smiling, laughing, crying. A plethora of emotions line the walls, the shelves, the bookcase.

I'm swimming in the Sound. Jogging on the beach.

Sipping tea with Mom. Eating junk food with Elodie. Laughing with Levi.

Covered in paint in my studio at Rogue.

Kissing Vaughn, stripping off my dress, body arched as we come together.

Each *private* moment is captured on film.

Oh my God.

My stomach rebels violently, and I fall to my knees, throwing up all over the floor. I wretch until there's nothing left, and I'm a sweaty, trembling mess.

When I look back up, tears are streaming down my face, and my mind is in overdrive, trying to make sense of what the hell I'm seeing here.

My eyes land on a smaller door at the back of the mostly darkened room, and I scramble toward it, rising to my wobbly feet as I try and fail to push the door open.

Another bang from within sees me twisting the key that's inside of the lock, simultaneously terrified of what's within, but more so of what currently surrounds me.

The door opens easily to showcase an enormous open-plan library with floor-to-ceiling windows facing out onto the immaculately landscaped gardens and the glistening bay beyond.

Walnut bookcases line the walls, packed to bursting, and images of the Porter family spanning generations are scattered throughout the space, each lit up almost eerily by old-fashioned kerosene lamps.

It almost feels like a sacred space, and I'm the clear intruder.

I slowly encompass the rest of the space, stopping when I find a foldable cot bed covered with a lumpy pastel blue blanket. I take a hesitant step closer as the blanket moves, and there's another louder thud.

My feet cross the space quickly before my nerves can desert me, and I grab the edge of the blanket, pulling it back in a single fluid motion to find the wide eyes of my mother staring back at me.

"Mom!"

A sob chokes me as I take in her bound wrists and the gag around her face.

“Oh my God!”

I rip the gag from her mouth and move to untie her wrists, but she stiffens, her words chilling me to my marrow. “*Run. Now! Get out of here, Wren.*”

I shake my head vehemently. “No. I’m going nowhere without you, Mom.”

She sets her jaw as I quickly untie her. When she’s free, she whimpers in pain, and I gently massage her sore wrists until she gains some feeling back in the abused joints.

“Wren, you shouldn’t be here. I *told* you to stay with Vaughn.”

Realization prickles my spine. “Wait, were you *here* the whole time?”

She nods as a shiver envelops her body. “Yes. Elliott brought me here after...after...” She trails off, her eyelids fluttering closed as she recalls what happened the night I’d been attacked.

“After Marcus hit you over the head with a flashlight.”

My eyes bulge as her words unlock my missing memories, and the horror of that night unfolds before my eyes as though I’m living it for the first time.

My head is pounding as my eyes flicker open. I’m in the backseat of a familiar car, but when I try to lift my head, the world spins.

I lie back down quietly, listening to the two voices speaking in the front of the car.

“Why didn’t you tell me what he was planning, Marc? You can hardly think it’s a good idea to kidnap his lover so she can’t leave him.”

I stiffen when I hear Matt’s beloved voice. Then Marcus answers with a snarl. “It’s a fucking amazing idea, Matty, and

I only wish I'd thought of it before Dad got his claws into Sloane. Uncle Ell owns South Brook. Sara Ricci is a fucking no one. Not a single person will question it if he tells them to look the other way."

I can feel him glance into the back seat, and I force myself to remain deathly still. I must pass inspection, because he turns back to Matt with a smile in his voice. "You should keep her. I know you want her. I've seen your room." He snorts a laugh. "You've got it even worse than me. You better hope no one else gets her while you're playing the long game."

"She needs to realize that we're meant to be, Marc. I'm giving her time."

Marcus sighs. "You're a more patient man than me. Or Uncle Ell. If I got within a hairsbreadth of Sloane, I'd be taking her for myself, too. You'll soon realize I'm right. We're Porters; we can do whatever we want. Embrace it, bro."

The car stops, and Marcus gets out, opening the rear driver's side door. I can feel the cool night breeze on my scalp.

"Why are we dropping her here, where Elliott works?"

"Because we can diddle the security footage. And anyway, the staff is in his back pocket."

He moves to reach for me, stopping suddenly. "Oh, and remind me to change his schedule. He's taking vacation leave to get Sara settled in."

"And why—"

Marcus sighs heavily as he cuts his brother off. "God, Matty. Sometimes you're the dumbest fuck—"

His attention is drawn to me, and I realize that, as I've been listening, I've opened my eyes, unknown to myself.

Bright blue eyes once again peer into mine. "I hope for your sake that you forget all about what you've just heard."

Then the butt of a handgun comes down on my forehead with a crack.

I'm panting heavily as I fall to my knees beside the cot my mother lies upon. Her eyes are filled with empathy. "I'm so sorry you've been drawn into this, Wren. I tried to end things with Elliott when I realized he was far too full on for me, but he wasn't taking no as his answer."

Her eyes fill with tears then. "When Matt hounded him into allowing me to speak with you to ease your mind and possibly attempt to get you to return to South Brook, I'd hoped to have been able to tip you off somehow. But I'm afraid that, in your time away, Matt has become as fixated on you as his uncle is on me. They're adamant we can be one happy family here on the Sound."

My whole body fills with unadulterated fear as she swallows back her emotion, holding it together for my sake. Then she sits up gingerly, slowly swinging her still-bound legs over the side to pull me into an embrace.

"We'll get out of this, my love. And everything will go back to how it was."

But instead of telling her the truth, that *nothing* will ever be the same again, I allow her to simply hold me as I take my longed-for comfort from her.

And all the while, my mind tics, searching through ways we can escape this insanity. Because I know with certainty, I will do *anything* to protect the life inside of me.

CHAPTER 38



VAUGHN

It'd taken twenty minutes to secure a chopper, and it was twenty minutes more than I was willing to lose. Ford pilots me as his team and a frantic Jules follow in choppers of their own.

The cockpit is entirely silent, each living in our own reverie until Ford's voice resonates in my ears. "There's South Brook. We'll land here and speedboat over to give us the element of surprise. We're almost there, V."

Then he shoots me an unreadable look, his brows drawn together in a deep frown. "I'm sorry, V. I didn't get the information in time. I should have dug deeper. I should have known—"

"Don't do that, Ford. Don't blame yourself for something out of your control."

Wren's words come back to me, resounding through me as I feel the veracity of them in my damn bones.

Maybe it wasn't entirely my fault.

Besides, with the background checks coming back as squeaky fucking clean, who could have guessed one of the Porter boys is, in fact, the stalker sending Wren those Prince Charming letters and emails?

I place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "The important thing is getting her back and making those motherfuckers pay."

He nods once, and we both look out the window in time to see a helipad come into view, Jo Fratelli waiting off to one

side. “Where are we landing?”

“Jo said to meet him here. It’s a private residence with a dock we can use. The closest landing point from Abrams Island.”

Ford lands easily, and I’m running toward Jo before the blades have even begun to slow their whirrs overhead.

“I have a boat ready. Come on, this way.”

I follow him down a narrow path, coming out onto a small dock. The speedboat is bobbing on the waves as we embark, Jo revving the engine just as Ford leaps from the shore, and we take to the ocean at full tilt.

Ford takes the helm as Jo clasps my shoulder, squeezing harshly. “How did you connect the dots, V?”

Once I’ve relayed my conversation with Lennon Porter, alongside the assumptions I’m making based off of it, he’s wide-eyed but unsurprised.

He passes me a bulletproof vest as he knocks his chest, indicating his own underneath his shirt. “Do you think Elliott has Sara *here*? Who’s on the boat in Puerto Rico then?”

I shrug as I unbutton my shirt.

“I have no idea, but I’m absolutely fucking sure that Sara Ricci has been here all along. After speaking with Lennon, I *know* I’m right.”

“I fucking knew there was corruption in South Brook, but Christ above, I had no idea it ran so goddamn deep.” He shakes his head. “Elliott Porter has always seemed so mild-mannered and unassuming. You’d never think—”

Vest in place, I begin to re-button my shirt as I cut him off. “That’s the thing with sociopaths, Jo. You’re not supposed to suspect them. It’s the façade. The mask only slips when they cease to get what they want.”

An island comes into view just up ahead, an enormous house dead in the center of beautiful landscaping, and I grit my teeth in readiness. “Get them out safely, by any means necessary.”

Jo reaches into his jacket pocket, drawing out a spare handgun, which I take. Then I lift the leg of my trousers, displaying my own firearm, and he smirks. “Should have known. You always were a greedy bastard.”

Ford lands on the shoreline at the northeast side of the house, and we silently make our way forward. Both men have their weapons drawn and are on high alert. There’s an almost eerie stillness in the air until a sudden familiar *pop* breaks the silence.

