



Scandalous
LIAISON

PIPER STONE

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Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

www.StormyNightPublications.com

Stone, Piper

Scandalous Liaison

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

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PROLOGUE



*S*uzannah

When I was a little girl, I'd wanted to be the princess in the perfect pink dress who believed in fairytales. I'd dreamt of a knight in studded glistening armor racing on his giant steed to come rescue me no matter the risk or the cost to his jeweled kingdom. Then I'd learned his armor had been silver plated, tarnishing easily.

When I was in high school, I longed to find the perfect alpha male depicted in every romance novel. Tall, dark, and handsome with broad shoulders and a chiseled jaw prepared to sweep me off my feet into a world of passion. Then as with the fairytales from before, I'd learned that behind every glistening smile and muscular man was a frog instead of a prince.

After college, I'd fallen into a trap of my own making, accepting defeat by marrying a man I didn't truly love. I hadn't fully understood the meaning of the word or the concept of unbridled passion. After giving up, I'd given in. Then I'd said 'no more.' I was finished with men. I'd promised myself that I would never be lured into a false sense of longing ever again.

Then Kendrick Gregory entered my life like a powerful tropical storm, refusing to take no for an answer or acknowledge that he was the worst kind of man.

A monster.

But even monsters could bleed.

What I'd learned in the whirlwind days of our first meeting was that love wasn't meant to be kind nor was it easy. It also refused to take a backseat to anything or anyone, no matter how dire the circumstances. He taught me many things, introducing me into his evil darkness, allowing me to crave what only he could offer.

But most important, he'd awakened the woman who'd been forced into steel chains.

Now there was no going back.

I, Suzannah Warrington, was destined to be his possession.

Forever.

CHAPTER 1



*K*endrick

I screeched around the corner, slamming on the brakes and immediately jumping out. My second in command flanked my side almost immediately, yanking his weapon into his hand. There was no need for words and Grayson knew better than to dare try to stop me.

One of the rules of engagement within syndicates was that you didn't threaten a grieving family on the day of a funeral. You certainly didn't do it as egregiously as handing the widow of the powerful empire a bouquet of flowers with a threatening note attached.

That was bad protocol, which led to men like me engaging in horrific acts of violence and bloodshed.

And enjoying every moment of it.

I casually removed my weapon, moving in front of my car as the roar of an engine sounded off in the distance. I'd watched my mother shed far too many tears over the last week, weeping uncontrollably until the family doctor was required to sedate her. Then the fucking note, promising the next victim would be her only daughter, my innocent sister.

Over my dead body.

As the sounds grew closer, I lifted my arms, the Glock firmly planted in both hands. I was well aware that the driver of the vehicle had been nothing more than a messenger. He'd been

hired by an unknown enemy to put the fear of God into my family. Namely in me. My name had been whispered on the dark web and in the streets of Louisville. There were those who'd known I wouldn't stand by and allow my father's death to go unavenged.

They'd goaded me into returning home.

And in taking over my father's regime.

I had no other choice, my younger brother incapable of handling the family's extensive business. Especially given we were monsters in suave disguises. That didn't mean the fucker couldn't provide information on who was behind my father's assassination.

When the headlights came into view, I took several long strides toward them, cocking my head and allowing the rage to pull me into complete and utter concentration.

"Remember, Kendrick. We need him alive."

I didn't bother answering Grayson. In fact, I was surprised he'd dared talk to me. He knew how I got when I was out of control. And I would dare say this was as out of control as I'd been in the last few years. I couldn't care less what happened to me, but for my sister to be threatened, my mother destroyed was unacceptable.

I had plans on destroying everything that was important to the person responsible.

The headlights caught our approach, the driver slowing. I continued walking, studying the man's face in the limited light of the rural area. He'd made the mistake of heading to a winding road that I knew well. I was fairly certain the asshole wasn't from around here. He should have stayed on the main roads. His bad decision would ultimately cost him his life.

The driver kept the vehicle idling as he studied me. Then he slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

I remained where I was, refusing to back down.

"Jesus. We're not playing chicken!" Grayson barked from beside me.

“Like hell we aren’t, my friend. You know how I adore my games. Especially when they’re life and death.”

What Grayson knew better than most was that I was a crack shot, one of the many skills I’d been required to learn.

I also had patience, something instilled into me since I was a child.

At least regarding the use of weapons.

Threats made against my family were something else entirely. I wouldn’t be satisfied until the head of the fucker responsible was on a silver platter at the end of my dinner table.

“Get the fuck out of the way,” Grayson hissed.

“Hold on. Just watch and learn.” I didn’t flinch, holding my breath as the asshole careened in my direction. When the driver was in the exact position I wanted, I fired off three bullets. Only then did I move to the left, yanking my soldier with me seconds before the man behind the wheel lost control of his vehicle.

I took a deep breath as the man overcorrected, given one of the three bullets had sliced through the front tire exactly as I’d wanted. I watched in satisfaction as the car went airborne, flying a solid thirty yards before dropping back to the earth, the tires skidding then the driver’s door slamming into a tree.

“Bingo,” I said and nodded several times, immediately easing the weapon into my jacket.

“What the fuck was that?”

“That, my friend, was how you capture a rat.” The only way that anyone could have been allowed to get close to any member of my family at the funeral was if he worked for my father. There was nothing worse I hated than idiots who betrayed their own.

They deserved exactly what fate doled out.

The creaking and hissing sounds were to be expected. I raked my fingers through my hair, allowing the image of my mother’s tearstained face to form a permanent place in the front of my mind.

“See if you know him,” I ordered.

“You shot him. I’m sure he’s dead. What the fuck does it matter?”

I slowly turned my head and he grumbled under his breath. Then he headed toward the wrecked vehicle, shielding his face and using the butt of his weapon to pound out the cracked glass on the passenger side.

“I assume he’s very much alive.”

Grayson snorted as if impressed. “You’re a wacked out son of a bitch.”

“It’s all in the art of knowing the right pressure points, my friend. He’s in significant pain but the gunshot wounds won’t kill him.” Something else would.

“Gunner. I should have known,” Grayson hissed. Then he headed in my direction, choosing to keep his voice low. “He was considered one of your father’s most trusted men. He’d worked with him for years. A little surprising.”

“Nothing should surprise you any longer, my friend.” The two of us were as close to being friends as I’d had in my life, although we wouldn’t be sharing family events together in the upcoming years.

“Gasoline is already leaking. There’s a good chance the engine will spark.”

Laughing softly, I clapped him on the shoulder. “I assure you that it will. I’m never wrong in my calculations. I suggest you back away.”

“You are one dangerous motherfucker.”

“Evidently, you’ve forgotten what I’m capable of.”

Grayson grinned. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

I was positive he wouldn’t.

I headed toward the car, crouching over and peering in through the window. Gunner was tough, still struggling to unfasten his seatbelt while enduring significant pain.

He grunted when he saw me, struggling to turn his head in my direction. Blood ran down his face from where his forehead had been slammed into the steering wheel. Sadly, I didn't feel bad for him in the least.

"Gunner. You have about fifteen seconds to bargain for your life before it will be placed in the hands of your maker. Who were you working for?"

He gritted his teeth, his eyes dilated from extreme anguish.

"Fuck you."

"Eleven, but who's counting?"

"Your father was a pig. I'm glad about what I did."

Sighing, I shook my head. It was always a risk attempting to get information from a traitorous son of a bitch. I crawled in through the window, easily able to see the fear of God in the man's eyes. Then I simply reached underneath him, finding his wallet in his back pocket. As I snatched it away, I noticed the first flicker of fire coming from under the hood.

It would seem my calculations were off slightly.

"It's your lucky day, buddy. Five additional seconds. Tell me the name of person who hired you and I'll pull you to safety."

"Go fuck yourself."

"O-kay. So be it." I backed out, standing just outside the door as I glanced into the man's wallet. He had the typical items, with a single exception. He had a weakness, gambling. Only he was smart enough not to gamble on my father's thoroughbreds, which was against the rules.

However, the name on the receipt was enough to draw a correlation, a syndicate on the other side of the country considered an enemy.

It was far too coincidental and there was no such thing in my world.

"Get the fuck away from there, boss," Grayson yelled. "It's gonna blow."

“I have plenty of time.” I grinned, holding onto the receipt then tossing the wallet over my shoulder as I took slow and easy strides toward where Grayson was standing. The look on the man’s face was priceless.

I heard a slight rumble first. Then I smiled.

The explosion shoved me backward by several feet, but I remained standing as billows of black smoke roared in my direction.

“Jesus. Fucking. Christ,” Grayson hissed, immediately backing away and shielding his face. When I moved beside him, he glared at me as if I’d lost my fucking mind.

I’d done that a long time before. Or maybe the fact I’d felt nothing inside for years allowed me to not only participate in but enjoy risky behavior.

“You have a fucking death wish,” he hissed, eyeing the receipt as I handed it to him.

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

“What the hell is this?”

“My father taught me many things, Grayson, including the fact that every man has a weakness, especially when they have a family. Find Rutherford Warrington’s weakness.”

“Who the fuck is he?”

“The person responsible for my father’s death. And I’m going to crush him where it counts.”

CHAPTER 2



*E*n route to San Francisco
Suzannah

“Whew,” I whispered, a smile crossing my face.

A tall man with muscles that went on for days had grabbed my attention, holding it from the moment he’d walked onto the airplane. I hadn’t seen him inside the airport. Maybe I would have asked him if he’d like a drink. I certainly would have noticed someone with such engaging dark eyes and obsidian hair so thick all I could think about was running my fingers through it while he fucked me long and hard.

Sex.

My God. The word just wouldn’t leave my mind. Maybe partaking in a double vodka martini at the airport hadn’t been the best idea. Either I was already half looped given nerves and exhaustion from the long hours I’d been working, or I was seriously in need of a quick one-night stand. Hold up. I’d sworn off men long before the ink on my divorce papers had been final.

However, that didn’t mean tasty eye candy was off the table completely. Did it?

As the tall, dark, and dangerously handsome man clenched his jaw, glancing at the rows of first-class seats, I gave him a solid ten on looks alone. However, I sensed his aggravation from

where I was sitting, an irritation I had a feeling would turn ugly within seconds.

The man was drop dead gorgeous, holding the kind of desirable and sophisticated aura that appeared on the cover of romance novels. It was impossible not to notice him, especially since he suddenly popped onto the plane at the last minute, the flight attendant very obviously interested in the man. What woman wouldn't be? He was the epitome of eye candy.

Sophisticated in his nicely tailored charcoal suit.

Stunning with his dark wavy hair and intense blue eyes that were easy to see from row five of first class.

Surrounded by an aura of power and danger, which elicited dark and filthy fantasies.

Bad girl. Bad... girl.

Then I couldn't help but notice I'd been correct in that he was highly irritated with whatever the attendant was telling him, which was an instant turnoff. His harsh glare presented the ugly side to him. I deducted four points for that alone. There was nothing worse than an arrogant asshole.

"Just let me get to my seat," he said gruffly and far too loudly, as if trying to make a scene. "Why can't they hire decent help?" He remained standing, tossing what looked like a laptop bag into the furthest seat across the aisle. Groovy. The man was going to be within striking distance if he got unruly.

Three more points had been ripped away the moment he'd opened his mouth. At this rate, he'd be spiraling into the toilet before the plane got off the ground.

The flight attendant smacked her hands on her hips, shaking her head. I could read her lips easily when she mimed the word 'asshole.' Then she noticed I was watching her and a flush crept across her jaw.

I grinned and winked.

"Be careful, buddy. Karma will kick you in the ass," I said without bothering to look at him.

“Excuse me?” he barked with all the gusto of a crocodile on steroids. He had human prey on his mind. That was easy to tell.

“You know what they say about treating people badly on the way up,” I cooed, aware the attendant was listening to every word, the bottle of Kristal in her hand to refresh my glass.

“Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“They get to dismember you on your way down. I’d sell tickets.”

The attendant could barely contain her laughter, turning her back on him completely. This time, she mouthed ‘thank you.’

Exhaling, I took another sip of my champagne, quite frankly eager to take off. And it had nothing to do with Mr. Asshole. While I appreciated the sinful images floating in my mind, I was eager for the flight to be over with completely. I turned my head toward the window, glaring at the ominous-looking clouds, my stomach already churning.

While economy class was full, the area where I was sitting had only four other passengers. When I heard a rustling sound, I turned my head once again, hoping for a quick refill before the pilot took off. Instead, I was rewarded with a delicious vision of the passenger’s shapely butt as he shoved his carryon in the overhead bin. I had to admit, whoever his tailor was needed a raise.

When he slipped into the seat only a few feet away, I took a deep breath. It would be difficult not to snag a few glances in his direction.

Even if he was a jerk.

“Would you like another drink?” the flight attendant asked as she crouched over next to my seat. “We’re going to be a few more minutes before takeoff.”

Crap. The meant the radar tower was watching the storm.

“I’ll have a Macallan. I assume you’re sophisticated enough to provide that for your first-class passengers on this flight.”

The flight attendant did her absolute best not to alter her pleasant expression. So I reacted for her, rolling my eyes. “Hey, pig boy. First of all. She wasn’t asking you. Second and much more important, didn’t your mama ever tell you that good things come to those who are nice?” I put as much attitude into my words as possible.

“Pig boy?” he repeated as if highly insulted.

“If the shoe fits, as my father would say.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Someone with manners. Obviously, that attribute was lost on you.” I slowly turned my head, watching as he almost blew a gasket. Good. He deserved it.

“You are a...” He sucked in his breath.

“I’m what? Please, do tell me what exactly you think I am.” I knew I was goading him but why not? It was a free country. He sucked in his breath then shifted in his seat. My God, the man was handsome but there was so much anger in his eyes I was shocked he hadn’t experienced a stroke.

“No one is talking to you. I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself. And what I was going to say was that you’re a real stuck-up bitch.”

That did it.

Maybe I was just angry from the terse phone call with my brother only thirty minutes before, the argument the same as always. My brother ignored my questions regarding the family business while I continued to bug him about financials and the bottom line.

Whatever the case, when I tossed the half glass of champagne into Mr. Asshole’s face, it felt damn good.

“Would you prefer Dom Perignon?” the girl asked, winking at me, a satisfied smile on her face.

I was shocked he didn’t say a word, nor did he react at first, merely staring at me with his hard, cold eyes. As if there was nothing inside but rage and dead space.

“Why, yes, I think I would,” I answered glibly. I half expected the few passengers sitting up front to flee to the back, but they barely reacted. Maybe they’d seen it all over the years. I could tell their eyes were ping-ponging between us, watching the action flick unfold before their eyes.

The flight attendant walked away without addressing the arrogant ass. Meanwhile, I turned my head toward him, smirking at seeing his scowl.

The dangerous aspect remained, the darkness in his intense blue eyes likely terrifying some people. I wasn’t just any woman. I’d been raised with a brutal father and two savages as brothers. This good-looking dude I could handle with ease.

I couldn’t contain myself, glancing over and watching as he jumped out of his seat, moving forward to the tiny bathrooms. Seconds later, it was obvious he’d wiped his face, returning like a raging bull in a china shop. He stopped directly in front of me, staring down with venom in his gorgeous eyes.

“Can I help you with something, like seeing if we can locate your soul? Oops. You don’t have one,” I quipped.

“You think you’re funny.”

“It’s easy to be when I have such great material around me.”

He finally chuckled and made himself more comfortable, removing his jacket. However, I had no doubt he was cursing me out just under his breath. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a champagne drinker.”

“Now, I’ll bite. Why not?”

“Perhaps I need to worry if you’re rabid.”

“Mmm... Perhaps. What would you think I’d be interested in drinking?”

“Tequila. Cheap tequila.” He turned his head toward me, his scowl already shifting into a passive-aggressive smile. Then he made the mistake of undressing me with his eyes, issuing a single growl that could easily be heard.

“You’re certainly an arrogant, opinionated man. Instead of expensive scotch, you should be drinking battery acid.”

My comment made him laugh. “Touché. Perhaps you’re right. I would apologize but I’m certain you’d say that’s not the kind of man I am. That I was faking my sincerity. And God help me if I offered an excuse like I just lost my father to a violent crime.”

Oh, fuck me. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. That’s just terrible. Please accept my apologies.”

His voice was deep, seductive, and hinting of dozens of salacious nights. That I could find this jerk remotely attractive meant it’d been too long since I’d had a moment of passion.

When the corners of his mouth turned up, I gripped the armrest of my seat with enough force it creaked. “You bastard.”

“Why, yes, I am.”

The fucker was goading me and I’d fallen smack in the middle of the ugly quicksand he’d poured. I wanted to lash out. I wanted to strangle him. I wanted to drive a stake through his heart. “Lying sack of shit. How dare you.”

“Such language. It would appear you need to have your mouth washed out with soap.”

“You know what, buddy? I’ll venture a guess that you’re coldhearted while pretending to care about those around you, able to plaster on a smile while figuring out a way to stab your competition in the back with a rusty dagger.” Now I was being the one with a bad attitude. That’s what the thought of spending time with my family did every time.

“Wow. You have me pegged. Very nice.”

“I’m remarkably good at it.” I heard a pop of the fresh champagne bottle and took a deep breath. Hopefully, another glass of bubbly would put me in the better mood for the five-hour flight. If not, the man might be strangled and my face on the evening news as the suspect.

“An interesting game,” he said in passing. “I would say you’re a scorned woman, your ex leaving you for another woman a few years younger and much more adventurous.”

Very few men set me off the way he had but instead of scratching his eyes out, I smiled. "I'll have you know I left him."

At least part of my tossed-out statement wasn't a big, fat lie. However, he didn't need to know that.

"Ah, I think I understand."

Oh, no. I wasn't going down that road. As the flight attendant approached, I leaned back in the seat, offering her my kindest smile. Unfortunately, she also had the jerk's glass of scotch. I had the urge to accidentally on purpose knock her hand, but I chose not to. The last thing I wanted to do was to be kicked off the flight.

"Whatever, buddy. Have a very nice, lonely rest of your life since no one would dare consider being around you for longer than five seconds."

"Ouch," he muttered, truly acting as if I'd hurt his feelings. Right.

"By the way, is your father even dead because if he's not, the excuse you used was the most reprehensible, horrible, disgusting thing anyone in the history of this planet has used. And for that alone, you'll burn in the fires of hell for all eternity."

Mr. Asshole looked me straight in the eyes, leaning over, his sexy lips pursed. His scent was deliriously intoxicating, his lips dangerously close. And I wanted nothing more than for him to reach out and kiss me. As if reading my mind, he pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger, causing a ripple effect of desire and need followed by repulsion and refusal to allow him to get under my skin.

"The answer, sweet princess, is yes. My father was murdered in cold blood in front of my younger brother and myself. Now, I'm left to pick up the pieces."

CHAPTER 3



*S*uzannah

To say I was stunned was the understatement of the year.

I'd opened my mouth wide, inserting my entire foot. Hell, I'd inserted my leg. What was I saying? I usually was never so callous, but as of late and with everything I'd been through with the divorce, my entire personality had changed.

For the worse.

Or maybe this man just brought out all the worst qualities in a person.

I felt like an absolute shit.

We were locked in a moment, his hold on my skin sending searing heat coursing through me. It seemed all time stopped, and he allowed me to see a hint of raw pain behind his soulless eyes. I swallowed, especially when I realized how much I wanted him to kiss me.

Finally, I came to some sense of rational thought, pulling away. Now heat crested across my jaw for an entirely different reason. "I am very sorry for your loss. I hope the authorities catch the bastard who did that to you and your family."

"That sounds like you mean it."

"Yes, I do. I happen to be a genuinely nice person."

Oh, God. I was a horrible person. Just horrible.

“Uh-huh. I’m certain you are,” he snipped.

Nope. I wasn’t a nice person given the horrible thoughts racing through my mind. For some crazy reason, ugly thoughts about my ex-husband popped into my mind. Christian had been kind, chivalrous in the beginning. Look where it had gotten me. Maybe I needed to give assholes a try for a change.

He exhaled and leaned back in his seat, not making a single noise. Why did I have a feeling he was still watching me? Was it wishful thinking?

With a fresh glass of champagne in my hand, I decided to ignore him, pulling up my iPad and shifting to the pictures of my brother and his fiancée the girl had on her Facebook page. They were far too cutesy, although I had a feeling she had no idea what she was getting herself in the middle of. The Warrington family wasn’t easy by any means, our wealth and power making it impossible to create an easygoing, Hallmark loving picture-perfect moment.

How long had it been since I’d been back to Napa? Not long enough. At least in my mind. The expensive pearls hanging around my neck were one of the few gifts from Christian I hadn’t tossed out the window, but the necklace also represented his sanctimonious attempt to buy me off while he was fucking everything wearing a skirt. The fact they’d put him back by ninety-two thousand dollars remained a priceless gift. In truth, they’d also become my worry beads, which was what I was using them for at the moment. I fiddled with them, rubbing my fingers across the dazzling iridescent pearls harvested from the South Seas, fearful I’d rip them from around my neck.

I could just see myself crawling on my hands and knees trying to collect them. Bad karma existed in my world. Christ. I was a worrywart. My thoughts drifted briefly to the conversation I planned on having with my father. Who was I kidding? The threat I planned on making, which was long overdue. The thought of ruining my father held a very special place in my heart.

There was no love lost between us. In fact, I wasn't entirely certain my father had ever loved me. *Stop wallowing in bullshit. Time to claim what belongs to you.* My inner voice was almost never wrong. What she continued to remind me of was the truth. I deserved a portion of the Warrington Empire besides the trust fund established when I was a child. I could take satisfaction in the fact that if I was successful, I'd rock my father's entire world. However, I had to be very careful about how I played the damning information I'd collected.

At least patience was one of my virtues.

I continued scanning for updates on my family's activities, a prickling sense of heat crowding into my system.

That's when I became aware Mr. Asshole was leaning over for a second time, attempting to find out what I was so intently looking at. Then he lowered his gaze to my nervous habit, which forced me to slide my hand away.

"Do you mind?" I snapped, immediately turning off the iPad.

"I'm always curious what romance novel of choice a beautiful woman is intent on reading. Let me venture a guess. Your genre selection is a big, bad boy alpha wolf. Or perhaps a hockey romance. No, that doesn't suit you. Maybe a cowboy? Women do need to fantasize." He laughed, obviously enjoying himself.

"Just a quick trade on one of my multiple stocks I own. However, you are correct. Given the men in the real world have dicks the size of peanuts, every girl needs a fantasy man who satisfy her needs."

"Ouch. Touché again. You are full of one-liners. I bet you're particularly fun at parties."

Uh-huh. He had no idea how close I was to popping him in the jaw. Rolling my eyes, I did my best to ignore him. When he leaned over even further, I issued a slight growl.

"If you're going to get that close, it would be helpful if you'd grab a mint." I slowly turned my head, and I could tell I'd amused him. Fortunately, the intercom system went on and it was announced we were ready for takeoff.

Mr. Dangerous Asshole lifted his glass, giving me a heated look. I did the same. Then I finished my champagne and took a deep breath. This was the part I hated the most.

“The lady is a true viper,” he mused.

“You have no idea.”

“Perhaps I’d enjoy finding out.”

Was the man flirting with me? Oh, my God. He was. “No, I doubt you would. Now, if you don’t want to get hurt, I suggest you back off, buddy.” Zero to sixty to zero again. Could I believe anything he had to say?

“I do love a challenge.”

This time, all I could do was roll my eyes.

The flight attendant collected our drinks as well as everyone else’s in first class, returning to the back. I took a deep breath, saying a silent prayer everything would be okay.

Then I threw him a hateful look as the pilot rolled the plane down the tarmac. After he chuckled, I took a deep breath, trying to keep from tossing my cookies. That would be the ultimate embarrassment. Especially in front of jerk boy. That wasn’t going to happen.

I had a feeling he’d detected my discomfort, whistling as he made himself more comfortable. Fuck him. Fuck all men like him.

Five minutes later, we lifted off and the grip I had on the armrest was so tight, I likely punctured the leather. It was difficult to breathe, the raging rumble of fear tearing through me like wildfire.

First class.

With the amount of traveling I’d done over the years, I had more points than the CEO of my PR firm. I could bypass the rest of the passengers, spend time in the most gorgeous airline lounges pre-flight. I had my options of when I flew and was treated like royalty wherever I went. I should enjoy the perks especially with overseas travel, including the free champagne

and meals comparable to any five-star restaurant in the world. Sadly, I did my best to hide a nasty little secret from everyone.

I hated flying.

Every. Single. Aspect.

Especially the turbulence.

I managed to calm my breathing, seconds turning into minutes. Then a sudden jolt had me yelp. “Fuck!”

“It’s okay,” he said.

“Shut up.” Great. Now I was yelling.

Today just happened to be one of those days where the wind shears were horrific, the plane bumping up and down in the air like an old-style wooden rollercoaster about ready to plummet off the aging rails. We’d barely taken off and the thunderstorm hit us so hard I was as electrified as the air outside. God, I could almost feel a panic attack coming on. I hadn’t been this bad in a long time.

A flash of neon blue lightning outside forced a strangled yelp from my mouth. I was mortified at the sound, furious with myself for showcasing my biggest fear.

Especially around the jerk.

“Don’t worry. The plane is one of the safest in the industry.”

Hearing the stranger’s voice again didn’t provide any comfort. In fact, just the opposite. I let out a deep breath but could barely move. I wanted to toss out a question like why would I think he’d care? Fortunately, I didn’t. “I prefer staying closer to the ground. Humans weren’t meant to fly.”

“Yet here you are. Mmm... A beautiful woman afraid of flying. That is a shame. Just try to take deep, even breaths.”

“I’m fine.” I was anything but fine and I sensed he knew it. This just couldn’t be happening to me.

“You’re more than fine. But if you continue breathing as you’re doing, you will hyperventilate or have a panic attack.”

While I wanted his voice to seem soothing, it was impossible. I was sucked into a strange vacuum, his voice echoing. Then I realized he was right. I needed to splash some cold water in my face, or I would pass out. Hell, no, that wasn't going to happen.

I glanced up at the seatbelt sign and grimaced. It had yet to be turned off. Damn it. There was no chance I would survive even another five minutes.

With the plane still ascending, rocking like a motherfucker, I reached for my seatbelt, somehow managing to unclasp it. I could do this. I could... do... this. I took a deep breath but the moment I stood, two things happened. One, I almost did the unthinkable, passing out. And two, the nice flight attendant from before had turned into a venomous creature, heading toward me with a vile look on her face.

"Miss. You need to sit down. We're experiencing significant turbulence."

"No shit, Sherlock," I spewed, taking a single step sideways. When the plane hit another rough patch, I was driven straight into the arrogant bastard's lap.

And I'll be damned if his cock wasn't hard as a rock.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh. Shit.

As I struggled to right myself, the sudden protective side in the man took over and he wrapped his arm around me, keeping me close.

"Miss. You need to get back into your seat. Please. I don't want you to get hurt." While there was sympathy in her voice, she wasn't kidding around.

"I think I'm going to be sick. You need to let me go to the bathroom," I insisted, my stomach lurching and rolling. Oh, this was so bad, one of the most embarrassing moments of my entire wretched life. I was stiff as a board, barely able to move.

"Sit back down," she instructed.

"I think you need to let the lady go to the bathroom. Here. I'll take her."

While I certainly wouldn't consider the man chivalrous to any degree, at that point, I knew beggars couldn't be choosers, especially since I wasn't entirely certain I could ever walk again.

I heard myself blubbing as he lifted me off his lap, unsnapping his seatbelt much to the attendant's chagrin.

"Sir. You can't do that. You both need to get back into your seats. Now!"

Just hearing his growl brought a strange laugh into my throat. Maybe it had been the two glasses of champagne. Or maybe I'd just drifted into another dimension. Whatever the case, I was giddy as if drunk.

He managed to ease me into the tiny bathroom. Then he had the audacity to close and lock the door behind him.

Remaining inside.

"What are you doing? Get out!"

He grinned and spun me around, wrapping one hand around the back of my neck, sliding the other hand down my back ever so slowly, jerking me against him.

Then he proceeded to do the unthinkable.

He captured my mouth.

CHAPTER 4



*S*uzannah

To say the man could kiss would be a serious understatement. I was thrown by how lightheaded I'd become and so quickly. Even my heart did several somersaults, ending in the pit of my stomach.

The little voice inside my mind reminded me that I was close to having a panic attack, enough so I couldn't think straight let alone the fact stars had been floating in front of my eyes for almost ten minutes.

However, this was entirely different. This man was totally in control of the situation, acting as if we'd been close for a very long time. He tasted of scotch and firelight, his scent rolling into every cell in my body. Suddenly, all logic and fear were sucked out of me, replaced with a need that could burn down tall buildings.

My savior ground his hips back and forth, allowing me to know just how aroused he'd become. None of this made any sense, but I gathered that was the point. He wanted me off kilter, accepting his dark prowess and unseemly demands. I molded into him perfectly, as if we were created to be together.

And my mind was completely thrown into an erotic abyss, taking me down a cracked path straight into purgatory. I wanted to repeat the mantra in my head how I hated men, but being in his arms, it was impossible.

He was gruff and masculine, taking absolute control of the difficult situation and of me. I was tossed into a flaming wave of unbridled desire, rolling both my hands over his broad shoulders, tangling the fingers of one in his long, shaggy hair, using the other to stroke his back. Just being in his arms left me breathless but the way he dominated my tongue, pushing me to the point of losing all sense of terror was magnificent.

Every sound he made was a deep growl, so throaty that it vibrated deep inside every muscle as white-hot heat coursed through me. He was huge, his body strong and muscular, his jaw sculpted to perfection. The taste of him was exquisite, the infusion of the well-crafted liquor and a hint of whatever peppermint candy he'd consumed. I was suddenly ravenous, more so than I'd been in a long time. I wanted nothing more than to continue kissing him for hours.

As he pushed me against the locked door, grinding against me, I had a sense of how aroused he'd become. He was even more famished than I was.

Sadly, as with all sinful desires, the mesmerizing moment wasn't meant to last. As he broke the kiss, both of us struggling to breathe, I retracted my arms, pushing my palms against his shoulders.

He pressed his forehead against mine, taking labored breaths. Then he brushed the backs of his knuckles down my side, driving his hand between my parted legs. As he cupped my mound, a single moan escaped, and I was instantly thrown back into reality.

Where I didn't really want to be.

"What are you doing?" I asked, barely managed to get the words from my throat.

"Taking what I want." I heard a hint of amusement in his voice as he pushed the heel of his hand against my throbbing mound. I was already wet, my panties damp from the dirty encounter. "You belonged to me the moment I stepped foot on this plane."

Wow. The arrogance factor was flying high as a kite. Maybe it was the altitude.

For both of us. Hearing his possessive words was a huge turn-on, the musky fragrance of my desire permeating the cramped space. And the ugly truth was I wanted him. I craved something decadent and filthy. He parted my lips again, darting his tongue inside. I arched my back, pressing myself against him and I sensed his satisfaction building.

I knew what I was doing was ridiculous and shameful, especially since I didn't know his name, but at this moment I wanted to experience being completely reckless and wild. The mystery man seemed to sense my headspace, wrapping a single finger around the thin elastic of my thong. The electric sound of the powerful man snapping his wrist forced a strangled laugh. When he dared bring the lace to his mouth and nose, a warm flush of embarrassment rushed up from my chest, covering my cheeks in a heated wash of electricity.

His eyes sparkled in the dim lighting, a mischievous look keeping my pulse skyrocketing. As he inhaled deeply, I couldn't take my eyes off the two- or three-day stubble covering his jaw or the way his lips moved in appreciation of my scent.

The moment he pocketed my panties as if keeping them for a souvenir, I remembered the way he'd acted only a few minutes before. God. What the hell was I doing?

"You are a bastard." I shoved him hard enough that he was pitched backward by the two short feet the lavatory provided. That allowed me enough time to crack my palm across his face. The sound echoed in the dense space, and I was ready to yank the panties from his pocket when he did the unthinkable.

He grabbed my wrist, a single savage yank tossing me against the tiny sink. There was no hesitation on the aggressive man's part. He yanked up my skirt, exposing my naked backside, immediately bringing his hand to my buttocks. The cracking sound was almost as sharp as the moan issued from deep within my throat.

I was floored, so much so I sputtered a few words then blinked like some wide-eyed deer caught in the headlights. This was insane. “You. You...”

His look shifted closer to a sneer, still controlling, still dark and intense. He brought his hand down again, moving from one side to the other and all I could do was count the rapid beats of my heart.

“You should be careful playing with fire, *prekrasna kvitka*,” he said in a husky voice little more than a whisper. “Especially when doing so with a man like me.” The ugly mirror over the compact sink reflected the dark smirk he wore. His eyes were stunning, deep and dark, the man allowing me a quick glance into his blackened soul.

“Such a bastard.”

“So you’ve told me. And yet you’re very wet. Tell me. Are you craving what only a disgusting man like me can provide? Do you hunger to wallow in the mud while I fuck you like a wild animal?”

I almost laughed because his words were exciting, pushing my boundaries. “Never.”

“You’re lying, princess, and I don’t see you as a liar. You long for me to shackle your pretty little wrists and fuck you from behind. I think that’s what I might do. Yes, you deserve to be my captive.”

“Oh, God.” I was so electrified that I couldn’t think about anything else but what he could do to me. And I craved it with everything inside of me.

While his words could be considered a threat to some, to me they were a promise of something filthy and dangerous, which excited the woman inside. I slammed my hands on the mirror, the pulsing sensations of the plane’s engine matching the hard trembling of my legs. I was surprised I was still standing. He delivered four additional cracks of his palm, discomfort turning into a shower of pain, but I was so aroused that my pussy was throbbing almost painfully.

After four more, he caressed the ache, rubbing the rough pads of his fingers across my heated skin. Then I realized he was unfastening his belt and trousers. The sane woman inside of me knew I should stop his egregious actions, but at that moment I couldn't think of anything I wanted more.

"Then fuck me," I told him with so much passion in my voice that his eyes lit up like firecrackers.

"Be careful what you ask for."

"I'm not asking. I'm telling you."

"And you'll never be in charge."

I laughed, the sound ragged and unlike me. I was panting like a crazed animal, fighting the demons inside of me. He'd awakened something I'd thought completely dead.

"I suggest you buckle up, princess. You're in for a long, hard ride."

Mr. Mile High yanked me away from the counter, sliding his hand down my thigh. His eyes pierced mine as he used his knee, pushing my legs as far apart as possible. When he rolled the tip of a single finger around my clit, I couldn't seem to stop shaking. The smirk on his face remained, as if he knew a deep, dark secret.

There was a possessiveness about him as he ground his cock against my buttocks. I was so wet, my pussy aching as much as my legs were quivering. I added pressure to my palms, fighting with my nerves as he teased me relentlessly. Yet the moment he drove his fingers deep inside, flexing them open as he pumped in and out, I was turned into a very bad girl.

I bucked against his hand, dragging my tongue across my bottom lip as he fingerfucked me. Within seconds, I was close to coming, which was as crazy as the entire moment.

"Mmm..."

"I'm curious if you taste as good as your delicious scent." When he pulled his fingers free, I gasped, fighting to keep from begging him not to stop. He drove the long, muscular digits into his mouth, sucking with enough gusto I was thrown

by his lascivious actions. The moment he pulled them free, the slight popping sound brought a single strangled moan to my lips. “Yes, you do.”

That was the end of foreplay, the dark and mysterious stranger thrusting the entire length of his cock into my pussy. I was tossed into a daze, stars floating in front of my eyes in waves. My mouth was open, and I was doing everything I could to keep from screaming as my muscles clenched and released.

The pressure was surreal, the ache instant. I wasn't entirely certain I'd ever felt anything so insanely amazing. “Fuck. That's so good.”

“Mmm... Talk dirty to me, princess. Tell me how much you want my cock.”

“Shove it into my pussy. Fuck me like a wild animal. Take me. Use me. I want it all.”

Where in God's name had that come from?

“My. You were made for corruption, weren't you, sweetheart?”

“Maybe so, but I'll never be anyone's sweetheart.” Everything about the man's rough touch was sweet torture, so much so another round of filthy images tore through my mind.

He pulled almost all the way out, plunging into me again. Then he developed a near perfect rhythm, his desire skittering off the charts as he pounded me, his actions brutal. When he wrapped one hand around my long pearls, twisting them against my throat, I sucked in my breath.

I should feel suffocated, but the man was a tower of power, so in control that I found myself falling into the beauty of losing every inhibition around him.

I couldn't focus, our labored breathing heating up the tiny space to the point of being combustible. A few beads of perspiration trickled down my forehead, but his face glistened from exertion and sweat, which forced my mind into another series of wicked places. I wanted to drop to my knees, sucking his cock, tasting his sweet cream.

I longed to have his face buried between my legs, licking me relentlessly until I screamed out his name. And I wanted him to devour every inch of me for hours at a time. There were times when you met a person that they affected you profoundly with little more than the intensity of their eyes as they spoke or the way they handled a crisis or tragedy.

This was none of the above, yet I felt so free with the stranger, as if I'd found a rusted key to the lock holding the chains of my heart in place. Perhaps returning to my childhood home was the reason I was thinking so deeply about something utterly carnal in nature. Even if that was the case, the arrogant stranger with the haunting eyes was spinning a moment in time that I'd remember.

He never blinked as he dug his fingers into my hip, jerking me as far from the sink as possible while keeping his tight hold on my necklace. When he tightened the strand, I issued several ragged moans. He could do anything he wanted to me. Anything. I wasn't certain I would care.

In those few minutes of bliss as an orgasm grew, I shoved aside all thoughts and responsibilities, savoring the extreme pleasure as if I'd never experience anything like this again.

"Oh..." I closed my eyes, longing for the climax to wait but there was no ability to hold back. Tingling sensations turned to a jolt of current so electric that my chest ached from the breath being ripped from my body. The single climax was quickly replaced with another, one so powerful that I could no longer feel my toes.

I concentrated on the savage pounding, the noise rushing into my eardrums just like his masculine scent of deep timber and citrus floated into my nostrils. This had to be what pure ecstasy was like. Still floating on a cloud, I sensed his body tensing, his needs cresting the surface.

With a deep, guttural growl, he nuzzled into my ear, raking his teeth across the nape of my neck as he released deep inside, filling me with his seed.

The action had been reckless, unhinged for a woman as controlled as I'd been my entire life, but all I could do was

shudder from the rapture.

Seconds later, he lifted his head, taking several deep breaths.

“Why did you do that?” I whispered, uncertain my question was audible.

“Did the panic ease?”

I laughed softly, nodding only once.

“Then I did my job.” He backed away, the look of mischief returning.

Studying him was easy, the way he moved as if a predator in the wild. I was never wrong about a person, and I could tell he was as dangerous as they came, controlling in every aspect of his life.

“What did you call me?”

“Beautiful flower.”

The language was Russian or something close, the sound as scintillating as the man.

As I smoothed down my skirt, he narrowed his eyes, taking a sweeping look from my face and lips to my chest. I knew I’d never see him again and that made the encounter that much more sinful and delicious.

CHAPTER 5



*K*endrick

There was something about the delicious woman that had brought out the arrogant bastard in me. Granted, her personality was as sparkling as mine was, but her feistiness was a significant turn-on.

It didn't hurt she was one of the most stunning women I'd seen in a long time.

Insanely sweet pussy.

A perfect voluptuous body.

Long legs with curves that went on for days.

Fuck me. The woman was everything I'd been craving and then some, including her caustic mouth.

I could almost swear the taste of her pussy lingered in my mouth, cherries mixed with rays of sunshine. Where the hell had that come from? Women were playthings and nothing more, casual flings that I tossed aside when I was bored. I'd never had a single long-term relationship. Women were a weakness, problematic at best.

Although there was a part of me that had hungered to settle down, this was certainly not the time. I would avenge my father's death, bring the corporation to another level. Then I'd consider arranging for a marriage and family. After all, I would eventually need an heir.

Now I sounded like my father. Christ.

However, there was nothing wrong with a quick and sexy distraction.

Laughing, I opened my hand, staring at the palm I'd used to spank her. Being able to do it had been refreshing as hell. She'd needed it. Tossing champagne in my face, slapping me? The woman had nerve. Another reason I was still aroused.

Mmm...

Get your mind out of the gutter.

I wasn't in the habit of fucking beautiful strangers, especially those confined on a plane, unless on my private jet. I also wasn't the kind of man to make small talk under any circumstances. Third and likely more important, I'd learned a long time ago never to tell anything personal to anyone that wasn't vetted completely. At least that was one lesson my father had taught me well, so much so that I'd avoided every arrangement my mother had suggested.

She wanted grandchildren after all and at this point, I was the one most likely to provide that for her. No. It had been best to walk away before things had gotten ugly or she'd figured out who I was, even if that was only remotely possible. There were almost zero pictures of me with my family. The internet was watched regularly, scrubbed when necessary. That was the only way I'd remained in the shadows successfully.

My father's greatest weapon, or so he'd told me more than once.

My father, Dominion Gregory, had been a formidable man by anyone's standards. He'd crafted a powerful empire, a legacy to leave to his three children. There were few who weren't afraid of what his power and influence could do, the man owning a good portion of the states surrounding Kentucky. We were considered kings of our empires, my father having the Midas touch. If he approved of another company, then the operation thrived. Likewise, if he gave it a thumbs down, the owner might as well file for bankruptcy.

I admired him for that and many other aspects.

Even if we butted heads more often than not.

He'd been a harsh taskmaster, a man who refused to accept anything less than perfection. But he'd been a family man nonetheless, ensuring his children were given the finest educations, honing their crafts. He adored our mother and showered her with gifts. I'd once heard him say she was the only woman who'd been able to tame him.

It was something my mother had never allowed him or me to forget. Before my father's brutal murder, she'd reminded me only recently that it was time I settle down. I'd almost choked from laughing so hard. Then she'd pointed her long finger at me in front of our father and had said without hesitation:

"You will be nothing until you have a good woman behind you."

My mother was never wrong, but now wasn't the time to consider anything other than a casual fling.

Why I'd told the mysterious blonde about my father's death was beyond me. Because she meant nothing to me. Right? To me she'd been a stranger on a plane with a voluptuous body and a killer smile. Seeing her again was next to impossible since we hadn't exchanged information.

And I had no intention of changing that any time soon. The single time I'd come out in the open had been to my father's funeral, although no photographers had been allowed. People from all walks of life had come to pay their respects, but only at the cemetery. The eulogy itself had been a private, family affair.

Given the stunning blonde with the deep green eyes was someone I'd never see again, I'd let my guard down. Maybe the truth was that I'd needed an appropriate release. Enemies to lovers seemed a good thing at the time. Besides, it had also been apparent that she'd had no interest in finding out anything more about me than what general talk one could have over cocktails and the remaining scent of sex. That had allowed me to relax for the duration of the flight.

We'd chatted. We'd had a few drinks. We'd laughed.

And we'd even fucked a second time, much to the chagrin and embarrassment of the flight attendant. However, she'd covered for us, protected our little secret from the pilot and other passengers. A smirk crossed my face just thinking about wrapping my fingers around my mystery woman's long neck, knowing that I had her life in my hands. It had excited the hell out of me.

Had she known with a single snap of my wrist I could have easily stolen her life?

After giving my hand another quick glance, I shook my head. The feel of the smooth pearls in my fingers had been a dark treat, choking her far too delicious. I'd wanted to see her in the same necklace, heels and nothing else, parading in front of a floor-to-ceiling window for dozens of men to see. The thought was deliciously filthy. So much so, I had to adjust my cock.

We'd said our goodbyes after walking off the plane in San Francisco, each going our separate ways.

Now I had a short layover and a score to settle prior to tracking down the troublesome asshole who'd begun to make my life miserable.

I'd ordinarily travel with at least two soldiers, but I wasn't well known on this side of the country. My family's legacy was noted, but the stories about my whereabouts varied greatly.

I was a Greek tycoon.

I was living on a yacht somewhere in the South Pacific.

I was a recluse holed up in the Montana mountains.

Every rumor had been started by the family of course.

I'd made certain stories were changed and enhanced through the years, which was one reason I'd remained alive.

I continued to think of the sweet taste of the woman as I headed down the long private road leading to the estate near San Bruno where the man whose life would end lived. He owed a good deal of his fortune to me and my family's operations, something he'd obviously forgotten.

He'd once been considered a trusted advisor. Now he was nothing but a rat.

And rats deserved to taste the family's special concoction of poison.

Then it was onto handling the asshole I had no doubt was responsible for my father's death. The Warrington family was tightly knit, the oldest son the heir apparent. What Grayson had discovered was helpful, albeit there was no smoking gun to use against the patriarch as of yet. That wouldn't stop me from getting what I wanted. I was a very resourceful man.

The afternoon sun was still unusually warm, beaming down on the rental car that would serve me well for the next few days. I tapped my hand on the steering wheel then glanced into the rearview mirror. I'd seen no sign of security at the front of his horse ranch, which reinforced the realization the man's arrogance had gotten out of control. I slowed down and pulled over to the side, tugging the binoculars into my hand.

As with every other consultant who worked for the Gregory regime, I knew everything about Harold Wymer from the liquor he drank to the cigars he smoked. I also knew exactly the number of dollars he had in his bank account. He'd been considered a close friend of my father's when the man had been alive, providing counseling services. Until two years before, Harold had been a practicing attorney in the state of California. That had allowed him to handle our limited corporate business activities there. We'd planned on expanding.

It was still something I was considering, but this man wouldn't provide any counseling from where he was going.

Besides, Harold had retired, turning his activities to his other methods of making money. Thoroughbred racing. Why my father had tolerated the man was beyond me, but neither his attitude nor the fact he'd buckled under pressure, providing several sordid details to the Feds, were something that could go without punishment.

Why bother sending one of my soldiers when I could kill two birds with one stone? The thought made me laugh. I noticed he

was followed his usual routine, going out for a late afternoon ride. I'd originally had plans on waiting until he was on his private trail. However, the moment I noticed he was tormenting one of his horses, all bets were off.

I tossed the binoculars, pressing down on the accelerator and heading for the stables, parking far enough away so as not to spook the horses.

While I would have preferred waiting until darkness had fallen, the creature of habit would be more difficult to kill. Right now, I needed everything to go smoothly over the next few days.

The ranch had several workers, but this was considered Harold's private time. Besides, they knew better than to bother opening their mouths. They'd been well trained. I headed into the barn, immediately hearing the horrified whinnying of the horse he was currently dealing with. With the weapon in both hands, I headed around the end of a series of stalls, noticing he was using a whip to try to coax a stallion out of his stall.

The horse was bucking, rearing up on his hind legs. The fucker continued hitting the poor thing. That didn't fly with me. "Toss the whip to me, Harold, or the discussion we're about to have will get much more painful."

Harold stiffened hearing my voice, immediately freezing. That allowed the horse to lunge forward, knocking him to the ground before racing out of harm's way. But not before trampling the man's leg, the cracking sound of bones breaking like sweet music. At least the asshole dropped the whip in the process. The horse whinnied again before heading into the corral.

Sighing, I rubbed the three-day stubble on my jaw, eager for a shave and a shower. Between the arduous last few days and the flight, I also craved more than one drink before crashing for the night.

I lowered my weapon and walked closer, taking a few seconds to glance at the other horses. Very few things shocked me any longer, but the gruesome treatment of animals pissed me the hell off. I couldn't care less about people, my line of work

highlighting some of the worst in humanity, but animals didn't deserve the kind of treatment a fuck like Harold gave them.

"Mister... Gregory."

"Harold. It would seem you've been a very, very bad boy." I had the choice of jerking him to his feet but given the fact he needed to lose more than a few pounds, I chose to crouch down beside him. "I don't think karma is going to be kind to you."

"Kendrick. I don't know what you're talking about. Can you help me up?" He threw out his arm as if I was going to do anything to help him. The arrogance of the man was overwhelming, enough so I shook my head.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, buddy. You know what irritates the fuck out of me? My father trusted you. Enough so he brought you into our family. He treated you like one of his own. Hell, I thought of you as my godfather over the years. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't appreciate being made a fool of. In fact, nothing sets me off worse than realizing my father was yet to be cold in his grave and you fucked with us. The same family you shared holidays with and broke bread with. You talked to the Feds."

Finally, the smile on the man's face started to disappear. Did he really believe I didn't have members of law enforcement in my back pocket?

Harold swallowed hard, eyeing me carefully. "You know I didn't have any choice. They pressured me."

Choices. The word was used far too often. The only thing that troubled me was that if I was correct in my assumptions about Rutherford Warrington, he had more powerful connections than my father had given him credit for. I'd scoured through my father's belongings, searching for pieces of the puzzle. Perhaps as my father had aged, he'd lost his once very sharp edge.

"How many times have I heard that, Harold? Too many. You could have called. You could have sent a message, a text. Hell, snail mail. We all have choices in our lives, some that are

difficult to make but often necessary no matter the outcome. You pledged your loyalty to my father. Here I find out you helped drag him to his death.” I allowed the information to sink in. I knew exactly why my father had been murdered in cold blood. I wasn’t just out for revenge. I was out to make a statement that no one fucked with the Gregory family.

No one.

This would be the beginning of a message sent, kingdoms destroyed. While killing those involved in cold blood would be enjoyable, it wouldn’t return the smile to my mother’s face. Nothing could do that. She’d lost the love of her life. She continued to worry about her daughter, who remained locked down with my mother inside the estate. I refused to allow them to live like prisoners for much longer.

It would be Rutherford who’d be made a prisoner. Thoughts of keeping him caged just so he could watch his empire crumble had been in my dreams the night before.

“So, here’s something I am going to do. As of now, the horses belong to me. In fact, your entire establishment belongs to me.” I pulled out a contract and my favorite pen, giving him a look when he hesitated. “You do want them well taken care of them after you’re gone. Don’t you?”

“Don’t do this.”

“And I suggest you keep your dignity, Harold. I’m offering you a sweet deal. The horses and your lucrative side business in exchange for my mercy. Or would you prefer to pay with various portions of your body?”

He knew my nickname of Blade given my adoration of hunting knives. He’d also witnessed firsthand the damage that could be done with one in my hand. When his mouth twisted, I held up the pen. He snatched it from my hand, scribbling his name on the bottom of the contract. I did prefer purchases I made to be entirely legal.

As he was finishing, I pulled out the silencer, taking my time screwing it onto the barrel of my weapon.

“You were like a son to me,” he said as he had the nerve to crawl backwards. I let him given the obvious pain he was in. When I’d finished, I returned my attention to the aging man. He’d grown soft after making his fortune. There was nothing I hated more than a man who allowed himself to go soft.

I was able to snatch the contract and pen, shoving them into my jacket pocket. That’s when I gathered another whiff of the beauty’s perfume, the exotic mix extraordinary. My cock stirred all over again.

“I am curious what you were offered, Harold. I mean selling your soul when my father extended his home, his business and friendship must have brought you a premium price. That’s right. Several million dollars.”

He stared at me. “I was arrested.”

“So I heard, but that didn’t stop you from depositing a pretty hefty sum in one of your three offshore accounts prior to being arrested. So the Feds would think you’re innocent?” I stood, refusing to get blood on my clothes. When I pointed the weapon at his forehead, he threw his arm across his face.

“Don’t. Please, Kendrick. I have a family.”

“That’s something you should have thought of before selling your soul to the devil.” I issued two shots between his eyes, one unnecessary but I was a thorough guy. That’s one of the many things my father had taught me.

He also instilled in me the need to take care of those who were injured. I’d already made arrangements for the removal of the horses. As I headed for the corral, I dialed the number I knew by heart.

“Have the horses removed and taken to my ranch. If you have any trouble, let me know. I’ll scan and email you a copy of the signed contract later tonight. You can wait until in the morning to begin the delivery.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take care of it for you. Have a good rest of your vacation.”

Vacation.

Brutal savages like me never took a day off let alone a vacation, but why not enjoy myself while I was in California? I laughed at the thought as I headed for my car. The day had certainly turned out better than I'd originally thought.

All because of a beautiful flower who'd sized me up in the space of a few seconds. I rubbed my index finger across my lips, still able to taste her sweet pussy.

Perhaps we'd meet again under different circumstances.

CHAPTER 6



*S*uzannah

Where the hell was my lucky dress? The one that made me look like a voluptuous vixen?

Lucky? I wasn't entirely certain I knew how to spell the word, let alone experience the concept. Before today, I hadn't gotten laid in so long I was sure I'd become the world's biggest ice queen even if I found a man I could tolerate for longer than ten minutes.

And I'd been wearing unfashionable business attire since I hadn't been able to get out of the early morning meeting prior to jumping on a plane. Irrational thoughts about the mystery man continued to run through the back of my mind. By the end of the five-hour flight, I still had no idea about his name. We'd decided keeping it a mystery was a fun part of the game we'd initiated. Yes, I'd egged it on, enjoying the twisted and very forbidden romance far too much.

I dragged my tongue across my lips, hating the fact I continued to tingle all over from the mere thought of his heated, commanding touch. I wasn't usually that kind of girl, wanton and wild, but I'd do it again.

You already did it twice.

There was that.

The flight attendant had even winked at me when we'd left. God. What in the hell had I done? A moment of utter shame

colored my face, the heat driving spots in front of my eyes. Why should I feel any embarrassment? I was a grown woman who'd lived on her own for years. I could do any damn thing I wanted to. There were no rules.

Except ones of decency.

I rolled my eyes and yanked out another dress. I'd concentrated on packing the ones for the wedding. Sexy yet conservative. Not a single one of them would do for tonight. It was apparent I wanted the raunchy moment to continue. I involuntarily reached for my pearls, fingering them like I'd done before. Then I hissed and yanked them over my head, tossing them into my suitcase. I'd never be able to wear them again without envisioning his face.

And his rock-hard body. Only I hadn't seen much of it. Maybe it was true that less was more.

“Ugh!”

Men like that weren't into long term anything and I certainly had no desire or time to try to navigate the intricacies of a relationship. What was I saying? A relationship was out of the question for a long time to come. That was if I could tolerate anyone. I laughed at myself, tossing another unwanted selection onto the floor instead of the chair in front of the floor-to-ceiling window.

Dating had been out of the question, even though I worked in public relations that provided fantasies for a living. Well, in the sense of the perfect romantic getaway. I was the queen of making every island destination, every winery excursion and overseas cruise deliciously impossible to resist. My clients were 'the' destination, the one that you wouldn't be caught not experiencing.

Romantic. Breathtaking. Once in a lifetime.

I'd won awards, had been sent at least two hundred 'thank you' cards from satisfied customers who'd been convinced into taking one of the fabulous trips, most of them getting married. I was paid the big bucks, which allowed me to live in

the lifestyle I preferred, my beautiful red Mercedes convertible my first luxury purchase when I'd hit six figures.

But it hadn't been the last.

I was known as the queen of romance. Men wanted to fuck me. Women wanted to become me.

I traveled. I tasted the most incredible foods. I lived in the lap of luxury, required to taste or try every product or service prior to agreeing to work with them. That had been a codicil placed in my recent contract, which had allowed me to travel the world in style.

And me?

I was lucky to be able to go home to my empty condominium every other weekend very much alone. That's why being even fifty miles from the old homestead had driven a near migraine into my temples. And I'd never experienced one before in my life.

Sadly, I was unfulfilled, the pomp and circumstance of my life bordering on tedious. However, that wasn't something I could share with anyone, including my family. They'd use what little uncertainty I had against me. That was the Warrington way, always in competition with each other. Hell, I'd even been in competition with my own mother, who hated the fact I was younger than she was.

Even though at times I questioned not only my sanity but what I was doing with my life, there was one thing I would stand behind. Going home alone every day was a hell of a lot better than my lying, cheating ex-husband and the game of cat and mouse we used to play.

Sadly, I was reminded of what had once been a passionate relationship every day I signed my name. I'd grown my reputation using his name as a selling point, the man considered king of real estate and finance. My boss had insisted I continue using it after my divorce. When I thought about it, I cringed deep inside, which was another reason I'd agreed to attending my brother's wedding.

If there was a chance to grab the vice president position within my father's lucrative firm, then I was all for it. Then I'd handle the business and my life the way I wanted.

Even if it meant returning to my father's scrutinizing and often condescending regime. One day he would retire altogether. While my older brother was slated to take his position, I could handle Steinbeck. A smile crossed my face. Yes, I could be a devious woman when I needed to be. Maybe the fact he was getting married would keep him preoccupied.

I was ready to pitch my suitcase to the floor of the hotel, groaning when I couldn't find that little skinny mini red dress I'd paid way too much for. It would seem the violet silk that I thought made me look like a weeping flower would need to do. Maybe the reason I wasn't as organized as usual was that my soon to be sister-in-law had begged me to attend her wedding.

The ugly truth was that I hated my brother, everything about him. As sweet as his fiancée, Ashley, had seemed over the four Facetime calls, it was the offer dangling over my head like a golden carrot from my father that had prompted me into grabbing the last flight out of Atlanta. That had left my packing skills tossed to the wayside.

I tossed a few additional things onto the bed, finally grabbing my makeup bag, phone, and the chosen dress and heading into the bathroom. It would seem a shopping trip was in order. But not until tomorrow. Tonight was about a foray into debauchery.

You mean another one.

A purring chuckle left my lips as I tossed the bag onto the granite counter.

The trip had been arduous, the turbulence remaining as an ugly black spot in my mind. Even the sinful joys of becoming a member of the Mile High Club hadn't dulled the queasy feeling completely. However, it was nothing a glass or four of cabernet wouldn't cure. And if I was lucky, some ogling of sexy California men.

At least I'd have the pleasure of spending a few hours with the three other bodacious, talented, and highly sexual women of the Bold and Beautiful Club, which we'd coined for ourselves way back when we were freshmen in college. Another truth was that three of the four had been late bloomers, including me, but that hadn't stopped us from developing attitudes. Now I laughed at our ridiculous behavior, but the friendships forged would likely last a lifetime.

I glared at the woman in the mirror, savoring the recent change I'd made the moment the divorce had been finalized. The brilliant golden blonde hair suited my fair complexion, accentuating the green in my eyes.

When I heard the singsong of an incoming text, I grinned at my reflection staring back at me. Let the night of debauchery begin.

Morgan: *Where are you? We're all here waiting for our queen.*

Me: *At the hotel. I'll be down in a few.*

Morgan: *Guess what we got for you?*

Uh-oh. The women were all wicked, which meant whatever the girls had done should terrify most chicks. Not this girl.

Me: *Should I ask?*

Morgan: *Let's just say you might have a date for your brother's wedding.*

Shit. I'd made the mistake of telling Morgan, the woman I'd remained closest to, that I hated the idea of showing up to my brother's wedding without a husband or at least a man on my arm I'd been dating for a long time. My father was stodgy as they came, acting as if I was over the hill already at twenty-nine.

Me: Nice try. Not a chance. You know there isn't a man alive who can handle me.

Unless it was carnally for a delicious interlude and the man on the plane certainly hadn't been the type to ask to be my fake anything.

My sentiments were the gods' honest truth. My ex hadn't been entirely wrong about the fact I'd turned into an ambitious ice queen, but Christian had known what was most important to me before we'd gone to the justice of the peace on a whim after a night of partying way too late. That had been my largest regret, but one I'd thought would turn out beautifully given who and what the man was. I'd been so wrong it continued to drive me batty.

I tossed the phone then turned on the shower, giving myself a little pep talk. An even uglier truth was that if I arrived at my brother's wedding festivities, which included several days of family gatherings, with a huge rock on my finger, a fiancé on my arm, my desire to be vice president would be taken more seriously.

My father was just old-fashioned that way.

He'd treated Christian like his long-lost son ready to turn over the secrets of the mighty Warrington Empire. That had infuriated me, which had led to the first huge fight with my ex.

"Stop. That part of your life is over." I needed a glass of wine.

Grinning, I yanked off my travel attire, not bothering to worry about where I tossed it. As I jumped into the shower, I reminded myself that I was rich, powerful, and a hottie by at least some men's standards. What I could easily afford to do was to coax a hunk into pretending to be my fiancé for the weekend. I'd buy a little bobble for my ring finger on the way to Napa Valley.

Then the stage would be set for a takedown of my family's company.

As I slipped under the hot water, I giggled like a kid. Well, not takedown but takeover.

Now to find the right man who would understand when I announced the engagement was off.

Perhaps I'd take my checkbook with me to the bar just in case.

My. My. I did have thick, icy, calculating Warrington blood running through my veins.

It was obvious the hatred of my father and his strict regime had followed me. The deep emotion left a sour taste in my mouth, my anger toward my family tangible.

Perhaps it was time to take control. I hated to admit it, but I'd run away, allowing my father to win. Where had it gotten me? Nowhere decent. The ugliest truth of all was that my father had tried to pawn me off to a rival, a man he'd believed he could control by arranging a marriage.

I'd fled instead of fighting, determined to make a life of my own. Yeah, I'd accomplished it alright, including marrying someone who turned out to be as big of a prick as the asshole my father had drawn up a contract with.

What if...

I glanced at my reflection, pointing my index finger at the girl staring back at me. Maybe Mr. Mile High had given me a glorious gift. A fake fiancé. Hmmm...

Yes, maybe Morgan's wild and wooly idea was a good one.

I'd invent the perfect husband. Now I just had to find him. As I showered, I allowed my thoughts to drift to the stunning piece of eye candy all over again. And I couldn't help but slide my fingers into my slickened pussy.

I wish I may, I wish I might, wish upon the sun, moon, and stars tonight.

Send me Mr. Mile High and I promise I'd be a good little girl for the rest of my life.

It was a good thing I'd crossed my fingers.

CHAPTER 7



*S*uzannah

Fifteen minutes later I stood back, twisting and turning as I looked in the mirror. There was nothing like a little paint and body work to get a girl in the mood. I dabbed my lipstick and grabbed my clutch. Fortunately, I was staying at the Marriott in the heart of downtown San Francisco, the bar called The View located on the thirty-ninth floor considered one of the hottest, most fashionable locations in the city.

I didn't have to worry about a cab or a potential rainstorm after consuming copious volumes of alcohol. All I needed to do was to worry about walking to the elevator without making a fool of myself.

Or at least not too much of one.

As I waited in the elevator, I thought about how my family was going to react when I walked in. If I knew my mother, it would be as if I hadn't been gone for several years or that my picture would no longer be recognizable. She'd fawn over my hair, making crude statements then acting as if I was her princess. It was all an act, something she'd learned to do early on in life given the way my father had been.

He was powerful in his own right, clawing his way up from meager beginnings to becoming one of the most influential men in the west. And he knew it too, flaunting it every chance he got. Why couldn't I let thoughts about the weekend go for a couple more days? My family had no idea I'd arrived in town

as I hadn't given my answer yet. Let it be a nasty little surprise.

The soft, computerized voice within the elevator let me know I'd reached my destination. Even before the doors opened, I could hear noise coming from the bar. It would appear it was going to be a rowdy Tuesday night. I smoothed down my dress, making my way to the double doors. Once inside, I took a deep breath. It had been far too long since I'd been here, the last two years crazy busy at work.

The sun was just setting in the background, twilight soon to arrive, but I was rewarded with a perfect view of the city, the golden vestiges of sunlight sparking through the massive windows. I almost had to shield my eyes as I scanned the crowded bar trying to locate my friends. If I knew them, they were camped out at the perfect spot, the table in front of the floor-to-ceiling circular window.

Given my height, I was able to look over the shoulders of dozens of people, finally noticing Morgan first, her hands as animated as she told a story as I remembered. Then I noticed Trinity leaning over the bar top, swinging her long legs underneath. Last but not least was Stella, the bodacious brunette a girl we'd taken under our wings in college, so shy she barely had talked to us. Now she was not only a hot model but a spokeswoman for several national organizations and dozens of voiceovers.

They didn't see my approach at first, continuing their lively discussion. The multiple glasses on the table were a clear indication that they'd been here for a while. By the time I made it to the table, I plastered a pouty look on my face. I was only two inches away before Morgan finally squealed, shaking her head when she saw me.

"Girl! You look fabulous." She gathered me into a hug, clapping her hands after I pulled away. "I adore the blonde hair. It makes you look so... wild and adventurous."

"Sorry I'm late. I needed to wash off the long trip." I bit my lower lip, refusing to tell them just yet about my wickedness. That could only come after two drinks.

“You’re such a bad girl,” Trinity said. “Blonde is your color, although so was raven and red and pink.”

“The pink was a mistake,” I said, half laughing. I’d become rebellious relatively late in my life, including the shocking pink hair and combat boots. I’d wanted to send a statement to my parents. Boy, had I ever.

“The pink was not a mistake, girlfriend. So you know, we were about to knock down your hotel room door,” Stella added.

Morgan shook her head. “You look stunning. Divorce has been good for you.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it for your pocketbook.” I immediately searched for a waiter.

“Ugh. Expensive attorney?”

I glanced at Stella and shook my head. “Try spousal support.” My thoughts drifted to the pearls all over again, which was ridiculous. The bastard had actually found the nerve to ask for them back, along with my engagement ring. I’d refused both requests, although I’d enjoyed tossing out the rest of his things on the sidewalk of our condo with a ‘free to good home’ sign on them. By the time he’d made his way over in his Lexus, almost everything had been picked clean.

“No!” all three exclaimed at the same time.

“Unfortunately, yes. Christian had a down year, and I think the judge was one of his buddies.” I glanced around the bar, growing thirstier by the minute.

“That’s horrible. We should come to Atlanta and make certain Christian knows how we feel about that,” Morgan teased.

“Where were the three of you when I needed you. I’m going to get a drink. Obviously, I’m way behind.” They laughed and I headed for the massive bar. That was the moment I knew wine wasn’t going to cut it for the evening. I craved something stronger. While the entire bar was crowded, I was easily able to find enough elbow room to try to garner the attention of one of three bartenders.

I could tell almost instantly I was being checked out by several guys. I would ordinarily not mind, but this was a girl's night out after all, no matter what my three besties thought. After a few seconds, it felt as if I had the creepy crawlies. I glanced over my shoulder, noticing four guys were sizing me up and if I didn't know better, I'd say they were taking bets on whether the chosen one would convince me to have a drink, a dance, or more.

The game was one perfected in college, cash even exchanging hands. I was insulted, shaking my head the second I noticed one of the four getting up from his chair, raking his fingers through his hair and swaggering toward me.

I adored a man with confidence, but when one walked as if he owned the world, that meant he had no clue about who he was or what he wanted to be in his life. Exhaling, I returned my attention front and center, smiling as a handsome bartender approached.

"What would you like?"

"Vodka martini. Very dry. Four olives. Make that with Stoli." Maybe the Russian vodka would allow me another private moment of my lurid thoughts regarding Mr. Mile High Club.

"You got it."

When a warm body slid next to me, I bristled, incensed by the man's cologne almost instantly. Why was it that guys thought they should slap on a half bottle of cheap aftershave and women would find that sexy?

"What's a girl like you doing alone in a joint like this?" the guy asked.

"Does that really work for you?" I asked without bothering to look at him.

"Does what work?"

"The ridiculous one-liners."

He grunted as if he was offended. "Hey, it looked like you needed a drink. I thought I'd buy you one. You don't have to be such a bitch."

The dude did not just call me that. I took a deep breath, waiting as the bartender placed the cocktail napkin then the drink in front of me.

“Would you like to run a tab?” the bartender asked.

“See the table of hot women over there?” I cooed on purpose, waiting as the bartender shifted his attention toward my friends.

“Absolutely.”

“Put whatever they’re having on my tab and keep them flowing. We are all four hot, powerful women who run our own destinies.” I could tell the bartender realized what I was doing, his grin as evil as my thoughts of sticking the cocktail stick in the offending jerk’s eyes.

“You got it. I’ll send a waiter over shortly.”

I winked at the man then took a sip of my drink.

“How about a dance? You can dance, can’t you?”

The guy was begging for a hard swing.

Using my teeth, I pulled off one of the olives, chewing and swallowing before tipping my head in his direction, purposely dragging my tongue across my lips. The flight had certainly broken my crappy mood. “Do you mind not standing so close?” I asked after he continued to crowd my space.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Or is that too bitchy for you?” I glanced into his face, keeping a polite smile. I knew I was off my game and likely being a little too harsh with the man.

The jerk made another mistake, clamping his meaty paw around my forearm. I glanced down slowly as I pushed the drink away, flexing the fingers on my other hand. There was no sense in wasting such a delicious treat, even if tossing the liquid in his face would suit my mood. Instead, he’d get a piece of my... fist.

I suddenly felt another presence behind me and stiffened.

Whoa. Hold on. I was instantly lightheaded. It wasn't possible that my wish had been granted. I fisted my hand, licking my parched lips. Then I heard a jealous, extremely possessive growl as if coming from a predatory animal.

I would know the scent anywhere as it had remained in my nostrils during the trip from the airport, one of the reasons I hadn't wanted to take a shower. I didn't waste any time with acknowledging Mr. Mile High's presence, choosing to throw a punch. I was shocked when he managed to snag my fist, pushing my arm down with ease.

Snarling, I snapped my head in his direction. His eyes were twinkling in amusement. Mr. Mile High in the flesh and blood. And looking far too delicious. Yet, the commanding look on his face reminded me of his sparkling personality. He wasn't just an arrogant bastard. He was a sublime egotistical maniac but at this moment, I adored that about him.

"I'm so very sorry I'm late, my beautiful flower. Is this man bothering you? Business kept me for a couple hours longer than I anticipated. I knew you were with your friends, but I didn't think that included a slime bag." The look he threw Mr. Slime Bag was one I'd remember for a long time.

As if he could break the man's arms and crush his spine for daring to look at me.

"Who the fuck are you calling a slime bag?" The jerk puffed up, his nostrils flaring.

"He is bothering me, but I can handle him. You know how I am or at least you should by now." Mr. Mile High Club's voice had me tingling all over again, but I kept my tone harsh on purpose. What were the odds that he'd ended up in the same bar and the same hotel I was in? About as much as winning a lottery or receiving praise from my father.

I could smell deceit a smile away and the stench now was definitely rancid. Still, the thought of parading him in front of my father kept a tingle coursing through me.

"Daddy. You wanted me to find the perfect husband. Well, I think I did just that."

Now I just needed to find out Mr. Mile High's net worth and I could be golden.

What are you doing? Are you crazy?

"Yes, I do, but does he know who you are? The better question is does he know the kind of jealous man that I am when I'm around you?" My mystery lover's smile was full of dirty innuendoes.

"I was here first." Mr. Slime Bag was adamant.

Both Mr. Mile High and I sighed at the same time. Then my mystery fling had his hand wrapped around the jerk's throat so fast, slamming him against the bar, I was as startled as everyone else. Those around us backed away while the jerk immediately looked as if he was going to have an aneurism or a heart attack.

Mr. Mile High kept the pressure, using his brute strength to lift the jerk to his toes. I couldn't help but smile. How could a girl not?

"So, here's how we're going to play this. I'm going to pretend you didn't touch my girlfriend. In doing so, you get to live. However, if you or one of your buddies dare attempt to talk to her, bother her, or even look cross-eyed in her direction, I will return. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Fuck you."

Oopsie. I could tell my mystery man didn't like the jerk's answer. He squeezed with such minimal effort that I could tell Mr. Mile High had been trained in the art of torture.

"One. Last. Chance," he snarled, squeezed until the man was wheezing then let off the pressure.

The jerk tumbled forward, smacking his hip against one of the barstools. Then he righted himself, rubbing his neck while coughing and wheezing.

Mr. Mile High tipped his head, giving me a salacious look. I gave him a nod of respect. While his Neanderthal behavior should annoy me, it had been a long time since any man had acted chivalrous around me.

“Sorry, man,” the jerk managed. “I wasn’t trying to poach.” *Cough. Cough. Cough.* “All she had to do was to say she was here waiting for someone.” *Cough. Cough.* The unwanted asshole held up his hands, backing away.

I continued to keep my smile, trying to figure out why my mystery man’s presence was unnerving. When the other guy was gone, I turned around to face the stunning hunk, giving him a hard glare. “For a man who enjoys being anonymous, you certainly do get around. I will have you know I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

Mr. Mile High crowded my space, drinking in my perfume. “Without a doubt. However, I do enjoy putting a pig in his place.”

“Who do you think you are?” I demanded.

“A man claiming what already belongs to him.”

Why did he have a way of befuddling me?

My nipples were fully aroused, something he no doubt was able to see. When he lowered his head, his lips dangerously close to mine, I blinked and forced myself to look away. “Are you following me?”

“Maybe I should ask you the same question.” He had the same sexy yet dangerous expression on his face, allowing his gaze to fall. Everything about him was subtle yet powerful. While I had the distinct feeling he was undressing me with his eyes, he did so in such a controlled fashion that I was left trembling, my pussy throbbing instead of feeling dirty.

And my mouth was dry, longing to taste his lips all over again. He lifted a glass, the shimmering lights of the bar allowing me to see the amber color.

“You are a man of habits,” I told him.

“I see you are not. Martini? I’m surprised.”

“Perfect for a girls’ night out.” Why were my panties damp?

“What a pity.” He glanced in the direction of where I’d motioned with my nod, his eyes becoming hooded.

“That you can’t handle four women at the same time?”

He leaned in, pressing his lips against my cheek. The searing effect was instantaneous. “I could handle four easily, beautiful flower. However, it’s not something I’d want to do. I’m a one-woman man.”

When he leaned back, I had the desire to sigh from his words but didn’t give him the satisfaction. “I would ask you to join us but it’s a special night for the four of us.”

“A celebration.”

“Yes.”

“Of? If I may be so bold to ask.”

“My divorce from a pompous, horrible, abusive pig. And my brother’s notoriously lavish and disgustingly repulsive wedding to a poor girl who has no idea the kind of reprehensible family she’s marrying into.” The admittance made me cringe all over again.

“A pity party for her soul?”

His question caught me off guard, forcing me to laugh.

“Yes, a pity party. To poor Ashley. May her soul not be blackened immediately.” I grabbed my drink, lifting my glass, curious as to what he would do.

The twinkle in his eyes drew me in like a spider to a gilded web. I wanted to hate myself for finding him so attractive, but I couldn’t stop tingling from his electric presence alone. He lifted his tumbler, slowly allowing our glasses to clink. “To poor Ashley.”

We heard male laughter and he shifted his attention away. While only briefly, it forced me to glance over my shoulder. The jerk and his three drunken friends were attempting to rile my sudden hero.

A shadow fell across his face as anger clouded his expression. “I’ll allow you to enjoy your evening. As far as your… husband? His loss. By the way, beautiful, welcome to enjoying the rest of your life.”

With that, he walked away.

CHAPTER 8



*S*uzannah

Oh, my God. Oh. My. God.

How could he be here? Mr. Mile High in the flesh.

Why were prickles dancing on both arms? And why did I have a very bad feeling it wasn't a coincidence?

I glanced toward the ceiling, half expecting Mother Nature to remind me of my promise. Being good for the rest of my life wasn't a possibility.

“Whew. Who was that?” Morgan's tone was almost accusatory, but she knew me far too well, always confronting me when I was holding something back. She dragged her tongue across her ruby-stained lips for emphasis, winking at the other girls to incite their entrance into what Morgan used to call the ‘bad girls club.’

That meant a tell all session, almost like spin the bottle, only the dare was never about kissing a boy but taking a shot of whatever cheap liquor was available instead. We learned every dirty, dark secret and desire the others had during those nights of our early stages of debauchery. I'd never wanted to do a ‘tell all’ again. What the girls knew about my family was enough to drag our names and already sordid reputations through the mud.

My father was seen as a pillar of society. If they only knew he enjoyed young girls on the side, gambling with his buddies

and partaking in bringing illegal cigars and various liquors into the country, they'd likely burn him at the stake. Not that I would mind.

"A savior," Trinity breathed.

"A hunk of a hero," Stella added.

"Sorry. The other guy was the one we thought would be perfect as your fake fiancé." Morgan shrugged sheepishly.

"You are kidding me?" I gave her a harsh glare.

"Sor-ry."

I lifted my brow, grinning as my first response. My first impression of Mr. Mile High remained intact, but he was growing on me. Maybe all the romance books weren't completely off base. Dominating alpha males were sexy as hell. I was surprised I'd shared the news of my divorce with him or about the wedding. What he must think of my behavior. Maybe the two of us were far too much alike. The devious plan I'd concocted rushed into the forefront of my mind all over again. Granted, there was a hell of a lot of risk involved but it was obvious the man could handle himself in difficult situations.

"Now, I'm curious. Who was the other sexy guy?" she asked, recovering from my condemnation.

"Just a friendly guy helping me get away from a letch." I threw a look over my shoulder at the four guys sitting at the table across the way. Unfortunately, they had a bird's-eye view of where we were partying.

"I don't know. The first guy didn't seem too bad," Trinity cooed. Then she burst into laughter when I glared at her.

"Nope. He was smarmy. You could tell that from over here," Morgan insisted. "But the other guy... Delicious."

"Girl. With all the money you make as a stockbroker you can't find a suitable guy?" I asked Trinity as I licked the rim of my glass, trying to be as casual as possible about scanning the bar for Mr. Mile High. It would seem he'd disappeared into the

shadows. But not before I'd noticed he'd changed into something far more intoxicatingly sexy.

He was wearing dark trousers and an open midnight shirt, unbuttoned just far enough I was able to catch a slight glimpse of a fine line of dark chest hair. There was nothing I wanted more than to run my fingers through the coarse hair, maybe even fisting a handful as I rode him like a wild stallion.

Girl. Get your mind out of the gutter.

"Hey. A girl can look. Remember? A night of eye candy," Trinity said in a lewd tone.

I hadn't realized I was still licking the rim of my glass until Stella propped her chin with her fisted hand only a couple of inches away, a raw look of amusement on her face.

"You do know that guy," she accused. "If not, he really wanted to get to know you in the biblical sense."

"No. As a matter of fact, I didn't catch his name." At least that part was true.

"Uh-huh. Why do I get the feeling something happened between you two?" There was a heavy twinkle in Stella's eyes. "You can always tell by how possessive they are when other men are involved."

"Don't mind Miss Stella, aka wild woman," Morgan intervened. "She's still reeling from catching a big fish."

"Who?" I snapped my head in her direction.

"Nick Sex-on-Wheels Campbell."

"No. Way." I pressed my hand over my mouth, turning my head slowly to stare at my once wallflower friend. Stella shrugged and batted her face as if overheated. The man was the highest paid, most celebrated actor of our generation. At least according to *People Magazine*.

"A girl can't tell a lie," she purred like a wildcat.

"How did that happen?" Trinity was just as flabbergasted.

Stella shook her head and wrinkled her nose.

“She’s fucking him,” Morgan said in a singsong voice.

“Time to talk. How did you do it? I heard he’s the most stuck-up man in Hollywood.”

Stella planted her hand on her hip. “You put your right foot in, you take your right foot out...”

I dropped my fingers into my drink, spritzing her face with alcohol. “I thought we were being honest with each other.”

“If you’re so into being honest,” Stella teased, “then you go first about Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome.”

“She’s right,” Morgan added.

All three girls leaned in, and I hissed. “Fine. He was across the aisle from me on the plane and we... talked. He’s actually not a very nice man. In fact, he’s an asshole, but sexy eye candy. Extremely possessive. And he smells like a dream.” I was digging such a huge hole for myself. “That’s it. We chatted. I slapped him. He patronized me.”

The three girls glanced at each other, and Trinity rolled her eyes first. “Right. And you flew here economy class. Right?”

“What’s that mean?”

“That means you’re blushing.” Morgan pointed and I cringed. They laughed. I wanted to crawl under the table. “What really happened?” When I remained quiet, she popped me on the arm.

“Spill it or else.”

I popped the last olive into my mouth, taking my time chewing it. “Let’s just say I had an experience I won’t forget in the tiny airplane bathroom.” I held my breath, lifting my eyebrows as I studied my besties. The looks of shock turned into ones of awe.

“Oh. My. God.” I didn’t think the three girls could squeal any louder, on cue and in unison too. I had a feeling dozens of people heard them. The insult was pushed to an entirely different level when Stella slapped my arm.

“You fucked him? The Mile High Club? I am soooo jealous.” Morgan seemed beside herself, fanning her reddened face. “I thought you didn’t have it in you any longer.”

“Very funny and a little louder please so he can hear every word you’re saying.” I wasn’t prone to falling into fits of embarrassment, but the impetuous decision had been very odd for me. Still, I tingled from the thought of his hard cock sliding inside.

And the savage spanking he’d given me. Every time I moved, I was reminded of the intensity of our actions. Morgan leaned in and I could tell she had something on her mind.

“You know. Then he’s the perfect candidate to take as your new fiancé. I know that’s what you want to do.”

I thought about the little promise I’d made to Mother Nature or God or something in the heavens. He could be the perfect choice but not without learning more about him. I envisioned putting together questionnaire and rolled my eyes.

Frowning, I turned my head ever so slowly in her direction. “He’s not the type. Trust me. He’s all about taking control, being in charge, dominating the hell out of me and you know I can’t stand a man like that.”

“You don’t have to marry him for real. Just make him a proposition he can’t refuse,” Trinity said with a mischievous lilt in her voice.

“I can’t do that. He’s obviously someone of importance. Or he acts like he is. For all I know, he’s a pauper.” Something about the story he’d told me about his father gave me the impression he had more money than God.

“There’s an easy way to find out,” Morgan said.

“Ask to see his financials,” Trinity suggested, bursting into laughter.

“I can’t do that! It’s not... polite. Besides, I’m not certain my father won’t see through the ruse. Then I’d be even more humiliated than returning a divorced woman.” Although the idea wasn’t a bad one. My thoughts drifted to the dude my father had wanted me to marry. What if he was asked to come

to the wedding events? What if a new contract had been written? Oh, God. I thought about the risks and rewards, more uncertain what to do than ever. “Plus. You know how secretive my father is about business and anyone who enters the fold. My father will insist on a background check, and I doubt Mr. Mystery Man will endure that.”

“How can your father do that if you just show up with him on your arm?” Stella’s question had merit. Given the festivities, my father wouldn’t have time to delve into the man’s past. *That’s what he has minions for.* Ugh. True enough. His attorney could find out anything about anyone in a matter of hours. Things were going from bad to worse.

However, there was the awkward fact we didn’t know a thing about the other. At least nothing tangible. I knew what his favorite food and drink was. I’d heard about a sailing trip he’d been on. And we compared notes on an overrated action flick. That wasn’t fiancé material.

“True but I honestly don’t know his name.” The admittance made me laugh. Heat rose across my jaw and my pussy started to throb all over again.

“Girl. You are our heroine. To the girl least likely to have a one... afternoon stand. Ooh-la-la.” Trinity lifted her glass and I held my head high. I guess I could cross something off my bucket list.

As we toasted to my scandalous liaison, Morgan appeared more serious as she leaned over the table. “Talk to me about what you’re really trying to do. This isn’t just about the wedding of the year in Napa Valley.”

“I could never get anything by you.” I glanced out the window at the neon lit buildings and twinkling lights of the city. On one of the rare occasions my mother took me with her on a shopping spree, we always stayed in the hotel, and I’d beg to come see the view from the bar. Given the amount of money my family had, the power and influence they wielded, the wish was always granted even when I was underage.

“Nope. Spill it. If you fucked a stranger on a plane, you’re very upset about something.”

I laughed nervously, which wasn't like me, and polished off my drink. When a waiter appeared out of the shadows, placing a fresh martini in front of me, I realized how pathetic I'd become over the last few months. "I'm worried my father will try and set me up again."

"You're almost thirty years old. He can't force you into marrying someone you don't want to." Morgan rolled her eyes then noticed my expression. "I forgot who your father was. Is that it? If so, Mr. Stud Muffin really is perfect."

"I wish that was it. My father dangled a carrot regarding the business in my face a few weeks ago. He's considering hiring a vice president of operations from outside the family."

"Wait. I thought your brother was his favorite boy toy."

"Steinbeck is the vice president of finance. Up until this point, my father was in control of all aspects of operations."

"Oh, so he's seriously considering retiring after all these years."

"It would appear that's the case." I ran my finger around the rim of the glass, thinking about my father's words when he tossed out his proclamation as if telling me in no uncertain terms I wasn't good enough to be considered for the helm of the business.

"Your brother is everything the Warrington Empire requires and deserves, but he will need a solid second in command to have his back."

"And you want that position."

The smile on Morgan's face was one of many reasons we'd gotten along from day one as freshmen. "I'm bored with Atlanta and in truth, I need to get away from Christian's shadow. I've thought about the inns and wineries we own, developing incredible plans for them my father never gave a shit about."

"You could always change your name."

"You know that will be challenging."

She lifted her wineglass. “You used to love a challenge. What bothers me about this is that you worked your butt off to get out from under your father’s thumb. Now, you want back in?”

“On my terms. My salary. My job description, one I’ve already created.” I had other demands as well, but they weren’t ones I felt comfortable talking with Morgan or anyone else about.

She glanced at the other two girls, who were actively flirting with two good-looking guys who’d stopped by. When she leaned over another couple of inches, I braced for impact. “Your father isn’t exactly... the kind of man with high morals. No offense, but it’s well known how ruthless your father has been over the years, destroying his competition.”

“I’ve never known you to tiptoe around the obvious. Yes, my father has always played with the gray areas of right and wrong with regard to criminal activity.” Why I was sugarcoating it with my bestie was beyond me. There was no doubt in my mind my father had used extortion and blackmail to get what he wanted. He’d also punished anyone who’d gotten in his way, including members of law enforcement. Politicians. You name it. I could swear the man had a little black book of nasty proclivities. I’d long suspected he’d assassinated certain enemies as well.

And Steinbeck was just like him.

I had to wonder if Ashley knew what she was getting in the middle of by marrying into the family.

“I don’t mean any disrespect to your family, but is this the kind of life you want to live?”

“Let’s put it this way. I don’t want anyone else to obtain a position that belongs to me.”

Morgan shook her head and eased her hand through her long hair. “Then that means you’re willing to jump through your father’s hoops, as in pretending you’re engaged to a fabulous billionaire. Right?”

“That would be ideal.” A tickling sense of electricity slipped down the back of my neck, crawling ever so slowly down my spine. I sensed his presence, Mr. Mile High. My mouth was

suddenly dry, red-hot heat searing my nerve endings. When I turned my head to the left, I noticed he'd returned to the bar and he was watching me. While the dim lighting hid his expression, there was no doubt given the vibes flowing from one side of the room to the other we had a strange connection.

And that he was very hungry.

Morgan followed my gaze, grinning in her usual seductive way. "Then it really does sound like the mystery man you fucked might be the perfect person for the job. I get there are risks but no pain, no gain. Right? Why not consider it?"

"Because I don't know him."

"It's Tuesday. The first event isn't until late Thursday. Right?"

"A fabulous wine and cheese party at one of our wineries."