Ford grunts as he drops to the ground, with both me and Jo following him. He has his palm pressed over a flesh wound on his upper left bicep, fury as I’ve never before seen splashed across his features.

He glances around, his eyes roving over the entire space, stopping when he clearly lands on his quarry. His eyes are narrowed to slits when he drops back down to face me.

“Your theory about Elliott being here all along is spot on, V. He’s on the porch, waiting for us to move so he can get another shot.”

“That means Sara *is* here.”

I nod at Jo’s statement before Ford sidles closer. “Okay, new plan. I’ll take this motherfucker, and keep him distracted so that you two can get inside the house. I’ll bring up the rear once he’s subdued.”

Jo glances at my impenetrable face before nodding sharply. “Got it.”

I clasp Ford’s uninjured shoulder, piercing him with a stare. “Don’t fucking die. I can’t have that shit on my conscience.”

His face splits in a wide grin, and he shoots me a wink before rising to take off at a pelt toward the house. He pops off a shot, keeping Elliott boxed in as he advances, and I grab Jo harshly.

“Move your ass, Fratelli.”

Jo shakes his head as he rises. “I’m surrounded by mad bastards.”

He trails after me, even when we hear several loud pops from behind us, and all I can do is hope Ford hasn’t done anything extra dumb as we step out onto the pool decking.

We nimbly make our way across to large French doors that lead into a huge, airy parlor.

Jo nudges me, pointing toward a door that opens out into a large walnut-clad hall. We move through it, silently checking the doors that line the space.

Two living rooms, a home theatre, a galley kitchen, a dining room big enough to house two hundred easily, but there’s no sign of either woman.

Having checked downstairs, we move to the first floor, finding it split into a west wing and an east wing.

Jo groans heavily. “Divide and conquer?”

“I’ll take the west wing. Fire off a shot if you find them or if you run into trouble. Don’t wait for me. Just get out. Get them to safety.”

WREN

A gunshot from somewhere on the property makes me jump to my feet, striding straight toward the huge windows to look down onto the lawn beneath us.

My heart catches in my throat when I see Vaughn crouched behind a hedgerow alongside Ford and Detective Fratelli. I bang my clenched fists on the windows, screaming at the top of my lungs as Mom rushes to stand beside me.

“We’re here. Up *here!*”

“He’s too far away to hear you, Neve.”

Matt’s even voice comes from behind us, and that usually calming tone sends an icy chill running down my spine as

goosebumps pebble every inch of my flesh.

I slowly pivot on my heel, maintaining a cool exterior, when my eyes land on both Porter brothers.

Marcus smirks as he pulls a handgun from the waistband of his pants, waving it around like a crazy person. “Look who’s finally here.” His demeanor changes as he grits, “And you brought those idiots down on us in the process. Well done, Wren. Their blood is on your hands.”

I tilt my chin in defiance. “You don’t stand a chance against them.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re mistaken.” Matt steps closer with a shrug. “The entire power of the South Brook P.D. will be here in less than ten minutes.”

He steps closer again as his next words see me freeze on the spot. “And their orders are shoot to kill.”

Mom steps past me, leaving me to absorb the devastation of those words as she presses her hands together. “Let them go, and we’ll stay here willingly. Don’t do this, Matt. I know this isn’t you. It’s Elliott’s influence—”

With the speed of a rattlesnake, Matt’s fist connects with Mom’s jaw, sending her careening backward. Gasping, I catch her, wrap my arms around her unconscious form, and lower her to the floor carefully.

When I rise again, my fists are clenched, and my entire body bristles with sheer fury. I allow my eyes to drift down his body, ambling back up to his face with a curl of my lip, showing him the true level of my disgust. “You’re a monster.”

Matt smiles boyishly, the familiar sight making my chest ache. “I’ll be *your* monster if it means keeping you with me.”

I shake my head with furrowed brows. “I’m not—”

“Shut up!” Marcus suddenly raises a quelling arm, whispering hurriedly, “There’s someone in my room. I’ll be back.”

He pads toward another mostly hidden doorway, clearly leading to his room, with his gun cocked, walking straight into

the fist of Detective Fratelli when he enters the library.

As Marcus stumbles back, Matt swears loudly, pointing his gun at the kind detective, who instantly raises his hands. “Don’t shoot.”

Matt pops off a shot, and I scream when it hits him square in the chest, sending him hurtling backward, and he lands on the ground with a resounding thud.

I begin to rush to his side, when Matt barks at me, “*Don’t* move, Neve.”

Marcus scrambles to stand, blood streaming from his nose, and Matt calmly murmurs, “Check his pulse. Put another one in him if you need to.”

With a nod, Marcus moves to do his bidding, when there’s a familiar growl at my rear.

“Put down your fucking weapons, or I won’t hesitate to kill you both.”

Relief fills my chest as I spin around, my eyes instantly filling with tears when I find Vaughn’s huge frame filling Matt’s bedroom door.

“*Vaughn.*”

One word, simply his name, but it’s filled with every single emotion that’s streaming through my veins. Filled with a plea and a prayer. Filled with undeniable, soul-shattering love.

His eyes flick to me, his gun still trained on the Porters, as he quickly checks me over, making sure I’m still in one piece before he glares back at his quarry.

“Every law enforcement officer in the New York State area is about to descend on this island within the next thirty minutes.” His voice is steel, his tone even as he addresses the men opposite us calmly and directly. “It’s your choice how you want to play this.”

Marcus lifts his gun, aiming it at Vaughn with a devil-may-care look. “You’re full of shit.”

“Not the first time I’ve faced that accusation, but in actual fact, this time, I’m *not* full of shit.”

Marcus bursts into hysterical laughter that makes even Matt frown before hissing at his brother, “Quit it, Marc. You look certifiable.”

Suddenly, Marcus stops, his laughter falling from his face as he lifts his gun, takes aim at Vaughn, and pulls the trigger.

Vaughn realizes a second before the bullet slams into his side and manages to pop off an answering shot that hits Marcus in the upper arm.

Both men grunt from the force of the bullets that have pierced their skin, and I cry out for Vaughn as he falls to his knees. His gun flies from his grasp, and he presses a hand already bright red with his own blood over the wound.

Before I can run to him, Matt grabs me around the waist, pulling me back, kicking and screaming as Vaughn growls, “Don’t you touch her, or I’ll kill you with my bare fucking hands, Porter.”

Matt just smirks, forcibly throwing me toward his paler-than-usual brother. “Hold her, Marc, while I finish the job.”

Despite his wound, Marcus holds me firmly enough that I can’t get away, and I start to cry as Matt looms over Vaughn.

“Please, Matty. *Please*. Don’t do this.”

His smile is manic as he brandishes the gun in Vaughn’s unflappable face. “Say goodbye.”

Vaughn’s eyes swing to mine, giving me strength despite the horror of our situation.

“Help is on the way, little bird. Don’t despair.” His midnight eyes fill with an unfathomable intensity before his whisper lands on my ears.

“I love you, Wren Caputo. I’ll love you through a million lifetimes. This isn’t the end for us. I *promise*.”

My breath catches on a sob that wracks through my entire body, and as Matt levels the gun directly at Vaughn, my voice

fills the space.

“Please, don’t...don’t take him from me.”

Blood thunders through my ears as I jerk from Marcus’s loosened hold, screaming at the top of my lungs, “I’m carrying his child.”

CHAPTER 39



WREN

Vaughn's eyes hold mine for a long beat, something silent but palpable passing between us, before his face darkens intently.

Matt loosens expletive after expletive as he rakes a hand through his hair, and it's a pasty Marcus who breaks his brother's rant when he chuckles.

"See where your patience got you, bro—"

My eyes blow wide when Matt spins to face his brother, levels the gun at him, and pulls the trigger without so much as a second thought.

"Fuck yourself, Marc."

His face is frozen in horror when the bullet hits him unerringly between his eyes, and I scream as the spatter coats my left side, scrambling away when Marcus's dead body falls forward with a thud.

"You never could just *shut up*."

Matt waves his hands manically as he shouts before he silently stares at his brother for a beat. Then he looks up at me with utterly wild eyes, regarding me for long moments. His navy-blue gaze deepens further as the seconds tick past until he explodes into a flurry of motion.

"You had to go and fucking ruin it all, didn't you, Neve!"

He sweeps the contents of each shelf onto the floor. Every single thing in the room lands on the growing pile surrounding us, and I look to Vaughn for reassurance to find his eyes

moving from the still body of my mother to the equally still one of Detective Fratelli.

“Prince Charming and Snow White were never destined to be ripped apart by an outsider like this *motherfucker!*”

At that last bellowed expletive, he begins to tear the portraits of his family members from the walls, the lamps beneath them smashing all over the books on the floor, and a shiver races up my spine.