"That's plenty of time. Think of it this way. You already know each other carnally." Her laugh was even more lilting. She didn't understand my family at all, her parents as close to the representation of the Hallmark family as I'd ever encountered. Being in their house for any festivity or celebration reminded me of what it would be like to go to Disney World. Not that I would know. I'd never been to an amusement park.

Far too beneath the Warrington family.

"My father is able to see through a ruse from a mile away. I don't know this guy and I seriously doubt he'd want to deal with my family's craziness."

"Girl. Do you see the way that man is looking at you? As if he could eat you alive. It's worth a conversation or perhaps a quiet drink in your hotel room." She pushed my arm, trying to get me to step out on a limb. She had no way of knowing I'd been doing that for years, just in entirely different ways.

As required by my family.

"I don't know anything about him," I told her for the third or fourth time, trying to remain vigilant. It would be enough to deal with days of interacting with my family. To have a complete stranger with me that I was required to pretend I was marrying, let alone that I was in love with, was dicey.

What happened to the girl who indulged in every adventure she could get her hands on?

She grew up. That's what happened.

Or maybe she'd lost her nerve. Now I was feeling sorry for myself. How quickly I'd gone from being a vibrant young woman to a bitter divorcee. I purposely looked away from him, debating her suggestion.

"Think about it. What do you really have to lose? You could have some fun at the wedding and if all goes well, your father will offer you the job. If not, at least you won't need to stand in the corner drinking all by yourself at numerous parties."

"Oh, thanks. You make me feel so much better."

Morgan threw her head back and laughed. Maybe she was right. I'd already made a fool of myself in front of the arrogant, sexy as hell man. Asking him to an extended date wasn't necessarily a crime. Was it?

Exhaling, I squeezed her hand. "Maybe you're right."

"That's the spirit. You go, girl. We'll cheer you on from the sidelines."

I pushed my drink aside, sliding my palms down the front of my dress. Then I plastered my signature smile on my face and turned around, prepared to take what I wanted for a change.

Then I laughed. Mr. Mile High Club had disappeared.

CHAPTER 9



*K*endrick

People watching.

I'd honed my observation skills over the years, initially to know when someone was lying to me. It had come in handy more than once, able to read a guilty man's twitches from a half block away. People could learn to lie very well but their bodies never failed to betray them.

It was easy to tell a few aspects about the stunning woman from the airplane not only by the way she was dressed and what little I knew about her, but also by the company she kept.

She came from money, likely a wealthy family.

She'd been educated in a fine upstanding institution where she excelled in an upper echelon sorority.

She'd gone against her father's wishes, which prompted the hatred she had for him.

And she was determined to take control of a life she'd allowed to go askew. That was evident by her reckless behavior on the plane. I took a sip of my drink, my heart racing.

At least tonight I had the pleasure of observing a creation straight from God himself. The mystery girl was perhaps the most beautiful woman I'd ever encountered. While I'd enjoyed the casual CEO appearance of her pencil thin black skirt and expensive silk blouse complete with the conservative set of

pearls, I much preferred the stunning violet dress and the way the shimmer of low lighting caught the iridescent flecks of colors in her hair.

However, images of her naked body in the necklace and heels weren't far from my mind. The woman made me want to turn our one-night stand into a nightly event.

When I'd seen another man daring to talk to her, then touching her against her wishes, it had set off the possessive side of me. I'd always been dominating, preferring women who enjoyed indulging my dark kinks. Their full surrender had been a requirement, but this woman had set off a more primal response. I'd wanted to spill the man's blood, ripping out his heart with my bare hands.

She'd been nervous on the flight but not only because of the turbulence. I'd caught a glimpse of her phone as she was confirming her return to Atlanta. If I had to guess, I'd say she knew California well given her selection of hotels, the very one I'd already booked a room in for the night. Given the inner-city location, the upscale Marriott wasn't necessarily one targeted by tourists.

I also knew given the way she'd been clutching her pearls that the trip she was on had brought bad memories. Her statement of divorce had confirmed it.

What a jerk.

I might enjoy, even crave violence in my life, but not with regard to women. Any man who was abusive to a woman deserved a special place in hell.

And I didn't mind putting him there.

The evil thought kept a smile on my face as I rubbed the rim of the glass against my bottom lip. It was difficult not to crane my neck, keeping her in my sights.

A wedding. I sensed there was discord in her family, which was usually the case. I'd revered my father, respecting not only his wishes as well as his aggressive tendencies, but that didn't mean we'd been best buddies. However, I was close to

my mother and sister. In my mind they were angels required to live with very bad men.

It was difficult not to watch the gorgeous blonde, studying her every move. She was dazzling, her laughter filtering across the room and over the loud music. I took a deep breath, reminding myself I had a job to do and an empire to get back to.

The buzz of my phone brought another moment of annoyance. As soon as I jerked it into my hand, I walked toward the entrance to find a more suitable location to talk. Grayson never called unless there was an issue. He knew better than to interrupt my work or my nights. They were my private time, my employees left with the understanding that unless something was burning down or an attack imminent to leave me the hell alone.

I took long strides through the bar, eyeing the jerk from before. At least I'd put the fear of God into him. After slamming my hand on one of the double doors, I moved quickly toward the hallway and down to the observation deck. "Grayson."

"Sorry to bother you, Kendrick, but you needed to know that Steinbeck cancelled the meeting with his stockholders."

"What the fuck? The man never varies from his business activities, which is one of the reasons I made the decision to fly to California at the last minute."

I'd been talked down from the rafters by my second in command, my original plan to terminate every member of the family neither prudent nor in my family's best interest. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew it was best, but I wanted Rutherford Warrington to pay for what he'd done.

"Well, he has a damn good reason. He was squeezing it into the middle of a packed weekend agenda." Grayson chuckled.

I could tell there was a hidden meaning behind his jesting words, but that didn't squelch my increasing rage.

"I don't give a fuck. Goddamn it." It had been a perfect scenario. I'd had plans on crashing the meeting, establishing new terms that couldn't be denied or argued with. Of course,

that was because of the information my father had collected on Rutherford over the years, keeping it in reserve in case he needed to rein the man in line. While Steinbeck had yet to take over, with a single phone call, I could crush the entire empire and that was something I'd planned on ensuring they understood before I left the building.

Now. This. Shit.

Now I'd need to find another way of playing hardball. Eliminating an enemy in any manner was truly delicious, but doing so while they watched their lucrative world dissolving before their eyes was much better. I'd had a former mentor, a man whose skill in destruction had rubbed off. The ultimate revenge was in living my best life but the second was gloating as a wealthy man's yacht sank.

Metaphorically of course.

"Steinbeck is getting married, bossman. I checked. He has five hundred guests coming and the damn thing is like a prince is getting hitched with the number of parties and festivities. Christ. They have every magazine and newspaper worth their salt coming for a few of the events. One huge lavish affair. Not a good location for you to crash, in other words. There will be too many photographers there, members of the press. You don't want to do anything irresponsible."

Fuck. Fuck.

"Are you attempting to handle me, Grayson, because you know that's not in your best interest."

"I'm attempting to keep you from doing something you'll regret or will get you thrown in prison."

Sighing, I closed my eyes briefly. Why was it that the luscious girl's face popped into the forefront of my mind every single time I did? A wedding. I took a deep breath, allowing myself to smile as I rubbed my jaw.

"I may have an idea," I said quietly.

"Yeah? As long as it doesn't involve me sending two cleanup crews I'm eager to hear it."

Red flags had instantly risen. There was no such thing as coincidences in my powerful world. I'd originally wanted to provide a heavy-handed warning to Steinbeck and his father to stay out of our territory. I'd hoped that would do the trick as killing them was a risky venture. However, since establishing the meeting, they'd ignored Grayson's phone calls and other business-related situations, preferring to act as if we weren't more powerful in every aspect.

My father had been in the ground for less than two weeks and they'd made overtures with some of my people. Granted, they had no idea how powerful I'd become. My father had preferred keeping me in the background, using me as what he liked to call his greatest attribute. In other words, I was his personal assassin, the man who'd cleaned up countless situations, playing damage control while garnering the respect of his men.

In the end, it had seemed as if my father had predicted his own death.

My advantage was my anonymity, at least for the most part.

That's why I'd arrived in California to handle the situation personally. Plus, suspecting the patriarch of the Warrington family had been behind my father's murder couldn't be taken lightly, albeit I had to react in a cautionary manner. While I had loyal members of my world in the sunny state, I wasn't in control of any real estate. That put me at a disadvantage.

Wedding or no wedding. The fact the firstborn son and heir to the throne was getting married presented a serious problem that required a more tenacious series of actions. Perhaps they needed to be creative as well.

Time for plan B.

"What is his fiancée's name?" I asked casually.

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I asked you."

Grayson grumbled under his breath, the sound of his fingers flying across a keyboard heard over his curse words. "Ashley. Humor me. Why?"

Well, well. It would seem luck had been in my favor after all. I shifted a lust-filled gaze toward the corridor, ensuring that the woman I'd already claimed wasn't attempting to leave without permission. Was she looking for me? Was she wondering where I'd gone, hungry for another taste?

"Let's just say I may have found another way into the festivities. I'm also curious. Does the groom to be have a sister?" While using the lovely blonde in such an egregious manner wasn't in my best interest, it might be the only choice I had left. If she was a member of the Warrington family, then it would seem karma had been kind to me for once.

"Yeah, he does but given she's not a part of the business, I have very little on her. Next to nothing really. Both she and her much younger sister are nothing more than appendages, if you know what I mean."

Meaning Rutherford was old school in his methodology. Women had no place in business. I'd say that would be a decent reason for the mystery woman to hate her father.

"Find out everything you can learn on the older sister and do it quickly," I told him.

"Why? What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I might enjoy a Napa Valley wedding. Don't worry. There won't be a significant body count to worry about. At least not unless I'm threatened."

Grayson chuckled. "You do like playing with fire."

"Yes, I do. Call me when you learn details and send me everything you have on the wedding including the locations for the various events. If I need to, I'll crash one of them. But I don't think I will."

"Do you want me to catch the next flight out?"

"Not necessary. I'm going to enjoy myself while I work." I had other thoughts in the back of my mind, including someone it might be beneficial to talk to while I was in the area. Hmm... I could be a devious man when I wanted to be.

"Just be careful," he said as he laughed.

I chuckled and ended the call, sliding the phone into my pocket. As I headed toward the doors of The View, I realized my balls were tight as drums. It would seem I had a reason to seduce the lovely woman for a second time.

Not that I really needed one.

She'd awakened the darkness inside of me. It was suddenly as if I was a man possessed. I threw open the doors, storming inside. Once I was able to see the table where she and her friends had camped out, I remained in the shadows for a few seconds. I could indulge in having a partner.

The thought was brilliant, ruthless, and improbable. But I was a betting man. And right now, I'd say she was looking for a way to get back at her father.

Enter one badass enemy with an even worse attitude. When she turned her head slightly, I sensed she was completely aware she was being watched.

I wondered if her lace panties were as damp as before.

After a few additional seconds of wallowing in my good fortune, I headed toward the table she'd been standing at with her friends, determined that by the end of the night, she would belong to me.

The length of time would likely become a negotiation, but only on her part. I had no qualms about following through with my promise of taking what I wanted.

Goddamn, I was an evil man.

As I approached, two of her friends opened their eyes wide, one of them touching the blonde on the arm to get her attention. There was no doubt she'd sensed my approach by the way her body tensed. I also had no doubt she had plans on attempting to ignore me. That was her method of handling what she wasn't comfortable with.

And she was confounded by our intense connection.

I'd never had anyone challenge me the way she had on the plane, which had added to the instant attraction. The seduction in the bathroom had only added fuel to the still burning fire. It

was interesting how often the things considered out of one's control were the most enjoyable.

As soon as I was within a few inches, I slipped my hand around her throat, pulling her back by two inches and against my chest.

“Did you miss me, *prekrasna kvitka*?” My whisper was husky and harsh. When I nuzzled into her ear, she issued a breathless moan.

She stiffened but remained quiet. All three of her friends were now glaring at me, ready to strike at a moment's notice. The lovely blonde pushed her drink across the table, spinning around suddenly, her hand raised as I'd seen it do now twice before. She smiled as soon as I snagged it, even dragging the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip to tempt me.

At that moment, I was more than just tempted. I could keep her caged and locked away for years to come, playing with my beloved pet on a regular basis. Did she have any idea that she'd fallen into the clutches of a predator?

I cocked my head, making a tsking sound that I knew she could hear over the roar of music. “Aren't you quick to react.”

“I need to when predators are involved.”

“Is that what I am to you, just a predator?”

She took a deep breath, allowing her gaze to fall down the length of my chest. My cock was instantly aroused, pushing against the zipper of my trousers. “Absolutely. An alligator dressed in expensive clothes.”

“I'm curious. What do you consider yourself?” I lowered my head, her perfume immediately intoxicating.

“A vixen. Or perhaps a black widow. My sting is deadly and dangerous.”

“I do enjoy that about a powerful woman.” I brushed my fingers against her cheek, allowing my heated gaze to fall with them as I caressed her neck, moving ever so slowly to her shoulder. I was instantly rewarded with goosebumps, her lower lip trembling.

“And I am very powerful indeed,” she whispered as she pressed her palm against my shirt, curling her fingers around the material and arching her back. “I wonder if you can handle me.”

“What did you think I was doing on the plane?”

“Taking advantage of a helpless woman.” She rolled her other hand up my chest, sliding her arm slowly around my neck, tangling her fingers in my hair. Everything about her was seductive, leaving her friends mesmerized and the man standing in front of her ravenous with hunger. I longed to thrust my tongue deep inside her sweet pussy, lapping every drop of her cream.

“I thought nothing about you was helpless. Perhaps vulnerable but I have a feeling you were raised to be self-sufficient.”

“Yes, that was a requirement in my family. What about yours?”

“It was dog eat dog in my world.”

“Yet you survived.”

“Yes, I did. In fact, I’m thriving.” The banter was pushing my boundaries to the point I would end up fucking her in the elevator if I wasn’t careful.

Perhaps her actions were involuntary, but I sensed with her she was used to taking what she wanted.

Even if her ex had done a number on her.

Tonight, she would learn what being with a passionate man was all about. I dropped my head even more until our lips were almost touching. I was surprised to find myself lightheaded, the desire roaring through me more intense than I’d experienced before. Few women could push me into such a blatant moment of need, my balls aching to the point of agonizing pain.

“Does that make you a wealthy man?”

“Would it matter to you one way or the other?”

Her smile was shockingly truthful. “I’d prefer if you weren’t.”

“Then I’m a pauper who just happened to steal a first-class ticket.”

The way her eyes lit up was a sweet reward. “Then I guess I’ll need to buy the drinks from now on.”

“That wouldn’t be gentlemanly of me.” I sensed her three friends had become uncomfortable watching my moment of seduction.

“Are you a gentleman?”

“Not in the least.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I like it rough and tumble style.”

“I noticed. That’s all I dole out, sunshine. The more savage the better.”

“Mmm... Delicious. What do you want, predatory man?” she cooed, her voice even more sultry than before. In front of her friends, she had even more confidence.

“If I told you a taste of everything, what would you say?”

“I’d say you were presumptuous.”

“Then you would be right.” I captured her mouth, holding her lips in place for a few seconds. It was as if all time stopped, all sound muted. I was pushed into a moment of fantasy, which had never occurred before. As I slipped my tongue inside, I slid my hand around to the back of her neck, digging my fingers into her skin. Then I pulled her onto her toes, driving my tongue deeper toward the back of her throat.

I captured her moan in the kiss, keeping her crushed against me. I finally heard one of her friends sighing, murmuring something to another. They had no idea we were just getting started. I wanted more. So much more.

And I would take everything I yearned for.

Her body.

Her soul.

And perhaps even a slice of her heart.

After that? Things would get interesting.

CHAPTER 10



*K*endrick

The way she felt in my arms was pure sin, but there was no shame about what I craved.

The lovely vixen undulated in my arms, still doing her best to try to take control, yet I could tell her defenses were falling.

I swept my tongue back and forth, tasting her sweetness, the tang of vodka and the brine of olives. It was a powerful aphrodisiac, the electricity adding to the roaring need. When I broke the kiss, I nipped her bottom lip, issuing a single growl. Then I dragged my tongue across my jaw to her earlobe, nipping it until she shuddered in my arms.

“It would seem karma intervened in our lives.” My whisper was dark.

“How so?”

“She wanted another round of wild, intense sex.”

When I pulled back, taking a deep breath, she glared at me defiantly, but a laugh bubbled from her lips.

“You are one bad boy.”

She had a way of making me smile like no one else could do.

“You’ve figured me out.”

“Absolutely.”

I lifted my head toward the other girls, giving them each a direct stare. "I know this was girls' night out, but I have other plans for your luscious friend."

"Please. Don't allow us to stop you," one of the women cooed, a twinkle in her eyes.

"You go, girl," another said.

My beautiful flower pressed her palm against my chest. "It depends on what you have in mind."

"Whatever I want. You're coming with me." I wrapped my hand around her fingers, pulling her away from the table.

"I didn't agree to go anywhere with you."

"And I didn't ask. It was a command." I kept my hold firm, yanking her away from her friends, taking long strides toward the door.

I could hear her ragged breathing and it turned me on.

Whether or not her friends were trailing behind or had any intention of attempting to stop me didn't matter in the least. They would learn just like the beautiful flower that my commands were not to be ignored or taken lightly.

Or else punishment would be involved.

Spanking her had been another surprise as well as a delicious treat.

She didn't attempt to pull away again or say a word until we were in the corridor.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Whatever I want," I answered, still taking long strides toward the bank of elevators. I had no intentions of letting her go. Almost as soon as I placed my hand on the button, the doors opened and I pushed her inside. After selecting my floor, I fisted her hair, taking a deep breath. Then I yanked one of her shapely legs off the floor, bending it at the knee.

She arched her back, her breathing shallow.

As I rolled my fingers across her soft skin, I gathered a whiff of her desire. Between the two of us, our needs had become explosive. I cupped her chin, my grip firm as she lifted her head. Then I raked my tongue just under her earlobe, enjoying every scattered murmur, the heated breath skipping across my face.

“So bad,” she murmured as she rubbed her hips back and forth.

“So are you.” I rolled my hand around her thigh, sliding three fingers under the thin elastic of her panties.

She tensed as she’d done before, but she pursed her lips and purred, continuing to buck against me. I could do this for hours, teasing the woman into full submission. I longed to have her drop to her knees, pushing every inch of my cock into her tight, wet mouth.

That would come later after I’d indulged in fucking her pussy all over again. She’d been so tight, yet her body so soft that I’d wanted to leave bite marks everywhere. I rolled the tip of my finger around her clit, rewarded with a few labored pants. Then I sensed the elevator slowing its descent. Unable to help myself, I shoved my fingers into her tight channel, my body more electrified than ever from the way her muscles gripped the thick invasion.

She threw her head back, laughing nervously as I fingerfucked her, gyrating her hips in a blatant push for more.

“My famished flower.”

“Yes, sir. I need a tall drink of...” She laughed after refusing to finish her sentence, adjusting her dress when I let her leg down.

She stared at me unblinking as I drove my fingers into my mouth, sucking them with all the vigor I could manage. When she grabbed my hand seconds later, pulling it from my mouth, I couldn’t have been more turned on at anything she did. She rose onto her toes, greedily taking my fingers into her mouth, forming a perfect O as if providing an example of what she had on her mind.

I was completely thrown by her actions, lost in a sea of lust. Every sound she made was exaggerated, her eyes on fire the moment we both heard the pinging of the elevator. I had a feeling we were going to ride the elevator all the way down to the lobby.

What the hell did I care?

When the doors started to close, she pulled my hand away, moaning softly as she licked each finger individually.

When she dropped to her knees, I was floored at her brazen actions, curious what she would do when the elevator stopped to pick up another guest. She didn't waste any time, staring up at me as she yanked at my belt, her fingers flying with practiced expertise. Seconds later, she tugged at my button and zipper, I lifted my head toward the ceiling of the elevator, forced to take several deep breaths.

The moment my cock was free of its tight confines, she engulfed the tip with her mouth, using her strong jaw muscles to suck with vigor. I slammed one hand on the steel wall, fisting her hair at the scalp with the other. Her tongue was magical, sweeping back and forth as she rolled a single finger down the side of my shaft, cupping and squeezing my balls.

"Fuck." The single word was full of angst, my heart skipping beats. She was damn good at what she was doing, pushing me to the point of seeing stars. She wrapped her hand around the base of my cock, twisting it until the friction made my legs shake. But it was the way she was taking me down an inch at a time that had me in a near frenzy. I couldn't take it any longer, pushing her head until her bottom lip touched my balls.

Her gagging sound was sweet music. If that made me an even worse man, I couldn't give a shit. I wanted my cock down her throat, claiming every inch of her. I rolled onto the balls of my feet, closing my eyes briefly as I took over full control, fucking her mouth like a crazed man.

She took what I doled out, every sound a beautiful moan. When the elevator slowed again, all I could do was smile.

Then the doors opened.

The woman's gasp was first, the man's garbled cough next. I threw my head over my shoulder, allowing them to see just how pleasurable the moment was. "Take the next elevator. This one is occupied."

"Yes, sir," the unwanted male said, although the way he was looking at my woman, I wanted to break his jaw.

As the doors started to close again, I laughed. "We gave them a show, my flower."

She resumed her task with more vigor than before. I wrapped her hair around my hand twice, pressing my back against the elevator. Her mouth was so damn hot and wet that every muscle in my body was tense, the heat between us becoming explosive.

"Such a good girl. That's it."

A gruff purr roared from her throat and she popped my cock from her mouth, immediately dragging her tongue down the underside, taking a testicle into her mouth.

"Fuck." I slapped my hand on the steel wall again, barely able to breathe at all.

Every sound she made indicated her extreme hunger. She squeezed my other ball with her fingers, the pressure just enough I was almost tossed into no return. She seemed to sense my discord, purring as she zigged and zagged her tongue up the side of my shaft, engulfing the tip once again.

I pumped several additional times, easily able to erupt in her mouth. I chose to wait, pulling out and taking a hard breath as I shoved my cock back into my pants. After raking my hands through my hair, I slipped my arms under hers, pulling the beautiful creature to her feet. When I rubbed my finger around her mouth, she mewed like a kitten.

"What's your name? I want your real name. And I will know if you're lying to me."

"Suzannah. Now, you know I will ask. What's yours?"

"Kendrick."

"Mr. Mile High has a name. It suits you."

“How so?”

“Sophisticated but with an air of danger.”

If what I had in mind with her played out, she'd learn my real name soon enough. Besides, doing so could prove to be a bargaining chip on several levels. I rubbed my crooked finger across her jaw, narrowing my eyes as I studied her. “A very observant woman. Somehow you pegged me accurately.”

“That's what makes me the best at what I do.”

“Then tell me what I'm thinking.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That you plan on doing anything and everything you want to me.”

“You are absolutely correct, Suzannah. However, there's more. As of right now, you're mine.”

“I'll add Mr. Possessive to your resume.” The soft lilt to her voice could quite possibly drive me crazy. “And for how long?”

I debated my answer for a few seconds, laughing softly when I heard felt the whoosh as the doors opened once again. “For as long as I want.”

She smiled slyly, giving me a hard onceover. My cock was now at full attention, making it difficult to walk. The woman could drive a man to doing crazy things.

“What if I say no?” she asked as I pulled her from the elevator.

“Are you planning on doing that? Are you really? You have one chance to do so,” I said as I held up my index finger.

“Then what?”

“Then all bets are off, *prekrasna kvitka*.” I sensed she wanted the same thing that I did and while uninhibited passion was involved, she wanted to use me. It would seem we were cut from the same cloth.

“You have me curious about something else. What language is that? Your name is very American.”

“Ukrainian. My grandmother taught me her native language. I was the only one to care enough to learn the ancient traditions and some of the language.”

“Then I guess you’re not all bad.”

“Is that what you think of me, that I’m a very bad man?”

A smile curled on the corner of her mouth. “Yes.”

“Then you would be right once again. I’m a wolf. Don’t allow the sophisticated name or clothing to fool you.”

“Not a wolf. I see you more as a jaguar, cunning in all things.”

“And you find that attractive?”

“More so than your arrogance.”

I had to laugh. “Then what is your answer? Will you accept that as of this moment you belong to me?”

“Do you kick puppies?”

The question surprised me. “Animals are my weakness.”

“Then I won’t say no.”

“Good answer. But allow me to provide you with a little secret.”

She pursed her lips. “What’s that?”

“I wouldn’t have accepted anything else.”

CHAPTER 11



*K*endrick

I wanted her.

I just fucking wanted her.

Suzannah.

The name hinted of conservativeness and class, just like her business attire had. But underneath the blanket of armor she'd placed around herself was the heart and soul of a warrior. And maybe a predator as well. That was why we were well suited together. She was just as dangerous, just as formidable, but she'd yet to blossom to her full level of power.

I would help guide her into doing so.

Maybe there was no rhyme or reason to my intense feelings. I hadn't felt an attraction this profound and insanely intense when I'd walked onto the plane. At least not until she'd glared at me with hate in her eyes, loathing everything a man like me stood for. Then I'd crawled out of my lair, allowing the darkened desire I'd locked away to see the light of day.

After that, it had been ridiculous to try to ignore my needs.

There was nothing I adored more than fucking a beautiful woman. To see her writhing underneath me as I filled her with my thick cock was the best way to start a day or end a day. I could see waking up beside her, requiring her to suck me off prior to getting in the shower. I was truly an evil man.

I drove the key into the card slot, barely waiting until the light turned green before twisting the knob and shoving us both inside. When I pushed her against the wall, she lunged forward, using both her hands to rip the buttons from my shirt. Her sparkling laugh gave me the impression she thought she was in charge.

Growling, I shoved her against the wall a second time, immediately gathering the hem of her dress into both hands. When I yanked it over her head, she uttered a slight yelp, pushing me hard with both palms.

As I'd done so many times before, I grinned and advanced again, using my hips to slam and pin her against the wall while I yanked first one then the other arm over her head, wrapping my fingers around both wrists.

"You are a bastard and you don't play fair," she cooed, fighting my hold within seconds.

"You have no idea, sunshine, but you'll soon learn." Housekeeping had already provided turndown service, the single light in the room the only thing I needed to bask in her voluptuous form. I shook my head, savoring the way her chest rose and fell and how she nipped on her bottom lip.

No pearls to help with her nervousness.

I pulled away, cupping her breast, pinching her nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

"Do you crave pain, *prekrasna kvitka*?"

"Do you?" She laughed when she almost managed to lift her knee into my groin.

"Very bad girl. I can see that you thrive on punishment." I plucked and twisted her already hardened bud, enjoying every whimper escaping her mouth.

"Oh, yes. You have no idea."

Her words were becoming breathless, her long dark lashes skimming across her shimmering cheeks. Just watching her reaction to what I was doing was priceless. It would seem I'd

awakened a sleeping beast, the woman likely never feeling so free before.

When I was forced to release my hold on her arms in order to swipe her nipple with my tongue, I was surprised she kept her arms over her head. She even arched her back, taking gasping breaths as I sucked on the tender bud.

With her standing in only heels and a thong, I allowed the fantasy to play itself out, savoring every moment.

Suzanne finally fumbled with my shirt, easing the material over my shoulders. After it slid down my arms, I yanked it off, shifting my attention to her other nipple. I made certain she was aware of how famished I was with every sound I made.

I shifted from one to the other, biting down until she cried out. When she lowered her hands to my trousers, unfastening them again, pushing them past my hips, I lifted my head. “You will never be in control, sweetheart. That’s something you need to get through that pretty little head of yours.”

“We’ll see.”

I kicked off my shoes, backing away then kicking out of my pants. She cocked her head, raking her tongue across her lips several times as she locked onto my throbbing shaft. “My. My. My.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’m surprised it fit into my mouth.”

Laughing, I grabbed her arm, yanking her forward with enough velocity she was forced to straddle my legs. Then I swiveled, taking long strides toward the bed, her shoes slipping from her feet in the process. As soon as I dumped her on the bed, she laughed and bounded up, somehow managing to crawl to the other side. When she jumped off, she blew me a kiss then darted toward the bathroom.

I managed to catch her a split second before she closed the door, tossing her onto the bed for a second time. She still tried to evade me and I pulled her to the edge by her ankle, immediately sliding my fingers under both sides of her panties.

“Be careful or I’ll rip another pair.”

“Then you’ll need to buy me several more.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I snatched the front, my fingers punching through the lace. Then I snapped my wrist, jerking them away from her overheated body.

She yelped, raising onto her elbows as she glared at me, watching as I lifted and spread her legs open wide. Then I dropped to my knees, not wasting any time before swirling the tip of my cock around her clit.

“Oh. My. God.” She threw her head back, gasping for air.

The taste of her was so sweet, cherries on a warm spring day. Who the hell had I become, some poet? I certainly wasn’t a romantic guy, but giving her pleasure, tasting every inch of her became necessary. I sucked on her clit and within seconds, she was extra sensitive, her entire body trembling in my hold.

“You are so... I mean I just...” She cupped her eyes, shaking her head back and forth. Her actions suggested she was embarrassed. The way she was pointing her toes indicated she’d never fully let go before. I couldn’t wait to require her release of every inhibition, demanding her trust as I took her to new heights of pleasure.

As I dragged my tongue all the way down the length of her pussy, she started panting irregularly, clamping her fists around the bedding and yanking. Then she thumped back onto the bed, opening her legs even wider.

Yes, I could easily feast on her for hours. I dug my fingers into her soft skin, holding her in place while keeping her spread wide open. The scent of her desire immediately put me into a drunken state, my needs bordering on sadistic. I blew across her slickened pussy, taking my time to watch her expressions shift from embarrassment to wild need, the woman inside breaking through the surface.

As I swirled my tongue around her clit, she bucked up from the bed, blinking rapidly, a nervous laugh pulsing past her lips.

“Breathe, *prekrasna kvitka*,” I said in a gravelly voice. Before I’d met her I’d never used the language my grandmother had

taught me, not once. There'd been no need, including when I had a woman underneath me. Why her? Why now? In fact, the only time I'd acknowledged that part of my heritage had been when my grandmother visited or during the years I'd been the only one to spend time with her after my father had locked her away in a facility.

They hadn't been close, their falling out affecting the entire family. With Suzannah, I wanted to call her something special. It made no sense but as I thrust my tongue deep into her tight channel, I couldn't help but whisper a few additional words in Ukrainian in my mind.

Zakhoplyuye dukh. Breathtaking.

Vrazhayuchyy. Startling.

Shakhta. Mine.

I licked her with vigor, every sound erupting from my chest guttural. I was more than just a man caught in a desert, so thirsty he'd drink the sand. I was a crazed villain, someone she should run from, although given who it appeared her family was, she was no innocent flower. Could she be a pawn in her family's empire? Absolutely, but the woman was highly intelligent, which meant she knew exactly what her father and brother did for a living.

Was it possible she'd learned about my flight, ensuring she was a passenger? I couldn't ignore the possibility even though I'd booked a commercial flight at the last minute, a calculated decision to try to mask my arrival. Perhaps I'd been foolish, as Grayson had felt necessary to remind me of more than once.

If she was luring me into a dangerous situation, she would learn quickly that I was a formidable enemy. For now, I'd enjoy the opportunity presented to me. I buried my face in her sweet pussy, taking my time to revel in the taste and experience, driving my tongue as well as three fingers inside.

She writhed and moaned, pitching her body back and forth, the light in the room highlighting the glisten of perspiration across her face. She was even more beautiful when she let herself go,

enjoying the moment. I sensed within seconds she was ready to come, her muscles tensing.

I plunged my fingers inside, flexing them open and curling the tips. A slight scream erupted from her throat, her eyes now open wide as her body started to shake.

“Oh. Oh. Oh... I can't... I'm going to...”

“Come for me, sunshine. Come on my tongue.” I growled out my command, keeping my hold firm even though she bucked and attempted to roll.

She clung to the bedding, yanking and pitching, gasping for air. Then an orgasm rolled through her, her lovely mouth now open wide, a silent scream turning into a strangled series of sounds. I refused to stop, every sound I made adding obvious fuel to the fire, a single climax turning into a beautiful wave. I could watch her for hours, enjoying every reaction.

When Suzannah jerked all the way up off the bed, she reached for me, her eyes wild with passion and fevered need. As she thumped down on the bed, gasping for air, I pulled away but not before pressing kisses on one inner thigh then the other. She lolled her head to the side, a look of satisfaction on her face, her eyes mostly closed.

I shifted to a standing position, placing one knee on the bed and planting my hands on either side of her. As soon as I leaned over, she gave me a lust-filled look, purring as she reached for me. I allowed her a few seconds of exploration, rubbing the delicate pads of her fingers down my chest, kneading my muscles.

There was no need for words at this point, our body language the only thing that mattered. She bit her lip and danced her fingertip across my sensitive slit, her smile turning provocative. That's the moment I chose to gather her into my arms, yanking her against me.

“Oh!” Her sharp yelp was followed by a laugh as she clung to me, wrapping one arm around my shoulder, digging the fingers of her other hand into my upper arm.

“Now, I fuck you.” My cock easily found her slickened heat, the tip pulsing as it slipped inside. Then I yanked her all the way down, filling her completely. As had happened before, the feel of her muscles collapsing around my shaft brought a wave of tingling desire unlike anything I’d ever felt. We both exhaled and I spun to face the massive window, the bright lights of the Bay City sparkling in the background.

Her laugh was jolted when I pushed her against the cool surface of the window, rolling onto the balls of my feet and pulling out. When I slammed into her again, she laughed nervously, fighting to wrap her legs around my hips. There was nothing like the lights of the city illuminating her voluptuous form, every nuance of the woman keeping me fully aroused.

With every brutal pulse, her expression turned darker, the look in her eyes as close to devious as I’d ever seen. My actions continued to be nothing short of savage as I fucked her long and hard, driving my cock so deep inside she moaned every time.

Within seconds, I found it difficult to keep control, my needs too intense. Gritting my teeth, I powered into her, realizing only seconds later that she was attempting to usurp my authority, squeezing her muscles on purpose.

With another series of throaty growls, I pulled out, immediately spinning her around to face the window. Then I crowded her space, pressing the full weight of my body against hers. Using my chin, I nudged the hair from her neck and face, taking a few seconds to control my breathing before whispering into her ear.

“I already told you that you will never be in control around me. I am your master, Suzannah. I am a dangerous man. It’s something you need to remember always.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m promising you that you won’t like the other side of me.”

She chuckled as darkly as I was capable of doing. “You might be surprised.”

“Mmm... Don’t tempt me into finding out.” I brushed the backs of my fingers down her arms, enjoying the way she continued to undulate against me. Our bodies were perfect together, the sheer volume of electric current shifting from one to the other and back again undeniable. It was as if we’d been created with one thing in mind.

Utter fornication.

The salacious thought remained in the front of my mind as my cock throbbed between her legs. I nipped her earlobe, sliding the tip of my tongue into the shell as she shuddered against me.

“Arms over your head, sunshine,” I directed.

Suzannah took a deep breath then slowly lifted one arm and the other, planting her palms against the glass.

“Imagine what it would be like for others to see me fucking you. The buildings are close. See that light over there?” I pointed toward the closest building, one I knew was residential. Even though it wasn’t close enough to detect anyone inside, the moment a bank of lights went on, she stiffened in my hold. “What if they’re holding binoculars and can see us? Can you imagine the show they’ll get?”

“Yes.”

“Then give them one, my special sunshine. Show them those long legs of yours while I get us a drink.” When I backed away, she instantly threw her head over her shoulder, licking her lips. “Keep your arms over your head and your hands on the glass.” I knew I couldn’t resist her for long, but I was parched.

“What if I don’t obey you?”

My answer was to provide four sharp cracks of my hand against her bottom. Exhaling, she rose onto her toes, throwing back her head then purposely swiveling her hips.

Chuckling, I backed away into the shadows, but not before turning on a light that would present her to the outside world in the most sinful of ways.

She shuddered audibly, bending her fingers until she was able to scratch them down the glass.

“Dance for me, sunshine. Don’t make me spank you with my belt.”

“Mmm...” She didn’t need any music, rolling to her tiptoes then swiveling her hips back and forth to whatever beautiful piece of music was inside her head. She had me mesmerized, my heart thudding in my chest.

She was easy to watch, her hourglass figure perfect, her rounded hips meant to be grabbed, held while I fucked her from behind. Her breasts were natural, not augmented as so many of the women I’d fucked over the years. And they fit perfectly in my hands. Even the way her long tresses swept across her back was sexy and exciting.

I shifted my hand to my cock, wrapping my fingers around the base and squeezing until pain tore through the raging desire. Goddamn, what the woman did to me. I pulled myself away, trying to concentrate.

The bar was fully stocked, my selection of champagne unusual but perfect for the moment. As she danced, it was difficult to take my eyes off her. She seemed to revel in the thought that someone could be watching. That made the dark man inside of me bridge the surface. I longed to fuck her in sinful situations, allowing others to partake in how lucky I’d become.

I poured a glass, taking a gulp before walking closer, able to see my reflection when I was a few feet away. She pinned her eyes on me, a sly smile crossing her face, her dancing becoming even more seductive. Watching her was an indulgence, one my cock wasn’t thrilled I was doing. I took another sip of bubbly, thinking about how delicious her body would look marked from my belt.

After taking another sip, I moved closer, wrapping one hand around her throat and tipping her head toward the ceiling. I was several inches taller, which allowed me to bend my head, capturing her mouth. As I used my lips to press hers open, she slapped her hands on the glass, swallowing the liquid greedily.

As the kiss continued, becoming a moment of intense need, I squeezed my hand around her lovely neck, finally taking a deep breath before issuing another whisper. “We’re going to get to know each other extremely well, Suzannah.”

“We are?”

“Absolutely. But for now, I continue fucking you. Now, I’ll enjoy claiming your sweet little ass.”

CHAPTER 12



*S*uzannah

Lips weren't supposed to be so captivating. Neither were commands given by a mysterious predator.

Or fingers that drove me to near madness when they pumped inside my pussy.

Only the man who was fucking me was no longer a complete mystery.

Kendrick's stare in the reflection was one of intense hunger, famished even more than before. I sensed not just a moment of utter possession but one tripping into obsession. Was that possible with someone I'd just met, someone I was fucking as if our lives depended on it?

The question wasn't one I could easily answer nor was I certain I'd like the answer. This wasn't real life. This was nothing more than a brilliant, sensual overload of raw sin. I enjoyed taunting him, becoming the bad girl that he expected me to be. I wasn't certain why, given I'd always preferred being in control. But with him, it was as if lightning had broken through my shell of armor.

Was I being too poetic? Placing too much emphasis on something that couldn't last? Was my need to pretend to be maddeningly in love with someone tainting my mental faculties? Exhaling, I tried to keep from allowing him to know how excited and enraptured I was.

Not by his presence. I'd been around powerful men all my life.

By his prowess, his animalistic needs that likely confounded most people, adding to the fact his personality had an insufferable quality. But he was perfect for me. Or maybe I was perfect for him, his match every step of the way.

Even if we only knew each other by our first names, I felt strangely connected to Kendrick. My girlfriends would say it was all about the hot sex we were having, the touch of voyeurism and that fact he'd driven a bully away. However, the tingling sensations screamed that the closeness we felt was unusual.

Plus, the air of arrogance, the hint of danger was as alluring as the man himself. He had my pulse of life in his strong fingers, his muscular physique such that he could easily break my neck if he so desired. Why did I have the distinct feeling his admittance of being a bad guy was barely the tip of the iceberg?

At this point it no longer mattered. I'd thought about Morgan's suggestion and decided I would ask him to the wedding. Why not? If nothing else, it would annoy my father and brother. While I knew that was a reprehensible thing to consider given the important event, perhaps it would allow both men to know I wasn't the little girl of the family any longer.

I also wasn't the kind to allow herself to be under anyone's thumb.

There was no fear coursing through me as he squeezed my neck, only a heightened level of excitement. He was undoubtedly a sadistic man, his question regarding whether I enjoyed pain furrowing in the back of my mind. I didn't have an honest answer. Unless the fact he'd spanked me was proof that I'd been craving something different in passion, something darker.

Even the thought that someone might see us fucking in front of a picture window kept an adrenaline rush tearing through my system. His reflection highlighted how gorgeous he was, and his kisses were just as possessive as the man had been in the

bar. I'd thought for certain he was going to kill the jerk who'd approached me.

When Kendrick backed away, I almost removed my hands from the window. Instead, I watched as he placed the champagne flute on the table, returning just behind me. The reflection of his face was fascinating. I could swear the man was dissecting me inch by inch, including the reasons we'd accidentally run into each other. It was next to impossible for that to happen, the odds astronomical. I sensed he was wondering the same thing I'd been.

Was there a chance he'd purposely gotten on that plane knowing I was sitting in first class? And if so, why? I wasn't provided with any additional time for contemplation. He grabbed my hips, yanking me away from the window, forcing my back to arch. Then without hesitation, he drove the entire length of his cock inside.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, his fingers digging in even deeper.

"Oh." The moan was involuntary, my entire body alive with electricity. I took gasping pants, the heat from my throat creating steam against the glass almost immediately. He pulled out until just the tip was inside, plunging into me again.

And again.

There was a sense of desperate need, his jaw clenched as he fucked me from behind. I couldn't get my mind off the promise he'd made. To fuck me in the ass. I wasn't a virgin to that either, but it wasn't something that I chose for myself as enjoyment. But with him, everything was different, filthy, and a sin against everything I'd been taught to believe in and avoid.

I loved it, including the thought of releasing the last of whatever inhibitions I might have been holding onto. He ground his hips against me, his cock so deeply planted inside that my pussy muscles ached from being stretched. He was huge, much more so than any man I'd ever had. I clawed and slapped the window, fighting my ragged breathing.

"Yes. Yes."

“My hungry flower.” He grinned and pressed his thumb against my dark hole, lifting his heated gaze to watch my every expression.

I bit my lower lip to keep from moaning, staring at him defiantly in the glass. His pontification about being in control left me with goosebumps everywhere. As soon as he slipped his finger into my asshole, I threw my head back, half laughing and half moaning.

“Oh, gosh. Yes...”

“I was right about you. You crave pain and domination.” Kendrick quickly replaced his finger with the tip of his cock, pushing in an inch at a time. He was the kind of man who not only took what he wanted but also refused to allow anyone else to touch. It was an innate feeling, an understanding that by being with him I would need to toss aside everything I’d encountered before.

He allowed me to get used to the invasion as well as the wash of instant anguish, the corners of his mouth upturned in a crooked smile, which allowed me to catch a slight glimpse of the dimple in his chin. While he’d shaved, I could still catch a hint of a dark shadow already crossing his strong jaw.

It made him sexy and wild looking, as if the man was incapable of hiding his true predatory persona. Once he was fully seated inside, he took a deep breath then developed a rhythm. I allowed myself to fall into the moment of euphoria as I’d done on the plane. I was no longer the conservative girl I’d pretended to be but the wild child who needed to be sullied by his touch.

Soon, I met every brutal thrust with one of my own, my breathing strangled but not nearly as much as his. His exertion was about holding back, keeping himself from losing control. So I pushed him hard, pressing my palms against the glass and arching my back even more.

“You’re pushing my buttons on purpose,” he muttered.

“Yes.”

“You want me to punish you.”

All I could do was smile at that point, the tingling sensations now rocketing through me, heat searing every nerve ending. He cracked his hand on my right ass cheek several times, the force he used pushing me onto my toes. I was so alive that explosive vibrations slammed down my spine, curling my toes.

“You will get what you need, not what you crave,” he muttered then bit down on my shoulder. I could swear he’d broken through the skin, the flash of pain blinding. Then he smacked my bottom three more times before gripping it, digging his fingers in. He rolled onto the balls of his feet, every muscle tensing as he fucked me, driving in slow and even strokes, yet with so much power that I was knocked breathless every time.

Beads of perspiration trickled down both sides of my face and when I moved my head, a few drops slipped across my lips. I lapped them up greedily, tossing my long hair back and forth. When he fisted a handful of strands, I laughed softly. He didn’t want me moving on my own without his permission.

The brutal fucking continued, the man’s stamina unbelievable. Just when I thought for certain he was ready to release, he wrapped his arm around my waist, lifting me from the floor. Then he dumped me onto the bed onto all fours, immediately crawling behind me, planting one foot behind my knee before driving his thick cock back into my asshole.

“Oh, my God.” I was unable to keep from issuing a short scream, the shift in the angle pushing his cock to the deepest recesses. I was lightheaded, focusing next to impossible. Exhaustion was taking over, pushing me to where I could barely think. He rocked our bodies forward, a slight creaking sound forming, floating between us. It matched our animalistic sounds as he fucked me like a crazed animal, once against fisting my hair and using it for a leash.

I clawed at the bed, every sound I made unrecognizable. The perspiration continued and a crazy thought entered my mind, something my mother had told me a long time ago. Why it stuck in my mind now was beyond me.

“Good girls don’t sweat when they fuck.”

Obviously, I wasn’t a good girl. Perhaps I’d never been. The thought brought a smile to my face as he growled his sentiments, his hunger off the charts. I pushed hard against him, bucking wildly, the throbbing of his cock increasing. Then without any additional warning, his entire body tensed, every thrust more brutal than the one before.

Then he issued a single deep roar that had to be heard from inside other rooms as he erupted deep inside.

“Fuck!”

CHAPTER 13



*S*uzannah

The thought of waking up next to a complete stranger who'd fucked me like a whore had seemed deliciously naughty the night before, but when I'd opened my eyes at almost four in the morning, the scent of sex hanging heavily in the air after several rounds of what could only be described as an absolute fall from grace, I'd left him still sleeping. Then I'd taken the stairs down the two flights to my floor, saying a silent prayer when I hadn't run into anyone on my long walk of shame back to my room.

My phone had blown up, all three girls leaving me several messages. Two were staying in the hotel, only Morgan remaining in the Bay area. However, I'd known as soon as the sun was up, she'd make contact, asking me if I completed my task.

Oh, I'd completed it alright, pushing every sensible boundary.

I was ready to step into the shower, erasing all traces of the wild night of passion. I'd laid in bed for thirty minutes wrangling with what to do about the wedding event, finally realizing I wasn't the world's best actress, even if taking a date was in my best interest. I yanked my hair into a ponytail, glaring at myself in the bathroom mirror.

Then I pointed my index finger. "You look like you are freshly fucked." A giggle formed on my lips and the moment I inhaled, I was able to gather a scent of him. My lover. Mr.

Mile High. Another group of sensations coursed through me, and I finally rolled my eyes. I was acting like an enchanted schoolgirl. How ridiculous of me.

My devious plan remained in my mind but I hadn't been able to close the deal. Hell, I hadn't been able to broach it.

When my phone rang, I didn't bother looking at the screen, answering it so I wouldn't continue to hear it ring. I had a hangover alright, only sadly it had nothing to do with copious glasses of alcohol, which was all that had been planned.

"I'm fine, Morgan. I'm a big girl and can handle a little sexy night out on the town. Or rather under the sheets. You don't need to berate me. Yes, I had a fabulous time and no, he wasn't a gentleman in the least. Thank God for that. He was dirty and filthy, sexy and ravenous, and took everything he wanted and I'd love to do it again. And no, I've decided not to ask him to be my fake fiancé. I'm not that kind of girl. Well, okay, so the jury is out. Imagine my father's face if I walked in with a poster boy for wanton filth. I had no idea how to ask him for that kind of favor. *'Hey, sexy dude. I need one hot, horny, and wealthy fiancé so I can fool my family. Your arrogance is perfect, by the way.'*" I laughed then shook my head. "He'd laugh in my face. The man likes inflicting pain. Well, I mean by way of doling out spankings. Don't you dare chastise me. It was the moment and God, the man is passionate and incredible in bed. Anyway, first, I need to find out who he is. He wasn't straightforward with his last name, which has me suspicious. Maybe he's an ax murderer."

I took a deep breath, playing back what little he'd said to me. Granted, we'd had other, more sordid things on our minds. A few seconds ticked by, and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. A lump formed in my throat, the hand holding the phone shaking. I hadn't been this stupid. It just wasn't possible Kendrick had heard what I'd said. Then I realized we hadn't exchanged phone numbers. That made the possibilities even worse.

Oh, dear God, no. Had my father called again? My brother? Oh, shit, my mother. That would explain the silence.

“Morgan. Talk to me. Oh, please talk to me. Did I answer all your questions?” I stuck my hand in the shower, flipping the lever. When I still didn’t hear a sound, I thought for certain the connection had been broken.

No, I actually prayed it had been.

When the wave of silence continued, my toes curled, but I was too terrified to move.

However, another unsettling feeling fizzled through me and I finally yanked the courage out of thin air, pulling the phone away and immediately walking out of the room as I held my stomach. I’d said all that to some stranger on the other end of the line. Oh, God. It could be a new phone number from a family member. No. No. No!

“Um, hello?” Please. Please. Please.

The laugh was deep, dark, and far too sensual. It was also recognizable.

Kendrick. Now I was mortified.

Why did God hate me so much?

“Well. Well. My beautiful flower needs a favor,” he said in his booming voice.

“How did you get this number?” My voice was suddenly so strained I didn’t recognize it.

“You think I’m sexy?” he asked, still chuckling under his breath.

I raked my hand through my hair, pacing the floor. “Right now, I think you’re an... the only way you were able to get this number is by breaking into my cell phone while I was sleeping. Is that what you did?” My tone had shifted from annoyance to one that clearly indicated I was pissed off.

“Let’s just say I had a feeling you’d leave without saying goodbye and that wasn’t acceptable.”

I almost called him an asshole except I’d been the one to walk out like a coward. Damn it. I couldn’t help myself, pacing the

floor as I tried to figure out what to say to him. “I’m sorry. I have a lot going on in my life.”

“For the record, I’m not a serial killer, although I have handled situations where violence was required. The people I kill deserve a bullet between their eyes. I am considered sickeningly wealthy. If you’d like a copy of my financials, I’d be happy to provide them. I’m not a sicko but I’m known to be a complete sadist, although only in a trusted situation with a member of the opposite sex. That is with the exception of providing the discipline a woman needs. Spankings are a matter of necessity.”

“I was just joking.”

“Uh-huh. I’m certain you were. Onto the point of my call. We’ll get back to your favor when we see each other in person.”

When. The man was so certain of himself. “Fine.” Oh, great. I’d rambled on. Now I had nothing decent to say in rebuttal?

“I thought we’d have breakfast together. Then we’ll talk terms of our deal.”

“Whoa. Hold the fuck on. We don’t have a deal.”

“Language. I have no issue washing your mouth out with soap.”

I opened my mouth to spew expletives but thought better of it. “I was just getting ready to jump into the shower. Lots to do today.”

“I see,” he said with a slight growl in his voice. “Then we will do it later.”

His confidence and possessiveness blew me out of the water.

Thankfully, I heard a knock on the door. Hopefully, it was either Trinity or Stella. At least they could help keep me off the rails. “I’m sorry, Kendrick. I had a wonderful time last night, but someone is at my door and I have a full day planned. It was lovely meeting you. It really was. The favor I mentioned was a stupid whim, nothing that I could bring to fruition, even if I would like to stick it to my father.” I headed

for the door, exhaling as my visitor became impatient, knocking on the door again. “I hope you understand.”

“Of course. It was very nice meeting you as well. Take care, Suzannah Caffrey.”

He ended the call abruptly and I wanted to say I was relieved.

But I wasn't.

I adjusted the terrycloth robe and reached for the door. That's when I realized he'd used my full name. Fuck. He'd searched through my phone. Oh, no. I groaned, slapping my forehead before opening the door.

When a bellman smiled, immediately pushing a cart past me, I was momentarily shocked.

“I'm sorry. I think you have the wrong room.” There was a bottle of champagne on ice, a pitcher of orange juice and four silver domes covering heated food. There was also a bowl of fruit, mostly strawberries, and a pot of coffee with creamer. I had to admit, my mouth watered since I'd skipped dinner the night before.

“Mrs. Suzannah Caffrey.”

“Ms. That's me but I didn't order any breakfast.”

Another tickling sensation coursed through me and I lifted my head toward the door.

“No, ma'am. Someone else did.”

As soon as the bellman finished the statement, Kendrick slid against the doorjamb, giving me the kind of heated look that would crumble a mountain of marble.

“Thank you,” Kendrick said then pulled money from his pocket. Two hundred-dollar bills were easy to see as he handed the sum to the bellman, the younger man nodding and grinning before walking out.

The moment the door was closed, Kendrick locked it.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, folding my arms across my chest, feeling giddy inside, butterflies swarming my stomach.

He advanced, lifting one of the domes. The scent of steaming scrambled eggs assaulted my senses and my mouth watered again. Did it really have anything to do with the food or about the man standing in front of me? On this gloriously sunny day, he was dressed in off-white linen trousers and a deep cobalt blue shirt.

My God, the man was stunning. And he was irritating as hell.

“Get out of my room.”

“No can do, sweetheart. First, you walked away without my permission. Then you refused to have breakfast with me. Both are completely unacceptable.” He took his time selecting a strawberry, holding the juicy piece of fruit into the air. Then he lifted his gaze. “And there’s that favor you need.”

He was enjoying the hell out of this.

“Get out or I’ll have you thrown out.”

“It would seem you’re in need of something that only I can give you.”

The arrogance of the man had finally taken a toll on me. If he thought he could enter my room doing a hostile takeover, he had another think coming. However, I was curious as to what he had on his mind. “What is it exactly that you are so certain I need?” I couldn’t remember exactly what I’d said earlier, which was as unnerving as the situation.

He popped the strawberry into his mouth, chewing it thoughtfully. There was something innately sexy about the simple action, as if I’d never seen anyone chewing their food before.

“A fiancé for a wedding that you obviously have no interest in attending but are required as with all family obligations, good or bad. Now, you are in luck in that out of the blue I decided to take a few days off after a very important meeting I had. That’s rare for me given I’m an important man. And as I said, extremely wealthy.”

I couldn’t help but smile, enjoying the way he thought he was king of the hill. It was obvious from my ridiculous behavior the night before that I’d given him the wrong impression. I

certainly wasn't a pushover, nor did I tolerate insufferable jerks easily.

"Oh, you are, are you?" I asked coyly. "An important man, I mean. Or so you think."

"Yes, I am. I'm paid very well for my services."

It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

"Then pray tell, what would you charge a damsel in distress for helping her blitz through several days of wedding events with what I consider to be a difficult family situation?"

"That would depend." He grabbed a handful of blueberries, tossing them into his mouth. He was enjoying the hell out of making me uncomfortable. Little did he know what I was capable of. "As you might guess, I make more money in my sleep than most people do in a lifetime."

And he didn't mind flaunting it.

"Oh, please." Fortunately, I regained some of my verve, swaggering toward him, ignoring how handsome and carefree he seemed. "Okay then. Why don't you provide a list of your demands and needs. I'm happy to accommodate to a certain point. But there would be rules to follow."

His grin was positively infectious, but the smile was because of his amusement over what I'd said.

He walked closer, or I should say he swaggered closer. Why did his scent capture the essence of what we'd shared the night before, blissful and mindless passion? I tried to look away, but the man made it next to impossible given his utter... power.

"It would be you who followed my rules, *prekrasna kvitka*. And what I want and the single thing that I will accept is your complete and total surrender."

The words were said in such a flippant way that after a few seconds I burst out laughing. "That's it?"

"Isn't that enough?"

The closer he came, the more nervous I became, trying my best to keep some semblance of rational within my system.

“Not two million dollars or stock in my father’s company?”

“Given I have no clue who your father is and that I am wealthy by anyone’s standards, neither one of those appeal to me.” He rubbed his jaw. “However, if you insist on adding a codicil or two then you will wear the ring we select together and one that I pay for.”

“What? You do realize that this would be a fake relationship. A fake engagement that we will break off spectacularly after the horrid event has concluded.”

“A pity but yes, I’m completely aware. After we’ve concluded our business, you can hock the item or choose to keep it. That’s entirely up to you. Oh, and we will be affectionate in public. None of that never touching garbage I see so often. I will require you by my side at all times. In turn, your family will believe our love is rock solid. Is that clear?” His eyes continued to sparkle, which meant he was goading me. “I assure you that I’m an extremely good actor if that’s what you’re worried about.”

What I was worried about was making a fool of myself. Again. And again. Still, all the delicious what ifs crowded the back of my mind. Why the hell not?

“O-kay. Then I have some conditions of my own.”

He took a deep breath, allowing his gaze to fall to my bare feet. “Of course you do. And they are?”

“You will spend the next two days with me so we can get to know each other. My father will see through a ruse in a heartbeat. That can’t happen. You will allow me time to speak to my father on a business issue without your presence. It’s the reason I agreed to go to this blasphemous event in the first place.” I could tell he was mulling it over.

“Done. Now, I’m the curious one. Why is this so important to you? What level of business are you interested in? Is it because of the fact you’ve never gotten along with your brother or your father or that they see a woman as a weak link?”

“Be careful reading into my family. Remember, we bite. However, your assumptions are correct, Kendrick. Sadly, the truth is much greater than simply one-upping my brother’s spectacular event.”

When he closed the distance, I was almost overwhelmed with desire, which couldn’t be any worse at this point. “And what is it, *prekrasna kvitka*?”

“I want what belongs to me. Half my father’s multibillion-dollar company. Yes, I have a trust fund, although I’ve used the money sparingly up to this point. I prefer to make my own way, but my father refuses to allow my involvement, unless you consider being a glorified secretary a proper position for the princess of the esteemed family.”

He opened his eyes wide then smiled. “We have many things in common, sweet Suzannah. More than you are aware. Perhaps I should have requested a few million dollars. For charity of course.”

“Hmmm... Of course. Because you are such a *decent* man. Too late now. Do we have a deal?” I purposely backed away, holding out my hand for the simple gesture of a handshake to seal the deal.

The dimple on his chin was more evident in the sunlight, a sinfully delicious attribute that would be difficult to take my eyes off. He grasped my hand, shaking vigorously as he would do with any male opponent. “You have yourself a deal, beautiful fiancée. I look forward to your full and complete surrender. Which by the way, starts now.”

With that, he slipped his finger into the sash of my robe, easily able to untie it, pushing the dense material over my shoulders before I had a chance to stop him. Then he wrapped his arms around my waist, jerking me against his heated body.

“Time to take a shower. Remember our deal, my bride to be. You belong to me. And if you’re a disobedient little girl, I’ll have no issue punishing you even if it’s in front of your family. Is that understood?”

Was he really looking for an answer? When he rolled his hands down my back, cupping my buttocks then lifting me into his arms, I was easily able to answer my own question.

“Yes. Sir.”

CHAPTER 14



*K*endrick

Murder.

The little vixen had thought me possibly a serial killer and wasn't far off the mark. The fact I'd told her I was a killer continued to surprise me but what had astounded me was that she hadn't batted an eye when I'd confessed my sins.

I stood staring out the window of my suite into the bright sky, sipping on a single glass of scotch. I was to meet my fiancée in fifteen minutes, enjoying a lovely dinner over a conversation that would allow us to get to know each other even better. I'd left her alone for a couple of hours, handling certain aspects of business that had required my immediate attention.

We'd exchanged surnames and I'd immediately noticed her eyelids had flickered. However, she'd regained a rather blank look on her face. Then I'd seen her smile. She was either feeling even more empowered or had done a deep dive into my background and had suddenly realized the game we were playing could be very dangerous.

I expected no less from a woman who'd insisted on having her attorney draw up a quick contract, which was due to arrive prior to us leaving the city in the morning. I had suspicions that once she found out anything about my background that she would attempt to flee, but she also might find comfort in the fact that her fake fiancé was considered a criminal higher on the food chain than her father.

She wasn't a criminal element, which meant she'd have guilt by now.

Perhaps it would be beneficial if I helped her understand that the money used on sending her through college wasn't exactly obtained from legal methods. No. She was far too intelligent to have ignored that aspect about her father. What I found the most fascinating was that for all her edginess, she was a little fawn deep inside, vulnerable yet determined. That was far too enticing.

Somehow, I had a feeling our fascinating relationship would suddenly become tumultuous. I couldn't wait, given the sex would be that much hotter.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to keep my mind on business. Sadly, events surrounding my family were weighing heavily on my mind, more so today than normal. Plus, there was a level of uncertainty in the air through the employees and soldiers my father had hired, which were in the hundreds. I'd yet to provide enough peace of mind for them to feel secure in either their jobs or their lives.

Although not a single other incident had occurred after my father's assassination. No loss of business. No threats on our territory. Nothing. In fact, it had been business as usual, a confounding situation. Still, I had a feeling a bomb was ready to drop and it had the Warrington name written all over it.

Now I stood staring out at a gorgeous city, not seeing anything but the afternoon my father had been murdered.

What had been as unsettling as the act itself was the method in which he'd been hunted down and killed.

I wasn't much of a golfer, but my younger brother had insisted that we honor my father's birthday wishes. The day had been similar to this one, only a few clouds in the stunning blue sky.

For some reason, they seemed more vivid today than since immediately after the assassination had taken place. Maybe because I would soon confront who I knew to be the person responsible for his murder.

“Stop worrying,” Marcus said, my brother shaking his head as I scanned the area, ready to draw my weapon at a moment’s notice.

“I don’t like the fact we’re out in the open, bro. You know that. This place isn’t protected.”

“Four of Dad’s soldiers are here. He’ll be fine and this is all he’s wanted to do for his birthday. Unfortunately, our mother didn’t get that memo, insisting on a family celebration.”

Something else I hated, rarely attending.

“Four soldiers. There are miles of green here, Marcus. Assassins don’t check in at the front desk.”

“This is a private club, for God’s sake. There are woods surrounding the property. The soldiers swept it.”

My brother was much younger, growing up entirely different than what I’d been required to face. I’d seen my first murder at twelve. I’d participated in one at sixteen, something that had pissed my mother off. She’d forbidden my father from allowing me to engage in a single activity until I turned eighteen. That was twenty-one years before.

I wasn’t in the mood to argue with him. I simply checked the ammunition in my weapon, sliding it into the waistband of my golf shorts as we headed for the club where my father waited.

The quiet between us was unnerving.

“Pop is acting weird,” he said.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning he’s made certain his will is in order, all the finances in place, Mother taken care of in the event of his death. He even established a trust fund for Lucy. I swear it’s like he has a feeling he’s going to drop dead of a heart attack.” While Marcus half laughed, I sensed his concern.

“Pops is smart enough to know that any of us could be killed at any time.” Lucy was our baby sister, an unexpected, and my mother would say unwanted, pregnancy. At barely fifteen, she was also the one most protected in the entire family.

“A lovely sentiment on a day of celebration.”

I threw him a look and noticed my father was waiting outside the club. He had a drink in one hand, a cigar in the other, as he usually indulged in when playing golf, poker, or billiards, his three favorite pastimes.

His soldiers were nowhere in sight.

“I’m shocked to see you, Kendrick. You made time from your busy schedule to meet with your dear old dad.” He clapped me on the back, his smile more due to chagrin.

I glanced at Marcus who rolled his eyes and looked away. He knew better than to get in the middle of my awkward discussions with our father.

“It’s your birthday, Pops. It’s not often a man is able to make it to close to being one hundred.”

“Ouch,” Marcus said, hissing for my father.

Pops was in excellent shape for a man in his mid-sixties, unlikely to retire any time soon. That was part of the reason he was the face and name of the company. Or maybe I enjoyed remaining in the shadows, using my assassination skills for the benefit of the entire family. Killing was in my blood after all. Sadly, it wasn’t in Marcus’. He preferred handling the financial aspects. While necessary, I often worried he’d end up becoming an easy mark for anyone attempting to take us out.

We had our share of enemies, too many to count. However, I was becoming worried that a hit had been placed on my father. I’d scoured the street searching for confirmation, but no one was talking. That pissed me off more than anything.

At least today there was some amount of harmony, also a rarity in the family.

“You are a hard man, son. But that means I’ve taught you well. You’re going to make a great leader one day.”

There was a strange faraway look in his eyes but he headed for the assigned two golf carts, his clubs and mine positioned in one, Marcus’ in another. Our father never drove. Not a vehicle. Not a golf cart. I honestly wasn’t entirely certain he

could drive. I'd never seen him behind the wheel where I'd been driving since I was fourteen, stealing one of the ten or so vehicles my father kept like status symbols.

I jumped in the cart, trying to keep from saying anything to him. He was set in his old ways, half Italian and half Ukrainian, although he'd purposely kept his children from the old traditions on either side of the family. But he'd had the brutality of his Russian heritage and the love of family he'd learned from his Italian mother.

Whereas I'd only accepted the genes for becoming a savage.

The thought brought a moment of irony today and I wasn't certain why.

As I drove the cart, I sensed he was more reflective than normal. I wasn't in the mood to play twenty questions, which was likely what he was hoping I'd do. Once at the hole, we all piled out, my father studying the rolling bright green swells of the golf course as if he'd never played here before.

Which couldn't be further from the truth.

He took his time selecting his club of choice, even testing the wind with a few blades of grass. The pomp and circumstance I could do without. At least we were only playing nine rounds given the time limitation.

My mother would skin him alive.

The thought brought a strange smile to my face.

I barely paid attention as he took the shot, my brother following behind. I was too busy scanning the area. I'd recently learned my father wasn't as secretive about his meetings or his golfing afternoons, information readily available online.

It was a conversation I had planned on having with him today. I'd wait, but not for long. There'd been two breaches of security that couldn't be tolerated. In fact, I had some 'business' to deal with after leaving the game and prior to his party tonight.

The fucker would learn that crossing our family was a losing proposition.

“Your turn, son.” Pops patted me on the shoulder, squeezing until I glanced down at his tired face. “Remember that family is very important. That’s something to keep in your mind at all times. Family should always be first. Always. Money, power, and all the toys a man can buy mean nothing if you don’t have someone special by your side. It’s something I should have taught you years ago. I feel like I failed you, son. That needs to change.”

“You didn’t fail anything with me, Pops. I use my skills every day, just like you taught me.”

“I taught you to become a killer, Kendrick. A monster. That’s not what fathers do. At least they shouldn’t. I should have encouraged you to follow your dreams instead of punishing you for not following my rules. Ridiculous.”

“What dreams did I have, Pops?”

“I’ll show you one day, son. When the time is right. When you’ll be receptive to hearing what I have to say.”

I could sense Marcus studying me, as if he’d already been through the same shit.

“Why are you telling me this, Pops?”

He glanced up at the sky, adjusting his sunglasses. “Because it’s something I learned too late. I don’t want you to face retirement if you’re so lucky without having someone special by your side. There is nothing better than falling in love.”

Snorting, I tested my club, uncertain what he wanted me to say. “Yeah, Dad. I’ll keep that in mind.” He backed away, allowing me to move closer to the tee-off.

I placed the ball then sighed, a strange series of feelings settling into a part of my brain I didn’t like. Our father was dying. I was certain of it.

As I turned my head, I couldn’t read his face given his dark sunglasses and the angle of the bright sun, but I knew in my gut I was right.

Fuck. He was trying to make amends before the devil's minions made good on what Pops had said was a promise to drag him to hell.

I'd heard that as a child more than once.

Just before I was able to take the shot, a glint from the other direction caught my eye. My instincts were never wrong. Yet as everything shifted into an ugly moment of slow motion, I swung the club to the side, yanking my weapon as I yelled to my father and brother. Every sound was muffled, the blur of tree limbs swinging in the light breeze destroying any opportunity to lock onto what I thought I was seeing.

Then shots rang out, six in a row.

"No!" I threw myself backward, tackling my father to the ground. Then I crawled toward Marcus, barely able to process seeing his bullet-ridden body as he was pitched through the air to the ground.

There was no time to waste. I shifted to my knees, firing off indiscriminately but at the distance, I couldn't be certain I'd hit a single target.

When I turned around, I noticed my father's lifeless eyes and my brother struggling to breathe.

And I made a promise that I would hunt down the motherfucker responsible and I would honor my father's request.

Family first.

That had been a few weeks before. One month of laying my father to rest, staying by my brother's bedside. At least Marcus had recovered, although our mother had aged significantly, Lucy continually having nightmares. Now I was toying with a woman who might offer me the opportunity to make good on my promise to my father.

I wasn't certain what I was doing was in my family's best interest.

But it would soothe the beast inside of me, the one that remained furious at everything that had happened.

“Earth to Kendrick. Where the fuck did you go?” Grayson asked.

Sighing, I rubbed my eyes then glanced at my watch. I’d fallen into a perfect situation with my need for revenge, yet I continued to feel hollow inside. That wasn’t like me in the least.

“I’m right here.”

“No, you’re thinking about the afternoon with your father.”

I had to laugh. “Am I that transparent?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Tell me what you found on Suzannah.”

“Suzannah Warrington Caffrey went to college on the East Coast, Yale to be exact. She is a brilliant and creative woman who has a solid reputation within the travel industry, which was still a surprise in her family. Maybe her love of hospitality was fostered by the inns her father purchased. A few quaint ones in Napa that were struggling. Not any longer. At least from what I gathered going back and looking at her social media pages, she scrubbed her life of everything to do with the Warrington name. She has a genius level IQ, but the fact she was pushed out of the family business was likely part of the reason she was lured to Atlanta after receiving a job offer.”

“Interesting.”

“I sent you a picture. A stunning redhead.”

“Redhead? She’s a blonde.” If she went to the extreme of altering her hair, that meant she’d done everything she could to eliminate any connection to her family. Perhaps that’s why she’d kept her ex-husband’s name.

“Women do enjoy altering their looks, Kendrick.” Grayson’s laugh irritated the hell out of me. He was thoroughly enjoying my moment of surprise, something that rarely happened.

“And the husband?”

“Christian Caffrey is a bigwig in commercial real estate. He’s powerful, rich, and also has his fingers in several different pies, including the firm Suzannah works for. I think that’s why she kept his name after the divorce.”

“Which was how long ago?”

“Six months. The funny thing is that his bank accounts have become very low over the past few years.”

I could tell by the grin on his face the information was of some significance. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning in addition to being a womanizer, he got himself heavily involved in gambling.”

“Huh.” I couldn’t help but smile. “That’s something I’ll keep in the back of my mind.”

“You are a clever asshole, Kendrick,” Grayson told me. “This wedding should be fascinating for you. I doubt old man Warrington will be stupid enough to try and do anything. However, I’m glad you came to your senses and ordered some soldiers to make the trek across the country.”

Laughing, I glanced at my iPad, the video call on his insistence. “I can’t take any credit for it for being clever and the soldiers are to remain offsite initially. If I need their assistance, I will let them know. It would appear karma has decided to provide me with a break. I plan on using that to my advantage.”

“Need I remind you the hit was made on your father and brother in the middle of broad daylight?”

“You don’t need to remind me of anything, Grayson. I was there. Remember?”

“And I wasn’t, which is something I’ll regret for the rest of my life.”

“Even your protection wouldn’t have saved my father and you know that. He made himself a target that day. I’m certain of it.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

I swirled my drink, angry that I'd kept the secret for so long. "Pops was dying of lung cancer. He had maybe three months to live. Instead of facing his demise through the illness, he chose to go out in the way his father did, in honorable terms."

"Jesus. Christ. Does your mother know?"

"No, and no one is going to tell her."

He took a deep breath. "Yes, sir. Not a word."

The moment of admittance wasn't cathartic by any means. And his suicide by assassin wasn't something I could confirm given the number of hits placed on my father's life over the years. He'd been a target of everyone from the Bratva to the cartels as well as powerful corporate America. My deductions were based on my almost never wrong instincts and the exhaustion on his face that day.

"How's Marcus?"

"He's fine. Why don't you give him a call and ask him yourself?"

Yeah, I knew I should. Marcus and I had never been close. With my father's death, it felt like I needed to make amends for not being a better big brother.

"After the wedding," I told him.

"Your call, but I think he could use a good word from you."

His sudden silence meant he had something else on his mind.

"What is it, Grayson? You've never shied away from chastising me before."

"No, and I've paid the price for what you called my insolence."

The fact was that the two of us shared a history that would be called brutal at best. It was long, violent, bloody, and encouraged by my father. Grayson had been a counterpoint to the savage I'd become as a teenager, the only son of a man who'd been killed in my father's line of duty. His mother had been ill, leaving him to fend for himself. My father had seen promise in him, recruiting him to become my shadow.

I'd made certain he knew early on I had no desire to consider him a friend. We'd sparred. We'd fought. We'd almost killed each other. He was the only person reckless enough to speak out of turn or with any hint of disrespect, something that had earned him an atrocious scar on his chest from one of my vicious tirades. The truth was Grayson was as close to a friend as I'd ever had in my life.

"Speak your mind. I have a date. Remember?" I threw back the rest of my drink, slamming the dense tumbler on the table. I was surprised to see fingerprints remaining on the glass given housekeeping had already been in hours earlier. I fingered the marks, my cock immediately twitching.

"How does it feel to suddenly ask a woman to marry you?"

"You do remember this is nothing more than a business arrangement. Right?"

"Need I remind you that those are famous last words?"

"Very funny."

"Who said I'm kidding?"

"I'm ending the call now," I told him after walking to the table, smiling as he waved me off, pressing the cancel button first on the call. It was time to collect my prize.

And to help her further understand my rules.

The timing of the out of the blue call meant I'd been right in my assumptions. At least the girl was a creature of habit. "Kendrick Gregory."

"Mr. Gregory. It's Shane at the front desk. Ms. Caffrey has checked out and is headed for the parking garage."

"Where is her rental car located?"

"Bay seven fifteen, sir. I did as you asked. She'll be stopped at the gate given its sudden malfunction, but I can't guarantee she won't attempt to bypass it."

I chuckled and headed toward the door. "I'll take it from here, Shane. I appreciate your help and I'll make certain you're well taken care of."

“Thank you, sir. Let me know if I can do anything else for you.”

As I shoved the phone into my pocket, grabbing my keys on the way out the door, all I could do was smile. It would seem my lovely flower was going to be more than just a handful. It was time to strip off the kid gloves, taking exactly what I wanted.

Maybe Grayson was right in that I would enjoy being engaged for longer than planned. After all, it could turn into a very lucrative business decision.

Hmmm...

CHAPTER 15



*S*uzannah

“What the hell?” I muttered as soon as I noticed the gate leaving the underground parking garage was closed. There were two vehicles in front of me, both occupants as irritated as I’d already become.

I had to get the hell away from the hotel, the city, and the man who’d lied to me.

The bastard who’d lied to me.

The sexiest man alive who’d...

“I’m sorry about Kendrick. Why don’t you come stay with me,” Morgan said. “I’ll even be your plus one for the wedding. We’ll get unfashionably drunk and make a scene.”

“Sounds evil but you know I can’t do that. Hell, I won’t do that to Ashley. She’ll have to deal with too much after she gets married to my brother.” I craned my neck, trying to free cobwebs from my mind.

“O-kay, but I don’t like how you’re leaving and what you told me about him. He sounds dangerous.”

“He is dangerous.” The fact he’d told me he was a killer continued to nag at me. Finding so little on him meant he was likely a hired gun for his family, an assassin. But I’d discovered enough damning information about his family to have a sense of who and what he’d come from. His family

made mine look like poster children for a sappy card commercial. My thoughts drifted to the reason for his arrival in California. Perhaps revenge? His father had been murdered. There were several articles on the man's demise, including the fact the case had never been solved. I wondered if the police even cared given the Gregorys were obviously sophisticated organized crime. Did that mean there was a bullet with my father's name on it?

Would you care?

Oh, my God. I couldn't believe my inner voice would say such a horrible thing. Okay, so my father had been verbally and emotionally abusive my entire life, but I didn't want him dead. Not unless I pulled the trigger.

"Then what if this asshole follows you?"

"Then I'll kill him." The words came out far too easily.

She laughed, although I could tell by her tone she knew I was only halfway kidding. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

Anger swept through me. Maybe Kendrick hadn't lied, but he certainly hadn't been forthcoming in his identity. Then again, neither had I. I smashed my hand on the horn, the blaring sound even making me jump. No, he'd told me his name and he'd known I'd look him up. He'd fallen into a deal that allowed him access to my family. I was an idiot.

Or maybe you're brilliant. Think about the ripples his appearance would cause.

I closed my eyes, the ache behind them horrific. Leaving was in everyone's best interest before things got out of hand.

"What the hell is that noise?" Morgan hissed.

After backing off, I smacked my hand on the steering wheel. There was a tiny part of me that wanted Kendrick to find me, although that wasn't likely. I'd checked out quickly, making a beeline for the garage. "I'm just stuck in the parking garage and I blew my horn because I need to get the hell out of here before he finds me. Trust me, sister. I'm going to be fine.

Maybe if you're free on Sunday you can drive up and it will give me an excuse to get away from the family unit."

"I can do that. And I'm sorry about Mr. Mile High. He seemed perfect for you. And for being a fake fiancé even with the danger involved."

Was there such a thing as perfection in any man? "Very funny and yeah, he did. Too perfect and that was part of the problem. He wants something much bigger than my total surrender out of this. I can feel it."

"Then think about this. Maybe a small part of you wants to protect your family. If he's your father's enemy, it's best to keep him close. You know?"

My bestie was right.

"I'll think about it and call you later."

"Good luck, girlfriend. I know you want this position but think about the woman inside. I can tell that man you just met made you feel something special. Do not lie to me."

I made a face, glaring into the rearview mirror. "Don't you dare hold that over my head for the rest of my life."

"Oh, I plan on it."

"You're on my hit list."

"Whatever you say."

Her singsong voice was another reminder I'd be entering shark-infested waters soon. I couldn't believe I'd gone to the trouble of speaking with my attorney in Atlanta, having him draw up a simple yet ironclad contract. I had to be out of my ever loving mind. I shoved my phone into my purse, trying to remain patient, but it felt as if I had a slight noose around my neck. Maybe I was being overly dramatic, but the strange events had put me on edge.

Strange?

They bordered on something straight out of a novel. The saddest truth of all was that I'd felt more alive in Kendrick's

arms than I had my entire adult life. What did that say about me?

I glanced at the console of the rental car, noticing I was supposed to be meeting with Kendrick in less than ten minutes. I'd cut it way too close, but what little I'd found on the man had been pieced together more than anything. He was very private, unlike his kingpin father. What was I saying? From what I'd read, there was little difference between his dad and mine, which meant his presence hadn't been an accident.

Goddamn it. I was usually a much smarter woman than to fall into a trap. Sadly, Kendrick had used the fact I was lonely, his looks, and my needs against me.

And I'd fallen smack in the middle.

What I'd found most interesting was that I'd discovered a single grainy picture from something taken years before. From what I could tell, it likely a situation where no one in the photograph knew they were being captured for history. The story on the family was as intoxicatingly romantic as it was telling on their current criminal status.

His father had crawled his way out of a Philadelphia gutter, his family poorer than church mice. He'd studied hard in school, gotten a scholarship, and worked three jobs while making the dean's list. Then he'd met and married the love of his life, building an empire slowly in the rich Kentucky fields. Bourbon. Horseracing. Real estate. Wine. The man had dabbled in several things over the years, all of them making him and his entire family wealthy.

However, twenty years before, reports hit the airwaves regarding extortion and blackmail, illegal gambling and drugs, the corporation being investigated by the FBI, the DEA, and ultimately the CIA given the family's international connections.

Sounded way too familiar.

Where was the firstborn son in all of this? Even on the corporate documents, his name wasn't listed. Then again, only the CEO and the registered agent were required to be provided

on the state records, but why not tout the son's abilities? That led me to believe that whatever position Kendrick held in his father's company was less than stellar, as in perhaps he handled the darker sides of the business, the illegal activities.

Was that any different than what Steinbeck did?

A laugh bubbled to the surface. The fruit didn't fall too far from the tree. In my case, I was talking about myself and the fact I'd been attracted to a very dangerous man. Okay, so he'd told me as much early on. Did that make what he *hadn't* told me acceptable? Not a fucking chance. The man was preparing to use me in a blasphemous game. Maybe I had a little loyalty to my family after all, refusing to allow them to be made out as a scapegoat or worse.

If I had any salt, I'd stay and lure the man to his demise, but I wasn't in the mood to play prickly games with a shark in infested waters. That would only lead to additional heartache.

I opened my window to see if I could hear details of what was going on. At least the young man working in the hotel was headed my way. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, miss. Malfunctioning gate. Maintenance is on the way. It could take twenty minutes or so. I'd return to your parking spot and grab a drink at the bar or a bite to eat."

A little early in the day for an alcoholic beverage. Plus, I couldn't risk running into Kendrick. What was I supposed to say to the insufferable man, other than cussing him out for lying to me? Okay, so maybe he hadn't officially lied, but he'd certainly neglected to tell me the truth about his identity.

"Thank you." My tone was a little too... conceited I was completely off my game. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, trying to figure out the best plan.

The two vehicles in front of me started maneuvering to turn around. Once they'd moved, I noticed given the size of the rental car, I could squeeze past the extended gate arm with plenty of room to spare. Not a bad idea. I glanced into the rearview mirror. The attendant was talking with the other drivers behind me. Oh, why not? It wasn't breaking any law.

I threw the gear into drive and headed toward the space. After managing to squeeze through, I shot forward, eager to get the hell out of San Francisco. That's the moment a sleek older convertible in shocking red pulled right in front of me.

Even slamming on the brakes, I came within inches of smashing into the side. What the hell was wrong with people? Before I had a chance to react, including getting out and giving the driver a piece of my mind, the person crawled out, taking long strides in my direction. The man's figure was huge but even though the sun was in my eyes, my sixth sense kicked in and my stomach started doing flips. The driver's wafting scent was far too recognizable. Oh, no. My luck had dropped straight into the toilet. That's the moment another wave of anger kicked in. How dare the man.

Now I was ready for a fight, throwing open my door and climbing out. When Kendrick grabbed my arm, pushing me against the side of the car, I snarled.

"Going somewhere, *prekrasna kvitka*?"

"Kendrick. What the hell are you doing?" I spat out, able to see his big, fat grin.

"Ensuring you hold up your end of the bargain. In my world, a deal is a deal with a verbal agreement. I've won in court twice from my word alone. Care to try me, princess?"

As soon as I'd felt another presence flanking our sides, I knew this entire thing had just been another setup, a part of a game. I turned my head, glaring at the attendant who'd given me a line of shit. His grin told me everything.

"Thanks, Juan. Just have this returned to the spot for me but if you will, have her suitcases placed in my room," Kendrick instructed with a lilt in his voice.

"Fuck you," I said under my breath.

Kendrick wagged his finger, lifting a single eyebrow.

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it, sir." Nodding, the attendant walked away but not before the two of them exchanged looks.

After the attendant had left, Kendrick yanked me onto my toes, his fingers digging into my skin. “Sweetheart, I suggest you get used to the fact that I’m not backing out now. We have too much to lose.”

“Then you’re going to need to tell me what you want with my father.”

He took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. Then he allowed it to slide across my jaw. Electric prickles danced across my skin, enough of them that I had to fight to keep from visibly quivering in his hold. Thank God I was successful. The man thrived on weakness.

“All in good time. After we get to know each other, princess.”

“What are you going to do, handcuff me to your bed?” I asked, half laughing as I tugged my arm. His hold was far too strong. Damn him.

“Don’t tempt me, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me your sweetheart. Or princess or anything else. You don’t own me.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to curtail my anger. The audacity of this man was unbelievable.

Don’t kid yourself. You’re loving this.

Fuck my inner voice.

“You’re a criminal.”

“So is your father,” he said in his suave voice, the one that said he remained in full control.

“Yours kills people for a living.” I was fully cognizant we were being watched, scrutinized even but I wasn’t certain I cared.

“Are we really going to do this now, princess? Or would you prefer to handle comparing notes on our respective families over a drink?”

“Like I said, I’m not your princess. Second, I’m not going anywhere with you.” After managing to jerk out of his hold, I skirted away from him. Seconds later, he yanked me back with ease, towering over me like a man possessed.

Or obsessed.

We were both breathing heavily, as if the wanton desire would be our undoing. I had to admit, envisioning his naked body had been difficult to ignore, especially since he’d carried me to the shower, scrubbing me clean after fucking me hard and fast.

I licked my lips in appreciation of the memory before I realized what I was doing.

“That’s where you’re wrong, sunshine. We have a deal, soon to be a signed contract. You will honor the exclusive terms, or I assure you that my attorney will make mincemeat out of your family. And I’ll ensure your father is made well aware of the deal we entered into. Given my father and yours were considered enemies, that should allow him to fully understand where his daughter’s loyalties lie.”

Were. Another reminder his father had been murdered.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He jerked me onto my toes, yanking off his sunglasses and giving me an explosively passionate look of desire that fantasies were made of. “I assure you that I never joke about business. Besides, sunshine. It would seem that our entanglement had fulfilled the fantasies that kept you awake at night utilizing one of your many toys you keep in your nightstand.” He gave me that look as if he knew a secret. Unfortunately, he was right. I had a massive collection.

My fucking God, the blatant arrogance.

“Get a room!” someone finally shouted.

I almost burst into laughter when both of us lifted our middle fingers toward whoever had the deep voice.

“You son of a bitch,” I gritted out. “What makes you think I won’t tell my father myself? And what makes you think they won’t escort you off the property at gunpoint?”

“Given the tumultuous relationship that you have with your father, and yes, I checked on your background as you checked on mine, I’m certain your father will likely disown you once I’ve told him how close we’ve become. That’s not what you want.”

“And what do you think I want?”

His grin was both irritating and far too sexy. “Why, my darling fiancée, revenge. Sweet. Cold. Revenge. The fact it will be at your brother’s wedding will add a cherry on the whipped cream. Now, won’t it?”

“You are a...” All I could do was laugh.

“I’m not wrong and you know it.”

The standoff wasn’t going to have a winner. I gritted my teeth, realizing that his assistance might prove to be helpful.

If I could learn to tolerate him without driving a sharp knife through his heart.

“You might have won this round, Kendrick, but I assure you that you’ll never win another one.”

“I will certainly look forward to seeing you try and come out the victor. Now, you’re going to be a good little girl and get in my car. We are going to dinner where we learn everything there is to discover about each other. Likes. Dislikes. Weaknesses. Strengths. And every moment of intense longing. Then you will return with me to my hotel room where I’ll ensure you won’t be able to escape. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal. That doesn’t mean I’ll comply.”

“I assure you that you will. One way or another. You are coming with me, Suzannah. And you will do exactly as I say, or I’ll have no issue punishing you like the bad girl you’ve become. As a matter of fact, as a show of good faith, allow me to provide an example of exactly what might happen.”

Bad girl? He had no idea just how bad I could be.

He’d soon find out.

“What does that mean?”

When he touched his belt buckle, I was mortified.