“Matt...”

He freezes, whirring to meet my eyes, closing the gap between us to pull me against him. All vestiges of *my* Matty have been drained away, and I’m chilled to the core when he pulls a lighter from his pants pocket.

“If I can’t have you...”

He flicks his thumb, and a flame dances to life as I choke out a whisper. “Matty, *please...*”

His grin is a sick parody of the man I thought he was when he drops the lighter as though in slow motion. “Then no one can.”

VAUGHN

I’m carrying his child. I’m carrying his child. I’m carrying his child.

Wren’s words go around and around inside my head as my heart swells to bursting. Her gaze buoys me, sending me strength, lending me hers.

Lending me our child’s.

Our child.

I swallow a lump of desperate emotion, and it’s all I can do to bide my time, waiting for the moment to take this lunatic out.

As he destroys the library, I reach toward my ankle with the hand *not* staunching the wound in my side to achingly slowly draw out the firearm concealed there.

It's almost within my reach when Matt really goes to town, smashing the pictures and lamps adorning the walls.

But I freeze when he draws out a lighter, realizing belatedly that those lamps look like old-style kerosene lamps and are surely full of flammable liquid.

He yanks Wren to him as he holds the lighter up high. "If I can't have you..."

With a flick, the flame shimmers on the tip of the lighter, and he smiles as he lets it go. "Then no one can."

The lighter falls down, down, down, landing on a stack of kerosene-soaked books, and the room is instantly aflame. Fire travels from stack to stack, filling the space faster than I'd have thought possible.

All the while, Matt stares at Wren as she thrashes, trying desperately to get out of his hold. I pull the gun the rest of the way out of its holster, pushing myself to stand despite the burning pain in my side where Marcus's bullet entered my body.

"Let her go, Porter."

Matt freezes when he sees my gun, and Wren uses that moment to reach into his waistband and grab his own gun.

He roars at her as she makes to run toward me, only for Matt to yank her hair back, holding her in place. Using her as a shield.

Rather than let him regain control of his gun, she flings it away into the corner of the burning room, and Matt loosens a growl of displeasure before staring me down.

"You can't have her."

I grit my teeth, sweat from the rising room temperature dotting my brow as I weigh my options quickly. I immediately know that I can't attempt a shot. Not when Wren could get hurt.

“Please, Matt, we’ll all leave together. We can make this right—*ouch*.”

She cries out when he increases his grip on her hair, pulling her back against his chest even closer and hissing, “You fucking *ruined* it. You ruined everything. *You* did this, Wren. You let him put a *bastard* in your belly—”

I fire off a warning shot, rapidly reaching the end of my rope. “I’m giving you one last chance before I put a bullet in you. Let. Her. Go.”

Matt opens his mouth to answer, but before he can say anything, Jo’s fist connects with the side of his head, sending him sprawling across the floor where he lies motionless.

“Took you long enough.” Wren hurtles across the room, carefully tucking her small form in against my non-injured side, and I press a soft kiss to her brow as relief fills me.

Jo shrugs as he rubs his chest, where the bullet hit his vest, before his keen eyes assess the situation and the encroaching flames. “I think it’s past time we made our exit.” Then he steps around us, plucking Sara from the floor as though she weighs nothing.

“Where’s Matt?”

Wren’s voice trembles as she peers into the flame-filled room, and I clench my jaw in frustration.

“He’s gone.” Her face pales as I spear Jo with a glare. “We don’t have time to look for him. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Wren sticks to my side as we make our way through the house and out the main door to find Elliott bound with cable ties, while Ford attempts to suture a bullet wound on his own side.

“Where are my boys?” Elliott seethes as sweat, blood, and dirt mix on his heavily furrowed brow. “Give me my sons—”

Ford brings his elbow down behind Elliott’s ear, and the bound man slumps forward heavily. “Doesn’t matter how many times I put him to sleep, the fucker won’t stop waking up.”

Jo softly lays Sara on the grass, and Wren kneels alongside her mother, checking her over with a grateful smile. The sound of an incoming chopper lightens the anxiety in my chest, and I press my hand more harshly over my wound, grateful that help is at hand.

I heave a sigh, staring up at the glass windows of the library as the fire begins to spread to the rest of the house, the devil in me hoping that Matt didn't make it out.

And as though my thoughts manifested him, Matt's roar pierces the air behind us.

"She'll never be yours."

I swing around, my body breaking out in a cold sweat, when I find he's aiming his gun straight at Wren. Before anyone can react, he squeezes the trigger, and I explode into motion, throwing myself in front of her.

The bullet pierces my side in almost the same spot as Marcus's did, and I fall to the ground as Jo races toward Matt. He avoids a shot before he pulls the gun from the madman's grasp and rams the butt into his face.

Wren's scream pierces the air as she scrambles toward me, hovering over me to press her hand over both wounds. I glance down, vaguely noting the fresh, sticky, red blood that already coats her delicate fingers.

She increases the pressure, and I hear Ford murmuring in the background, his voice as panicked as I've ever heard.

I raise my hand to Wren's cheek, my lips attempting to lift in a smile as I take a moment to truly appreciate the masterpiece before me.

"Help is on the way, Vaughn. Stay with me."

Wren's voice is trembling, and fat tears fill those stunning gray eyes as I continue to soak in her beauty. As though I can bottle it and take it with me when I go.

I swallow roughly, working my throat muscles as my thumb brushes a tear from her bottom lashes.

“I’ve heard—” My throat constricts, and I cough, the action sending pain lancing through my entire torso before I try again. “I’ve heard that at the end, you will see the person you *wanted* to be...the person you thought you *could* have been—”

“*Hush*, don’t say things like that.” Her tears are flowing in earnest now, and I place my free hand over hers where she’s attempting to stem the blood flow.

“I see that man when I look into your eyes, Wren Caputo. The man your eyes reflect has always made me feel that maybe, *just maybe*, I could rack up enough decency to be deserving of you.”

Her bottom lip trembles as she swallows her emotion, and I dust my thumb over and back across it. “You make me feel that I might just leave this world a little better than I found it.”

My hand drops down to her stomach, and a low, keening cry leaves her mouth as her head falls forward. “You can’t leave me. You can’t leave *us*. Fight it. Fight to stay with us, Vaughn.”

My lips tremble with the force of choking out the words. “You’re the air in my lungs. You live in every beat of my heart. Before you, there was only darkness, little bird. You—you’re the stars when I’ve been living in perpetual night...”

The edges of my vision begin to blur as a flurry of activity erupts around me, but I feel like I’m watching it all from above.

A plethora of emergency responders swarm the scene. Mixed among them are the crooks from South Brook P.D., the tide instantly changing when Jo informs the State authorities what’s been happening in this sleepy Long Island town.

Jules has arrived. My heart rejoices when I see he’s cradling a sobbing Wren against the side of his large bulk as Ford helps Sara get the help she needs. All while paramedics work on my limp body until blissful darkness pulls me under, and everything stops.

CHAPTER 40



VAUGHN

The Gothic gates of Woodbury stand tall as I pass through them. The sun is shining overhead, and birdsong floats on the barest breeze as it gently rustles through the tall sugar maple trees dotted throughout the cemetery.

My feet slowly amble toward the final resting place of my best friend, my brows tugging together when I find that I'm not his only visitor.

A lone figure, broad-backed in a white shirt paired with khaki slacks, stands by the graveside, head bowed low as I close the space.

I'm almost at my destination when the stranger looks up, and my feet plant themselves on the ground.

"Lorenzo?"

My friend's mouth lifts in a bright smile as he spreads his arms wide. "Get over here."

I stride forward, pulling him into my embrace as a mixture of shock and delight flows through my veins.

"Am I dead?"

Renzo pulls back, a deprecating grin on his face as he chuckles. "Unless you believe in the afterlife, then this must be a dream, right?"

I nod as a frown grows on my face. Wren's face appears at the forefront of my vision, her cries echoing in my ears, and the longing to comfort her is entirely overwhelming.

“How the fuck do I wake up, then?”

My friend shrugs. “You’re undergoing surgery, so...I reckon right now would not be the best time.”

I scrub my palms down my face, my stomach suddenly flip-flopping as realization strikes.

“Will I live? Through the surgery, I mean.”

Renzo flattens his lips, his eyes boring into mine. “That’s up to you. Do you want to live?”

“Yes, I want to live. I need to live. I can’t leave...not now.”

I pace back and forth, willing myself to awareness.

Wake up, Burton. Wake the fuck up. Wake up now.

Then I pinch myself. Slap my cheeks. Blink rapidly, but I’m still faced with the sugar maples twitching gently in the breeze.