“That means I think you need a lesson in who you belong to.”

When he deftly yanked the thick leather strap free of its tight confines, my mouth dropped open.

And the moment he spun me around, tossing me against his expensive sports car, I fell into utter shock.

Then he ripped up my dress, tearing away my panties as if I wasn't wearing any.

Then right in front of a captured crowd, he issued the first savage crack of his belt, across my naked buttocks.

Shame, heat, and the feeling of wanting to crawl under the pavement swept through me like a tidal wave. I was sick inside, unable to react quickly enough to stop the next three strikes that came one right after the other.

Somewhere in the background, I heard muffled sounds, other people as much in shock as I was. Finally, after the thick leather landed on my upper thighs, the pain shooting straight to my brain, I reacted. I slammed my hands against the side of his car, almost managing to push myself away so I could spin around and kick him in the nuts.

Alas, he was far too responsive, his huge palm pressing against my back with enough force I was driven into the cold, hard steel once again.

“I suggest you behave, or we'll be here for a looong time. Do you understand?” His growl was positively... sensual. Butterflies swarmed my stomach, my mind still unable to process this was happening in broad daylight. Even worse than the shock and awe factor was the realization that I liked it.

A lot.

In fact, my pussy was throbbing, heat building to an explosive level. I licked my lips, shooting a quick glance toward the long line of cars. I couldn't count how many had eased from their vehicles, now standing as if watching a show.

All they needed was a tin of popcorn and I sensed they'd be satisfied.

I cinched my eyes shut, trying to use my nails to claw the pretty exterior of his car as the horrific spanking continued. My bottom was on fire, but the tingling deep inside my core remained. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

But I was so aroused I was sick inside.

He caressed my aching buttocks, lowering his head until his lips were pressed against my ear. "I know you can be a good girl. You just need training. I will enjoy the acts of discipline as much as I will providing you with needed praise. You like being called a good girl. Don't you?"

I almost nodded. What. The. Fuck?

He resumed the spanking, cracking the belt against my backside at least six more times in rapid succession. Then he backed away, exhaling deeply. "I think that will do for now."

I remained in shock but managed to pull down my dress. Then I slowly turned in his direction.

"When you least expect it, Kendrick, I will put a knife in your gut, twisting and lifting upwards. Make no mistake. I will come out the victor of this game."

"Perhaps this isn't a game after all, my sweet and beautiful flower. But even so, you will never be the victor. But I will so love seeing you try."

CHAPTER 16



*S*uzannah

Punishment.

The man had actually acted as if he had the right to turn me over his knee anywhere, at any time.

And he'd done it as if proving the ugly fact would make me compliant. Fuck him. If he dared try again, I wouldn't hesitate to break his fingers or worse. At least the thought provided a smile as well as a series of tingles.

My bottom ached, the heat continuing every time I moved. Oh, God. Had the wretched spanking really happened?

"Remember. You're required to behave," Kendrick said before nuzzling into my neck, his heated breath creating a series of tingling sensations. "At all times."

Was the asshole laughing at my expense?

"Yes, or I'll be spanked like a bad girl, perhaps even shackled to the chair." I purred an answer, shifting gears in our game of thrones. He had no idea what I was capable of.

Keep telling yourself that and maybe you'll believe it.

"You are beginning to understand. By the way. You're exquisite when you moan in pain and pleasure."

"Be careful, boy toy. You never know when I'll strike back."

“As I said before. I’ll be looking forward to witnessing you try.”

As we walked onto the exterior deck of the restaurant, the view of the bay took my breath away. Kendrick kept his hand on the small of my back, pushing me gently toward a table overlooking the water. There were a few tables close, but it would seem he’d called ahead, making certain we weren’t interrupted. Perhaps he thought my volatile behavior would continue. Granted, I had attempted to escape by almost managing to jump out at a traffic light. I was surprised the man hadn’t attempted to spank me in the parking lot all over again given his reaction from before.

“Do you come here often?” I asked when the hostess placed menus on the table, walking away after bidding us a good dinner.

“I’ve enjoyed their food on a few occasions. I do travel, sweet Suzannah.”

“Your family is considering expanding into California?”

“Overtures have been made by certain investors. It’s now my job to consider whether it will be profitable or not.”

“That means you will be direct competition.”

He grinned. “Somehow, I have a feeling both you and your family can handle a little friendly competition. Don’t you?”

“Of course. Very impressive,” I said as I was seated facing the water. Kendrick pushed in my chair, taking his time walking to his own. I couldn’t help but notice he scanned the entire deck prior to sitting down. I didn’t blame him. It was apparent his family had a target on their backs, his father’s murder still making headlines in Kentucky and the entire Midwest.

“The restaurant or the fact I’ve been lucky enough in my profession to travel to several incredible destinations?”

“Both, but more pointedly your attempt at seduction, which isn’t necessary. You seem to have gotten what you wanted. Although I do admit that the Lamborghini Miura was a nice touch. Rental?”

“Actually, I purchased the car when I arrived.”

“Do you plan on driving all the way to Kentucky in an older convertible?” I had to admit, the ride over had been more enjoyable than I’d experienced in long time, even if my hair was likely ruined. I even laughed briefly at the thought as I ran my fingers through the tangled mess.

“I wouldn’t mind crossing the country in any vehicle if I had a lovely companion to join me. We shall see how well we’re getting along.”

“Dream on,” I told him. God, the man was far too attractive, especially in candlelight, his massive body framed by the last vestiges of afternoon sun.

“You look stunning, Suzannah. And I usually make dreams come true.”

“Right. A cross country trip wasn’t part of the deal. A long weekend. Nothing more.”

“Codicils to the contract can be arranged,” he said in a dark, demanding voice that drove a rush of need between my legs.

“It’s very rare. The car, I mean. A seventy-three, isn’t it?”

Kendrick smiled and gave me a nod. “You know your vehicles, including those considered classics.”

“Don’t be shocked. I was raised with a father who used to drag race as a kid and two brothers. I was driving as soon as I was tall enough to see over the steering wheel.” While it was true, I wasn’t certain why I’d bothered telling him. He seemed impressed, giving me a nod as if allowing me a true moment of respect.

I wanted to wipe it off his face, still furious how he’d caught me leaving.

“A real surprise,” he said. “A pleasant one I might add.”

“What? You thought I played with Barbie dolls while I wore cutesy, girlie clothes? That wasn’t me. I was the girl most likely to get mud on her jeans, preferring animals and bugs to dolls. My mother hated me for it.”

“I doubt your mother hated you.”

“Then you would be wrong. Granted, the tabloids only highlight the glorious family gatherings at horseraces and other celebrations. She’s truly a piranha in fabulous clothes, spending more money on plastic surgery than anyone I know.”

Chuckling, he eyed me carefully, leaning back in his chair, completely comfortable in his surroundings. As soon as he unbuttoned his jacket, I caught a glimpse of a shoulder holster. We both remained quiet as the waiter approached. I paid no attention as Kendrick ordered a bottle of wine without asking me what I preferred. I wasn’t planning on letting myself go, or enjoying even a single moment.

As if you have a choice.

I rolled my eyes at the words whispered by my inner voice. I did enjoy being with the man but that didn’t mean I would let my guard down around him ever again. I still had my phone, which meant I would contact my friends. The four of us had escaped more than one challenging situation in the past.

The waiter left and Kendrick yanked the napkin off the table, placing it in his lap. Heat rose on my face from the way he was staring at me. To think I’d purchased a sexy little dress for the evening, spending way too much money on it and new lingerie. I was out of my fucking mind.

The fact he remained quiet became more unnerving with every passing second. I snapped my head in his direction, narrowing my eyes frustratingly. With strings of vibrant fuchsia, tangerine, and plum crisscrossing the sky, mixing with twinkling stars and a very bright full moon, his entire massive frame was close to being luminous. Even the way the light breeze tousled his long locks drew my attention away from the rage I felt deep inside.

“What’s wrong, sunshine?” he asked, although the sound was husky, more like a savage growl.

I leaned over, folding my arms. “Do you always come packing?”

He laughed, his eyes sparkling like precious gems. “The answer is yes. I’m certain you’ve figured out it’s a necessity in my business just like I’m positive it is with your father.” Oh, my God. He was loving the fact he could challenge me, shoving me off my high horse.

“Don’t you dare do that.”

“What am I doing?”

“Comparing our families. They aren’t the same.”

“Aren’t they? Let’s make some notes, shall we?” He leaned forward, the table small enough he filled up more than half the surface, his face too close to mine. His lips too dangerously delicious and tempting. “Your family owns wineries, a horse farm, and several thoroughbreds who’ve won dozens of blue ribbons and trophies. Mine owns distilleries, a large horse ranch, and our thoroughbreds have won a similar number of prizes. We’ve also sired a dozen champions. We recently purchased two small wineries, the wines winning four major competitions last year. Now, if you’d like to continue the comparison, including real estate, I’m certain the list will grow exponentially.”

The grin on his face was one I wanted to wipe off.

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, darlin’. That will happen later tonight, I assure you. Our next few days are set in motion. I do have the contract with me, by the way. I saved you the effort.”

How the hell had he done that? He’d intercepted a private message from my attorney. My God. The man was capable of anything, all of it unscrupulous. “You’re a reprehensible bastard. Now, answer the question from before. What do you want with my family?”

“Who says I want anything? We just happened to meet on a plane. Two strangers getting to know each other. Did you ever stop to think that quite possibly karma had determined that we needed to meet? To fuck?”

Every word was dripping with arrogance. I was ready to launch into him again when the waiter appeared like

clockwork, going through all the motions of highlighting the wine, opening it slowly, allowing the man at the table a taste and waiting as that said man took his time swirling the liquid in the glass, taking a deep whiff, contemplating then finally nodding. I was ready to scratch out both their eyes from disgust.

Kendrick had enjoyed planning every second of this.

“Right. And I have a lovely tropical island to sell you in Egypt.” I reached for my glass, yanking hard enough I sloshed wine over the edge. When I pulled it to my lips, licking off the drops, he narrowed his eyes, his chest rising and falling.

“The truth is I have unfinished business with your father.”

“Which is?”

He suddenly appeared more uncomfortable. “Let’s just say our families have traveled in the same circles for a long time. Often that leads to disagreements.”

“I was right in my assumptions. You do consider my family an enemy.”

“Very good, sweet Suzannah.”

“Which is why you came to California. To crush my father’s regime and build your brand in its place. How fascinating.” And I’d fallen into the trap.

“I am a consummate businessman.”

This wasn’t about a disagreement with a contract or a mishandled wine order. I leaned across the table, lowering my voice. “You really do think my father had something to do with what happened to yours.”

He didn’t answer, merely studying me as he’d done before, running the tip of his index finger around the rim of his wineglass. When he did speak, the question caught me off guard.

“Why did you leave your family, moving to Atlanta?”

It was a way of letting me know he had learned every scrap of information about my life possible. I looked away, studying

the water for a few seconds. The location was beautiful, a reminder of how much I'd missed by taking such an extreme action years before. There was no reason to lie. "After my father made it very clear when I graduated college that there was a position he'd selected for me inside the company, I was excited. I had ideas for expanding the corporation including new forms of marketing for the winery and our beautiful inns. I wanted to be a part of the hospitality end since my father had purchased several small resorts, turning them into niche operations. Boutique hotels were just starting to become the rage."

"Then what happened?"

"Reality happened. The great position I was promised was as my brother's secretary." I waited for his reaction, which was little more than a tight scowl but his eyes flashed in anger as they'd done before. "My father didn't even have the decency to label the position as an executive assistant or office manager. In my father's eyes, I was nothing but a glorified secretary, which meant I'd never advance within the company."

"A truly sexist pig. I'm curious. What did you do?"

"Somehow, I managed not to pull out one of my father's weapons, shooting him between the eyes. By that point, I'd been offered a job in Atlanta handling marketing at a small firm specializing in the hospitality and travel industry. It wasn't far removed from what I'd hoped to do within the Warrington operation, so I hopped a plane the next day and never looked back. I became America's sweetheart of the travel industry, faking smiles for the camera. And no, I don't regret it. I learned a lot, including what I wanted out of my life."

"Which is?"

"To have absolute control at all times."

"I doubt that's what you really want. At least personally."

"You don't know me, Kendrick. What you learned in your quick investigation of me doesn't tell you about the woman

inside. It doesn't provide any details of the sacrifices I've made or the friendships I can no longer trust. Hell, I can't even rid myself of the last name of the asshole I married because my boss won't change my contract. The name is far too valuable to him. So, don't you presume to know what I need or want. I might seem naïve or young to you, but I'm certainly not weak. I've just made some mistakes. And trusting my family was the biggest mistake of all. However, that's not something you should attempt to use against my father. I want to work within the company, not have it destroyed." Perhaps I was being unfair to the man sitting across from me. If what I was saying was true, what I'd learned in the tabloids and on Google meant nothing about the man sitting in front of me. However, I wasn't going to open myself up to criticism or heartbreak.

No matter how good looking he was or how much I enjoyed being with him.

"Understood."

"I hope so."

He toyed with his glass, running his finger around the rim. Then he dunked the tip into the smooth cabernet, immediately rolling the tip across the pursed seam of my mouth. "I've learned many things in my life, Suzannah, including the fact losing control during moments of passion has nothing to do with weakness or the lack of resolve. Your work ethic and desire to climb the ladder is admirable, but often those who long for control in the boardroom hunger to lose it in the bedroom. That keeps them balanced. You crave finding the right person you can place your entire trust in that will provide you with the needs you've already identified. In doing so, you'll finally feel free to indulge in all the darkness that's been furrowing deep inside of you as long as you can remember." He pressed his finger past my lips, thrusting in slow and even strokes.

I wanted to be appalled, to force his hand away, but I found myself wrapping my fingers around his wrist, holding his arm in place. I even used my jaw muscles to suck like I'd done on his glorious cock. However, this moment was more intimate,

sensual in a way that hinted of sinful things to come. The taste of his skin alone was spectacular, enough so I had visions of doing this for thirty minutes.

“Maybe.” Of course he was right. I’d just been terrified to admit it to myself.

“The fact you agreed to surrender to me body and soul tells me many things about the woman inside. Her strength. Her intelligence. Her passion.” He took another deep breath, shaking his head so slowly that I could tell what he was thinking.

He wanted to devour me all over again.

That wasn’t going to happen. But there was nothing I wanted more. He was intoxicating in everything he did, the padlock around the armor encompassing me shattered forever.

When he removed his finger, he held it close to the flickering candle, his nostrils flaring.

“What else do you think you know about me?” I asked, far too curious.

Before he answered, he darted his tongue across the tip of his finger and I shuddered to my core, breathless with need. My damp thighs forced me to shift back and forth in my seat. Damn the man. Damn his attractiveness, his insane wit, and his refusal to be denied anything.

God, I found that far too charming.

“What I know is that the hurt you felt years before has driven your career as well as your personal relationships up to this point. You selected a man who was safe and comfortable, or so he appeared on the outside. A good family. Well educated. Christian said and did all the right things at first. That’s why you agreed to marry him. Tell me I’m wrong, Suzannah.”

I took another sip of the wine, trying to hide my frustration. “No, you’re not wrong.”

“Then you found out that he was the worst kind of monster, hiding beneath his suave appearance and polished words. By

then, you felt trapped. Plus, you didn't want to allow anyone to see you'd failed."

Goddamn him for figuring out the worst aspect of my life. At least he wasn't being condescending, just matter of fact. "What does that make you?"

"I've already told you that I'm a dangerous man. I didn't lie and that is something I won't do, *prekrasna kvitka*. I pride myself in my honesty, often to the chagrin of my family."

Why did I have a feeling he didn't usually call any woman by an endearing name? And why did that thrill me as much as it did? "If you think that's going to allow me to trust you then you would be wrong."

"I can tell your ex-husband had a suffocating leash on you. The man deserves a very special place in hell for his actions and his attitude."

His expression darkened and for a few seconds, I felt a strange sense of satisfaction in knowing that Mr. Mile High would have no issue putting a bullet in Christian's head or worse.

I tingled inside from the realization.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small box. I glared at it at first, remembering seconds later that as part of the deal, he'd insisted on selecting an engagement ring. I had to admit, a tiny bit of excitement tumbled through my stomach. However, I wasn't going to allow him to see he could still entice me. Leaning forward, I issued a tight smirk. "Yes, I agree, but keep in mind I was the one who tossed him out."

"Only after you found out he'd been fucking other women. Correct?"

Every aspect of my life with Christian had been highlighted in Atlanta social circles, fodder for people to jest over when they all had skeletons hidden in the darkest locations of their closets. Everyone did. That's something I'd learned years before. This gorgeous man was no different. I just needed to dig deep in order to find them.

"You're right on the money tonight. The bastard had the nerve to allow me to find him with a friend of mine. Or I'd thought

she was a friend. It was humiliating. But I *am* a survivor. That's what I do best." Why I was reliving this with him was beyond me.

"Which is why you want this position and would enjoy crushing your father's and brother's control while turning it into a legitimate corporation. You're also aware that of anyone you've ever met in your life, I'm perhaps the most logical choice to help you achieve your goals. Imagine what we could do if we combined forces."

Was he kidding me? The idea was at least fascinating in every way.

"What's in it for you? I won't allow you to kill my father, no matter what you think."

A new flash in his eyes highlighted a hint of pain, which surprised me. "Killing your father would only bring a momentary satisfaction, a sweet taste of revenge that would fade almost as soon as I stepped on a plane. I'm certain you were thorough in your investigation of my family and our particular empire. The legitimate worlds we walk in are very similar. What isn't on the record books is how similar our more lucrative businesses are."

I leaned back. "Drugs? Illegal arms? Real estate? Let me guess. Blackmail and extortion are used on a frequent basis. Perhaps there's a little black book of secrets our respective fathers used to keep people in line." I chuckled as I pulled my wine to my lips, licking the rim before taking a sip.

He cocked his head, a sly smile crossing his face. "Perhaps it's best you don't know the ugly details."

"I'm not a child, Kendrick. I always knew Daddy dearest crossed the morally gray line a long time ago. Once he did, there was no turning back."

For a few seconds, he drummed his fingers on the table. "And you want a part of that?"

The question was one I'd been wrestling with for a long time. "I do." I could see a change in his expression as memories shifted into his mind. It was interesting to see a portion of his

armor had fallen. “I’m sorry about your father. However, as horrible as Daddy dearest has been to me, I don’t see him as a killer. I assume you were close with yours.”

He chuckled. “Your father would order the killing done. My father was as hard on me as yours has been on you. Pops wasn’t entirely certain I respected our heritage.”

“That’s right. He was also a self-made man.”

“You were checking on me.”

“Absolutely. I’m many things but fool me once is enough.”

“That’s why you tried to escape.”

“Perhaps.” Just the way he was looking at me kept the electricity flowing. I found it fascinating that I felt freer around him than I had with anyone else in a very long time.

“You are correct in that my father was considered a self-made man. He was also a ruthless tyrant who required everything in his household to be a certain way. I value what he taught me, respecting the man and his business ethics.”

I wasn’t certain if he was trying to convince me or himself.

“If you’re attempting to garner control of an empire, why indulge me with entering into a deal? That’s what you really want. Isn’t it? You want to take over what he has, slowly watching his entire world crumble before your eyes. Please don’t try and tell me it’s not completely personal.” I offered him a sly smile, which brought another look of heated desire to his face.

“Be careful of what questions you ask. You might not like the answers.”

“I appreciate the truth in all things, Kendrick. I think you’re aware of that.”

He chortled before taking a sip of his wine. “You’re very astute. I think it’s fair to say getting to know each other even better will be... enjoyable.”

“Yes, it will be. I need to know what makes you tick, and I don’t mind admitting it.” It would seem I’d accepted the deal

we'd made. Perhaps the shock and awe factor would be a delirious moment I wouldn't get otherwise. But no matter what he thought, I would control the situation.

He took his time opening the box, not bothering yet to turn it around to face me. "To fully answer your question, Suzannah, I'm many things and have taken dozens of heinous actions, some of which I'm not proud of. However, in my line of work and the people my father did business with, violence was often necessary."

"If that's the case, then what aren't you proud of?"

"I'm a brother, a son, a killer, a businessman, a martyr, and a sadist. What I'm not is a man who can tolerate violence or degradation of a woman under any circumstance."

"But you don't mind the thought of someone catching us in our moments of filthy sin?"

A slow smile spread across his face. "You are correct. There is a significant difference. Highlighting the fact I'm a very lucky man is a perk of being a sadistic beast, and allows me to show how much I appreciate my possession." He rolled his finger from one side of my jaw to the other, his breathing more labored than before. "But if another man so much as looks at you in an inappropriate manner... They. Will. Die."

His words stole my breath. I knew he meant them, and it thrilled me.

He never blinked as he leaned forward, brushing his lips back and forth across mine. The intimate moment was freeing in a way I couldn't entirely understand. I should consider him my enemy, a man who planned on keeping me captive at least through the duration of the wedding events. Why did it seem so utterly exciting?

When he leaned back, he took the ring from the box, pulling my hand into his with the other. "You will make a beautiful bride."

As he slipped the ring on my finger, the diamond sparkled in the candlelight.

"And make no mistake, Suzannah. You *will* marry me."

CHAPTER 17



*K*endrick

I wasn't the kind of man to make impetuous decisions. I thought them through. I planned the cause and effect. I also endured the aftermath without issue because I'd calculated what that would look like. With her, with the princess of the Warrington kingdom, I'd drifted into unknown and unwanted territory.

The fact I'd told Suzannah in a blanket statement that she would marry me had surprised the hell out of both of us.

Yet I'd meant the words.

We would form the kind of alliance that would keep enemies on either side from daring to try to overthrow our power. I found it interesting that I would even consider having her rule by my side.

My queen.

As a businessman, combining forces would be an incredible opportunity for both of us, increasing our hold on the various markets we shared exponentially. But that hadn't been a part of the initial plan, nor had I ever been the man to consider having a partner outside of the family. Why with her did everything seem so entirely different?

I thought about what I'd told her regarding women in control. Perhaps I'd allow her a place in the boardroom as my vice

president. However, in the bedroom, she would forever surrender to my needs.

In another moment of surprise, she hadn't acted appalled or repulsed as I'd expected, merely curious where my proclamation was going. That had allowed the time spent together to be much more enjoyable. The changes in her, the quiet resolve crumbling had been because of her realization I'd easily managed to unravel the tightly woven webbing she'd placed around herself as protection.

While her ex had done a number on her, he hadn't managed to break her spirit. She was eager to get back at her father for treating her like nothing more than an object of a man's desire to be used and flaunted.

I had full intentions of helping her achieve every single goal.

We'd walked down to the water's edge, enjoying the sight of the boats docked in the harbor. I could tell by the serene look on her face that she was more at peace than she'd been before. Yet since we'd started walking fifteen minutes before, she'd remained almost entirely silent, more reserved than I was used to.

The wharf off to the side wasn't nearly as commercialized as the one at Fisherman's Wharf. Neither was the restaurant, which was one of the reasons I'd selected the location.

Still, I sensed Suzannah was chilly given the drop in temperature and the way the breeze had picked up through the evening. I yanked off my jacket, easing it around her shoulders and she stopped short, taking a quick, scattered breath. I was certain she'd toss it back into my arms, but instead she tugged it forward.

"So I need to add chivalrous to your list of attributes." I was so used to her accusatory tone that I had to smile.

"My goodness. An actual compliment. Before you know it, you'll enjoy my company." We continued walking, headed to the wharf that housed a couple of bars and a frozen treat store. Music floated into the air around us, adding to the peaceful atmosphere and the beautiful setting.

“The truth is, Kendrick, that I do. That might surprise you. And why? Because you revel in riling people on purpose, trying your best to ensure that no one will ever get close to you. The reason our connection is so electric is that I can see right through your charade as you could with me, both revealing the raw side of our personalities.”

She had a way of stopping my thoughts, her words so fitting that I couldn't deny them. No one had ever done that before. “Be careful digging too deep, my sweet. You might not like what you find.”

“That's what bothers me the most. I want to know the real you.”

Her comment was almost profound. The fact she'd suddenly turned introspective meant she was debating whether our deal was acceptable. Or perhaps she was looking forward to the possibilities.

I'd learned several things about her during our two bottles of wine over dinner, including her favorite colors and foods, movies, and music. Slowly, she'd become more comfortable even though I'd constantly scanned the restaurant.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had a feeling that we were being watched. Maybe it was a product of the industry I was in or the training I'd received, but I refused to rule anything out. The feeling had slowly faded, which had allowed me to open up to her more than I had to anyone before. We hadn't asked about aspects of our family wealth, business practices, or the level of power and influence our fathers had gleaned. We'd simply enjoyed getting to know each other.

The more difficult questions would come later.

“By the way. Don't take my compliment lightly. I rarely give them,” she said then laughed, scrunching up her nose when she glanced at my sour expression. “I was kidding. Aren't you ever silly?” Her tone of voice was more playful, which was more disarming than she knew.

“Silly? Hmmm...”

“Are you asking for additional compliments?”

“It’s not only women who like them.”

“Hmmm... I suppose you’re right. Let’s see. You’re handsome but you know it and you use that to your benefit. You’re an excellent dresser, not too stuffy yet sophisticated all the same. You command a room when you walk inside, likely because people are terrified of you. And you can have puppy dog eyes when you want something really badly.”

When I said nothing, she burst into laughter, turning around and taking backwards steps.

I stopped walking altogether. “Interesting how every compliment had a jagged side. Passive-aggressive.”

“Aren’t you the sensitive type.” She continued backing up, finally shaking her head. Then she removed her high heels, placing them in one hand before spinning around again and racing toward the pier.

Watching her actions was the first breath of fresh air I’d gotten in as long as I could remember. When she bounded onto the pier, she spun around and I could swear she was testing me. Teasing me.

Beckoning me with her crooked finger.

Then she darted into the crowd.

I took off jogging, bounding onto the deck. Then I realized I couldn’t see her. What if something had happened to her? Fuck me. And I’d left my goddamn weapon in my jacket. What was wrong with me? I started pushing my way through the people, searching the area. Where the hell could she have gone?

I stopped again, raking my hand through my hair, my chest aching from the heavy breathing. The last thing I wanted to do was to draw attention to the fact I was searching for her in case we were being watched. However, in the next few seconds, I was frustrated as fuck, my anger popping to the surface.

I zigged and zagged my way further down the pier, fisting my hands. Then a jolt of electricity tore through me like some crazy tidal wave. There she was standing barefoot in front of the small ice cream shack, talking with the girl behind the

counter, carefree as she'd been the entire night. I took a few seconds not only to catch my breath but to bask in her beauty.

She was without a doubt the most stunning woman I'd ever seen, beautiful in every regard.

But she was also the most infuriating.

I took long strides in her direction, yanking her by the elbow away from the counter.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"You ran from me. What did I tell you?" Christ. I sounded as if I was panicking.

Suzannah narrowed her eyes, placing one hand on my chest. "I didn't run. I thought we were playing, enjoying our time together. I was right here. I just wanted some ice cream."

Now I felt like a shit. Exhaling, I glanced at the girl behind the glass who was staring at me with terror in her eyes. "Don't do that again."

"You were really nervous? Is there something you need to tell me?"

"I'm surprised you don't understand that enemies can be everywhere."

"You were worried about me. My, oh, my. Does that mean my fiancé actually cares about me?" She glanced down at her ring, and I wanted to drag her over my lap, giving her a hard spanking for scaring me.

"I meant what I said before. No one is allowed to touch you."

"Hmmm... Okay, tough guy. Would you like an ice cream cone to cool your jets? My treat."

She twirled the ring on her finger and all bets were off as to if I could make it until we reached the hotel before ravaging her all over again. She had a way about her that drove me insane.

"Well, if you're buying."

Her laugh returned and she took my hand, maintaining an attachment as she pulled me to the small window. "What is

your flavor of choice or let me guess. A man like you doesn't eat ice cream."

"It's been a while. Why don't you make a selection for me?"

A smirk followed by a wrinkle of her nose fell across her face. "O-kay, but don't you dare complain if you don't like my choice."

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you." She had such a playful attitude at times that it was hard to see her as a member of the same family who'd orchestrated my father's death. She pointed her finger at me then clapped her hands. "A scoop of white chocolate and black cherry on a sugar cone for Mr. Grouchy and I'll have a single scoop of butter pecan with sprinkles on a sugar cone."

The girl grinned. "Comin' right up."

She pulled out her credit card, humming to whatever country song was coming from the outdoor speakers of one of the bars and I stood with my hands in my pockets watching her. To think I'd spent fifty grand on the ring without batting an eye and hadn't been satisfied with the selection. I'd even had a crazy thought of replacing it when I was able to talk with my preferred jeweler.

That's why seeing her conversing with the girl, the clerk eyeing the ring and squealing as Suzannah showed it off struck me strangely. This was all just pretend.

Or was it?

She finally turned around, a look of mischief on her face as she presented me with the cone. "This is the best ice cream I've ever had. Anywhere." As soon as I wrapped my hand around the cone, our fingers touching, another jolt of electricity soared through us.

Her eyes opened wide and she leaned forward, dragging her tongue across my two scoops. How could such a simple act be so sensuous? She laughed as she pulled away, forced to dart out her tongue once more to capture the few drops that had trickled past her lush lips.

“You are quite the tease,” I told her.

“I just wanted to perform quality control. You know. Since you’re clueless about ice cream.” She backed away again, almost tripping, her laugh floating into the air around us. Even though she concentrated on her cone, she kept her eyes locked onto mine.

Seconds later, I realized the top scoop was threatening to fall off. That forced a smile and I took a huge bite.

Her eyes opened wide.

Suddenly, mine did as well as a moment of ugly pain tore through my head. “What the...”

“Brain freeze.”

“What?”

“It’s called a brain freeze when you eat something icy too quick. You need to savor your treat. Take your time licking the ice cream, not chomping down on it.”

On purpose, I dragged my tongue up from the bottom, closing my eyes once I did. “You mean like that?”

“Purr-fect.”

“Just like licking the pussy of a tempting woman.” When I looked up, she’d cocked her head, giving me a harsh look.

“You are incorrigible.”

Another laugh pushed to the surface. “That’s not what I’m usually called.”

“Hmmm... I can only imagine.” She backed away a few feet, this time taking slow steps toward the railing overlooking the water.

I moved behind her at first, admiring the view before easing beside her. We returned to silence, enjoying the treat. I could see the streetcars in the distance, the treks heading to and from Fisherman’s Wharf. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d jumped on a streetcar, even though I’d been to San Francisco at least a half dozen times.

“One of the few memories of my father I had that was positive was the day he’d brought me here. I don’t know why, other than he had a meeting with someone. My guess is that I was a prop he used, protection or perhaps as a way of showing the Feds that he wasn’t doing anything illegal. Why would you dare bring your seven-year-old daughter into a dangerous situation. Right?” She glanced at me, her tone returning to the bitterness I’d heard before.

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago and as I said, it was a good memory. He got me ice cream right here. There was a small carnival going on in the parking lot. He allowed me to ride a few rides and even won me a teddy bear. That wasn’t like my father. Then we rode a streetcar for the first time. I was so scared, terrified actually. But my father was my hero that day, keeping his big arm wrapped around me while explaining the sights. After just a couple minutes, I was no longer terrified.” She licked the ice cream several times, finally taking a bite of the cone itself.

She had a way of making everything she did look tempting. I found myself enjoying the ice cream, something I couldn’t remember enjoying before.

“Anyway. It was one of those silly memories I kept in the forefront of my mind for years. It’s funny though. I haven’t thought about it in a long time. A long time.”

“Family obligations have a way of dredging up memories, often unwanted ones.”

“True.” She continued watching the streetcars come and go, a strange look on her face. She was the one who dumped the last few bites of her cone into the trash first. I took a few more bites, realizing she was watching me once again. After tossing the remnants, I nodded toward the exit. “We should get back. I’m certain you want to get an early start in the morning.”

“At least we can get settled.”

“Then you agree to my terms,” I stated. It wasn’t a question. She would do what I wanted.

“Was there ever really a choice?”

“No, there wasn’t.”

She smiled and we walked off the platform to the sidewalk, heading toward the parking lot.

As we both heard the rumble of one of the last streetcars for the day, an idea popped into my mind. “Come with me,” I told her.

“Where now? To purchase those handcuffs?” she teased as she tipped her head. The anger from before was gone, a hint of the real woman shining through. She’d enjoyed herself, although I doubted that she’d admit it.

“What if I told you I already had a pair inside my suitcase. Would that surprise you?”

She tugged hair from her face, half laughing. “To be honest with you, nothing about you would ever surprise me.”

“I’m not certain I take that as a compliment.”

“You should. I’m just doling them out with ease tonight.”

I took her hand, leading her to one of the streetcars.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Why not end the night with a little sightseeing?” I dragged her with me, lifting her onto the moving car, shocked to see there was no one else on it. “Go find a seat in the back while I pay for our ride.”

“What do you have up your sleeve?”

“Me? Never.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

I chuckled as I pulled out two hundred-dollar bills plus paid for the ride. “Take us to the wharf and back. Don’t pay any attention to the crazy kids in the rear.”

They grinned and nodded, and I knew I’d been right about her choice. She’d selected the furthest seat, the bench perfect for what I had in mind. I took long strides toward her, noticing the

way she was looking at me. Then I sat down and immediately pulled her between my legs.

“Welcome to San Francisco, little girl. Allow me to point out the sights.”

“Are you qualified to do so?” she cooed when she asked.

“That’s a very good question. You’ll need to rate my performance when I’m finished.”

“Oh, that I will do.”

I wrapped my arms around her, grinding her bottom against my already throbbing cock. When she placed her palms on my thighs, I breathed in her exotic perfume. The effects of the wine and cognac I’d had couldn’t compare to the intoxicating freshness of vanilla, jasmine, and a hint of cinnamon.

“Did you know that the Chinese fortune cookie was born in San Francisco?” I brushed my fingertips up and down both her arms, my balls tightening.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Yes. What about the fact that sea lions only appeared after nineteen eighty-nine?”

“Wow. You know a lot.”

“You’d be surprised.” I nipped her earlobe, enjoying the way her breathing almost immediately changed. “San Francisco had over fifty hills.” I tugged on the hem of her dress, pulling the material over her thighs.

She moaned softly, her body tensing. “That I’d believe.”

I lifted her buttocks, spreading her pussy. “And Alcatraz was once a military fort before becoming a prison in nineteen thirty-four.”

Suzannah reached behind her, fumbling with my belt, yanking on my zipper. I helped finish the job, freeing my cock. “Tell me more,” she purred.

I teased her sweet pussy, sliding my shaft back and forth across her wetness. “The city has the oldest North American

Chinatown.” I pressed the tip against her swollen folds, allowing her to control pushing herself down on every inch.

“Oh, my, oh my,” she whispered. “Such an amazing city.” She eased the back of her head against my shoulder, squeezing her pussy muscles on purpose.

As the streetcar continued to rumble across the tracks, lights flashing as it moved at eight miles per hour, she moved up and down on my cock. Her control was effortless while mine was already reaching a difficult point. She was so wet, so hot that beads of sweat had already formed just underneath my hairline.

Suzannah whimpered, dragging her tongue across her lips as she rocked against me. The effect was delicious and exciting, her breathless sounds adding to the rush of adrenaline flowing through me.

“Tell me more,” she managed.

“Fires destroyed much of the city in eighteen fifty-one and fifty-two, causing it to be rebuilt.” I was running out of history lessons, my cock swelling even more, which made it almost impossible to think clearly.

“That’s right. Hot. Fires.” Her actions increased in intensity and she reached for my hand, pulling it under the front of her dress.

I didn’t need any further instructions, fingering her clit as she rode me, every sound she made ragged and in need. I continued fingering her, even pressing my finger in beside my shaft several times.

For a few seconds, there was no need or desire to talk, our bodies taking over as desire continued to build. Then I sensed she was ready to slide into pure euphoria.

“Oh, you’re so bad. You’re so…” She bit back a cry, her entire body tensing as she tossed her head from side to side.

I heard noise and sensed we were no longer alone. It didn’t seem to bother her in the least, her entire body gyrating as she took what she wanted. I was the one suddenly struggling to hold back, her pussy muscles clamping and releasing to the

point she pulled me in even deeper. She was so damn tight I was in awe, my chest aching from how hard my heart was thudding.

She gripped my leg, squeezing it savagely, her breath skipping. I adored the look on her face, the way her mouth twisted as she came.

I yanked her against me, wrapping one arm around her waist as I continued to tease her clit with the other. Now I was the one bouncing her up and down on my lap.

The sound of her lilting laughter was enough to send another wave of explosive fire into me. I wasn't going to be able to hold on for long, but we would soon be nearing the end of my sinful ride.

“Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you later, sexy kitten?” I asked as I wrapped my hand around her forehead, keeping her head against my shoulder. “Do you have any idea the kind of debauchery I have planned for you?”

“I'm certain you'll tell me.”

“No, I plan on showing you.” I lifted her up by several inches, yanking her down, the sound of her skin slapping against mine heard over the rumble of tires on tracks. “I'm going to bring you to your knees. I'm going to make you quiver, crying out my name as I bring you into the throes of passion. I'm going to keep you chained to my bed where you'll find yourself happy and safe, eager to serve me. And I assure you, beautiful flower. You will serve me.”

She shuddered in my arms, her mouth open. I wanted nothing more than to fill it with my cock, taking her to new heights of pleasure. That's the moment I noticed two passengers watching us, utterly embarrassed at doing so, but aware of our sin, enjoying the show.

“Open your eyes, sunshine. Tell me what you see.”

“We're being watched,” she muttered.

“Yes, as I told you would happen. You are the most beautiful creature in the city. And I have no issue allowing them to see

what belongs to me. I think you appreciate that. Don't you, little flower?"

"Never."

"You can lie to yourself, but your body has yet to lie to me. Maybe I'll select a collar and leash for the wedding. Yes, something in jewels would suit you."

"I..." She laughed nervously, but I could tell by the way she was trembling in my arms that she wouldn't mind.

"Let yourself go, Suzannah. I will never let anyone hurt you."

The scattered moan she released brought me back to the realization my cock was aching like a son of a bitch.

They were the last remaining coherent words I could offer, the ache in my cock turning to a swell of agony. When my body tensed, she squeezed her muscles again.

As I erupted deep inside of her, she dug her nails into my thighs, grinding against me.

Knowing we were being watched brought me up from the shadows of lust and sadistic need. Yet the idea of collaring her remained in the forefront of my mind. She would look lovely with diamonds wrapped around her long neck. Perhaps a stop on the way to her destination would be in order.

Besides, the owner of the jewelry firm had been a close associate of my father's. He was also my mentor, someone I hadn't seen in several years. I'd made a phone call, requesting his assistance. If anyone knew the pulse of what was going on in Napa, including with the Warrington family, Carlos would. I could kill two birds with one stone.

However, his help and his advice would come with a price. He'd already mentioned he needed a favor. That's the way it worked in this world. Given the past we'd shared and the fact he'd retired from the 'business' years before, he needed someone he could trust implicitly to handle a situation for him.

He hadn't mentioned it over the phone because even though he'd changed his status, now mostly on the up and up, that

didn't mean both he and his organization weren't under constant scrutiny by law enforcement.

It would be business as usual, my unusual skills utilized as they'd once been before. How long had it been since he'd called me into action, providing me with a mission that stretched my boundaries?

Suzannah's soft moans pulled me back to reality. Our bodies were molded together, our skin on fire. Being with her was far too pleasurable. "You are mine. Forever mine." The whispered words were easy. The truth as to why burned deep within.

I was falling for the girl, not just because of what she could do for me. The trouble was I was worried I'd be the one who crushed her spirit.

I held her in place for a few seconds, both of us learning how to breathe again. Then she laughed softly she adjusted her dress, lifting her torso until I could make myself decent.

Then she moved into the aisle, holding out her hand. As I gripped her fingers, she tugged, jerking me into the aisle. As we passed by an older couple, the man gave me a nod and a grin.

I hadn't been this relaxed in years. All because I'd taken a commercial flight.

Forget about karma.

What we were sharing was predestined, our fate already sealed.

Now that we knew each other, the real festivities were set to begin.

May the strongest survive.

CHAPTER 18



“Sin has the devil for its father, shame for its companion, and death for its wages.”

—Thomas J. Watson

Suzannah

Words of sin and shame.

I’d thought of little else since we’d left the hotel, still tingling from the rough rounds of sex and the promises he’d made. Marriage. Could I endure marriage to someone like Kendrick when our alliance would be considered shameful at best? I bit my lower lip as images of his naked body rushed into my mind. I hadn’t paid attention to the scars on his back before, finally tracing them with my finger as he lay snoozing.

Had they been caused by acts of sin, the man punished because of them? He’d awakened in the middle of my egregious act, immediately wrapping his muscular fingers around my throat. For a few seconds, it seemed he hadn’t recognized me, determined to squeeze the life out of me. Then he’d grinned as I’d seen him do so many times, issuing a sexy warning.

I slipped my hand around my throat, shuddering as I’d done several times since our departure.

What was it about his determination to ruin my father that continued to intrigue me? My father had once told me that fear had a distinct scent, rancid and disgusting. So did power. It wasn't that it smelled of money but there was a freshness to it, as if opening a bottle of the finest red wine. Kendrick was power.

Then again, so was I.

Would our relationship have a fairytale ending? At this point, I'd given up on the thought. I stole a look in his direction and as soon as I did, I tingled all over. What neither one of us wanted to admit, at least to the other, was that our intense connection had more to do with our desire for the other, not merely revenge. I pressed my hand against my lips, remembering the last kiss, one so passionate that I'd almost melted into him. That's what I'd always wanted. God. What was I thinking?

The afternoon sun beat down on the convertible, but the ride was glorious.

We'd gotten a late start.

Very late.

We'd enjoyed spending the morning together. I'd laughed the moment Kendrick had pulled out the handcuffs, showing me that he was deadly serious about shackling me to the bed if necessary. I'd almost tested him, racing toward the door. Then I realized I wanted to spend the night curled up next to him.

What did that make me? Oh, yes. A very bad girl indeed.

The truth was that I'd sold my soul to the devil.

No, the truth is that you like it.

Maybe I'd allowed him to borrow it for an extended period of time. Him. The man I'd enjoyed spending an evening with. The man I'd come close to exposing my soul to.

Ice cream. A streetcar. I had no idea what had changed within the man, but the alteration in his demeanor had been enthralling. Or maybe I'd forgotten I'd planned on closing myself off from him and his methods of seduction.

Whatever the case, the closer we came to Napa Valley, the antsier I became, but a part of me was looking forward to seeing the faces of my family. The deal we'd made together was still nagging at the back of my mind, but it had already gone too far to consider backing out now.

My phone had almost blown up with the number of phone calls I'd received. My mother. My brother. My sister. I'd lost count of how many times they'd called. And I'd ignored all of them. They didn't need to hear the play by play regarding the trip.

When he pulled the car into the parking lot of Padis Jewelry, I turned my head. "What are you doing?"

"Picking up a little something extra. Come on. I know our timing is short." He winked at me, immediately opening the door and climbing out. As he always did, he scanned the area, ensuring we hadn't been followed. How many times had he glanced into the rearview mirror? Enough for me to realize his life was dangerous. Now, my life was as well.

He wore a smirk on his face as he waited for me to exit the vehicle. Then he guided me inside the lovely yet quaint establishment. As soon as we'd entered through the doors, an older man headed for him, his hand extended.

"Carlos," Kendrick said, obvious admiration in his tone.

"My dear Kendrick. It's been a long time, far too long. I was shocked but so pleased at getting your call and made the exact arrangements you requested." The well-dressed man gripped Kendrick's hands then pulled him into a bear hug. It was obvious to see how much the older man cared about my new fiancé. When the jeweler pulled away, there were tears in his eyes. "I am so sorry to hear about your father. He was such a great man, a good friend. I apologize for not making the funeral. I had certain... issues to deal with."

Carlos made the sign of the cross, both men communicating without saying words. There was more between them than the fact Kendrick's father had been a preferred customer. My instinct told me that.

“I am still reeling from his death,” Kendrick said.

“Yes, I can imagine,” Carlos said gruffly. “Please give your mother my best. She must be suffering greatly.” He turned his head in my direction, giving me a pleasant smile but there was a level of darkness behind his deep chocolate eyes that indicated danger as well as significant power.

A slight shiver coursing down my spine, I glanced at Kendrick. I should have known he’d planned something else after his collar and leash comment the night before. However, this meeting was about something other than jewelry. There were aspects of Kendrick’s life that I would likely never learn. Perhaps I didn’t want to.

I slipped my hand around my throat again, more nervous than ever. I seemed to remain flustered around the man, which was so unlike me. At least I was no longer biting his head off. We were making advancements in our relationship.

What was I saying? We didn’t have a relationship. We’d had sex.

Passionate, kinky, deliriously wicked sex. Several times. Oh, God. I was losing my mind. And I wanted more. I wanted the whole white dress wedding with the honeymoon.

“Thank you, Carlos. She is but at least she had family near her. I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Suzannah Warrington. Suzannah, this is Carlos Santia. He’s an old and very good friend of my father.”

“Fiancée,” Carlos exclaimed. “Reno. Bring a bottle of our finest champagne for our guests. We have reason to celebrate. Congratulations, my son. I thought for certain no one would ever be able to tame this man’s heart. He is so much like his father.” He took my hand into his, kissing my knuckles.

Reno beamed and it was obvious he and Kendrick also knew each other.

I didn’t want to burst his bubble since he seemed genuinely excited. “Thank you very much. It was truly a whirlwind romance.”

“I wish the best for both of you. Come. I have a selection you requested, my finest collection of Tacori Blue Diamonds.”

“Tacori Blue?” I asked. I was unusually flabbergasted. I knew their worth and their rarity. “That’s too much, honey bunny.”

Kendrick lifted a single eyebrow. “Honey bunny?” He was obviously amused at my choice of endearments.

“Yes,” I cooed in a babytalk kind of voice. “You’re all soft and squishy inside just like a fluffy bunny.”

I could tell by the look on his face that he’d get me back later. I couldn’t wait for the sparring festivities to begin.

“It’s so nice to see young love,” Carlos said longingly. “If only my wife felt the same after all these years.” He grinned and walked behind a counter. He took his time pulling out a special case, unfolding it and presenting the pieces.

I was floored. Speechless. They were perhaps the most gorgeous pieces of jewelry I’d ever seen.

“These are spectacular,” I whispered, noticing a young man had brought a champagne bucket with ice and two glasses to one of the small tables on the side. A linen towel was wrapped around his arm and he expertly opened the bottle. I could only imagine what brand of champagne was being served. What did Kendrick really think he was doing by plying me with expensive gifts? Was this all a show for my father?

Even if it was, he knew what I needed, which was to look the part of a woman in love with a powerful man, someone who could drown my father in his ruthlessness.

“Select whichever one you want, my darling pickle. With you, the sky is the limit.”

I cocked my head, glaring at him as he winked. The two of us were well suited for each other. Perhaps too much so.

“May I?” I asked as I selected one, lightly brushing my finger across the stunning jewels.

“Of course. Take your time. I will leave you alone. Leave the champagne,” Carlos directed, stepping back to provide us with a little privacy.

“Congratulations, Kendrick,” Reno told him.

Kendrick grinned. “She’s a handful.”

Reno gave me a nod then poured two glasses.

Then the two men disappeared behind a curtain. “One day, perhaps you’ll tell me the real story behind how you know each other.”

He chuckled. “Let’s just say Carlos was a mentor for a little while.”

“Ah. That means he’s organized crime.”

The look he gave me confirmed my suspicions. “Which would do you prefer?”

“What are you doing? This isn’t what we agreed to.”

“And what exactly did we agree to?”

I wasn’t certain how to answer the man. “I’m not the kind of woman who falls for any man attempting to impress me.” I laughed after issuing the words. “At least more than once.”

He took a deep breath and presented me with one of the glasses of bubbly. “If I could do so without causing you irreputable harm, I would teach Christian Caffrey a lesson he wouldn’t soon forget.”

“You’d torture him, cutting his fingers off perhaps?”

“Oh, I assure you, *prekrasna kvitka*, there are things that can be done to the human body that no one can see that are some of the most painful experiences in life, and also permanently damaging. I find the constant nagging reminder a reason for those who betray me not to do it again.”

“You enjoy inflicting pain.” I took a sip of champagne, uncertain of how I felt any longer. I was crazed by the notion that this man was flippant about his desire for violence, yet on the other hand, I was thrilled by his desire to hurt someone who’d nearly crushed my soul.

“I do what’s necessary. That’s what I was taught.”

“Just like my brother.” I couldn’t look the man in the eye. I couldn’t even find words that would make our attraction appropriate, let alone what we were doing. I continued fingering one choker after another. “They are exquisite.”

Kendrick leaned over. “I promised you a collar and leash. At least for now, I can make good on half of my promise.”

“Why? I need to know exactly the reason why or I won’t select one.” Now I was able to lift my head, staring him directly in his shimmering eyes. It seemed that every room and every location we walked into, the lighting was kind to him, highlighting all his best features and attributes. Maybe he didn’t have any bad ones.

Except for the fact he was a killer. There was that.

His expression darkened. “Because I want everyone to know I own you.”

The answer was honest, succinct, and satisfying.

I lifted one, studying the finely crafted work of art, diamonds so perfectly clear that they held a slight iridescent blue hue. Then I eased another into my fingers, the rigid design the clearest reminder of an actual collar. I could hear his breathing shift when I’d selected the one in my hand. “This one is perfect.”

“Yes, it is. If you’ll allow me to place it around your lovely neck, I would be honored.”

He’d either been raised to express two entirely different personalities or he was an extraordinary actor. Either way, I felt special for the first time in as long as I could remember. How sick was that? After placing the flute on the glass surface, I turned around, lifting my hair. He took his time placing the expensive bobble around my neck, his fingers brushing across my skin several times as he fastened the hook.

Shivers coursed down my spine, which was what he wanted of course. When he wrapped his hand around my throat, pulling me against him, I was able to feel how aroused he’d become. And I’d never felt more like a possession in my life.

“You are truly beautiful, my sweet fiancée. I hope this will prove to be a symbol of our time spent together that you will learn to value and appreciate.”

There was a hidden message in his words. I was certain of it. He squeezed for a few seconds, leaning over and pressing his lips against my cheek. Then he took a deep breath and backed away.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak to Carlos for a few minutes. Enjoy the champagne.”

What would he need to talk with a jeweler about? Of course this was about business, dark business.

As he walked away, I noticed the outline of his weapon and shuddered all over again.

Someone was going to die on this adventure we were on. Of that I was certain.

* * *

Kendrick

Carlos was a formidable man hiding in plain sight in nothing more than a richly tailored suit. His son, Reno, had worked with him for several years, long enough I’d seen him grow from a lanky kid into a fine-looking young man. How many trips had I accompanied my father on under the guise of purchasing a treat for my mother while also handling aspects of business?

Few knew about Carlos’ earlier life, the one his wife had begged him to leave. He’d always been into precious jewels, his business catering to the rich, famous, and ruthless men and women across the globe. In his early days, he’d been a hired gun for a family who’d basically adopted him from the streets. In fact, he’d been the man I’d spent several months with the year I turned eighteen. My father had wanted me to learn from the best, as he’d told me.

Carlos' training had been brutal, unforgiving, and I had the scars to prove that I hadn't been the best student. However, the experience had been one of the best in my life. He'd taught me much more than about weaponry and explosives, combat fighting and several martial art forms. He'd also taught me sophistication where up to that point, I'd been little more than a thug.

I'd even been with gangs, acting as if I was one bad ass. Carlos had put me in my place in the first few days, keeping me in squalor until I earned the right to even eat at a table. He'd taught me about jewels and wine, fine foods and cigars. I'd become a man in those few months, completely changed when I'd returned to Kentucky.

It had been the single time my father had patted me on the back after observing me for two days. Then he'd said he was proud of me. That had never happened again, but I'd seen it in his eyes every time we'd talked.

I considered Carlos a second father, someone I trusted and respected. The fact he kept his fingers in every situation had proven helpful more than one.

Carlos was waiting for me in what he liked to call his man cave. It was a beautiful, highly secure patio area where he felt comfortable talking. Music was playing from the speakers, specifically designed to mask every listening device out there. That's something else he'd spent quality time training me in. I knew about security systems, surveillance techniques, and had been taught to hack even the most secure computer systems. If only people understood how powerful he truly was.

He sat with a glass of his favorite wine, a cigar in his fingers. He was a controlled man yet over the last few years had allowed himself to indulge in certain proclivities, including Cuban cigars. He had a glass of wine waiting for me as well, a cigar already cut and ready to light. There wasn't a question as to whether I would join him. To choose not to would be an insult that would result in bruises on my face. Well deserved.

As soon as I sat down, he grabbed his favorite lighter, flicking and waiting as I leaned over with the cigar in my fingers. That

allowed him to study my eyes, which he'd always told me were the windows to a man's soul, but a woman could always hide her feelings. It had taken me years to realize he'd been right.

"You're enamored with her, but your relationship is fake."

I was no longer stunned by his proclamations. He was never wrong. Chuckling, I nodded before answering. "Yes. She was an interesting find, an accident."

"Have I taught you nothing?" There was a hint of anger in his voice, one of disappointment as well. "There are no such things as accidents in our world."

"Perhaps my lovely bride to be has an agenda of her own. However, she is also a pawn in her family's savage lineage. According to her father, women are to be seen and not heard. That doesn't suit her personality."

"You like her."

"I do."

He laughed. "I could easily tell the woman has spunk. That will bode well for you over the years, my son. I would consider keeping her after this game you're playing is over."

"It's not a game to me, Carlos. My father was murdered. I intend on finding the killer."

"Perhaps you should allow your father to rest in peace." There was a flash of pain in the man's eyes.

When I exhaled, I sensed he was watching me. "You knew he was ill." He seemed surprised I knew.

"Your father rarely hid anything from me. One aspect of our friendship that we both needed during the most brutal times in this country was the ability to be able to trust each other. He cared for his family greatly and wanted to ensure you and your siblings and mother were adequately taken care of."

"I have a feeling he arranged his death." His words added credence to my line of thinking.

“Your father wanted to die with dignity, but what happened to him was not something he planned.”

“Someone wants to destroy my family. Suzannah will help me determine if I’m right.”

“Yet, it is entirely possible you will be challenged.” Carlos had concern in his voice.

“I will order additional soldiers to protect my family but I won’t stop until I find out who had my father killed.”

“Truth is a double-edged sword.”

“Yes, but necessary to provide some peace for my mother,” I told him. He studied me carefully. “Hence the reason for forming an alliance with Suzannah.”

“You are a tenacious man. From what I can tell, the two of you are very powerful together even if your impending marriage is something you both consider nothing more than a business arrangement. However, be careful, dear boy. You are playing with fire.”

“Which you know is something I enjoy doing.”

“Risking everything you were trained for could cost you something that will break you, my son. While I know you better than most, it’s easy to see you care for the woman.” He eyed me critically, but gave a nod of approval, a slight smile. He cared for her as well. I found that very interesting.

He hadn’t wanted to train me, my father asking him several times before the man agreed. I’d asked Carlos the reason why on the day I returned to Kentucky. He’d patted me on the shoulder and turned toward his wife, the incredible woman tending to my wounds and feeding me, treating me as her own son during my months of training. I’d seen the look of love in her eyes not only because of the relationship we’d been lucky enough to form but also because of how close she was to Carlos.

Their love had withstood violence, the test of time, the loss of a child, and several other tragedies.

His answer hadn't been something I'd understood at the time. Now, I did. He'd told me that the one thing an assassin could never allow himself to experience was love because if he did, the emotion would become his death warrant. But only after the woman he'd fallen hard for was tortured in front of him.

"I understand, Carlos. However, if what I believe is true and Rutherford Warrington was behind my father's murder, he deserves to be punished. Do you know the answer to that?"

"Whether or not he is remains to be seen. What I do know is that he's had plans of expansion on his agenda for several months. The marriage of his son is merely putting several additional pieces together. He's ready to unfold his plans. I know your father was investigating adding California as a possible second location, which likely irritated Rutherford."

I thought about what he was telling me and sighed. "I'm sure it did. Who is he working with?"

He took several puffs of his cigar, taking his time answering. That meant he knew something but wanted to ensure that I would use it wisely. I knew better than to rush him. I enjoyed the wine as well as the taste of the cigar.

"Do you remember the first mission I sent you on?"

"To eliminate the son of the Diego Cartel out of South America." There was no need to expound on the information. He hadn't forgotten a single aspect of the direction he'd given me or the reason why. The man had a photographic memory, which had allowed him to keep track of every enemy he'd encountered and those who were troublesome to the few people outside his regime he trusted and admired.

The illustrious list had included my father. They'd been good friends, close enough they each considered the other a brother.

The brutal leader of the Diego Cartel had managed to slide into California and the southern states that Carlos had controlled at the time. He'd killed hundreds of Carlos' soldiers, hijacked several important shipments of jewels and drugs, and had ceremoniously claimed California as his own. That had been long before anyone like Rutherford Warrington

realized sliding into the morally gray areas of business was far more lucrative.

And Carlos' firstborn son had been gunned down two nights before his wedding.

It was a tragedy that Carlos had never gotten over, even sending his youngest son away so Raphael Diego couldn't have a chance to claim another life. They'd been dark times, my anger spiraling to the point of losing control.

His grip on his wineglass increased from the horrific memory.

He and my father had done favors for each other over the years, something I'd taken over at that point. Dealing with the tragedy had been one of them.

"Do you remember why I hesitated in sending you on that particular mission?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

When he turned his head, I sensed he wasn't expecting my answer to reflect that fact I'd still been a wild child, refusing to follow his rules. I'd earned another set of scars from the brutality inflicted on me after being caught and kept in Raphael Diego's dungeon for several weeks. The imprisonment had increased my awareness and my hunger for revenge. That had been the moment when I'd truly adapted a lust for spilling blood.

Then I'd killed the bastard's firstborn son as required, an eye for an eye. I'd captured the moment for Carlos, waiting in the shadows long enough to hear Raphael's sorrowful bellow when he'd opened the box wrapped in festive Christmas paper, revealing his son's severed head.

That's the moment I'd realized what he was telling me.

"You knew that one day Raphael would exact his revenge when you least expected it."

He took another sip of his wine, returning his gaze to the fountain in front of us. "Exactly. I've always believed he would attempt to destroy the rest of my family. However, his intentions are to start with people I've associated with. Two of my most loyal friends were recently gunned down at the same

time your father was. However, Raphael has become quite clever. He is still in his mansion in Colombia.”

If what he was telling me was a possibility, then my father’s murder stemmed from my act of retaliation. Why now?

“He’s using hired guns,” I suggested.

“It is my belief Raphael has made an alliance in blood of a different color. That is why this game you are playing is very dangerous and one that will require all your training to return to the forefront of your mind. If you are not careful, the love you feel inside will be used against you.”

I took a deep breath. “I understand.” As soon as he rose to his feet I did as well. Then I stubbed out the cigar.

He opened his arms, ready for another fatherly bearhug. As he held me close, I sensed his concern increasing. “I hope you do, Kendrick. Your father wasn’t good at telling you, but he wanted a much different life for you and your sister and brother. He truly did. Let the man rest in peace. That’s the only way you’ll find yours.”

I clapped him on the back then pulled away. “Maybe so, Carlos. However, business must go on. To that end. What favor do you need?”

His usual carefulness came into play as he moved to the stereo system in the corner, turning up the volume. Then he slipped an envelope from his pocket, handing it to me as soon as he returned. “I have a situation with someone who decided to steal from me. As you might imagine, I don’t take that lightly since I’ve worked hard for everything I’ve achieved. You don’t need to know his name, just where he resides.”

I took a few seconds, pulling out the contents. The information was concise, a photograph and a few notes on his possible locations. “When do you need the man handled?”

“As soon as you have the time. Sooner if he catches wind that I’m onto him. I’m aware of the festivities you are expected to attend. He has no idea that I even know how much money he’s extorted from me.”

“Any requests?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “Other than making it as painful as possible, just like I taught you to do. Even at my age, I find that I often need to send a message. I’d handle this one myself, but I promised Cherie a vacation to Italy. Our flights are already booked, the villa secured for a month. I would hate to disappoint her.”

“Absolutely not. I am happy to provide assistance.”

He clapped me on the back once again. “You are truly a good man. I know your father was extremely proud of you even if he didn’t say it often enough. Don’t be a stranger. When you select the wedding bands, I hope you’ll do me the honor of selecting my fine establishment.”

His booming laugh made me grin. “If that comes to pass, then absolutely. Thank you for everything.”

“I will give you one more piece of advice that I hope you’ll listen to. Be careful, my son. If you allow life to pass you by, you’ll only have regrets. You can’t take your wealth to your grave, but I do believe your memories will survive long after your body is forced to expire. Create memories and you will be a rich man.”

He’d always had words of wisdom but on this day, they were more important.

And there was only a single reason why.

Suzannah.

CHAPTER 19



*S*uzannah

A choker.

I fingered the piece, suddenly feeling ostentatious. However, my thoughts constantly shifted to Carlos. What had their private conversation been about?

“I’m glad to see you’re enjoying the collar,” Kendrick said.

“It’s beautiful. Ridiculously expensive but gorgeous. Is it on loan?”

“Absolutely not. I’m not that kind of man. My fiancée deserves only the best.”

“To what do I owe such generosity?”

“Well, you did buy a starving man ice cream.”

I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “Now I know the way into your cold, black heart.”

“Ouch. That hurt.”

“Bullshit.” The expensive bobble had to set him back over a hundred grand. I wasn’t entirely certain how I felt about that. Of course the man had come from extensive wealth, but that didn’t mean I preferred diamonds to sterling silver. I was a simple girl who preferred simple things. “Well, thank you.”

“Oh, I assure you that you will be thanking me shortly. My way.” I was starting to adore his playful side, surprised he had

one. Was this just a method of showing off for my parents? Of course it was. I knew the technique well.

Even when my family hadn't been considered wealthy as such, my mother and father had pretended we were, living large. Our first family home in Napa had been way out of their league, the riding lessons not something I'd requested. Our clothes. Our school. The furniture. Everything had been for glow and show, including the first birthday party I'd had after our big move. I'd been eight years old, school nothing but a chamber of horrors.

My mother had expected I'd easily gain dozens of friends, which was why she'd hired a baker and a caterer for the event, sending out dozens of invitations to everyone from my class.

Not a single soul came.

My mother had been devastated. I'd been hurt but also relieved. I'd known from the moment my brothers and I had stepped foot into the huge house that we were living in a ticking time bomb or perhaps the more appropriate term had been a glass house.

Nothing would stop my mother from getting what she wanted. That had included contacting every single parent. I'd overheard her and the threats she'd made. A new party date had been established, my birthday suddenly a week later. Lo and behold, ninety-five percent of the people invited had attended, the birthday presents worth thousands of dollars.

I laughed softly to myself as Kendrick pulled into the parking lot of the more low-key inn I'd selected to stay in. Of course, my father had insisted he knew where I was staying. I adored this place, the very first winery and small hotel my father had managed to purchase legitimately.

After the early success, everything had changed, my father's income increasing exponentially. Then the real glow and show had started.

"Who is Carlos really to you? I know you said mentor, but there's more. Isn't there?"

He tossed me a look. “My father was a thorough man. He wanted me well trained to handle anything that came my way. Carlos is ex-Mexican military. Their ways are more brutal but effective.”

“My God. The scars. He gave them to you. Didn’t he?”

“Let’s just say I was a rebellious student at first.”

“How can you stand that kind of life? I would never want that for our children.” What in God’s name had I just said?

“Our children? I like the sound of that.”

Shuddering, I looked away, shifting my thoughts back to that party from so many years ago. Perhaps my mother hadn’t been such a bitch after all. It was funny. None of the families who’d avoided my fake birthday party remained in Napa Valley. That much I’d learned years before.

I did remember my father explaining to Steinbeck that our family would always deal with enemies in a timely fashion. No matter how powerful they were.

“Your father has done very well for himself,” Kendrick said from the driver’s seat. “This is a stunning location.” He slowed down as he drove along the long, aggregate entrance, both sides lined with flowering trees and shrubs.

“Yes, this is a favorite location of mine. Before I was tossed aside, I was able to put some of my love and suggestions into the renovation.”

“You’re a very talented woman.”

I leaned my head against the headrest, glancing at him through my dark sunglasses, taking a whiff of the scent of warm yeast coming from the bakery attached to the facility. “A piece of advice. Take it or leave it. Don’t allow my father or his minions to fool you. That includes my brother. His wealth is measured in whatever achievements others have made. In other words. He’ll never be happy with being a simple billionaire. That’s why he’ll remain in the gray areas for as long as he’s allowed.”

“I’m not fooled easily, my sweet.”

“No, I suppose you’re not. Is money everything to you?”

“I used to think so.”

“But not any longer?”

He rubbed his finger across his lips and sighed. “No.”

“Lucky you.”

I heard the bitter sound of my laughter and sighed. The day was picture perfect, the breeze light, the flowers in full bloom, and the fountain positioned on the cobblestone pavement of the lobby more spectacular than I remembered. The place had an air of Spanish elegance, as if shipped from Madrid stone by stone.

Every aspect of the masonry had been reappointed, columns and pillars ornate yet bold in design. I’d adored this place from the moment my father had shown his family what he’d managed to purchase, beating dozens of others participating in the foreclosure auction.

“Such bitterness for such a festive event.” He chuckled and I smacked his leg playfully. When he grabbed my hand, placing it on his thick, throbbing cock, I had the same reaction I’d had a half dozen times.

My core was set on fire.

“It’s not bitterness, honey bunny. Just an understanding that drinking will be necessary. That’s something for you to keep in mind as well.”

“Just be careful, snookums. You will want to keep your faculties about you.”

As soon as he pulled up to the valet parking, I yanked off my sunglasses. “And why is that? Am I required to supply you with information? That wasn’t part of the deal, my sexy fiancé. You’re perfectly capable of forming your own conclusions.”

“This about nothing more than helping you out of a tough time.” He handed the keys to the valet as well as a hundred-dollar bill and I shook my head.

“You certainly do make an impression wherever you go.”

Kendrick took my arm, guiding me through the lobby doors. He stopped us both from walking any further into the interior after we were just inside. “While I might take what I want, I was taught to give back in return.”

“I wonder who taught you that?”

“The most powerful man I’ve ever met.”

“Carlos,” I whispered, pulling away from his hold and glancing into his eyes. As he peered down at me, I involuntarily touched the collar. “Your world is full of surprises.”

There was something entirely different about the expression he wore. Still dark. Still unnerving. Yet his possessive nature was stronger than ever. He swaggered closer, fingering both sides of the jeweled piece. “Remember what I told you about asking questions you might not want the answers to. Carlos is a good friend to the family. He’s also the best jeweler around, his days of delving into violence over with. Check in, my sweet fiancée. I have a phone call to make.”

“Of course you do. I do wonder what Carlos told you about my father. That is what he was doing. Right? I’m certain whatever it was will serve as ammunition.”

The amusement in his eyes was evident, the slight curling on his lips genuine. “You are very much a force to be reckoned with. Carlos had nice things to say about your father. By the way, later I will thoroughly enjoy breaking you down to your most base level where every sensation, every emotion, and every desire will become explosive.”

“I’m not certain if I should be excited or terrified.”

“Perhaps a little of both.” His laugh followed me as I headed to the front desk. The man had a way of unnerving the hell out of me.

“Can I help you?” the young girl asked.

“Yes. I’m checking in.” I pulled out my wallet, sliding my driver’s license over the counter. Then I shifted, glancing over my shoulder. Kendrick was already on his phone, but every

few seconds he darted a look in my direction as if I was a little bird locked inside a perfect gold cage.

When I turned around, the girl returned my license, her fingers furiously flying on the keyboard in front of her.

As she processed the paperwork, I glanced at the dazzling ring sparkling in the light of the atrium windows. The man had spared no expense in providing me with a glorious adornment and statement of our love.

I wanted to laugh. A man like Kendrick Gregory couldn't fall in love with anyone. I had a feeling that it was forbidden in some rule book that was likely handed down through the generations, although what he'd said about his father's love of his mother had been touching and genuine.

Still, he wasn't my plus one for romance starlight gazing. I'd been so consumed by him that I'd yet to make a decent plan on how to demand I grab the operations position. I would need to play it by ear at this point. While that wasn't like me, it would seem I was in the mood to try new things as of late.

Just who was Carlos Santia and what was his relationship to Kendrick? Another shiver skated down my spine thinking about what pain Kendrick must have endured. Why would a father do that to his son? The answer was easy. To turn him into a cold-blooded killer with no conscience. There was more to it though. I would certainly search the internet, which was something Kendrick knew I would do. Their bond was entirely different, something that was even stronger than family. I was certain of it.

"So glad to see you, Ms. Caffrey."

The voice caught me off guard. I almost squealed when I saw the man who'd appeared in front of me "Jose. You didn't retire."

He grinned. "I doubt your father would allow me to retire."

He'd aged so much in the last few years, his once dark wavy hair completely gray.

"Give me a hug. I mean if that's allowed." I moved behind the front desk before he objected. He'd always been a staunch

man, so practiced and polished that as a kid, I'd called him Mr. Grouchy Pants. He'd looked out for me when I was here, always giving me a lollypop or two, something my mother had frowned on.

The memories were more startling than I thought they'd be.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm doing well." I returned behind the counter, allowing him to breathe easier. He wasn't the huggy type of man.

"Is your husband staying with you?"

"Come now, Jose. I'm certain my father has kept you up on the ever changing times in our family. I go by Warrington now." I made the statement because I refused to use my married name any longer. Fuck my boss. Fuck the contract. "Caffrey was my married name from a looonggg time ago." I elongated the single word on purpose. Maybe then I'd believe it once and for all. I was a free woman.

Uh-oh. Technically, I wasn't.

"Ms. Warrington. I'll make the change for you on the records. It's been a long time."

"I know, Jose. It has been. How is the family?"

"Doing very well. You are all set. There will be no charges. Your father made certain of that." His eyes twinkled but I sensed he knew what I was about to say.

The fact my father couldn't resist flaunting his wealth shouldn't surprise me. "Jose," I said as sweetly as I could. "I don't take handouts no matter who my father is. Besides, my new fiancé is really paying for the entire glorious mini vacation we're on." I lifted my hand, showing off the ring. I knew it wouldn't be but so long before Jose made a point of congratulating my father on his daughter getting hitched for a second time.

"Congratulations. I'm glad I've already sent a celebratory basket for your arrival. I will have another bottle of chilled champagne sent as well."

“You are such a sweet man. I appreciate that. Yes, this is a celebration. Isn’t it? A new family member.” After following my gaze toward Kendrick, he accepted my credit card, but I could tell it was reluctantly.

“Yes, your brother seems happy. And your fiancé is a very lucky man. I hope he knows that.”

“Yes, he is, Jose, and he does.” The fact Kendrick was watching our interaction closely was surprisingly enticing. He hadn’t liked the fact that Jose had hugged me. I could tell in his eyes. I couldn’t remember a single time when Christian had expressed any concerns when another man had admired or talked with me.

I turned toward the open-air lobby, purposely ignoring Kendrick’s heated aura, admiring the view of the winery in the background. “How are the grapes doing?”

“Fortunately, this year has been much better. Thankfully, we were spared the fires last year but the winter before we had significant frost damage.”

“I heard what happened. I’m so glad things are better.” I’d read the information. The only person I’d talked to in the family up to this point was my sister. Even Serena had been guarded the last few months. I couldn’t blame her since she was still tethered to our parents given her college education and my father’s insistence that she remain living in the house she grew up in. I’d read about the destruction to my precious inn online like everyone else.

“Here are your keys and you’re set to go. Let me know if you need anything,” Jose told me.

“Thank you so much. Take care of yourself and consider retiring.”

He chuckled and shifted his eyes toward Kendrick once again. How long would it take until he’d picked up his cellphone, dialing my father’s private number?

I grabbed the two key cards, happy to be back on the property. The couture hotel had been recently renovated, the location absolutely gorgeous and the view spectacular. It was one of the

smaller wineries we owned, the property backing up to a series of rolling hills.

As Kendrick sauntered toward me, his nostrils flared. “Down, big boy,” I told him.

“You know him.”

“As I mentioned, this is a location my father has owned for years, Jose a long-term employee. If you dare try and lay a finger on that man, I will kill you myself.”

He laughed and pressed his hand against the small of my back as he’d done before.

The valet already had our bags, rolling them toward the wing I’d chosen. There were several different areas, including rooms for families. I’d selected the most private location complete with an outdoor terrace surrounded by a stone wall, dozens of plants and flowers, and a hot tub. I’d thought I was going to be alone, selecting a king-size bed.

The stay would be interesting to say the least.

We both remained quiet while the man that I’d never seen before pushing the cart went on and on as if we were tourists visiting the dozens of wineries in the valley. I could sense Kendrick’s increasing amusement, but he said nothing as we were led to our room. After unlocking the door for us, he allowed us inside first before rolling the cart in. Then he proceeded to take long strides toward a set of French doors, opening them to allow fresh air in.

I found it enjoyable as I used to when I thought for certain I’d be the one taking over as being the person in charge of our wineries and hotels. He’d been well trained, likely due to Jose and his old school methods. The young man made certain everything was as it should be in every room, including the bathroom. Then he moved toward the basket that had been placed on the granite counter of the bar area, giving a single nod.

Once the bags were in place, he approached the door without a second of hesitation.

Kendrick cut him off, but the bellman shook his head. “Not for the daughter of the owner. That is unacceptable.”

“And what I find unacceptable is for a man of your caliber to go a day unrewarded.” Kendrick shoved the money in the man’s pocket.

“Thank you, sir.”

I shook my head and moved further into the room, kicking off my shoes and brushing my fingers across several of the surfaces. I was surprised he remained quiet, but I sensed his eyes watching me as I checked out the marvelous room.

The living room was complete with a small stone fireplace for quiet evenings after enjoying a visit to a winery or two. There was a bar that I knew was fully stocked with the most expensive wines and liquors. I rolled my hand across the smooth granite top, settling in front of the basket of goodies. As I started to pull a few items out, he finally approached, watching me intently.

“We have plenty of treats for later.”

“The only treat I need is standing in front of me.”

Laughing, I backed away, giving him a onceover as he’d done to me. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and open a bottle of the wine. We have some time before we need to go.” The look on his face made me laugh. I spun around, floating toward the bathroom. Millions of dollars had been spent on the renovation, the tub big enough for six, the shower for eight or more. I couldn’t help myself and counted the number of showerheads. Ten. Who needed ten showerheads?

There were plush towels and shampoo for the rich and famous in baskets just begging to be stolen.

I moved back into the bedroom, eyeing the king-size canopy bed. There was even gauzy material draped over the trestles in a lovely shade of violet. I’d been the one to recommend the romantic aspect, something my father had laughed at. It would appear he’d used several of my suggestions. Hmmm...

The room was gorgeous, another set of French doors leading to the stone patio. I threw them open, the scent of flowers

immediately assaulting my senses. When I walked outside, I couldn't have been more impressed. The furniture was iron and steel, but the cushions were plush. There was a small but adequate pool and an attached hot tub. The suite was fit for a queen.

At least a tarnished princess and her... I wasn't certain what to call Kendrick at this point. I held up my hand in the sunlight, allowing the sparkling jewel to create prisms of color. It was too bad the ring was as fake as the way we felt about each other.

Or was it?

I honestly wasn't certain any longer.

I felt his presence behind me and didn't bother turning around. He remained hovering near, silent as a church mouse. That was okay. The hard thudding of my heart echoed in my ears. He finally eased his hand around to my throat, lifting my chin with his fingers while rubbing his thumb back and forth across the choker.

"When we return tonight, I want you in your pearls and nothing else. Is that clear?" His voice was huskier than before, the tone sliding over me like a soft velvet blanket.

"Yes, sir."

He squeezed my neck with enough pressure a single moan slipped past my lips. "I do love to hear you call me sir. I think I'll make that a requirement." He took his time, running the fingers of his other hand down the length of my bare arm, sending an array of tingles and goosebumps into my system. Then he lowered his head, pressing his lips against my shoulder blade, brushing them back and forth aimlessly.

His tender touch set me on fire. Shuddering, I realized my body was swaying from desire, the longing for the man too intensified to fully understand. He had a way of creating a deep-seated need that refused to go away.

"Having you as my possession is delicious," he whispered then dragged his tongue across my shoulder blade. When he

leaned back, there was another strange look of sadness in his eyes.

“Does your family know you’re here and what you’re doing? That you’ve entered into a nefarious engagement?”

He laughed, taking his time to brush his finger down my arm. “They know I’m in California. You will be a lovely surprise for my mother. Perhaps you can even make her smile.”

“I’m sorry about her grief.”

“She’s also worried about certain threats the family received.”

“Threats?”

“Yes, something that occurs on a regular basis, but not normally at a funeral.”

“Oh, my God. How horrible.” No wonder the man was dead set on retaliation. I couldn’t blame him.

“Yes, my sweet. All the ugliness of being a child in our respective families. Now, no more talking.” When he slowly lowered the straps of my sundress, I took a deep breath and held it. Then he allowed gravity to take it to the floor. I didn’t need to be told to kick it away. There was something exquisite about standing outside in heels and nothing else since he’d already stolen my panties.

Kendrick lifted my hair, nipping the side of my neck as I tipped my head to the right. Even the way he raked his teeth across my skin was sexy. When he suddenly backed away, a smile crossed my face. I knew better than to turn around until he commanded me to do so.

The sound of the soles of his Italian loafers added to the rapid beating of my heart. Then I sensed he’d sat down, but not before unfastening his belt. There was no mistaking the sound. I took a few shallow breaths, biting my lower lip to keep from moaning. The goosebumps remained, the light breeze tickling every inch of my skin.

My nipples were rock hard, still aching from the delicious abuse he’d given them the night before. And I had a feeling my bottom remained bright red from the spanking.

“I should hate you.”

“Then tell me exactly how much you hate me, baby. Tell me how much you can’t stand my guts while I’m fucking that tight pussy of yours. Or would you prefer to do so while I’m feasting on your sweet nectar? I’m all ears, excited to hear what you have to say.”

The truth was I should hate him, but he was everything I’d ever wanted. “You’re such a bastard.”

“Which is why we get along so well. Turn around slowly,” he ordered.

I did so, holding my head high. Finding him on one of the outdoor chairs, his trousers pushed past his hips and his cock in his hand made my mouth water. He had one hand wrapped around the base of his cock, his eyes becoming more hooded than I’d seen them before. Then he beckoned me with the index finger of his other hand.

“Come ride me, princess. I need to fill you with my seed.”

His command was not to be denied, but I didn’t mind teasing him, swaggering closer with small steps. All the while his chest rose and fell, his jaw clenched. I couldn’t take my eyes off the two-day stubble, the light covering adding to his filthy persona. When I was close, he lifted his head, studying me intently.

Then he grabbed my wrist, pulling me down and forcing me to straddle his legs. His cock seemed to have a mind of its own, the tip finding my swollen folds with ease. When he yanked me all the way, filling me completely, I threw my head back, uncaring if everyone on this side of the building heard me.

“Oh, God. Yes.” I bucked hard against him, half laughing from the explosion of vibrations, lights popping across my field of vision.

“That’s it, baby. Ride me.” He brushed his hands up the length of my back, forcing me into a deep arc. Then he kissed my stomach, issuing several lengthy growls.

I grasped his shoulders, squeezing my knees against him, staring up at the bright blue sky with more than a hint of

happiness in my heart. Everything about this moment was perfect.

I rose off his cock until only the tip was inside, teasing him for several seconds as he'd done to me countless times. When he dug his fingers into my hips, yanking me down with purpose, the sound of skin against skin was primal and savage. And I loved it.

During the next few seconds, I rocked him long and hard. This wasn't about tender passion or making love. There was no foreplay, other than our bantering that kept us both aroused. This was about pure, raw sex, the wicked kind.

Panting, I continued riding him like a wild stallion until I was far too lightheaded to concentrate. We could both sense I was drifting closer and closer to an orgasm.

“Come for me, baby girl. Come on my cock so I can fill you.”

His commanding voice lingered in my mind like his musky scent did in my system. In those few precious seconds where light and darkness met, where sin and shame no longer troubled me, I let go completely.

Not just physically but emotionally as well.

And there was something else.

I lost a piece of my heart as well.

To a cad.

To a heartless man.

To the one I was terrified of falling in love with.

CHAPTER 20



*K*endrick

“The soldiers are in position,” Grayson told me. “In case you need backup for tonight. I don’t mind telling you I don’t like the fact you’re at this party. You’re a sitting duck.”

“You suddenly underestimate me. I know what I’m doing.”

“You always say that, bossman. One day you’re going to get yourself killed. Did you forget you and your family were threatened?”

That was inevitable, a part of my job and an understanding I’d had since I was young. The fact I’d told my companion about the threats was yet another surprise. However, it seemed to help her trust me if only a little bit. “Never to be forgotten, Grayson. Have you discovered any connection with the Diego Cartel?” I’d had him searching for a definitive connection between Rutherford Warrington and Don Diego. It was always better to make certain of betrayal before issuing the final blow. I’d heard of syndicates being picked apart, destroyed in bloody wars when prudence wasn’t used.

“Nothing. You know Diego’s reputation. I’d be shocked if he used someone else to do his biddings other than his trained soldiers. What I can tell you is that he hasn’t left Colombia in a long time. Almost two years.”

The man was getting older. He’d been shot several times and I’d heard he’d developed cancer given his heavy tobacco

usage, but men who suffered losses the way he had never forgot or forgave the incident. It was only a matter of time before he struck like a viper. “Yes, I know the man well. Including what he’s capable of. Keep searching. Make certain my family is well protected.”

“Stop worrying. I have everything under control,” Grayson said with disdain in his voice. The man didn’t appreciate being challenged any more than I did. That’s what made us somewhat compatible. I almost laughed at the thought. He tolerated me at best because I paid him well to do so.

I stood outside the vehicle, surveying the location of what was being called an engagement party. From what I’d been able to determine, the relationship between Ashley Winslow and Steinbeck Warrington had been considered a whirlwind romance. In our line of work, that meant it had either been arranged or Steinbeck had been ordered to find a suitable bride. It certainly didn’t hurt that she’d come from a very well-to-do family, one considered some of the early settlers in the west. The family owned several huge ranches, considered multimillionaires. And her father happened to be running for governor.

My lovely bride to be watched me intently from the car. She had a smug look on her face, as if realizing whatever business I was handling would affect her family. The time spent sparring with her had been far too enjoyable. The evening would prove to be interesting.

The winery was larger than the one attached to the hotel, yet still quaint. Her father had hired plenty of security, but that didn’t mean my soldiers couldn’t take a position that would allow them immediate access if necessary. “How long until you arrive?”

“Two hours give or take. We hit turbulence.”

Turbulence. The word shifted a few delicious images into my mind.

“Then we’ll meet in the morning. It’s possible I’ll have a favor to handle for an old friend later this evening. That means put pressure on our contacts. I need quality information about

whether or not someone was hired by him or is working with him.”

“For Carlos. I’m not a miracle worker, Kendrick. I suggest you allow me to go with you at minimum. Maybe I can gain more information than you can.”

His methods of exacting answers were almost as brutal as mine.

There was something unsettling about the fact he knew more about my business and my past than anyone else, including my younger brother. “I’ll consider it. Send me a text when you’ve landed. But you know I pay my debts. My reputation is everything.”

“Understood. I’ll see what I can do. Are you really considering going into business with the Warringtons?”

“Anything is possible at this point.”

“And what about the Feds? We’re not one hundred percent that what Harold Wymer provided won’t be enough for indictments.”

“If they’d had anything worthwhile, they would have arrested me by now or frozen our accounts.”

Grayson sighed. “What about the new agent snooping around?”

“Anything else on Suzannah?”

While I hated that I wasn’t certain whether I could trust her, the fact I had feelings for her only complicated things. Feelings. My need to possess her had quickly turned into something else that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

That meant suddenly I had a weakness. In the game of Russian roulette we were playing, showcasing I had any emotion with regard to her wasn’t acceptable.

“Everything about her life checks out with perfect lettering. She was highly respected, humiliated yet crawled up from the muck to reclaim her career even stronger than before. However, she didn’t need to leave the city when she did. She

had other job offers in San Francisco, Los Angeles, even Seattle. She really wanted to get away from her family.”

“Which means she’s hiding something.”

“Exactly.” When I didn’t respond right away, he laughed. “You care about this girl.”

“She’s... not what I expected.”

“Wow. The great Kendrick Gregory has feelings. I was lucky enough to see them when your family was threatened. Now this. You’re entirely different.”

“Be careful what lines you think you have the right to cross, my friend. It would seem I’m in the mood to continue exterminating the rodent infestation.”

“Duly noted. Boss. I’ll call you later after I’ve landed.”

“You do that.” I ended the call, slipping the phone into my jacket. Then I headed for the car, opening her door. As soon as I grabbed her hand, she lifted her chin, staring at me intently.

“Do me a favor and promise me you aren’t going to kill my father.”

What I found fascinating was that Suzannah’s voice held utter conviction and sincerity. She’d shared with me additional aspects of how she and her sister had been treated like nothing but property over the years, yet she still held some sense of loyalty to him given Rutherford was her father. The woman fascinated me more every hour I was with her.

“Would you prefer the honor?”

“Unlike you or my father, Kendrick, I have no place for violence or murder in my world. I know who and what you are, but I want no part of it after we’re married. I also want no part of drugs, including legal ones.” There was a challenge in her tone, another moment of rebellion in her eyes. She was also attempting to confirm whether my bold statement had been truthful.

And it took all I had not to toss her over the back of the car and fuck her from behind.

“You’ve been doing your homework.”

“You forgot to tell me about the investigation into your father’s association with Tapcock Pharmaceutical. Or should I believe everything the tabloids had to say?”

She was using that as a bargaining chip. “You should know better than to believe everything you read. How about this? I can promise you I won’t kill him tonight. Although I’m not saying anything about roughing him up a little. You are quite the tough businesswoman. Maybe I truly did underestimate you.”

“Very funny and you did. I’m a badass.” She snorted as she laughed, a slight flush crossing her face as she covered her mouth. The trait was adorable.

I knew what I’d promised her before, but the real reason for Grayson’s call had been about being approached by a junior agent from the DEA, likely bucking for a promotion. From what Grayson had said, the kid had been fishing, but had had enough information on a sordid aspect of one of my father’s prior alliances to mean that some extra digging into our past had been done. Someone was definitely out to destroy the family. While my father had shifted away from his early days of selling what he called party favors to the ‘it’ crowd, including cocaine and heroin, the shift to oxycodone had ended up being not only risky but had almost brought down the empire.