I spin around, finding Lorenzo’s eyes on my movements, his arms crossed over his chest.

“So, you want to live now after spending the last twenty years barely surviving, is that it? Because it’s a fucking insult that you’ve chosen to float through life when there are others...” He trails off, clearing his throat pointedly as he jams his thumb to his chest. “Others who would have lived to the fullest if they’d been given half the chance.”

“I’m sorry—”

“For what? Wasting the last twenty years?”

I expel a heavy sigh as he cocks his head to one side. “Or could it be for banging my daughter?”

His eyes are accusatory, and despite the fact that his words should make me feel guilty, all I can feel is a rising anger of my own.

“I’m not at all sorry for falling for Wren.” I stand taller, utterly unapologetic for my actions. “I’ll never be sorry for taking her for myself.”

Then I step closer, reaching out to clench the material of Lorenzo’s white shirt in my fist.

“And I won’t give her up. She’s the one good thing in my life, and I’d have continued to waste decades waiting for her to come into my world because she’s worth waiting for. She’s everything.”

“And don’t you ever forget it.” My friend’s eyes gleam with approval. “Live for both of us, my friend. No regrets. Remember: you only get one chance at life.”

Then he rears back, his fist driving forward to connect with my jaw, and everything goes black.

“They said he should wake any time now, Mom, so I’m *not* going anywhere.”

The determined voice of the inimitable Wren Caputo pulls me from the darkness, and my eyelids flicker as the natural light streaming into the room makes opening them harder than it should be.

“I’m not saying you need to leave the floor, my love. Just stretch your legs. It’s not good to be in the same position for too long.”

Sara’s soft voice is pleading, filled with the need to ensure her daughter’s well-being, and Wren surely hears it too.

“I’ll grab a water from the vending machine, and then I’ll be right back. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it. Grab me one, too, please.”

Wren sighs heavily, and I can feel her unfurl her lithe body from where she’s been pressed against my side. My body immediately feels the loss as she pads toward the doorway.

The door of the room closes with a soft *snick*, and it’s Sara’s turn to sigh.

“She’s a lot more headstrong than she was before meeting you. That’s for damn sure.”

My left eye opens a crack, observing Sara as she folds her arms. “I presume that’s *your* influence.”

I attempt to shrug but stop when my entire body rebels, pain seizing me harshly.

“Be careful, V. You literally just used your body as a human shield.” She quirks a brow. “One of the only reasons I’m not kicking your ass here and now.”

“Sara, I—”

She holds up her hand, halting my words. “I don’t have to like it, but you clearly love my daughter. And knowing what it’s like to live without the one you love...”

I swallow roughly when she trails off, a devastating sadness haunting her features before she squares her slim shoulders, her eyes snapping back to mine.

“I would never take away her happiness. But know this.” Her eyes narrow, and her tone drops half an octave. “If you hurt her, I *will* kill you while you sleep.”

And though both women look nothing alike, in that moment, I can see an uncanny resemblance that almost makes me smile. Thinking better of it, I slowly nod my acknowledgment.

“Your daughter owns me, Sara. I’d die before I’d see harm come to her, least of all from my hand.”

Sara’s face softens, and a silent understanding passes between us before the room door opens. “They only had sparkling...”

Wren’s eyes fill with tears when they land on me as she trails off. The bottled water in her arms drops to the floor, the plastic bottles bouncing as my name leaves her mouth on an exhalation.

“*Vaughn.*”

I pat my chest with the tips of my fingers before opening my arms, and she flies across the floor, gently sliding into my embrace, resting her head over my heart. I hold her as tightly

as my wounds will allow before she angles her face up to mine.

The door closes softly as Sara takes her leave, and Wren's eyes fill with tears. "I thought you were dead. You *should* be dead. Your surgeons said it's a miracle..."

She trails off as emotion clogs her throat, and I gently rub her back as I press a kiss to her brow. "I told you before, little bird. Not even the hounds of hell could take me from you."

I pull back, my eyes piercing her with an intensity that physically hurts me.

"When you first came into my life, I tried to keep you at an arm's length despite the instant pull I felt toward you. You weren't just *made* for me, Wren Caputo. We were made to be soulmates, destined for one another long before either of us came into being. And I'm sorry it's taken all this time for my head to catch up to what my heart knew the moment it felt your presence."

Her lips turn upward, even as a small sob tumbles from her lips. Two fat tears crest her long dark lashes, spilling down her emotion-stained cheeks as she closes the gap to brush her lips over mine. A fleeting kiss.

A kiss filled with promise.

"I love you, Vaughn Burton."

Her words dance over my lips, and I smile into gray eyes that mirror mine in their fervor. "Love is too small a word to encompass how I feel for you, Wren Caputo."

Her smile grows as I press our brows together, whispering softly, "But it's a starting point. And we have forever to make it count."

"We do now."

I frown slightly, pulling back enough to find her eyes with mine. "What happened after I passed out?"

She blows out a heavy breath. "Ford is helping Detective Fratelli to deal with everything relating to the South Brook police department. There's going to be a *huge* investigation."

I nod at that, glad to see that Jo is finally making that change he'd spoken of wanting before Wren continues softly.

“Elliott and Matt are looking at spending the rest of their lives behind bars.” Her eyes cloud over, and my chest tightens at seeing her in such open pain. “Delilah Porter’s body was found in the back office of Zephyr. Foul play is evident, but neither of them are saying a thing.”

“I’m sorry, Wren. I know you looked up to her.”

She blinks before shaking her head, a frown marring her features. “I just can’t believe I never really knew *any* of them. I think that’s the scariest part.”

Then she half snorts, half sobs, as her eyes flicker between mine. “Well, that and the fact that you took a bullet to save my life.”

I gently cup her cheek in my hand, tracing the pad of my thumb across her delicate skin. “You saved my life long before I saved yours.”

The irises of her eyes sparkle like stars as I stare deeply into them, willing her to feel the honest truth in my words.

Because she *did* save me in all the ways that make a life worth saving. Worth *living*.

“Besides, life wouldn’t be worth living without you, little bird. It’s as simple as that.”

Wren’s smirk is dubious as she gives a wry shake of her head. “You’re clearly *crazy*.”

One side of my mouth tugs upward. “Crazy for you, beautiful girl.”

Her smile lights up the room, and I’m grateful to have distracted her when she pulls back and palms her forehead. “Did that bullet do something to your brain too, because that was next-level cheese.”

My smile grows as I wink. “What can I say? Life’s just so *gouda* with you.”

She chuckles lowly, quirking a playful brow. “And it always will *brie*.”

I wince as I stifle a bark of laughter, pain ricocheting through my torso, and Wren sits up straight, smoothing her hands across my chest. “Don’t overdo it, Vaughn.”

Her lip twitches suspiciously before she tugs it into her mouth, suppressing a naughty grin. “You’ve got to take it *cheesy*.”

My nostrils flare as I quash a chuckle. “At least until I get *feta*, right?”

I follow it up with a wide yawn that makes me wince, and Wren smooths her hand across my brow with an amused huff. My eyes feel more than a little heavy as she continues to hold my gaze, fingers threading through my mussed-up hair.

“You need to rest now. I’ll be here while you sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

She slowly brings her mouth to my ear, whispering across the shell words I’ve spoken to her in the past. “*You’re safe with me.*”

A sense of completeness fills my chest as the need for rest overtakes me. I feel as though, in this moment, our roles have changed, and I wilfully fall headlong into a healing sleep, safe and whole at last in the arms of the woman I love.

CHAPTER 41



WREN

TWO YEARS LATER

“Are you sure you’ve got her paci in there?”

Mom swats my hand away from Alessia’s diaper bag. “I’ve got spares, my love. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

I expel a heavy breath as my mother watches me with a patient smile. “I’ve never been away from her overnight, that’s all.”

Sia will be spending the night with her adoring nonna, who helps out most days if I’m painting and Vaughn is needed at Rogue for something or other. But this will be the first time one of her parents won’t be within an arm’s reach, and the thought makes anxiety churn in the pit of my stomach.

Mom cups my cheeks in her hands, focusing on me with kind eyes that make my heart lighter. “Every step toward letting your daughter become her own person is hard, but it’s a thing of beauty when you see her spread her wings and *fly*.”

My bottom lip trembles, knowing she’s referring to our own mother-daughter relationship as much as mine and Sia’s, and when she pulls me into a gentle embrace, I slam my eyes shut against the sudden onset of tears.

“Thank you, Mom.”

We stand for long minutes, relishing the closeness, until a cry over the baby monitor alerts us to the fact that my sixteen-month-old daughter’s nap is apparently over.

At the exact same time, a key rattles in the front door, and butterflies replace the knot of anxiety in my stomach, knowing Vaughn is finally home after a long week of giving testimony at the trial of Nolan Fritz.