Upon my insistence, Pops had ceased to deal with a single aspect of the production of the legal yet deadly drug, possibly growing a conscience in his older age. There’d been too many reports of deaths from the product he’d funded production of. Besides, the pharmaceutical company he’d been working with had all but gone bankrupt. Since it was old news, I had no doubt the sudden interest by the DEA was based on a phone call received from Rutherford himself.

Or someone working for him.

Could that be in his recent response to hearing about his daughter’s recent engagement? Or had her father been in touch with her or vice versa? Even I had to admit the timing was

circumspect at best, but could he manage to do that overnight? Only if he had members of the DEA in his back pocket. At least he'd laid his cards on the table, which was what I'd hoped he'd do. "Is there something you're hiding from me, my sweet? Are you really working with your father in a double cross?"

"I'm a damn good actress but not that good, Kendrick. My hatred of my father is real." She refused to blink, allowing me to see she was telling me the truth. I found that interesting.

"Your father is testing me. Tonight is about issuing an ultimatum. If he reacts well, we'll do nothing more than enjoy the remainder of the weekend."

She stopped short, placing her hand on mine. "We can handle this without violence."

"We," I repeated as I brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "You're so certain you want to be involved?"

"Absolutely."

"Then you'll be tarnished."

Her laugh sparkled in the twilight. "I'm not the good little girl you think I am. In fact, I don't always play by the rules. I can tell you exactly how to bring my father down. Didn't you tell me that revenge was best served when you could continue watching it play out over several years?"

"You're more like me than I realized."

"Perhaps you have no idea. You don't back a woman into a corner, Kendrick. They are truly the most venomous creatures out there."

"Yes. Of that I'm certain. Were you told how Ashley and your brother met?"

"Do you really think they'd tell me anything? No, but why?"

"Her father is running for the Senate. I find that curious timing."

A smile crossed her face. "Then I'll do a little snooping of my own."

“Just be very careful, my darling snookums. Your brother and father will be watching everything you do.”

“You truly don’t understand how powerful I just might end up being.” She laughed and gave me a sensual look, one that would drive a stake through most men.

“Now, you have me curious. It would seem you’ve been holding out on me. You had plans of your own.”

She offered a sly smile, one that could drive a man to madness. “Of course I had plans. I’ve simply been waiting for the right time. And I had to know if I could trust you.”

“Your decision?”

“Well, I won’t rule out a required prenup, but it would seem you and I are cut from the same cloth.”

It was easy to laugh when I was near her. I backed her against the exterior of the building, inhaling the scent of her delicious perfume. “Be careful playing with fire. At least that’s what my second in command continues to tell me.”

The fact Grayson had hopped on a flight, determined to help me with the cause, meant word on the street was getting dicey. And not only with regard to the Feds. That wouldn’t bode well for regular business, which I also couldn’t ignore. At least I could count on Marcus to keep things running until my return. Given what was at stake, Grayson’s assistance might prove to be necessary. There was a nagging that troubled me, as if I wasn’t seeing the bigger picture. Why did I have a feeling I was in the middle of a vicious game? My instinct told me that things were about to get very messy. The woman had me more than curious. What did she have as a possible hold over her father’s head?

“A second in command. I’ll be eager to meet my competition.” Her grin was infectious.

“I assure you that when we complete our business, combining our operations, you’ll be my equal.”

“Uh-huh. As long as I bow to your commands in the bedroom.”

“Now, you understand. I suggest you confess your sins and what you’ve been hiding from me given you will be punished later. It’ll go easier if you tell me everything.”

She laughed and adjusted the lapel on my jacket, daring to drag her tongue across her lips.

“That won’t work, little vixen. If you have something on your father, I need to know. We are a team.”

“Yes, but I still want to be the one to drop the bomb.”

“This is sounding more devious than I thought.” I slipped my hand under her dress, grasping her bottom until she moaned. “Talk to me.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. I know my father better than anyone gives me credit for. Bend him. Break him. However, he’s much more powerful than you realize because he employs dozens of people to do his biddings. He also uses blackmail extensively. People fear what he can do. The only reason he’ll care about our involvement is because he can’t hide details about your family or control the decisions you make. In turn, he’ll be terrified that I’ll initiate a scandal that will allow all his enemies free rein at the bloody feast. Or... He can give me my thirty-three percent of the business.”

“Only thirty-three?”

“Until his retirement, which will be in six months. My terms,” she cooed.

She was more of a shark than I realized. My hunger only continued to increase.

“Clever, but how do you intend on toppling your father off his pedestal?”

“It’s simple, really, a tactic I’m certain you know well. I might just have a little black book of my own. Only mine has documentation that can ruin him within twenty-four hours.”

“Well. You are industrious. You did hold out on me.”

“My father didn’t raise a fool. And as I said before. It’s all about trust. That must be earned.”

The woman knew how to play hardball. It would seem I'd underestimated her.

"Why now? You wanted out of your family's life. You were the one who left to find a better life for yourself."

Suzannah took a deep breath, glancing away from me. I noticed the look of pain in her eyes even in the gathering darkness. "My father wanted to marry me off to what I assume was the highest bidder. I have no doubt what my worth is. I'm old enough I can fight for myself, but my younger sister is another story. She'll do what my father says. I don't want that for her. Serena is far too young and innocent."

"Which is what you were when your father suggested marriage." I wasn't appalled. Arranged marriages were still popular in certain cultures as well as to pay off debts. However, it highlighted the kind of reprehensible man her father really was.

Her laugh was laced with bitterness. "Maybe I was born older. I knew the situation with my father early on. My sister always thought of him as a hero. Anyway, I refuse to allow the situation to continue."

"Yet you'll enter into a marriage with a stranger."

"On my terms. Besides, you aren't a stranger any longer."

"Be careful, my bride to be. I could sweep you off your feet without hesitation."

She eased her hand to my aching cock, squeezing. "And be careful, Mr. Mile High. Your soft underbelly is showing." Backing away, she blew me a kiss before heading toward the entrance.

And I was forced to adjust my cock.

I would allow her the joy of sharing what she had with her father. As long as he played by the rules tonight. "You will obey me."

"Why, of course."

Her laugh was laced with mischief. "Then remove your panties."

“I’m sorry?” She was completely thrown by my command.

“You heard me. When I give you an order, it’s not a request. I expect it to be followed.”

“You will always be a bastard. Won’t you?”

I grinned in partial response. “That’s what I was born and bred to be. If you don’t comply, the first order of business will be to spank you in front of your father.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

There was such fire in her eyes, yet I was able to gather a scent of her arousal. She pushed me away, scanning the parking lot. I’d planned the timing, arriving a fashionable twenty minutes late on purpose.

“You weren’t born to be a bastard, Kendrick. You were bred to be a dangerous man,” she said casually as she slipped her fingers under her dress, fighting with the body-hugging material to shimmy her panties down her legs. I crouched down, peering up at her while the lacey material fell to the pavement. Then I lifted her leg, taking my time to ease the thong over one heel then the other.

“Perhaps you’re right.” I couldn’t help myself, brushing the tips of my fingers up one calf, pressing kisses against her heated skin.

She took a deep breath, leaning her head against the exterior of the building. “But you will forever be a sexy bastard.”

I chuckled and bit her leg before standing, pulling the damp lace to my nose and mouth, taking a deep whiff. I could drink in her musky scent for days. I took my time, enjoying the moment until hearing someone walking by. Only then did I slip the pair into my suit jacket. “Much better. Time to go inside.”

“So bad. You are so bad.”

“Another compliment.”

We walked forward and I took a deep breath, curious as to what the evening would bring.

Social gatherings.

I'd endured dozens in my life starting at an early age. You didn't get to be in the upper echelon of society, as my parents had, by hiding in the shadows. At least not according to Dominion Gregory. He'd never avoided the limelight, parading my mother, a former pageant beauty queen, in front of the paparazzi every chance he got. When his children, or his preferred spawn, as he affectionately liked to refer to us, were old enough to understand the statement 'smile until it hurts,' we were shown off as well.

That was until I'd reached the ripe old age of fifteen. Then suddenly, my father had ripped me out of the illustrious private school I'd been in only thirty miles away, sending me abroad for advanced training. That had begun my shift into becoming an assassin. I'd hated being away from home but in looking back, I realized the experience had been something dreams were made of for a cold-hearted bastard like myself.

There'd been initial rumors I'd died in a boating accident and my parents were grieving. Then I'd heard the one that I'd fallen ill to bone cancer, barely hanging on in some Swiss hospital. My parents had neither confirmed nor denied until a couple of years later when a tenacious reporter had gotten wind of the fact I'd been enrolled in the most expensive school in the world. The man had lost his job days later, and poof. He'd suddenly disappeared a week after that.

I'd never asked my father if the man had been paid off to escape to a tropical island for the rest of his life or if he ended up at the bottom of an ocean. I hadn't cared. What it had taught me was how powerful my father truly was. I'd respected him on that day and every one of them since.

Including in his death.

That's why walking into down a stunning pathway studded with twinkling lights and a trellis covered in vines and roses while photographers snapped one picture after another didn't bother me in the least. My lineage would be the fodder for a

few days, my identity difficult to pin down. Either a member of her family would comment on who I was, or it would be a little secret providing me with days to perfect my plan.

Our plan.

CHAPTER 21



*K*endrick

Our plan indeed.

“Just remember that you need to behave,” I whispered in her ear before swiping my finger across her choker.

“You take all the fun out of lording something over my father.”

“Oh, my *prekrasna kvitka*, you’ll get your chance. I assure you.”

She would and I’d enjoy watching.

“Your grandmother must have been a hoot.”

I had to laugh. “She was a spitfire, much like you are.”

“Something I’ll keep in mind,” Suzannah cooed.

No matter her practiced bravado, I sensed Suzannah was nervous, yet her smile was as practiced as mine. She’d chosen a stunning dress, the material appearing iridescent in the dim lighting. It also went perfectly with the choker I’d purchased. I couldn’t help but notice she continued to finger the piece as we walked.

“Mrs. Caffrey. Where is your husband?”

“Mrs. Caffrey. Is it true that you’re a recent divorcee?”

“Mrs. Caffrey. Who are you currently dating?”

The questions came fast and furious, the click-click of high-powered cameras annoying as fuck, but she was an old pro at avoiding them while giving the reporters asking the most pointed questions a death stare. I admired her even more, especially when she stopped, spinning on her stilettos, waving for the cameras with her left hand. Then she dared to slide her index finger under my jaw and across the seam of my mouth for effect.

I couldn't help but smirk as the surprised looks on the reporters' faces turned to ones of predatory hunger. They would have swarmed the facility had the hired bouncers not been there to prevent them from doing so.

Once we were guided inside, I pulled her into a shadowed corner, pressing the palm of my hand against the small of her back. As I pulled her into the heat of my body, she gingerly pressed her hand against my chest.

"You are one naughty girl," I told her.

"Too much or not enough?" Her laugh was lilting yet fake. I knew every sound she made, every purr of passion and desire. Even now, my cock ached to fill her tight little pussy.

"Perfect. For now." I slipped my finger under her chin. "Just remember, my darling fiancée, that you do belong to me. If I see you flirting with another man, I will ensure that won't happen again."

"Why do I have the feeling the method you'd do so won't be temporary?" She rose onto her tiptoes, darting her tongue around my lips.

I sensed a presence and wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, my hold possessive as I French kissed her, sweeping my tongue inside.

"Jesus. Fucking. Christ. Suzannah. Don't you know there are photographers here?"

While I didn't recognize the voice, I had a feeling it belonged to her older brother. I'd never officially talked with Steinbeck, had only heard his voice once in my life. I didn't bother responding initially, allowing our moment of passion to

continue. When I did lift my head, I ensured he knew I was pissed at the interruption.

When his eyes opened wide, I realized he hadn't believed she was sleeping with the enemy. I'd also been right that a phone call had been made to the family almost immediately.

"Isn't Ashley looking for you, brother? You'll need to learn that leaving your bride alone prior to her wedding isn't the best idea," Suzannah asked without bothering to look in his direction.

Steinbeck glared at me. In his hand was a drink, but it was obvious he'd already consumed more than one. "The ink is barely dry on your divorce papers, and you've already attached yourself to another man. How gauche of you, sister of mine. And a criminal, no less. At least you had the decency with Christian to select a law-abiding citizen."

There was no real recognition, but I sensed he'd been told his sister was arriving with someone to watch out for.

Her laugh didn't surprise me. Neither did the venom in her eyes. She gave me a wry smile before closing the distance. In her tall heels, she was almost able to look eye to eye with her brother, something I could immediately tell he loathed.

She planted a hand on her hip, the stance more like a fighter than the beautiful lady she was. "I suggest you remember whose sperm created the man you've become, Steinbeck. Neither you nor dearest Daddy can hide who and what you are from me. I find it laughable that you're questioning a single one of my choices after all this time and everything you've done."

"You couldn't understand, sister of mine. You always had your head in the clouds, believing the best in everyone. I can tell nothing has changed." He kept his hard glare positioned on me, his smirk turning into an award-winning smile. At least he knew how to act the part of the heir to a throne.

I kept the smug look on my face. While the possessive part of me wanted to step in, this wasn't my place to do so. Yet. From what I'd discovered, Steinbeck was little more than his

father's puppet, dancing to whatever jig allowed him to continue living his life lavishly. Why he was settling down was beyond me.

Except that as with other powerful families, those who were married appeared more stable.

"I do wonder what Ashley thinks about marrying such a deceitful human being." She laughed when he said nothing. "Perhaps I'll fill her in with the details. She does deserve to know." When she started to step away, he grabbed her arm, yanking her back by the few inches.

"I suggest you take your hands off my fiancée, or you won't like what happens." By now, her father had stepped into view, standing at the entrance to the festively decorated tasting room.

She laughed, cocking her pretty little head as if she didn't have a care in the world. "Don't worry, darling. My brother doesn't have the guts to go against a real man. That's why I feel sorry for Ashley." When she snagged the drink out of his hand, his eyes opened wide, his snarl loud enough their father stormed toward us.

"Stop this now. This is an engagement party!" her father demanded. As with his son, he barely gave his daughter a second glance, concentrating on the man who'd crashed his party.

And who was marrying his daughter.

I leaned against the wall, shoving my hands into my pockets. I couldn't help but enjoy the show.

Suzannah didn't budge at first, but I could tell her fingers were white knuckled around the glass. I almost encouraged her to toss the liquid in his face, but even I wasn't that crass. When she tossed back the entire amount instead, I almost applauded her. My little vixen had sharp claws. I'd need to remember that.

Then she handed her shocked brother his glass, able to break away from him easily. I couldn't help but notice she was

spinning her ring on purpose, drawing attention to the fact we truly were engaged. The overt action wasn't lost on her father.

"Daddy. What a lovely party you're thrown for Steinbeck. That's funny. I don't remember you offering to pay for a single aspect of my previous wedding. Don't worry though. You won't be invited to this one. Meet my fiancé, although I think you know him well. Or perhaps you knew his dead father. But allow me to make introductions. This is Kendrick Gregory."

A squeal sounded off before either her father or brother could retort, and a young woman raced toward Suzannah, throwing her arms around my fiancée's neck.

"You're here. I was so worried you weren't coming." The girl was practically giddy with happiness.

"Ashley. Of course I'd come to your wedding. It isn't every day my oldest brother is getting married. Plus, I have so many things to tell you."

I waited until the women had left before sauntering toward Mr. Warrington. I could sense Steinbeck had moved behind me.

"You're not welcome here, Mr. Gregory. This is a private party," Rutherford said with a smile on his face.

"I'm not leaving. In case you didn't notice, I was invited by your daughter. That isn't a crime."

I shouldn't have been surprised when Steinbeck took a swing, but I was. Yet my reflexes were well honed. I snapped my hand around his fist, squeezing until a look of pain crossed his face. Then I used it to push him back by several feet, ultimately slamming his back against the wall.

Gasps could be heard coming from the other room. Both guests as well as two different oversized men dressed in all black flanked my side, prepared to toss me out if necessary. When one had the audacity to yank my arm, I let go of Steinbeck quickly, slamming the man in the jaw not once but twice. Then I wrapped my fingers around Steinbeck's throat, giving him a smile.

"I wouldn't fuck with him if I were you," Suzannah said with a purr in her tone.

“Don’t do this. Just stop it. That’s the man I love,” Ashley exclaimed. “This is my engagement party!”

“Then you need to tell your boyfriend that I’m not in the mood to play games,” I told her casually. There was no need to upset her any more than necessary.

“What’s going on? Why are you trying to ruin my wedding?” The girl was close to being hysterical.

“Let him go,” Rutherford hissed. “And don’t touch him. That goes for you as well, Steinbeck.” He eyed me with a mixture of hatred and trepidation.

After taking a deep breath, I backed off, adjusting my jacket as well as pulling the cuffs on my long sleeves.

“There’s nothing to look at, folks. Go back to the party,” Rutherford continued. He planted a smile on his face, turning around and guiding the guests back into the room.

I glanced at Suzannah, giving her a stern look. She wrapped her arm around Ashley’s waist, guiding her into the main room and away from the crowd.

Rutherford exhaled, not bothering to turn around before speaking. “As I said before. You’re not welcome here. We have nothing to discuss. I know you’re attempting to expand in Napa. You’ll find the atmosphere unkind to those who aren’t from around here.”

“I’m certain I can negotiate the murky waters, Rutherford. That’s what I do best, which is why I’m worth so much money, my influence well known throughout the west. But first things first. It might come as a surprise, although somehow, I doubt it, that I’m engaged to be married to your daughter.” I noticed another young girl was watching from just inside the main room. When Suzannah moved beside her, I could see the resemblance. The two of them gave me a hard look then Suzannah whispered in the girl’s ear. The woman was obviously Serena.

Rutherford spun around, certainly not at all shaken. When he dared to walk closer, I was surprised. “I don’t know what hold

you have over my daughter but it's not going to fly. She will never marry you. I'll die before I allow that to happen."

His words made me laugh.

"I think it would be a very good idea if we had a discussion and clear the air so you can get on with the night's festivities." I wasn't giving the man a choice and he knew it. "Man to man without your son. Besides, I doubt you want to face my wrath. As you might imagine, I'm still a little testy since my father's murder."

There was an odd look shared between the two of them. Now, why was my bubble almost burst, given it appeared they were shocked I was insinuating they had anything to do with it?

Steinbeck started to retort but his father threw out his arm, shaking his head. He knew I was deadly serious.

He would play by my rules first.

Then I'd allow his daughter to pick him apart piece by piece.

* * *

Suzannah

"What was all that about?" Serena demanded as she cornered Ashley and me at one of the two bars.

"And hello to you as well, sister of mine." Every step I took, I was reminded that my lover had stolen my thong. I felt like a dirty little girl standing in the middle of such upstanding people while wearing nothing but heels and a fabulous dress. The tension from the wretched interaction remained but I was proud of myself for holding my own.

I'd also noticed how possessive Kendrick had been, acting as if snapping my brother's neck wouldn't have bothered him in the least. There was much more to our sinful relationship than a business arrangement.

Or maybe I was just hoping as much.

She shook her head. While she was close to turning twenty-one, she appeared older, as if the toll of continuing to live with our parents had been significant. She also looked nervous. Maybe she'd been warned not to provide me with tangible information. My guess was that Ashley hadn't received the same passive-aggressive threat.

"Our father doesn't like my plus one choice. Nothing more than that."

"Who is he?" Her tone was more demanding than I'd ever heard it.

"He's handsome, whoever he is," Ashley added. "Did I hear you correctly that he's your fiancé?"

I held up my left hand, wiggling my fingers. Then I scanned the room as the bartender filled my order. True to form, there were several A-list celebrities, movie moguls, corporate leaders, and politicians. My father was turning this into the event of the year. "His name is Kendrick Gregory. His family is from Kentucky and oh, surprise, they're involved in similar industries as dearest Daddy."

Ashley narrowed her eyes, obviously recognizing the name.

Serena opened her eyes wide. "Didn't you just get divorced?"

"Six months ago."

I could tell she was debating how to handle my answer as well as process what she'd heard. Then she threw her arms around me, pulling me close. "I'm sorry, sis. I've missed you. I thought you'd never come back to see me."

"I'm back. Maybe for the duration."

When she pulled away, I could tell my sister's concern deepened. "You can't. You hated it here. They'll eat you alive."

Ashley cleared her throat. "I'm getting married into your family in two days. Please don't tell me I shouldn't marry your brother."

Both Serena and I turned toward her then shared another quick look. "I'm curious. How did you meet my brother?" I asked.

The smile on Ashley's face was spontaneous. She was positively glowing with happiness. "Daddy insisted on taking me to the horseraces one day. He'd never asked me to go before so of course, I said yes. Steinbeck was there, handsome as could be. I accidentally tossed an entire fruity drink down the front of his crisp white shirt. I was mortified, turning fifty shades of crimson. He burst into laughter. We started talking and I haven't left his side other than to go to class since we met. He's wonderful, the man of my dreams. He asked me to marry him two weeks later." She showed off her ring much like I'd done, only her excitement was genuine.

"Wow. That's not like my brother," I said, wondering if I would ever feel such utter joy. I noticed my brother standing inside the room, his eyes constantly darting toward us even while he mingled with his guests. He didn't like the fact I was talking to his beloved fiancée.

"Then you obviously don't know your brother very well," Ashley quipped, her eyes opening wide as she slapped her hand across her mouth. "I'm sorry. That was so rude of me."

"That wasn't rude, Ashley. I don't know Steinbeck very well. We were never close as kids and certainly aren't now."

She squeezed my hand. "He told me about your estranged relationship. In truth, I think your brother regrets everything that happened between you. The arguments, the nasty words. He wants you to be a part of the business, to share in the extensive workload."

I was taken aback, throwing Serena a look; she shrugged. "My brother told you that?"

"He did. We do talk, you know. I'm not just pretty arm candy, as my father has insisted is all I'm capable of becoming. I have my sights set on bigger things. My own business, for example." The slight haughtiness in her tone surprised the hell out of me, even if her gaze continued to follow my brother's whereabouts.

"Well, I'm uncertain what I want to do at this point. Plus, I have a job I adore in Atlanta."

“But your family is here. Well, most of your new family. The Gregorys are out of Kentucky. Right?” She batted her long eyelashes, and I lifted my eyebrows in response.

“Yes, they are. You know them.” Now I was more curious than ever. Perhaps the alliance between the two families had been the beginning of a very nefarious plan. What angered me was that Ashley had been dumped in the middle. Why was my inner girl already nagging me that something was off kilter?

“I know of them.” There was a strange look of fear that crossed her face. “Just be careful.”

“Why the warning?”

“Because my brother was shot a long time ago. Supposedly, my father was the target. He saved my father’s life, thank God.”

I glanced at Serena who shrugged her shoulders again.

“Whoa. Is your brother okay?”

She laughed. “He’s right over there. He’s going to be the president of the United States one day.”

“Wow. This is a lot to take in.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ashley said quickly. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Please. Do tell,” I said in retort, trying to disguise the irritation in my voice.

“Well,” she said as she scooted closer as if preparing to provide the latest town gossip. I learned a long time ago that families in Napa held several dark secrets behind closed doors. That was due to wealth and greed. She even lowered her voice, as if worried she’d be heard over the lively music. “Daddy told me a year or so ago that Mr. Gregory hired his own son to try and kill him. I guess he’s some bigwig assassin, nicknamed the Blade. Can you believe that? Anyway, they weren’t able to prove it.”

“I assure you that Kendrick isn’t this Blade person or an assassin. While I know you want to place blame on someone for your brother’s injury, my fiancé isn’t your man. He’s just a

powerful businessman with some incredible ideas. You never know. He might want to fund your business.”

Now my sister rolled her eyes. Meanwhile, I wondered why her father had mentioned the story to her. Unless Steinbeck was filling her pretty little head with nonsense to keep her in line. Whatever the case, a game was being played.

“Anyway, I have a favor to ask, and I know it would mean so much to Steinbeck.” Ashley certainly wasn’t upset about her brother’s accusations or the fact I was likely marrying the man responsible. She’d been raised to be the perfect wife, a Stepford wife. I shuddered from the thought.

“What’s the favor?” I took a sip of wine, hoping the liquor would help me get through the rest of the evening. At this point, I wasn’t certain I could tolerate all the family love.

“Would you consider being my maid of honor? I wanted to ask you sooner, but I waited to see if you were coming to the wedding at all.”

The gulp of wine flew from my mouth, hitting her square in the chin, staining her way-too-white frilly dress. “I am so sorry.”

“Oh. Oh... It’s okay. Really. It’s just a dress. Please just say yes. Okay? Please?”

My God, the girl was beside herself with anxiety.

“Um. Sure. Yes. Let me get you cleaned up.”

“No. That’s fine. I’ll do it. Nothing a little soda water won’t fix. Thank you. I told Steinbeck I could count on you. I know the dress I selected will fit you perfectly. Yes it was presumptuous of me but I had plans on begging you so I could make Steiny happy. By the way. It was his suggestion.”

Steiny? Talk about bad pet names. Snookums seemed better and better.

Ashley scampered off before I could say anything. However, my hackles were raised. When I glanced in Steinbeck’s direction, Serena followed my gaze.

The smirk on the man's face meant I was right in that he'd put his own fiancée up to asking me of all people to be a part of her wedding party. The reason why? Steinbeck wanted to ensure I'd stay at the wedding and reception the entire time.

"Wow. That was... awkward."

"I'll say. Maid of honor?" She quickly followed my gaze. "He and Pops have been in several secret meetings lately."

"Which means they have something planned. You haven't signed anything recently, have you?"

"What does that mean?"

"That means do not sign a single piece of paper our father presents you without yelling for me. Promise me that." I wouldn't put it past my father to con my sister into signing a marriage contract. Or worse, signing away her portion of the business. She had a trust fund as well, stocks just as I did. I had very bad feeling the carrot dangled in front of my face was really about some blackmail scheme my father had concocted. Shit. This would need to be played out carefully.

Could I trust Kendrick? It would seem I'd need to.

How had this game gotten so far out of hand?

Because you're not a game player. Don't kid yourself.

"Okay. Okay. What are you so worried about?" Serena asked.

"When it comes to our father and his greed, everything. Have you seen any sign Steinbeck cares about that girl?"

"It was very quick. Like exactly as Ashley mentioned it happened," Serena answered. "But they seem very much in love, at least from the little bit of time I've seen them together. You think she's being used."

"I think our father is a master manipulator. He'd sell our souls to the devil for a hot few bucks."

"Then you need to warn her."

And burst the girl's bubble? While I knew Serena was right, adding wedding wrecker to my list of accomplishments wasn't what I'd had in mind when returning home.

The girl was hopelessly in love with my brother. Meanwhile, I agreed with Kendrick that our father had arranged it for Steinbeck like he'd tried with me years before. The jury was out on whether or not he would treat her right. Yeah, I'd need to break her heart.

Great.

The days were getting better and better.

CHAPTER 22



*K*endrick

At least Rutherford Warrington was bright enough to take me to another portion of the winery where we could have a more private discussion behind closed doors. He walked to a cabinet, pulling out a bottle of scotch. I allowed him to take his time pouring two glasses. We were civilized after all. My bride to be was correct. There was no need to ruin a festive event.

Yet.

I studied the wines as he took his time, enjoying the tension and his apprehension. He wasn't certain what to make of me.

"So you're the mystery son everyone thought was dead," he said as he handed me a glass, studying me intently.

Chuckling, I immediately brought the rim to my lips, taking a sip. "Excellent choice."

"I sell wine. I can't stand to drink it. I'm curious. Where have you been all these years?"

"Business abroad. My family does have an international corporation. But you already knew that."

"Yes, well, your father was a highly respected man. I was sorry to hear about his death."

After taking another sip, I turned to face him. "You and I both know you were behind his assassination." I wanted to see his

reaction. There was genuine surprise in his eyes, something that couldn't be faked or masked. I wasn't certain what to make of it.

"I'm many things, Mr. Gregory, but killing a rival wouldn't be in my best interest. As you've likely predetermined, I have a lot to lose by making foolish decisions. However, I was aware your father had several dangerous enemies. Have you checked with them?"

While it was possible he had no idea who was behind my father's death, he was celebrating the man's demise. He also hadn't realized I'd been ready to take over. Smirking, I lifted my glass. "Excellent performance, Rutherford. You don't mind me calling you by your first name since we are going to be family."

"What is it that you want, a portion of my company?"

"Well, perhaps, but we'll start with the truth. Did you have my father murdered?"

He chortled then glared at me. "Why would I do that? Even if your father had managed to steal some of my business, his success would have been short lived. We weren't friends but there was no need to be enemies."

"Heartfelt. Surprising. What about siccing the Feds on the family or threatening my mother?" Now I was more than curious as to his reaction.

He cocked his head, as if something odd had come into his mind. "I don't know what my daughter told you, but I'm not an evil man. Have I crossed a few lines in my life? Of course I have. Just like both you and your father have done, but threatening a grieving woman? I'm not that crass."

"Okay. I'll keep that in mind. You are a consummate actor if nothing else."

"What have you done to my daughter? What do you think you have on her? She would never consider marrying a man like you. While she's made some imbecilic decisions in her life, marrying you wouldn't be one of them. She knows I'll disown her."

“First of all,” I hissed, hearing the discord in my tone and doing what I could to back it down, “she is likely the smartest member of your family. Second, she is a formidable woman in her own right, which is something you never gave her credit for. And third and most important, we care about each other.”

“Talk about a performance. You almost had me believing that your little tryst is anything but what it is.”

“And what is that?”

“An attempt to extort money from my estate. That will never happen.”

I laughed, amazed he would think such an egregious thing. “I think you are likely aware I don’t need money.”

“Power. Isn’t that what all men hunger for in our positions? If you take a portion of my business, you’ll have more power than almost anyone in the world. That would be worth killing for.”

He believed he had me over a barrel somehow. Or he was simply accusing me of being the bad guy.

“Power is best gained with truth, Rutherford. Don’t you agree?”

“What are you getting at?”

“It’s very simple. I am marrying your daughter. And as a wedding present, you are giving her one third of the company. That is what she deserves and you know it.”

As soon as he burst into laughter, I bristled. “You’re fucking out of your mind. She has no clue what it would take to run a company. And if you think I’m going to allow you to get your hands on it, you’re wrong. My attorneys will ensure that never happens.” Now we were playing a game of wit and will. I was beginning to enjoy it more than I should.

I took another sip of my drink, swirling the scotch in the glass and enjoying the moment. I could already tell he was starting to sweat. “Your daughter will be CEO of the company. Period. She will run the day-to-day operations, which will include

combining our hotel and winery operations, including purchasing new vineyards and expanding our supply chain.”

“You’re fucking out of your mind. I won’t go into business with your organization. It’s dirty. Drugs. People dying.”

“And yours isn’t, Rutherford? I assure you that I’m well aware of your dealings in South America as well as other foreign countries, ignoring certain trade embargos. I also learned of your methods of extortion and money laundering. I will give you credit. You’ve been very clever in maintaining a fairly squeaky-clean organization. Kudos.”

He was befuddled, his jaw clenching. “You don’t know shit and can prove less. I run a tight ship.”

“Are you certain about that? I have information that if leaked would ruin you. I doubt you want that to happen.” I was bluffing for the most part, although I’d learned enough to see all the signs. He wasn’t so clever after all nor was he hiding anything effectively. That was because of his heightened level of arrogance. Perhaps I needed to get my hands on Suzannah’s little black book.

“You’re bluffing. You’ll be hearing from my attorneys.”

I was enjoying the moment, allowing him to sweat. “I assure you I rarely bluff or jest about business activities. Prudence has made me a wealthy man. Just think of it this way. We’ll be creating hundreds if not thousands of job opportunities in our endeavor. And I’ll even allow you to have all the credit. Now, I don’t want to take the thunder away from Suzannah. She’s suffered enough by being born into the wrong family. At the meeting she has planned with you, she’ll go over the remaining details, including about your impending retirement. However, I do have one requirement that is non-negotiable.”

I watched as a single bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

He was already having heart palpitations. “What the hell else do you want from me? Blood?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Do not tempt me. I watched the light in my father’s eyes leave on a hot day in the middle of a goddamn golf course. I

have no doubt you were involved in his death. I had to be the one to tell my mother that he wasn't coming home. And last but not least, I watched terror form in my sister's eyes just seconds after she'd been threatened. You will do everything that I say or so help me God, I'll strip away everything that's precious to you. Every dollar. Every trinket. There won't be any mistresses or visits to the kind of kink clubs that would disgust most people. You won't have the opportunity to steal money from your investors or hide your earnings from the IRS. Do you fully comprehend what I'm saying to you, Mr. Warrington?"

I'd played more than one game of poker in my life. I'd become an expert at it. As the color drained from his face, I realized that he had no ability to retort because my instincts had been spot on.

"Yes," he hissed. He still had a look of surprise on his face, as if shocked I'd accuse him of threatening my family or killing my father.

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other. As I was saying, I have one condition that will not be fucked with. Serena will not be entering into a marriage contract with anyone not of her choosing."

"Why would you care?" He was genuinely confused.

"Because of what you did to Suzannah years ago. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes," he snarled. "But this ballgame isn't over yet."

"Oh, yes, it is. I'm now in control of the ball." I backed away, giving him a polite nod while I wanted to shove my fist down his throat.

"Why are you doing this? You don't love my daughter. You yourself said you have more money than God. And I didn't kill your father."

"That's where you're wrong. Your daughter has become the light of my life." As soon as I said the words, the conviction in them shocked the hell out of me. It did him as well, his eyes opening wide.

“Perhaps your daddy didn’t tell you, but we respected each other. At least we did at one time. I knew him pretty well. Your father would be proud of you, son. You’re just like him.”

I wasn’t certain if he was being condescending or truthful. It didn’t matter.

I laughed. “Leave my father out of this. Just make no mistake. Warrington Industries will be pulled under my corporate veil. Of course, you will continue making a yearly salary, remaining the spokesman of the organization for as long as my lovely bride determines it to be viable. However, if you dare attempt to threaten anyone in my family again, I will destroy you. And I assure you that I have the perfect weapon to do so.”

“What exactly is that?”

I polished off the scotch, slamming the tumbler down on the table. I gave him a lurid grin before heading to the door. Then I stopped, took a deep breath, and turned to face him once again. “Your daughter, Mr. Warrington. It would seem she’d made it her life’s mission to destroy you. I just happened to come along at the right time to pick up the pieces.”

“You fucking bastard. You’re threatening me on my daughter’s behalf?”

“Just like you did at the funeral of my father, which was tasteless I might add. I know it was you. I feel it in my blood.”

“You’re wrong and in your blindness, my daughter will be the one hurt out of all of this.”

I wanted to remind him that his actions made it apparent he couldn’t care less, but I decided it was time to move on. I headed toward the closed door, placing my hand on the knob. Then I gave him one last thoughtful look. “Don’t think you can fuck with either one of us, Rutherford. My soldiers are waiting in the shadows for a single word or shot fired. They will eradicate your family if necessary. Oh, and I don’t threaten. That’s not my style. I make promises I always keep. That’s something you should learn about me. Now, I’ll let you get back to your festivities. Just one more thing, you’re going to announce our engagement to your fan club. Tonight.

Anything less and the deal I just made with you will be off the table. Do you understand?"

"You won't get away with this."

"You underestimate me. But you'll learn. Yes, you'll learn."

"You're right to accuse me of many of the deeds you mentioned, but I didn't have your father killed. However, whoever did won't stop with their plan of destroying what your father built."

His words were disturbing on several levels. However, I walked out, keeping a smile on my face. He'd been sufficiently warned. Whether he would heed my threat was something else entirely. However, what continued to nag at the back of my mind was the true surprise in his eyes. Either he was a consummate actor, or he had no knowledge of my father's murder.

There was something strange going on. Whoever had coined the phrase 'truth would set you free' was right. If I acted without full understanding of what was going on, then I could see the family empire imploding. Let alone what it would do to my cohort in crime. Or was it in fact finding?

As soon as I entered the main room, I searched for the woman I adored. It was strange to be feeling that way, especially here. I walked further inside, pushing my way through the crowd of at least two hundred. When I didn't see her, my muscles stiffened. I'd fucking left her alone. Would her damn brother try to harm her in the middle of his engagement party?

People were dancing, the band in full swing. Others stood enjoying lively conversations, drinking expensive champagne and eating ridiculously luxurious food while so many in the state went hungry. The notion was just as strange as the fact I was unsettled without Suzannah by my side.

I continued my search, anger building to an unprecedented level. I was about to reach for my weapon when a flash caught my eye.

There she was, standing outside on the deck, peering up at the full moon. For a few seconds, I basked in doing nothing more

than watching her, mesmerized by her beauty. I'd never felt so strongly about anyone before and it continued to catch me off guard.

I walked closer, ignoring the three men who decided to try to engage me in conversation.

"Mr. Gregory. My God, you really are alive."

"Mr. Gregory. I'd like to talk to you about an investment opportunity."

"Not now, gentlemen," I managed to say. When I was within a few feet of the terrace door, I stopped again. I'd never really taken an appropriate amount of time to study her insanely gorgeous physique. I'd thought of her as beautiful in the beginning, but she was so much more. For all our sparring, our initial hatred, the spark had been there from the minute I'd walked onto that goddamn airplane, kicking myself that I hadn't brought the jet.

She stiffened and within seconds, slowly turned around. The shimmer of moonlight illuminated the sparkle to the handsewn beads on her dress, adding to the mystery of the woman standing in front of me. She'd curled her hair, placing it in a loose upswing. As I moved toward her, my fingers were itching to remove the piece, longing to tangle my fingers in her hair.

To tease her, I retrieved her thong, once again pulling the lace to my face and breathing in deeply. When I opened my eyes, I sensed we were being watched by the same men who'd attempted to talk with me. She put her glass of wine on one of the tables, folding her arms and giving me a defiant look. As I walked closer, she shook her head. "You are shameful."

"Yes, I am. That's another reason you adore me," I told her. When she tried to snatch her panties from my hands, I was ready to hold them out for the other guests to see.

"I will kill you."

I laughed and shoved them into my pocket. "I won't tempt anyone else with what belongs to me. We agreed on no bloodshed tonight."

“Incorrigible.”

The temptation of her was too much to resist. I yanked the clip from her hair, immediately pulling the long strands over her shoulders. “I know what I want and as usual, I take it. Now, come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To dance. Where else?”

“Knowing you, it could be anything.”

I led her toward the dancefloor, noticing that almost everyone parted the way, allowing us to move to the center.

The band was playing a more romantic song, allowing our hold to be more intimate. When I pulled her close, she gave me a heated look before sliding her arm over my shoulder. “What did you say to my father?”

“That it would be in his best interest to embrace his daughter’s relationship and that it could be of benefit to his bottom line if he agreed to your terms.”

“You told him that?”

“I did. What did you learn from the lovely Ashley?” I spun her around, noticing her father had returned to the room. I pulled her even closer, purposely dipping and holding her in place for a few seconds longer than I normally would. I yanked her up with flair and she flashed her eyes, unable to keep from laughing.

“That she adores my brother and that the marriage was arranged. However, there’s something odd about the entire situation. I’m curious. Do you know their family well? You do know her father is a senator.”

“I can’t say I’ve had the displeasure of spending any time with them, but yes, I’m aware of what position her father holds. Why?”

“Just curious.”

Nothing with her was about curiosity only. She was still testing me as I was doing to her. That made the fire shared

between us burn much hotter.

When I spun her around again, catching her with a hard thud as I dragged her against my chest, she cocked her pretty little head. “Interesting.”

“You’re a very bad boy and my father is making his way to the microphone. I guess we’ll need to compare notes when we return to our... getaway destination.”

She had a way of making everything sound sinful. “Fair enough, my sweet snookums.”

“Good to hear, honey bunny. Besides, since you’re so old, won’t you be tired?”

Old. She knew exactly what buttons to press to get me hot and bothered. “Would you like to know what I plan on doing to you when we return?”

“I’m certain you’ll tell me.”

“Handcuff you to the bed. That’s when the fun will begin.” I leaned down, dragging my tongue across her jaw. “Tell me. Are your panties damp? Oh, that’s right. I own them like I do everything else. Just so you know. You’ll never be wearing underwear again.”

“Bastard.”

“You love me for it.”

She lifted her head as her father cleared his throat. “In your dreams, buddy.”

I was still laughing when Rutherford’s eyes located us in the room. I could tell he was uncomfortable, remaining so as he shifted his attention to the bridal couple. Only then did he finally smile.

But not before noticing a different level of anxiety. The look was brief but definitely in place.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to one of the Warrington Wineries. Thank you so much for attending such a wonderful family celebration.”

The crowd cheered, dozens of people lifting their glasses. I was taller than most of the people in the room, allowing me to see over their heads. Steinbeck was as smug as before, but he was antsy, checking his watch every few seconds. What was he waiting for, the event to be over with?

“Tonight, we are celebrating the engagement of my son, Steinbeck, and his beautiful fiancée, Ashley Winslow.”

Ashley squealed.

The guests clapped again, some whooping and hollering.

When Rutherford gestured toward Steinbeck, I couldn't help but notice a moment of bad blood between them. Perhaps his son wasn't enthused about the required marriage arrangement after all. Suzannah seemed to sense it too.

“He doesn't love her,” she half whispered.

“Does that surprise you?”

“Not in the least, especially if dear old Dad set them up. I'd forgotten how close my father was with Senator Winslow.”

“Very interesting.”

Rutherford went on with a speech about their relationship and how lucky they were to find each other. That allowed me to study people in the room. What I hadn't paid any attention to before was that there were definitely a number of hired guns posing as guests. They continually observed what everyone was doing. What were they searching for? Or were they simply hired security?

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“Your father is a very cautious man.”

“Not really. If you mean the bouncers at the front entrance, I'll venture a guess they were hired by Steinbeck. What's wrong?”

“We'll be leaving soon.”

“Eager to fulfill your promise?”

“Always. I might have a few things to handle first.”

“Such as?”

I glanced in her direction. “Don’t ask if you don’t want to know the brutal truth.”

She traced the slight scar on my cheek that few people had paid attention to. “Someday you’ll need to share with me why Carlos gave you all those scars and what you did to earn them.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because they helped shape you. Your wants. Your desires. The way you handle business.”

“As with aspects of my business. Be careful what you’re asking for. The truth won’t set you free.”

“Who says I want to be freed?” She lifted her gaze, locking her eyes onto mine. For a few seconds, there was no one else in the room. “Just be nice. Being a good listener can go a long way in solving issues, including those of the heart. Choose life over death when possible. Revenge will never heal the demons inside. Besides, I can tell you’re a good man inside. No matter what you’ve told me.”

“Spoken like a true warrior but I didn’t lie to you. I’m a very bad man.” Her words were profoundly cathartic.

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t want to lose her soulmate so soon after finding him. And I don’t buy it for a second. The way you looked at my brother for insulting me indicated underneath all that bravado is a man I could fall in love with.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Maybe?”

Sadly, she’d end up being sorely disappointed.

I pulled her closer, realizing there were people watching us from all around. “Is that what I am, your soulmate?” I slipped a single finger under her chin, lifting it slowly.

“You’re that and much more. But if you tell anyone I said that I’ll be forced to kill you.”

After issuing a deep growl, I captured her mouth, immediately pressing my tongue past her voluptuous lips. I’d never been

much of a kisser before, preferring more sadistic acts hands down. But with her, kissing was a requirement.

And an extreme pleasure.

She undulated against me, purposely doing everything she could to drive me crazy.