Unbeknown to everyone, Vaughn had come up with a plan to see Fritz not only pay for my father’s murder, but also face trial for the wrongs he’d committed against hordes of women he’d used one way or another over the last two decades.

Jo Fratelli had a contact who'd been able to set the ball in motion for Vaughn to receive total immunity in exchange for his testimony and all the meticulous records he'd kept for over twenty years in *Ravish*.

His case was also being linked to several other missing persons cases, and it was looking promising that karma would extract at least *some* vengeance for us.

The trial set in motion by Vaughn and Jo had ended earlier today after close to a month of no contact, and now we wait for the jury to debate. In the meantime, Vaughn is finally home, and his proximity makes my heart sing.

"I'll grab little Miss Sia." Mom shoots me a wink as she moves down the hall, calling out as she ascends the stairs.

"Nonna's coming, my sweet girl."

I'm smiling after them when Vaughn rounds the corner into the kitchen, and he stops, dropping his bags to the tiled floor beneath his feet as he inhales deeply.

"Oh *fuck*, I've missed that smell."

My brows crease when I walk toward him, my feet moving closer as though magnetized by his sheer presence. "I've not been cooking. Not that you'd like the smell if I tried..."

His arms go around my waist, and he buries his face in my hair as he breathes in. "Your smell, little bird. I've missed that citrusy sunshine fragrance that soothes my soul and calms my demons."

Then he pulls back to tip my chin up, his eyes raking across my face, drinking me in like a parched man before he presses his lips to mine. My arms go around his neck as my breasts are crushed against his chest, and he groans hungrily when I immediately deepen the kiss, needing more from him.

His mouth leaves mine, and I gasp as he trails kisses down my neck, nipping my collarbone as his hands grip my ass. He tugs me closer against him, and I softly whimper, "Stop, Vaughn. I'm already entirely intoxicated by a simple kiss."

He stands tall with a dimpled, devilish smile that I feel all the way down to my toes. “You’ll be near comatose by the time I’m through with you tonight, my Wren.”

I arch a brow and step out of his hold with a taunting wink. “Old men like you are all talk, Mr. Burton.”

Laughter dances on his face when he snakes out a hand to grab me, but I sidestep him with a snort to stride briskly toward the stairs. I jolt when his palm wraps around my neck, twisting me around to pin me against the wall.

My entire body lights up as fire builds in my lower stomach when those midnight eyes I adore beyond all reasoning stare down into mine, the intensity within them sending a tingle up along my spine.

He slowly moves toward me, his lips close enough to taste when he breathes softly, his words an exhalation into my mouth.

“We’ll see if your opinion changes tonight, because I’m going to edge you *all* fucking night. Until you’re crying to come, pleading for release, and I *still* won’t let you have it.”

I inhale sharply, and his eyes flare as his lips twitch with a wicked grin. “I want to see you on your hands and knees, little bird. Crawling to me, begging me to pound your sweet pussy. Oblivious to everything but the need to come however I’ll let you. On my fingers.”

He tightens his hold on my neck as he dips his free hand down to cup my pussy through my leggings.

“On my tongue.”

Then he draws the tip of his tongue along the seam of mine, plunging inside when I gasp audibly, my eyelids struggling not to close against the seduction of his filthy fucking mouth.

His tongue wars with mine, working me into a frenzy as I squirm against him. Until he tears himself away, his chest rising and falling as fast as my own, and both of his hands move to grasp my hips, pulling me firmly against him.

“Only then, beautiful girl...*then* when you’re right where I want you, your pussy dripping, your body *aching* for me, only *then* will I let you have my cock.”

He grinds his pelvis against me, his brow pressed to mine, and I’m already so turned on that I’m a sweaty mess, panting for air. Desperate for all the nasty promises he’s making.

“And then, I’m gonna fuck you. Hard and deep, fast and slow. Soft and rough, and every damn way I want to until you come apart on my dick, screaming my name as you pass out in sweet exhaustion.”

The blood running through my veins turns molten as his eyes flicker between mine, and I revel in this man. In how he utterly consumes me. How he owns me and always will until a small voice echoes around us.

“*Dada!*”

Vaughn presses a kiss to my brow before surreptitiously adjusting himself and spinning to face my very much unimpressed mother, who’s holding our bright, smiling toddler.

Alessia squirms to get down, and Mom obliges with an indulging smile.

Vaughn drops down to his knees, opening his arms to watch our daughter rush across the space, throwing herself into his embrace. He scoops her up, holding her tight to his chest as he buries his face in her halo of light brown curls. “Princess, I missed you.”

She giggles contently, her small fists wrapped tightly around her father’s neck, and the sight does things to my already rioting insides. The sight of Vaughn Burton brought to his knees and transformed from a filthy-talking deviant into a puddle of love is something I’ll never get over.

“I missed you, my sweet girl.”

Sia sits back, pressing her palms flat against Vaughn’s heavily stubbled cheeks. “Lub Dada.”

Midnight eyes identical to her father's sparkle and shine as Vaughn smiles broadly, then proceeds to pepper kisses all over her chubby cheeks. Sia's infectious belly laugh brings the house to life around us, and I know I would never, in my wildest dreams, have expected my life to go the way it has.

And I'd never wish for it to be any other way.

Vaughn's cell sounds in his back pocket, and I reach my hand inside to slip it out as he grins wryly, murmuring for my ears only, "If you wanted to touch, you could have just asked."

I drop the chiming cell into his waiting hand with a shake of my head. His demeanor changes instantly, noting it's a video call from Jo, who'd chosen to remain behind to wait for the jury to reach their verdict.

Vaughn's forehead is puckered when his eyes find mine, and together, we look at my hand-wringing mother. Her face is pale as she swallows harshly before nodding. "Answer it."

He does as he's bid, and Mom and I ease down onto the hardwood floor beneath our feet alongside Vaughn and a still-squirming Sia. I pluck our daughter from his lap as Mom passes Sia her comforter, distracting her enough to allow Vaughn to answer the call.

He blows out a breath before swiping to answer. "Hey, Jo."

Jo's face fills the screen, but the loud courtroom at his back almost drowns out the sound of his voice. "Can you hear me, V?"

Vaughn nods. "Yeah, what's going on? Have the jury come back already?"

"Fuck yeah, they have." Jo's smile is pearly white and utterly shit-eating. "The bastard got life without parole."

Mom's gasp fills the entire space, and tears I didn't realize I was withholding stream down my cheeks unchecked.

Vaughn gathers Sia and me close, and I take the cell from his other hand so he can tug Mom against his other side, offering her comfort as she sobs quietly. "For you, Renzo."

Emotion washes over me like waves as Jo relays the jury's unanimous decision, and by the time he's signing off, I've begun to rally somewhat.

Mom is the first on her feet, picking some non-existent lint from her pants. "You two go ahead and do your celebrating." She reaches for Sia with a soft smile. "I have a date with my sweet girl."

As she plucks my daughter from my arms, she looks down at both me and Vaughn with a grateful smile. "Thank you for helping me finally live again."

Then she sets Sia down on the floor, moving toward the kitchen. "How about waffles for dinner?"

Sia blabbers nonsensically as they round the corner when Vaughn pulls me against his side with red-rimmed eyes. "I can't believe we pulled it off."

I slide my arms around his waist, smiling up into those eyes that truly *see* me.

"*You* pulled it off, Vaughn. You made sure he paid the highest price he could. You've helped to give *so* many people closure by taking a stand for what's right."

"It took me fucking long enough."

"You tried to straddle that fence between right and wrong for *years*. For two decades, for crying out loud."

I straighten myself, bringing our faces level to cup his face in my palms. "You're a good man who was faced with limited choices, none of which were good. By opening *Ravish* and enforcing strict rules to protect those women as much as you could, you did the best you could do with the limited options you had. Our *circumstances* don't define us. Our *actions* do."

He shakes his head as his face flushes with emotion before sliding his palm around the nape of my neck to draw me closer for a soft kiss.

Then he pulls back enough to whisper against my lips, "Come with me, little bird. I have something for you."

CHAPTER 42



WREN

Once I've hugged Jules and Kendra, the co-managers of Rogue—who think they're keeping their relationship a secret, but really couldn't be more obvious—Vaughn takes my hand in his and tugs me from the staff quarters, down the hall toward the elevator.

“When you said you had a surprise for me, I wasn't expecting a return to the place where it all began.”

The doors of the elevator open, and Vaughn places his palm at the base of my spine, urging me to step on.

“It felt like the right place to be.”

His voice is low, and I look up to find him watching me intently as the elevator begins to move. “And besides, coming here isn't your surprise.”

He slowly reaches out to trace his finger along my jawline, and he shakes his head with a wrinkled brow.

“Christ, Wren. You're absolutely fucking flawless.” Then he brushes his lips across mine, and my chest fills with emotion, feeling the adoration of his words.

The doors open, admitting us to the quiet of the apartment where we fell in love, and I slide in against his side, hugging him around the waist as I close my eyes, inhaling his addictive bergamot scent.

That smell, this apartment, the feel of Vaughn's body against mine; everything takes me back in time as visions of

pudding-covered stockings and blue-streaked legs make me smile.

“Come on.” Vaughn strides forward, taking me with him, and I open my eyes to spot two wrapped packages in unmistakable Luciano’s wrapping.

I’m suddenly ravenous. “Did you get *subs* for dinner?”

He passes me one with a wry grin. “When we’re in the neighborhood, I think it’s important to support local businesses.”

My mouth lifts in an enormous grin. “You don’t ever need an excuse for one of these bad boys.” I tear the wrapping off, inhaling the mouthwatering smell of the marinara sauce when it hits my nostrils before taking a huge bite.

“*Shit!*” I speak around my mouthful of sub as Vaughn watches me with laughter in his eyes. “I’ve missed living here.”

We’d moved to Vaughn’s mostly unused house in Lenox Hill shortly before Alessia’s birth, knowing Rogue was no place to rear a child, but the bones of our relationship will forever remain inside these walls.

Vaughn opens his sub at a more sedate pace, and he chuckles, watching me scarf mine down as though I’ve never eaten in my life. My face is a mess, my clothes are spattered with sauce, and it’s with a full belly that I flop onto the couch, waiting for Vaughn to finish his food.

“Want to...” I trail off as I pop a devilish brow and shoot him a wink, filling my next words with innuendo. “Netflix and chill?”

He snorts before he swallows his mouthful of sub and points toward the studio door that used to be my closet of sorts. “I’ve actually set up a screen through there.”

Then he grins in self-satisfaction. “Picked a good movie, too.”

Curiosity sufficiently piqued, I stand and hurry toward the room. My mouth drops when I open the door to find an

enormous floor-to-ceiling screen on my right and an oversized loveseat scattered with cushions on my left.

I pivot to find Vaughn smirking as he raises a remote control, pointing it at the screen before shifting his gaze to mine. He arches a smug brow. “You’re welcome.”

Then, the quiet, hauntingly familiar opening scene of Pan’s Labyrinth begins to play behind me, and my eyes blow wide with surprised delight as Vaughn closes the distance between us, looping his arm over my shoulder to steer me toward the loveseat.

“Come on, beautiful girl. Time to educate me on the pros of subtitled movies.”

By the time the credits roll, Vaughn is just as enraptured in the story of Ofelia and the faun as I am every time I watch, and he flops back onto the seat beside me with wonder on his face.

“That was...” He trails off with a shake of his head. “There are no words.”

I lean closer, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “And very fitting with the outcome of today’s verdict, too.”

His brows crease. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, Ofelia’s sacrifice is rewarded, whereas her stepfather’s oppression is punished. Similar to Fritz getting his karma, you’re free to live as you wish, having taken a stand...”

I trail off, suddenly self-conscious, as Vaughn continues to stare at me until he cups my cheeks, his eyes darkening with emotion. “*Fuck*, I will never stop falling in love with you. Ever.”

He leans closer, brushing his lips across mine in a silent promise that sends a thrill through me before resting his brow against mine. “It’s always been you. You, and *only* you, Wren Caputo. I’m forever yours.”

Silence surrounds us as the movie credits come to an end, and for long moments, we don’t move. We soak up one

another's presence until Vaughn sits back and stands with his hand outstretched.

"Come on." Mischief twinkles in his dark gaze. "You have yet to receive your surprise."

I slip my hand into his and jump to my feet, anticipation flowing through me. "Don't leave a girl hanging. Where is it?"

He chuckles at my impatience, a dimpled smile growing on his handsome face. "I'll grab it if you want to freshen up."

I'm out the door before he's finished speaking, almost sprinting down the hall as his laughter chases me all the way to the closed door of our old bedroom.

As my hand twists the knob, I glance down at my saucerspattered top, having a lightbulb moment when I remember I'd left some naughty negligee in the closet of the guest bedroom.

Dropping my hand, I cross the hall and quickly rush to the dresser, my feet grinding to a halt when I spot the absolutely gigantic shiny black butt plug sitting atop it.

My jaw unhinges as I distantly register noise behind me.

"Please don't tell me *that* is my surprise." Slowly, I twist about to find Vaughn standing in the doorway. "Because it's going nowhere *near* my ass."

His eyes move past me, and his face scrunches up comically as he scratches his temple. "I guess that's confirmation that Jules and Kendra are getting serious."

Then he extends his hand, and I walk closer to take it, grateful to be leaving King Kong behind on the dresser. He chuckles as he closes the guest bedroom door. "Jules stays here some nights. He's the only person with access besides Jo, and we both know he's celibate, hoping your mother will eventually give in to his persistence—"

"She's being an idiot."

Vaughn shrugs. "She's being cautious, and who could blame her?"

We stop outside of our room door, my sigh filling the space. “I guess.”

Then I glance back at the guest room, my lip curling up. “And tell Jules that *Kong* over there needs to exit the building.” I shiver exaggeratedly, and Vaughn grins. “Poor Kendra. I got weak at the knees at the mere sight of that thing, and *not* in a good way.”

Vaughn’s deep chuckle stokes my own humor, and my lips twitch despite myself as I open the door, only for my heart to falter beneath my breastbone at what greets me.

Fairy lights twinkle, illuminating the room, highlighting the white and lilac rose petals that are strewn across the floor and the black satin sheets on the bed.

I dimly register “What Have I Done” by Dermot Kennedy playing softly as I step over the threshold, taking a beat to note the framed images that line one wall like a collage.

Every photo is of us.

Vaughn palming my swollen belly before I’d been brought for my c-section.

My first time holding Alessia, with Vaughn smiling over us both.

This past summer, on our family trip to Italy, when we were swimming in the turquoise waters of Lake Garda at Malcesine.

And last Halloween, when we’d been laughing uproariously at my Smurfette costume.

My lips are curved upward as I tap it. “This is one of my favorite memories.”

Then I turn to see Vaughn’s reaction to find him down on one knee, an unopened small navy box on his upturned palm.

He swallows harshly before blowing out a breath. His midnight eyes alone hold me up on legs suddenly made of jelly.

“I never wanted much in this life. My driving force was to extinguish all memory of my father. To make *my* mark. *My* legacy. Of being *better* than he was. And I thought it was enough...”

He trails off, shaking his head with a small smile. “It *was* enough. Until you came in here and blew my world to pieces when you set my motherfucking soul on fire. When you kick-started my heart back into existence with the force of your presence. And then there was something I wanted. Something I craved with a single-minded intensity that was the catalyst to changing my life. Something that shifted from a want to a *need* long before I realized it.”

His brow creases, his gaze deepening in potency as a single hoarse word falls from his lips. “You.”

The sound hangs between us as my heart gallops within my chest. His head tilts to one side, his brows knitted together, and the vulnerability in the action makes my stomach dip.

“I had no business wanting you. No intention of falling head over heels in love with you, yet here we are. My heart is so full of you, I couldn’t even call it mine anymore. You live within every beat of it, within every breath I inhale, within every thought, every single day.”

His head drops, and when he looks back up at me, his eyes are glistening with emotion. “Until retribution was had...until I could look into your eyes and finally *feel* like I deserve the love you so freely give to me, I couldn’t ask the question I’m about to ask you now.”

“*Oh my God.*”

He pops the lid on the box, and my gasp echoes between us when I see a stunning solitaire diamond ring nestled on a bed of navy velvet.

“Will you marry me, little bird? Will you be my wife?”

CHAPTER 43



VAUGHN

Wren's face splits in a bright smile before she launches herself at me, bumping the ring box onto the floor as she throws her arms around my neck. The force of her almost knocks me backward, and I enfold her in my arms, slamming my lips to hers.

“Yes.”

Kiss.

“Yes.”

Three more kisses.

“A million times yes, Vaughn Burton. I'll be your wife.”

She kisses me again, harder this time, and I pull her even closer against me, growling into her mouth before I deepen the kiss.

My tongue gliding across Wren's sends a shiver of desire through me, settling in my balls, and I break the kiss. “I need to feel you. I need to be inside you...”

She's nodding even as I lift her into my arms, walking us to the petal-strewn bed to gently deposit her on the soft sheets.

My fingers peel her clothes from her body until she's bared to my heated gaze, but when I put my hands on my belt, she stops me. “Let me do it.”

Her eyes don't leave mine as she undoes my belt and pulls my pants and Calvins down my legs, allowing them to pool at

my feet. My shirt follows, and she palms my tattooed chest almost reverently before smoothly dropping to her knees.

I shiver as she kisses first one thigh and then the other as one delicate hand encircles my thick length, pumping once, twice before taking me inside the heat of her mouth.

“Fuck.”

She works her mouth up and down, her tongue circling the head as my hand tangles in her long hair. I watch her work me over for long minutes, the sight turning me on even more, and I grit my teeth against the orgasm threatening to end things far too soon.

I pant almost desperately when her free hand reaches around to palm my ass, encouraging me to thrust my hips forward until she gags.

Then I hold myself in place, my deep groan filling the room as Wren whimpers. Her eyes are on mine as I withdraw, allowing her to take a deep breath before pumping forward again, and this time, she holds me in place.

“Shit, that’s it, little bird. That’s my good girl. Relax your throat, take me all the way.”

I stroke her jaw, withdrawing slightly, and she swallows around me, taking me deep inside her throat. Tears fill her eyes as I drop my head back with a hiss. *“So. Fucking. Tight.”*

I rip my saliva-drenched cock from her mouth with a low growl and pull Wren to her feet, pressing our chests together when I kiss her roughly. Our tongues spar for long minutes until she’s squirming against me, her nipples scraping off my chest, her low whimpers driving me higher.

I break our kiss, and she gasps, reaching for me with a low cry. *“More. Give me your mouth.”*

My lips twitch as I walk her backward until her ass hits the wall, then I fall to my knees, watching her with a hungry gaze. *“I’ll give you my mouth, alright.”*

I run my hand up one leg, my thumb skimming the apex of her thighs tauntingly before I grasp the back of her knee.

“Hook it over my shoulder.”

Her nostrils flare as she follows my instruction, laying herself open to me. I slip my middle finger through her slick pussy lips, passing over and back teasingly before taking her clit into my mouth.

She cries out when I flick my tongue over and back, sucking almost harshly until she’s grinding against my face. Then I use my free hand to palm her ass, lifting her other leg from the floor and placing it over my shoulder until she’s leveraged between the wall and my face.

I continue to worship her clit as two thick digits slide inside her tight cunt, and my cock throbs when the taste of her arousal coats my tongue. I groan deeply, spearing a third finger into her greedy little pussy as I nip her clit with my teeth, and she cries out, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Oh shit, I’m going to come.”

Her body trembles as I suck her clit hard, and her cunt clenches around my fingers when she rocks her hips, chasing the sweet ecstasy of the orgasm barreling through her sweat-slick body.

But I don’t give her a moment to recover. Instead, I unhook her trembling legs and rise to pluck her from the ground and carry her to the bed. I lay her down on her back, urging her over onto her stomach with her pert ass in the air.

I palm a cheek, brushing my thumb over her puckered asshole and sending a shudder through her before she looks back over her shoulder with questioning eyes.

“Kong *isn’t* going in there.”

I smirk, reaching for the nightstand to withdraw a bottle of lube and a much smaller butt plug. “Baby steps, my Wren.”

She arches her back in silent assent, moaning loudly when I uncap the lube and squirt it against her ass. I slide a hand around Wren’s thigh, strumming her clit with my thumb as I slide the fingers of my free hand through the lube. The tip of my middle finger slips inside, and she gasps at the invasion before I withdraw, sliding back inside slightly farther.

I keep it up, taunting her, building the sensations with my thumb on her pussy and my finger in her ass until she's rising to meet me. Then I straighten, cover the plug with a large squirt of lube, and draw the tip back and forth across her asshole.

"It might feel strange at first..."

Then I press it inside, pinching her clit between my thumb and forefinger as I press open-mouthed kisses along her lower back. She gasps audibly before a deep groan leaves her mouth, and her back arches, pushing her ass higher.

I rise to take in the sight of the bejewelled plug sitting deep inside my future wife's ass, and I palm my cock, jacking myself almost violently as she looks back at me, eyes hazy with pleasure.

"I like it." Then she bites her bottom lip. "But I'd love it with your cock inside my pussy, fucking me deep."

"Made for me, little bird. Fucking made for me."

And it's with that, I grip her hips and enter her roughly, driving all the way home on one deep thrust. Our moans of pleasure mingle as I begin to move, sweat beading on my brow as my climax builds.

She's moving back against me, meeting me thrust for thrust, and I'm so fucking close, so fucking close, so fucking close.

"Come *now*, beautiful girl." I flick the jewel of the plug, my balls drawing up, ready to fill her with my cum, and Wren cries out, shouting my name over and over as she comes on my dick.

I fill her to overflowing, my cum leaking out and onto the sheets beneath her as I finish with a roar.

She falls forward onto the bed, panting heavily as I pull myself from her soaked heat, my jaw ticking at the sight of our joint pleasure. "Let me clean you up."

I wet a towel with some warm water, and quickly clean my Wren's well-loved pussy before gently slipping the plug from

her ass.

“Ouch.”

I smirk as I wrap everything into the towel to be dealt with tomorrow before gathering her against me and snuggling under the sheets. “You weren’t saying that a few minutes ago.”

Her grin is self-deprecatory before she presses a soft kiss to my lips. “That’s true, but I’m adamant Vaughn.” She fixes me with a determinedly firm stare. “No Kongs in our future.”

I throw my head back and laugh, even as she shakes her head playfully. My eyes are filled with dark promise when they meet hers. “No Kongs, I agree. But my cock will soon be the one inside that tight hole, little bird.”

She chuckles, the sight making me grin. “You’re nothing if not determined. I’ll give you that, Mr. Burton.”

My smile grows, settling her more firmly against me as I nod my agreement. “When it’s something I want, I’m sure you know by now, I’m relentless, my soon-to-be Mrs. Burton.”

Her lips find mine as a contented sigh leaves her mouth.

My heart fills with overflowing love, a feeling I’d never expected to have and one I don’t ever want to live without as we kiss for a long time, eventually falling asleep wrapped up in one another.

Cocooned in our love for this night and all the nights to come.

EPILOGUE



WREN

ONE YEAR LATER

The waterside gazebo on the sprawling estate, just outside of Malcesine, that Vaughn had so extravagantly gifted to me as a wedding gift is wreathed in purple flowers that match the tie my groom had so graciously agreed to wear instead of his usual black-on-black.

I slip Vaughn's platinum band onto his ring finger, breathing deeply through my nose as the gathering of our loved ones smiles on.

My voice quivers when I speak, but I rapidly gain confidence seeing how Vaughn's eyes light up in pure joy at my softly spoken vows.

"I've heard it said that the heart knows when the search is over. The search to find its partner, to find its other half. But my heart never searched, never needed to seek for something it was missing because my heart was made to be wholly and entirely yours. And so, I carried it within me, ready...waiting to give it to you *completely* when the timing was right."

My eyes fill with tears as I take a deep, soothing breath, and Vaughn steps slightly closer, as though to shield me from the gazes of the gathered crowd. He palms my cheek, holding my eyes while lending me his silent strength, enough to get my next words out.

"And in giving you my heart, I've found myself in so many ways. My art. Our daughter. Our found family at Rogue and Haven. And that's because of you, Vaughn Burton. Because you're the best man I've ever known."

Vaughn inhales sharply, emotion shrouding us both as I press myself against him, holding his gaze, willing him to feel my truth.

"Loving you and receiving your love in return is a privilege that I will be forever grateful for. One I will never take for granted. *Ever*. And I can't wait to step into our next chapter by your side. As your wife."

Silence surrounds us for a long beat as the world fades into the background. Vaughn blinks heavily before pressing a kiss to my brow and then reaches between us to take my hands in his once again.

“And now, Vaughn,” the celebrant murmurs, her words breaking the spell around us. “If you’d like to recite your vows.”

My eyes lock onto Vaughn’s, finding him smiling softly as he slides a diamond-encrusted wedding band onto my ring finger. When he brushes the pad of his thumb over it, my heart swells in my chest, but when he speaks his vows, it stops entirely.

“This ring tells the world you’re my wife.” He stops, and his nostrils flare. And when he repeats those glorious words for my ears alone, his voice has dropped an octave. “You’re *my wife. My wife.*”

Those midnight eyes deepen in their intensity, flickering between mine as the meaning of his declaration floods my entire system with delight.

I lightly squeeze his hand, and his mouth lifts in a slow smile that awakens a myriad of butterflies within my abdomen.

“This ring is also a circle that, like my love for you, has no beginning...and no end. Let it be a reminder to you, each time you look at it, that I will love you more than anyone else could for every lifetime to come.”

A single tear streaks down my cheek, and Vaughn raises his hand to brush it away with his thumb before sliding his palm around the nape of my neck. He brings our brows together, his eyes speaking straight to my soul.

“Before you, I walked a dark path. Lost. Alone. Veiled in self-loathing. And when you appeared, I was scared. Afraid my demons would hurt you if I let you get too close. That you would be taken from me. That you’d see the truth and realize I was nothing but a monster. And so, I chased you away with hateful words and callous actions.”

His lips twitch. “But my Wren is persistent. Her light would not be dimmed. Her glow would not be diminished. My Wren knows her own mind, and once she’d decided that I was worth saving, she wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He chuckles lowly, mischief dancing in his eyes. “Not even turning her into Smurfette could dissuade her.”

Our loved ones laugh then, everyone having heard the stories of our prank war long before now, and Vaughn sobers.

“And save me, you did. Before I knew it, that lonely path was illuminated, and my lost soul found purpose once more. That endless night lit by a constellation of stars bearing your name.”

My breath hitches on a sob, and Vaughn swallows harshly, his next words husky with unconcealed emotion. “And it was in the presence of that guiding light I was able to find my way home to you, little bird. And there’s nowhere else I ever want to be.”

Silence radiates around us as I absorb the power of this man’s vows until Vaughn’s best man, Ford—standing beside my teary-eyed bridesmaid, Elodie—sighs heavily.

We whip our heads around to find him smirking before blessing himself as he deadpans, “With words like that, it’s safe to say Cactus is well and truly dead. May he rest in ornery peace.”

VAUGHN

The sun sparkles on the waters of Lake Garda at Wren’s back, but nothing shines so bright as the smile of my bride as she clinks her champagne flute against her mother’s.

Both women are laughing at something Jo has said, and he loops his arm around Sara’s waist, pulling her closer to press a kiss to her flushed cheek.

My wife of a mere three hours catches my eyes, and a myriad of emotions flow wordlessly between us.

I extend my right hand with a smile that she returns tenfold, and our feet bring us closer to one another until she steps into my embrace. As my arms encircle her, she sighs in contentment before leaning up on her tiptoes to brush her lips across mine.

“Today has been magical.”

She smiles into my eyes, and I hold her closer as we begin to sway softly to the raspy tone of Caden North’s voice. Wren’s favorite singer’s eyes find mine as he begrudgingly croons a cover of “Work of Art” by Benson Boone, the man’s distaste for singing another’s lyrics putting a great big self-satisfactory smirk on my face.

“Stop taunting the man.” There’s a smile in my wife’s voice that belies her words, and when I meet her gray gaze, blatant mischief dances in her eyes. “I still can’t believe you’re friends with him.”

“Pfft! I am *not* friends with that arrogant prick, little bird.” I grimace before narrowing my eyes playfully. “And I still can’t believe I let you talk me into having him perform at our wedding.”

Wren’s low chuckle makes me shake my head as my eyes move around the dancefloor. My gaze shifts past Ford, who’s speaking with Summer North, wife of Caden—though I don’t hold that against her—to find Alex dancing with Reyna, their daughter, Ana, propped between them.

Grayson is standing off to one side, watching his seven-year-old twins squabble about who gets to play with Alessia when she wakes from her nap. He rolls his eyes before stepping in patiently, catching my gaze as he does, and he mouths the words, “These damn kids.”

A silent understanding passes between us before he intervenes, and my smile is gracious when Wren slips from my embrace, catching my hand in her much smaller one.

“I haven’t given you your gift yet.”

Her cheeks flush, enticing me further to follow her as she weaves her way through our guests, leading me into the main house.

We continue past staff and caterers until she leads me into the study. “Close the door.”

I do as she instructs, and when I turn back to face her, she’s standing beside a sheet-covered canvas.

“What do you get the man who can buy anything his heart desires?” Wren nibbles her bottom lip nervously, and I chuckle.

“The only thing my heart desires are you and Sia.”

My wife’s smile lights up the room, my words dispelling her nerves as I’d hoped they would, and she continues with more confidence than before.

“It’s entirely from my imagination. Pieced together from stories mostly, but...” She trails off, inhaling through her nose before blowing it out through her mouth. “I think you’ll like it.”

She drops the sheet, and my mouth drops alongside it as my chest tightens with emotion.

It’s an image in the staccato style Wren prefers of Renzo and me as young men, arms around one another as we laugh at something in the foreground. I step closer, realizing it’s underwear covered in chili seeds, and I half-snort as tears fill my eyes, not for the first time today.

“That was absolutely *not* your father’s reaction.”

Wren gently props the canvas back against the wall and walks closer with a pleased smile. “I know. Nonna Julia was particularly fond of telling that story.”

Once she’s within touching distance, I slip my hands around her waist, drawing her closer to brush my lips over hers. My words whisper across her mouth as our gazes hold, and the entire world fades into oblivion.

“You’re the dream I would never allow myself to have. The dream I never felt worthy of. The dream I would *die* to

protect, little bird.”

Wren presses her lips firmly to mine, her eyelids fluttering closed as she sighs, “You complete me, Vaughn Burton. I love you. I love you with *everything* I am.”

I palm her cheeks with a furrowed brow, a feeling of utter contentment filling my chest as I speak from my soul.

“I love you deeper than the deepest ocean, higher than the tallest mountain. I love you further than the stars and into all the galaxies beyond. The boundaries of my love for you are ever-expanding, each and every day until the end of time, Wren Burton.”

When our lips meet, it’s as though the stars have aligned when a sense of completeness fills me from head to toe, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this place, in this woman’s arms, in receipt of her love, is the place I’ve yearned for my whole life.

A place I’d never have thought myself worthy of. A place not meant for devils and villains like me.

Home.

THE END

Ford Holloway’s Forbidden Bodyguard romance is coming in early 2024. [PRE-ORDER IT HERE!](#)

But first, keep an eye out for Elodie Rivers’s mafia romance coming Spring 2024!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank some exceptional people who have been a part of this wild ride.

Katie K. I love you to bits, and if you hadn't gotten my head in the game when I started writing this book, I'm pretty sure I'd have thrown in the towel. Thank you for being my beautiful friend. I value our friendship deeply, and I'll always be your wafflepot!

Adi. It breaks my heart that we live so far apart. I'd legit drive you demented if we lived closer, so take heart: there are many oceans and continents between us. Your friendship, support, rants, and in-jokes are highlights of my daily life. Thank you for being inherently *you*. For encouraging me to be better, not only in my writing but in my personal life. I can categorically say I'm less of a pushover for knowing you!

Katie L. My soulsie (don't tell Mickel, I know you feel the same!) You and the boys are more family than friends at this point. I'm forever grateful for the day I slid into your DMs. Thank you for *everything*, especially for keeping my wormy brain from spiraling daily!

Sara. Girl, you are a machine! I don't know how you manage to pull it all off, but you were born to do this job. You're a wonderful PA, a beautiful friend, and an all-round amazing human being. Let's keep doing this!

Aimee. From hitch-hiking with windswept up-styles to those drunken tequila nights, coffee mornings to play dates, and sharing *way* too many details about those unmentionable incidents (did someone say *all night long*?!). I'm blessed to have you in my life, and along on this bookish journey with me. Thank you for listening to me, especially when I can never just get to the damn point *facepalm*

Jen, Sel, and Danielle. Thank you for pestering me to even embark on this journey. I'm forever grateful for you girls!!

Karina. My grammar ninja. My fantasy guru. My beautiful friend. I'm so glad you listened to Adi and gave my books a shot because my life is richer having you in it.

Lilian Harris. I love you. I can't wait until Denver so I can ramble the ear off you in person!! Thank you for always being there for me from the very first. If the world was filled with more people like you, it would be a truly beautiful place.

Mom, Dad and Michelle. Thank you for your support and encouragement. For watching the kids when I'm trying to hit word count. For continually asking how it's going. For understanding that things can slip through the net when I unsuccessfully juggle too much. I love you!

Will, Jamie, Ben, Zach, and Izzy. My five masterpieces. I love you infinity times infinity. Forever and ever. Seeing the individuals that you are becoming is truly a humbling experience. Oh, the places you'll go, my beauties!

James. I love you, flaws and all, because you make my world a better place. Thank you for helping to make this dream a reality for me.

And finally, to *you!* My reader. Thank you for picking up my book. I truly hope you found an escape in my words. I'm so grateful to you for taking a chance on this story, and I'm excited to share what comes next!!

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Pamela O'Rourke lives in Ireland with her husband, James, and their five young children. Life is hectic, but she wouldn't change a single second of it. She loves sunny days, strong coffee, and daydreaming about her next book boyfriend.

Her books are all available and free to read on Kindle Unlimited.

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