“We have another announcement on this beautiful evening, one that came as a complete but pleasant surprise,” Rutherford continued.

I broke the kiss, rubbing my thumb back and forth across her lips. “Are you ready for the big announcement?”

“You convinced my father?”

“Let’s just say I allowed him to see the error of his ways.”

“While this isn’t meant take anything from my son’s incredible celebration, since all our friends and family are here, I wanted everyone to also share in the joy of learning that my beautiful daughter, Suzannah, is also engaged to be married to Kendrick Gregory, heir to the Kentucky Gregory Empire. In addition, our families will be doing some beautiful business together, creating hundreds of job opportunities across the county as we cultivate new wineries and additional opportunities.”

There were a few moments when all the air seemed to be sucked out of the room. This was one of them. The reason wasn’t because Rutherford had heeded my threat or that Suzannah was as surprised as I was.

It was the way Steinbeck reacted.

With zero emotion.

As if he’d expected nothing less from his own father.

CHAPTER 23



*“Vengeance is a monster of appetite, forever
bloodthirsty and never filled.”*

—Richelle E. Goodrich

Kendrick

The quote was one of my father’s favorites, something I’d read on a blotter he’d kept over the years. I’d often wondered why the bleak quote had seemed so important to him. As it rolled through my mind several times, I realized I was finally beginning to understand.

He’d been attempting to remind himself on a regular basis that revenge needed to have a true purpose, not one based on bloodlust. Maybe the reason he’d tasked me to be the enforcer of the family was because of my lack of empathy or feelings. I was cold-hearted about killing, never allowing the guilt to bother me in the least.

It was as much a part of my job as anything else I did in a day. That had allowed me to be damn good at what I did and never to think twice about the orders given to me. I was a cold-blooded killer with a powerful instinct and some of the best observation skills in the business. I’d heard every excuse possible, had seen every horrific family situation, and had learned the hard way that people enjoyed lying their asses off

and would sell their babies to try to talk their way out of being killed.

I couldn't give a shit less.

Unfortunately, even the goodness inside of Suzannah couldn't change what I'd become.

This was no different. I didn't know the man I'd been asked to exterminate. I simply knew that the target was causing issues for Carlos, a man who'd been very good to me over the years. Perhaps this was a rare time I should feel something given all he'd taught me and the time spent, but I didn't.

Other than on this night, it was an annoyance more than anything. Bad timing. However, if the fucker had gotten wind that Carlos had a hit taken out on him, then he wouldn't stay around long enough to discover if that was the truth or not. No one did.

We'd barely gotten back to the hotel prior to the expected call coming in. Fortunately, there hadn't been any additional delays in Grayson's plane landing. My second in command had been right. I preferred having him by my side. I'd left Suzannah with my number in case there was an issue, keeping one of my soldiers watching the hotel. There was no reason to believe that she was in any danger, but given I'd played a portion of my hand with her father, until all the facts were in, I refused to risk her safety.

"Just like old times," Grayson said as he exited his rental vehicle, heading toward me. We'd parked across the darkened street from a quaint house far removed from the winery estates. "I kinda like it here. Some decent wines. It's been a long time since I've been to this part of California."

"Well, you might get your chance to spend additional times in these parts."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning after I'm married, a portion of the California wineries will belong to my wife and myself."

"You're really going through with the wedding? The acquisition?"

“You already asked me that, Grayson. My final answer. Yes, I am.” Especially since I had the feeling Mr. Warrington had been genuine with me. Now my instincts were on high alert, but there were still too many shattered pieces to put everything together.

“And I thought I knew every scheme in your playbook.”

I chuckled as I slapped a new magazine into my weapon. While I’d been asked to make it painful, I wasn’t in the mood to take but so much time. However, I’d task Grayson to handle the cleanup, which would entail a lengthy follow-up to my visit, allowing me to return to my cozy bed. I also remained concerned that Carlos had needed a favor now. Something didn’t smell right. I would keep on my toes.

Who would have thought that I’d enjoy the thought of waking up next to someone after all this time? “Perhaps you don’t know me well at all.”

“I found a source that I’ve yet to check but one who might know something about what’s going on with the Warrington family.”

“Where is this person?”

“In Napa. And he might have a connection to Raphael Diego. That’s the part I’m uncertain about.”

“That’s enough to have a conversation.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll arrange it.”

“Good. Now, let’s get this handled. I have better things to do.”

He laughed and slapped in a fresh magazine as well. “Yeah, I guess you do. Is this going to be a huge wedding?”

All I could do was grin. “Whatever my bride to be wants, she gets.”

“What are you going to do with this guy?”

“It’s simple. I’m going to let him know he fucked up verbally. If he cooperates then perhaps I’ll allow him to live.”

“Wow. The woman is rubbing off on you already. I’m not certain what to make of that.”

We both watched from the shadows as the door opened, a suitcase brought out to the car sitting in the driveway. The man had figured out his life was in danger. I had no idea of his name, which was what I preferred. There was no reason to make this personal. Fortunately, Carlos had only provided an address. I liked it better that way. From where I stood, I couldn't make out anything about him. But there was no doubt he was attempting to flee.

When he went back inside, leaving the trunk open, I couldn't help but sigh, remembering what Suzannah had said. This was nothing but a job, a favor owed a man I cared for deeply. "She has a way about her that allowed sunshine into my overcast life."

"Sunshine? Really?"

"Really. However, she's also someone I will tame."

"That's the man I know and respect. And if talking to this guy doesn't work?"

"Then I'll help him understand what to expect from the master of creative arts."

"I do love my job," Grayson said far too enthusiastically.

We moved across the street, ensuring no one was paying attention. Although there were no houses in close proximity, that didn't mean there wouldn't be traffic on the road. I headed straight to the house. The front door was open, the storm door unlocked. As I approached the entrance, I noticed a very nice interior complete with a leather couch. But there was no sign of the target.

I pulled my weapon into my hand. It was entirely possible we'd been made. The door was silent, no sound coming from the hinges. Once inside, Grayson shifted toward one side of the house while I took the other. We'd done this before, our routines almost always the same.

I headed down the hallway toward the bedrooms. Only one door stood open, sound coming from the interior. With stealth-like steps, I moved closer, still standing in the shadows. The target was filling another bag, tossing items from the

mirrorless dresser into the suitcase on the floor. I was easily able to advance, pointing the barrel of my weapon at the back of his head.

He bristled, taking a gasping breath as he rose to his full height, lifting his arms in surrender. "Please don't kill me." The man's voice was strained.

I wanted to laugh. "You should have thought about that before you stole money from him."

"I knew he'd send you. I knew he would."

Fuck. I recognized the voice. When he turned around, it was the first time I didn't like being an assassin. He smiled the same goddamn smile he had at the jewelry store when he'd congratulated me. "Reno. What the hell is going on?" The fact Carlos wanted me to kill his only remaining son was something that could trip me up. I shouldn't care. In fact, I shouldn't give a damn. But I did. "You stole from your father?"

Fuck. He'd been a little kid when I'd been sent to spend time with his father. He'd followed me around, hero worshipping me since I gave him some attention when his father rarely did. He'd told me more than once he'd wanted to be like me.

I'd told him to forget I ever existed and to fall in love with a nice girl. His brother's murder had taken a toll on him. I'd heard he'd turned to drugs but had thought he'd gotten clean.

"It's the money he promised me," Reno insisted. "My trust fund. He locked it down because of my ugly past. But he was supposed to release it to me last year."

"Is this drug money? Do you owe a dealer cash?"

"No. God, no. It's nothing like that. I've been clean for six years. Six fucking years. But he never forgave me." He had a faraway look in his eyes.

I glared at him.

Then he unbuttoned the sleeves of his shirt, yanked them up to show me there weren't any track marks. "See? I had good reason to get and stay clean. I've been working for my father

for years, paid like a fucking foot soldier when he makes millions. I just wanted... I wanted a better life.”

He knew as well as I did that when you born into a cartel family, you never left. It was an unwritten rule that had resulted in assassinations before with other families. I’d thought his bond with Reno because of his wife if nothing else would prevent him from taking his child’s life.

“Then what is the money for? You need to fuckin’ tell me.” I heard a sound behind me and knew Grayson was standing in the doorway.

Reno shifted his gaze toward my soldier and slumped against the dresser, his Adam’s apple bobbing when he swallowed. The boy had never been cut out for what Carlos had wanted him to be, which had been a replacement for Jonas. He didn’t have the killer drive or the desire to follow stringent orders. He reminded me of my kid brother more than anything. Maybe that’s why we’d gotten along.

I’d never had this experience before but killing him was going to take a lot out of me. It felt as if Carlos was testing me all over again.

“There’s something you need to see,” Grayson said quietly. “Might explain what’s going on here.”

I could tell by the instant look of horror and fear in Reno’s eyes that whatever Grayson was recommending I see was the reason the man had stolen from his own father. When I backed away, Reno came at me, but not with a weapon, with the same pleading look I’d seen on far too many dying men.

“Please. If you’re going to kill me then take him away.”

Him?

I narrowed my eyes, noticing how Reno’s eyes shifted toward the door constantly. Then I took long strides across the hall, slowly pushing open the cracked door. Fuck me. The beautiful room had been decorated with everything a growing boy could want.

“Please don’t hurt him, Kendrick. I beg you. Just help my boy find a better life but not anywhere near my father. He’ll turn

into a monster and I don't want that for my son."

Jesus fucking Christ. What the hell was I supposed to do with this? Grayson flanked my side, lifting his eyebrows.

At least the boy was sleeping. There was a small suitcase filled with baby clothes, a box with toys. He was trying to get his kid out of harm's way.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I didn't have an answer for my soldier at this point, at least not one I could live with. "Give us a little space."

When Grayson didn't budge, I snapped my head in his direction.

Grayson backed away, giving me a single nod. I waited until he was out of the room before turning around to face Reno. "He's yours?"

"Yep. Something else my dad didn't like. A girl from the wrong side of the tracks if you know what I mean."

Yeah, I knew exactly what that meant. An enemy. In his world, there was no such thing as a decent alliance, not with another cartel anyway. Tit for tat. The expression slipped into the back of my mind. I was paying a debt for whatever recent favor Carlos had performed for my father. I didn't like what those potential favors were. "Where is his mother?"

"Dead. A drive-by shooting. She loved our little boy so much. You should have seen her with him. We had plans together, to build a life away from our families. Away from the violence. Then I lost her. It about tore me apart but I had him to care about and for. So I kept quiet and did my best trying to raise him these last few months."

There was such sadness in his voice, a resignation from knowing I would take his life.

"You suspect your father had her killed."

He hung his head, staring at his little boy. "Yep. I know he did. There's a bounty on my son's head too. His mother's family wants to take him away from me. I can't let that happen. Pops didn't understand nor would he listen to me. I loved her. My

father told me love was for suckers. Up until now, he's never threatened my boy, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I think he knew I'd made inquiries about finding another place to live. He has eyes and ears everywhere. I only took the money that was owed to me. I just wanted to get away and never look back. You know?"

How could I say that I understood when I didn't? When I glanced down at the little boy once again, his eyes were open, a smile on his tiny face. Then he started to laugh and so help me God, a stake was driven through my heart.

"You're a good man."

Suzannah's words echoed in my mind.

"What's his name?"

"You won't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"Kendrick."

I lifted my gaze then looked away.

"Um. Would you find a good family for him? That's all I will ask, one that will love him and give him a normal life? Maybe one day you can let him know his mama and daddy loved him. I know that's asking a lot but maybe you could find it in your heart to do that."

A ragged laugh left my throat. How many times had I reminded the woman I cared about that I wasn't a good man? And that I didn't have a heart.

"Can I say goodbye to him?"

When I looked at his face, all I could see was the little boy who'd followed me, the one who'd giggled for a full hour when I'd bought him ice cream. There were tears in his eyes, the kind a father would have when he knew he was about to vanish from his son's life.

Exhaling, I backed away from the crib, allowing him to spend time with his boy.

Kendrick.

Why the fuck did he name the kid after me?

I watched as he picked up the little boy with loving hands, pulling him against his chest and immediately rocking him. Then I heard a song in Spanish, some of the words I could understand. It was all about unconditional love.

I backed away another couple of feet, turning away from the heartfelt act. Then I pulled out my checkbook and a pen. The sound of the young man's voice would haunt me for some time to come.

After a few seconds, I turned around.

Reno wiped his eyes then kissed his son on the forehead before easing him back into the crib. He wiped his palms on his jeans then walked forward with his head held high and his shoulders back.

Just like I'd taught him to do.

"I'm ready."

The kid was perhaps the most honorable man I'd met in my profession. "I have one question for you. Have you heard talk about Raphael Diego causing any issues for your father?"

Reno narrowed his eyes. "Where did you get that idea? I don't know this to be the truth, but Pops told me the man died a week ago. He succumbed to cancer. My father celebrated the man's agony."

I took a deep breath. What. The. Fuck? At least I had a few answers. I held out the folded check. "Take this."

"What is it?"

"It's a new life. You have a one-time offer, Reno. If you fuck with me, I'll follow through with your father's wishes. Take this and finish packing up. Then leave town and never look back. You can't contact your mother. You can never come through this town again. Not once. As you said before, your father has eyes and ears everywhere. This will get you a brand new identity. If you make your way to Philly, track down a man named Jasper Wallace. Tell him I sent you. He'll take care of getting you an iron-clad new identity for a price. Then

go somewhere else but not near the girl's family or back here. Do you understand me?"

He opened his mouth several times then nodded, tears streaming down his face. "Why are you doing this? If my father finds out, he'll kill you."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "You underestimate me, Reno. Remember you used to call me your hero." I headed toward the door. There was a reason Carlos had asked me to do this, one I definitely didn't like.

And one I would figure out.

"Take care of your boy. He's beautiful."

As soon as I left the room, I heard Reno sobbing. I found Grayson in the kitchen, staring out the window at the backyard.

"There's a fucking playset out there," he said in the same hushed tone I'd used. Maybe we weren't such tough bad-asses after all.

"Change of plans. Wait here for Reno and his baby to leave the house. Make sure they get out unharmed. Then torch the place. Make it hot. Find a stiff and toss him inside. Don't you dare touch the body of a kid. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Carlos would ensure I'd done the deed. Fuck this shit. I suddenly hated the world I'd grown up in. The silence was more about reverence than anything. I finally glanced at him. When he gave me a nod of respect, I felt like a shit.

"I'll take care of it, bossman. Go back to your bride to be. I think I like her already."

Snorting, I headed for the door. "So do I, Grayson. So. Do. I." The woman had managed to slip inside the darkness, to peel away my armor instead of the other way around.

She'd become important to me. Not just because of the value of who she was but because of what she'd brought to my life.

The luscious woman with the caustic mouth was my salvation.

I would do everything in my power to keep her safe.

And mine.

CHAPTER 24



*S*uzannah

I always feel like someone is watching me...

The words to the song from eons ago were replaying in the back of my mind. There was no reason why. As usual, Kendrick had been careful after leaving the party, glancing in the rearview mirror every few seconds, paying attention to every single vehicle on the road as if one of my father's security guards had been sent to follow us. He knew where we were staying. I hadn't bothered to try to hide the fact. Why should I?

My father was many things, including disrespectful to his children, but hiring a thug? Not a chance. However, as I sat with my feet curled under me, enjoying the full moon, bright stars, and the sound of the trickling water in the lap pool, creepy crawlies continued to dance down both arms.

Maybe the fact my lover, aka the devil I'd made a deal with, was out doing God knew what was the reason for my insecure feelings. After our return, he'd taken a single phone call, talking in a hushed voice. Then he'd programmed in his phone number on my phone, told me in no uncertain terms to keep the door locked and remain inside the room. He'd also mentioned he had one of his men stationed outside, walking the perimeter of the hotel. I told him he was nuts. He laughed.

I snarled at him.

He'd swatted my behind.

Then he'd grabbed several magazines of ammunition from one of his duffle bags, sliding them into his jacket pocket before leaving.

But not before telling me what he would do to my body after his return. His filthy remarks had kept the fire burning even now, lurid thoughts also keeping a smile on my face.

God. I craved the man more than I had any other in my entire life. How was that possible?

He was out killing someone, doing a job. Being an assassin. I knew it.

And I wasn't entirely certain how I felt about it either.

On one hand, everything about the man was exciting, so much so as I sat with a glass of wine in my hand, wishing upon the twinkling stars, at least fifty percent of them had to do with the man and our future.

What future?

What good would come out of a union forged in the need for revenge? Morgan would remind me once again that the best lovers were the ones who started out as enemies. Rough sex equaled passion. She was right as usual, but that wouldn't make our relationship last beyond the honeymoon phase.

Or could it?

Just thinking about getting and staying married to him made me anxious, so much so I continued to chew on my inner cheek until I tasted blood. Ugh. I took a sip of wine, unfurling my legs and easing off the comfy chair. I'd changed into a little dress I'd brought with me, no longer the belle of the ball I'd felt like at my brother's engagement party. I bit back a laugh. I'd stolen the spotlight from him, although that hadn't been my intention. Somehow Kendrick had orchestrated the announcement.

I'd apologized to Ashley, but she reminded me of a Georgia peach, still succulent and sweet at all times, refusing to let anyone or anything get her down. She'd squealed as she'd

done before, insisting that when I came to visit her the next day, she'd share her issues of whatever bridal magazine she'd been glancing through.

As if I hadn't been married before.

Granted, doing the deed at the justice of the peace was entirely different than the big, fancy glorious wedding she was having. I'd told myself I'd never wanted that. Maybe I'd lied to myself a little bit.

But I was almost thirty years old. It was time to shove aside fairytales and thoughts of heroes on huge thoroughbreds rushing to save the day. Wasn't it? Oh, my God. Maybe Ashley's sparkling happiness was rubbing off on me.

I only hoped her joy and hope for the future wasn't crushed as soon as she said her 'I do's. That would be grounds to knock my brother out of the ballpark. I grinned as the thought tickled the front of my mind. Yeah, I was a tough girl alright.

The breeze was slightly chilly, fueling the goosebumps, the draw of the heated pool irresistible. Things had certainly turned out much differently than I thought they would.

I eased down on the edge, tugging my dress up to my thighs then plopping my legs into the water. Instantly, I was at ease, leaning back and planting one hand on the cool tile while I stared up at the sky. A few seconds later I laughed, wishing with all my heart and soul that Kendrick was here sitting beside me. There was a bright shooting star, something I'd only seen twice in my life.

It was a sign. I believed in them just like I did in astrological signs.

After all I was a Leo, a lioness with sharp canines and claws.

I was finally relaxed yet it was impossible not to think about my father's announcement. The news had spread like wildfire. When we'd left, reporters had reappeared, more excited to grill the two of us than they'd been about Steinbeck and Ashley's impending nuptials.

I guess our union was considered the marriage of the decade, an alliance that resembled Camelot. Who knew? I chuckled at

the thought, kicking my foot out. The water was warm and inviting. Maybe I'd indulge myself and take a quick swim.

What had surprised me was that dear ole Daddy hadn't seemed that pissed at being forced to announce we were getting married. In fact, he almost had a look of pride. Or maybe it was smugness, a new plan set in motion to derail his enemy. I wouldn't put anything past my father. Ever.

Steinbeck had been conciliatory, even congratulating us with a smile on his face. One that told me in no uncertain terms he'd sold his soul, but at least it had made for excellent photographs since a reporter had managed to sneak inside the facility. I could only imagine how many newspapers and internet sites we'd turn up on tomorrow.

I laughed softly, wondering what my boss would think.

Especially when I sent him my two-week notice.

Mmm... I was turning into one devilish girl. Or maybe I'd always been and it had taken a man like Kendrick to bring it out of me.

I took another gulp of wine, lifting the glass toward the stars in a silent yet gleeful toast. I was poised to get everything I'd wanted. Now I just had to figure out what I wanted to do with it. For me, it had never been about the money. But I couldn't say I wouldn't mind basking in the glory of opulence. I'd be lying if I tried.

Ping.

The slight sound came from over the stone wall, but it sounded close enough that I instantly froze. The feeling of being watched returned, my heart instantly racing.

While I had to remind myself that one of the small parking lots was close enough it could be someone returning to their room, dropping something on the pavement, my instinct told me otherwise.

Whoosh.

The second sound came from behind me. I was fairly certain of it.

A lump formed in my throat, my pulse moving to overdrive. I glanced over my shoulder, realizing that I hadn't left a single light on inside the room. Wait a minute. I'd taken my shoes off, dropped my purse on the dresser. It hadn't been in the dark. Neither had the long kiss I'd shared with Kendrick.

Had I flipped off the lamp before coming outside?

As I searched my brain, I removed my feet from the water, awkwardly trying to rise to my feet making as little sound as possible. There was nothing but ominous shadows coming from inside the room. However, I refused to panic. I'd locked the door myself. That I was certain of.

I placed the wine on the table, taking a few extra seconds to ensure the stem of the wine goblet didn't scrape the glass surface. Then I backed away from view of the French doors, chastising myself for not accepting the weapon my cohort in crime had offered.

I'd shot a weapon a few times in my life, but it had been years. I'd told him I hated guns, which was the truth. Now? I would give anything to have one of them in my hand. Where had I left my phone? In my purse. How many feet away was that?

Far enough I'd need to cross through the living room portion to get there. What if someone was inside? What then? Well, I couldn't jump over the wall and race into the parking lot. I had no other choice.

I took a few deep breaths then headed toward the blackness, reminding myself there was a lamp on the table just inside the set of doors. I stepped foot across the threshold, allowing my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. Then I reached for the lamp, almost knocking the damn thing over.

After grabbing the base, I slid my hand up to the switch, flicking it.

Nothing happened.

What the hell? Hadn't this light been on before? I couldn't remember. Whatever the case, this wasn't good. At all. I shifted closer to the table, scanning the room. It was

impossible to see anything but shadowed lumps in front of me. I stopped and did nothing but listen.

Ping.

There was sound coming from at least twenty feet away. A single bead of perspiration trickled down from my forehead. The best thing to do was to get to the door and head into the hallway.

I moved further inside, determined not to fall into a panic. There was a light switch on the other side of the bar. That much I remembered about the room. I held my breath, hating the fact my heart thudded in my chest, which meant the pulsing was echoing in my ears. I couldn't see a thing, the angle of the full moon barely illuminating a couple of feet past the doors.

When I cleared the bar, I turned briefly, struggling to find a switch. Oh, no. No. There was no power, at least in the room. Then why was the pool still running? Because they were on separate circuits, which meant someone had cut the power to this room specifically.

Now I was in full panic mode, my chest heaving from terror. Who would do this? Had they gotten inside the room or was this about terrifying me? Or was I simply overblowing the entire situation? With no light, it was impossible to tell. I slowly turned my head. The door was maybe fifteen feet away. The best thing to do was lunge toward it and hope for the best.

That's exactly what I did but right before I reached the door, I was certain I noticed a shape off to my right. A huge shape. The size of a large man. I smashed my hand around the door handle. That's the second I felt a presence behind me but was unable to yelp as two things happened at once.

A hand fisted my hair at the scalp.

And a second hand was slapped around my mouth, preventing me from making a sound.

Then I was yanked backward, lifted off my feet as if I weighed nothing. I was momentarily stunned, then a rage unlike anything I'd ever known took over and I began to struggle.

While my legs were flailing, I managed to kick the attacker in the shins with enough force the asshole grunted.

The deep, masculine sound reminded me that I was very much alive yet if I didn't continue fighting with everything I had inside of me, I would end up abducted or dead. And ransom had always been a distinct possibility, which was why my father had hired security for his children years before.

Then again, this could be about the man I'd entered into a deal with. The announcement. Had we gambled and lost?

I managed to elbow the jerk and kept doing it when I knew I'd hit the mark. At the same time, I twisted my body, the desperation in me continuing. The force I used pummeled us backwards, the assailant hitting a piece of furniture. In turn, he dropped me. I scrambled quickly, letting off a shrill scream. There was just one problem. The rooms had been soundproofed as a benefit, a perk of the guests.

If anyone heard me, they could think it was just a far too loud television or music of some kind. Hissing, I pitched my body forward, knocking into something. A sharp pain tore through me, the anguish putting spots in front of my eyes. Panting, the time I lost was enough for him to grab me again, tossing me backward and over the couch onto the floor.

Stunned, I couldn't move at first. The attacker moved around the side of the couch, peering down at me. The fucker was dressed in dark colors, including a ski mask. Oh, hell, no. I reacted quickly, slamming my foot into his stomach, using all the gusto I had in my muscular thigh to drive him backward by a few feet. Then I twisted around again, racing toward the French doors.

The assailant was on me in seconds, but not before I issued a shrill cry. If Kendrick's soldier was somewhere close, there was no doubt he'd heard me. Please, God. Please.

"Bitch," he muttered, dragging me back into the room.

"Yeah, I am," I said through clenched teeth, able to issue a hard punch to his face. It connected, sending him reeling

backward by a couple of inches. So I threw a second punch. Then a third, this time into his gut.

My sudden bravado was quickly stripped away when he backhanded me. But not before I managed to wrap my fingers around his mask, determined to hang on.

When I was successful, the material coming with me as I was pitched all the way against the wall, at least I could smile. Before the anguish settled in and I slid down the wall, completely out of breath. The stars had returned in full force, preventing me from seeing anything.

“Help... me. Help. Help!”

Laughing, he lumbered forward and while I did everything I could to scramble away from him, I couldn't move quickly enough.

The bastard jerked me up on my feet. There was no mistaking the barrel of a gun as it was shoved against my temple.

Then another sound caught my attention a split second before the door was nearly torn off its hinges, another figure coming inside.

All hell had broken loose, yet in those few seconds of carnage, time slowed to a slight pulsing beat, all sounds muffled. Another wave of pain sliced through me as I heard a single popping sound.

There was no doubt the assailant made good on his promise, killing me.

CHAPTER 25



*S*uzannah

Thud!

The sound reverberated in my ears. Then there were at least three more. I blinked furiously, struggling to crawl my way up the wall, uncertain what was happening. A moan slipped past my lips and thankfully, the stars had faded, allowing the light coming in from the hallway to bring some of what was happening into my slightly tunneled vision.

A body was pitched across the room, the sound of something shattering making me smile. Yet while I heard sounds of a brutal fight, I couldn't see anything, the heavy furniture in my way.

Someone else flew into the room and I was able to see his silhouette, someone I didn't recognize. When an ugly whimper flew past my lips, he turned his head toward me. Then he headed in my direction, lifting the weapon in his hand, and I let off another sharp cry.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

The intruder slowly fell to his knees, landing on my legs. I let off another high-pitched yell, fighting to get the man's weight off me. Oh, my God. He wasn't dead. He wrapped his hand around my leg, keeping me pinned down.

There was another strange moment of slow motion and a slight flash as he lifted his weapon again, pointing it at me.

I heard an intense growl and the man's head was ripped back, a muzzle flash allowing me to smile, even if blood and brain matter were splattered all over me. Someone had saved my life.

Gasping for air, I slumped onto the floor, completely winded and utterly terrified.

Yet the first name I called out was the man I was crazy enough to fall in love with.

"Kendrick! Oh, God. Kendrick."

"Fuck. Fuck. I'm right here, baby. Right here."

Suddenly, I was scooped up into strong arms and I didn't need a single light to tell me who'd been my savior, my hero. "You're here. How? I thought you were dead. I thought..."

"No one is allowed to touch you, baby. No one. I'm right here."

Another guy rushed into the room, gasping for air. I could easily tell he'd been shot, fighting to breathe. "Mr. Gregory. I'm fucking sorry," the man panted, his voice filled with pain.

"What's happening?" I asked as I pressed my hand against Kendrick's chest. "The power's out. They cut the power. I tried to get out. I tried to fight but the asshole was so strong."

"Shush. You're okay, *prekrasna kvitka*. I'm not going to let you go and trust me, I'm going to find out who did this." He turned his head toward the guy who worked for him, his tone of voice much darker. "Make certain the two assholes are dead. Call in reinforcements. We need a cleanup crew stat, a second to surround the property. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. The dude came out of nowhere. He hit me from behind, stole my weapon."

"Just get the goddamn electricity on." He didn't wait for the man to answer, moving through the room and into the bathroom. From here, moonlight streamed in through the oversized window, allowing me to see the man I... loved. As he eased me onto the counter, I could see the snarl on his face. "Are you hurt?"

“I ache all over but I’m okay. Am I covered in blood? Oh, God.”

“I don’t think so. But I *will* check you thoroughly. Every. Single. Inch. Over and over again.”

Just the sound of his voice made me shiver all the way to my core. He had a way of yanking away the fear, but I knew whoever was out to get us wasn’t finished. “How did you know I was in danger?”

He planted his hands on either side of me. “The moment I got out of the car, I knew you were in trouble. I sensed it. I felt it. You’ve become a part of me, Suzannah.”

“How is that possible?”

As he lifted his hand, rubbing his fingers across my face, I shuddered from his touch. “Because for some crazy reason, lady, you’ve become the air I breathe, a need so intense that I can’t live without being close to you. You snapped a photograph of what’s left of my soul and refused to let it go. Now, you’re reaching for my heart.”

How was it possible that this brutal man could actually sound as if he was falling in love with me. Me? The quirky girl with the nasty mouth. I adored him, so much so I spread my legs wide open, ignoring the muscle aches and the fact my head was pounding. I slipped my arm around his shoulder, tangling my fingers in his hair. Having him this close made me feel safe.

“This isn’t over. Is it?”

“Not yet, my beautiful woman. But it will be.”

“Please tell me you didn’t kill anyone.”

He laughed softly and pressed his forehead against mine. “Because of you, I saved two lives tonight, a father and his son.”

“What?” I couldn’t think straight, my pulse still racing.

“I’ll explain later. You have a powerful influence over me, lady. I’m not certain I like that or if it’s good for business.”

He'd always had a way of making me laugh. Today was no exception.

Even after what I'd been through.

"I thought I was dead." Saying the words out loud made me realize that playing a deadly game was going to fulfill the prophecy I'd had.

"You're a tough girl, but I'll never leave you unprotected like that again."

"The power is on, boss," the man from before said, barely sticking his head into the room. I sensed he was concerned that he'd be blamed for what happened. "Do you want me to turn on the bathroom light for you?"

"No," I answered. "Not yet."

"Thanks, Mark. How long until the others get here?" Kendrick asked, his tone gruff.

"Fifteen minutes."

"Check for any identification. When the others arrive, head to the parking lot to see if you can determine how they got here. I'll be there in a little while."

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to contact Grayson?" Mark asked.

Kendrick exhaled. "No. I'll call him later. He's on assignment. Just do your job as I ordered you to do."

"Yes, sir."

"No. He needs to get to the hospital," I told them both. "Mark has been shot. You have to care about him."

"I'm just fine, miss. The bastard knocked me out. The bullet went straight through. I'll be out in the living room if you need me."

I noticed he closed the door before leaving. "Don't blame him, Kendrick. The assailant managed to pick the lock. I double checked I locked it when you left. Then he cut the power. I tried to escape."

“Sshhh...” He placed his finger across my lips. “Perhaps he was given a key.”

I hadn't thought about that possibility. My mind drifted into the black zone as I realized I could have been betrayed by someone I'd trusted my entire life. “No. No. That's not possible. You don't think Jose is responsible. Do you?”

“Right now, I can't put anything aside. But first things first. *Podbayte pro te, shcho dlya vas nayvazhlyvishe.*”

“What does that mean?”

“It's advice my grandmother used to give me. Take care of what's most important to you. You are definitely what's most important right now. The rest can wait. The sons of bitches won't be going anywhere.”

“Wise words from someone who sounded like a formidable woman.”

He cupped my chin, tilting my head with his thumb. “As I said before. Just like you. The thought of losing you just about killed me, baby. Fuck. This is getting out of hand.”

“I'm here. I'm safe. Because of you. The man I've fallen hard for.” I leaned forward, wrapping my fingers around his shirt and tugging him closer.

“And here I thought you hated me.”

“My grandmother was a sour old bitch who hated almost everyone. Yet one piece of her advice suddenly sticks out in my mind. She said hate and love were two sides of the same coin. The feelings of adoration and passion could easily flip to an anguish and loathing that fed off the force of the prior.” I brushed my lips across his, inhaling the rich scent of his testosterone.

“Very profound,” he breathed. “And very sad.”

“Not necessarily.” I darted out my tongue, tasting his mouth as if he was the only person who could quench my thirst.

I was desperately thirsty.

“How so?”

“Just think about where we’d be if we’d allowed our first impressions to stand.”

“I would have fucked you anyway.”

I burst into laughter then suddenly a wave of nerves rushed through me so shockingly intense that tears started to fall, sobbing sounds racking my system. “What’s... wrong with me? I mean... I’m alive and...” Another series of gasps erupted from my throat.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, baby. Except you took the wrong plane.”

“You mean... I fell for the... wrong man.”

“That’s something you’ll need to tell me later. Maybe five years from now.” He captured my mouth, holding our lips in place as he slid one hand around the back of my neck, squeezing with enough pressure I moaned into the kiss.

Tingles prodded away some of the pain, allowing me to feel alive all over again. In his arms there was so much strength, as if we could shove aside the rest of the world. The taste of him was sweet and tangy, just like the man could be when he wasn’t practicing his asshole mode. There was nothing quite like kissing him, the hunger building to a precipice of need so intense that I was lightheaded for the umpteenth time around him.

There was more of a longing as he dominated my tongue, even more possessiveness in his hold, yet there was also an unexpected gentleness, something that surprised me more than I could express. It was as if he was terrified I’d break into a thousand little pieces.

He obviously didn’t realize I had some pretty terrific resolve. Maybe because I had more reason to hang around than ever before.

And it all had to do with the fact *he’d* stepped on the wrong plane.

When he broke the kiss, he dragged his tongue around the seam of my mouth, taking a deep breath. Then he broke his hold completely, backing to the door and turning on the light.

As a harsh glare filtered into the room, I winced, more from seeing the hardening of his expression as rage took over where the passion had been seconds before.

Kendrick looked away, cursing under his breath. “Goddamn it. You’re going to bruise.” With two long strides, he was close again, yanking a washcloth from the stack, turning on the water with such vigor it splashed all over the counter.

I watched him as he shook his head, easing the terrycloth under the stream. Then he rose to his full height, bringing it to my face. “This might sting.”

When he placed the cloth against my cheek, a hint of the same pain from before washed over me. Yet once again, his actions were tender, which seemed in direct contrast to the man. He blotted my skin and when he pulled his hand away, I noticed there was blood, just like there was on his white shirt. “I need to ask you a question.”

“O-kay.”

“Why did you ask me about knowing the senator?”

“Because her father was attacked years ago, her brother almost killed. I guess the good senator mentioned your father was behind the attack and that rumor had it he hired his son to handle the assassination.”

“Interesting.” He made a face and I sensed what I’d told him was perhaps the most troubling information he’d received up to this point.

“That’s what you always say. Explain.”

He continued dabbing the cuts on my face then sighed. “Not until I check a few things. You’re going to need to trust me. Can you do that?”

“Yes. You killed those two men. They’re dead. Right?”

“They’re dead,” he told me. Then he walked toward the shower, reaching inside the door and turning on the faucet. “I don’t know who they are yet but I’m going to do everything I can to find out who hired them.”

“How? This is getting crazy, as if we were pulled into the middle of a game that’s been going on for years.”

He chuckled. “I have my ways, sunshine. Just like you have yours. And I think that’s exactly what’s going on. We were never intended to be a part of it. But here we are, fucking with things for the people involved.”

“Interesting,” I teased. “What happens after this?”

“You’re going to take a shower and I’m going to try and identify the assailants as well as make a few phone calls. Then we’ll get another room and a good night’s sleep. We won’t be attending the rehearsal dinner.”

“We can’t do that to Ashley.”

He lifted a single eyebrow. “I don’t want you a target any longer. We don’t know for certain who we can trust.”

“We either live our lives or we lie down and allow the evil of mankind to walk all over us.” I laughed after issuing the words. “My, aren’t we both profound tonight.”

Exhaling, Kendrick shook his head and walked closer. “Maybe so, but I refuse to place you in harm’s way. I need to get some answers. We’ll talk about the wedding later. Take a long hot shower. Okay?”

It was his way of telling me that he didn’t want me interfering in his business.

“Okay.”

“I’ll be right outside. No one can get inside from the bathroom window, so you’ll be safe.”

“What if I never feel safe again?”

“You will. I’ll make certain of it. Can you tell me anything about them?”

“I wish I could,” I said. “The first guy was wearing a mask. He could have been hiding in the room. There was no sound at first. I was outside for fifteen minutes.”

“Well, they were professionals.”

“After you or me?”

“Maybe both.” He headed for the door and I needed him more than I had before.

“Don’t go.”

Kendrick had his hand on the door, his entire torso heaving from what I could tell was extreme anger. “I need to find out who’s behind this. I won’t rest until I do.”

“Can’t it wait for a few minutes?”

As he slowly turned his head, the look he gave me was carnal. “Do you need to be a bad girl?”

“I am a bad girl. I just need to forget for a little while.”

After taking a deep breath, he locked the door. Then he advanced like a predator, yanking off his jacket and tossing it aside. “You’re hurt. You need to heal.”

“You obviously haven’t figured out how tough I am.”

He laughed then tugged at his tie, ripping the knot apart. “And you obviously have me pegged as someone else.”

“Let’s see. Arrogant bastard. Suave dresser. Big talker. Business mogul. Killer. I doubt you’d allow me to forget that. Now, savior. What did I miss?”

“You forgot wine connoisseur.”

“Oh,” I mused as he eased me off the edge of the counter, yanking off my dress and tossing it aside. Then he rubbed his palms down my arms, his nostrils flaring from see the few scratches on them. I tingled in response, a set of goosebumps popping along my skin. “Is it getting hot in here, wine boy?”

“Careful, darlin’. Since I’m your master, you should remember who’s in control.”

I rolled my eyes and bit my lower lip when he tugged at the panties I’d slid into when I’d returned. He tsked as he pulled them off my feet, holding them up in the light, a stern look crossing his face. “What did I tell you about wearing these?”

“Oops. You can’t spank me. I’m hurt. Remember?”

“But I can add it them to a growing list of infractions.” He tossed them aside as well then yanked off his tie, immediately grabbing my arms and pulling my wrists together. When he wrapped the material of the tie around them several times, I gave him a pouty look. “What are you doing?”

“Whatever I want.” He unfastened the buttons on his shirtsleeves, rolling them up past his elbows as he studied me, his eyes still twinkling. Then he took a few seconds to unfasten several buttons on his shirt. With the specks of blood on the material and his tousled hair, he looked far too sexy for his own good. “Like this.” He gathered my legs into his arms, splitting them wide open, and as he lifted them, I was forced back against the mirror.

He wasted no time, dipping his head and swirling his tongue around my clit. Maybe it was the danger I’d been in, the heroic rescue, or the fact my life had flashed in front of my eyes during the horrible event, but I was so aroused I almost climaxed the moment his wet tongue touched my tender tissue.

“Oh, God. You’re so bad.” I slapped my hands on his head, fisting his hair and holding on for dear life. I even struggled with the ties holding me in place, gasping for air as he proceeded to torment me. He was famished, sucking on my clit, a desperate man in need.

He growled his response, sweeping his tongue up and down the length of my pussy. All I could do was twist my head back and forth, struggling to keep my wits about me. I pointed my toes, the tension in my muscles slowly fading. When he thrust his tongue past my swollen, glistening folds, the events from before seemed like a lifetime ago, the pleasure immediate.

I kept my fingers tangled in his hair, fighting the urge to scream out his name. There was no telling how many people were outside in the suite. The wicked girl inside of me had almost asked why he hadn’t wanted an audience. I bit my lower lip to keep from crying, blinking several times as the rush of pure bliss drove me closer to the edge.

Every sound he made reminded me of a famished man getting his fill.

As I finally leaned my head against the mirror, I closed my eyes, allowing the sweet release of pleasure to take me away from the strangeness of the evening.

And my life.

My family.

My legacy.

I didn't care about the money or the clout of being a Warrington. I never had. I'd wanted a different kind of fairytale, one that involved a quaint house and a lovely yard, a dog or two, and a passel of kids. My God. Was I really thinking about becoming a mother? Not a chance. I laughed then gasped again as he drove several fingers inside, flexing them open.

"Sweet Jesus."

"You taste sweet. Yes," he said in a low, husky voice.

The way he was furiously licking me as he plunged his fingers deep inside was too much to take. I jerked forward, struggling with the tight bindings around my wrists, my mouth open wide as an orgasm swept through me like a tidal wave of ultimate pleasure.

"Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes!" There'd been no way to bite back a scream, the ecstasy rolling through me spectacular. My entire body was trembling, the essence of what was happening pushing me into the sweetest moment of release.

He didn't stop his savage actions, burying his tongue inside as he continued pumping his long fingers deep inside my tight channel. My pussy muscles clamped over his thick digits, pulling him in even deeper. I was tense all over, jerking up from where I'd rested my head, staring at nothing in front of me.

Only when he started to slow his actions did I relax once again, another wave of exhaustion settling into the deepest portions of my body.

He chuckled darkly, pressing kisses on the inside of one thigh then the other before rising to his full height. Then he kept his

eyes locked onto mine as he unfastened his belt.

I had no energy to help him, fighting to keep my eyes open. I concentrated on his delicious smirk, longing to kiss his mouth for hours. “You’re far too perfect.”

“I am, huh? If I remember correctly, you called me the most arrogant man alive.”

“Oh, that. Well, yes, you are, but delectable.”

I’d been able to make him grin from the start, which had really only been a few days. How was that possible? I’d never believed in love at first sight. Lust? Hell, yeah. I’d been there more than a few times, but love? Not a chance. Not for a girl like me. Guys had wanted to date me for no other reason than who my father was. I’d been the geeky girl with glasses, the kid least likely to go to her prom.

Then the star quarterback had asked me. I’d said yes, a happy girl who’d been accepted into the popular crowd. At least I’d enjoyed half the prom before learning the truth, that the bastard’s father had owed my daddy something, so I’d been set up like a pawn in a game. It had been the first time but certainly not the last.

Only this time, I’d set myself up.

“Why do you enjoy my company?” I cooed and forced myself into a sitting position, fighting to be the one to unzip his trousers. He allowed me.

“Do you want to know the truth?”

“No, lie to me. That’s what I’m used to.”

He gripped the side of my face with enough pressure I was taken aback, forcing me to look at him.

“Because you *are* the woman I can’t fucking stop thinking about, the one who hasn’t left my mind since you catapulted your way into my world like a firecracker sent from hell. I shouldn’t want you. I can’t need you. You’re a goddamn weakness if you ask anyone. Hell, my father would have called me soft, but there’s something... No, everything about you pushes my buttons and I want more. Now, I don’t give a

flying fuck who your dad is or if you grab the brass ring or brass knuckles instead and knock your father's block off. I want you, the feisty broad who dragged my heart through the mud already. Now, shut the fuck up because I'm going to fuck you because that's what you want and more important, it's exactly what you need."

The man could take my breath away. I wasn't given the opportunity to respond before he ripped open his trousers, yanking out his thick cock, tugging my bottom to the very edge of the counter then plunging his cock deep inside.

"Oh, God. Oh, yes." I threw my arms up and over his head, locking us together given my bindings. He grinned like a kid and pulled almost all the way out, driving into me with enough force the breath was knocked out of me.

"So fucking tight."

My muscles spasmed for a few seconds as they tried to accept the huge girth, clenching and releasing several times. I managed to place my heels on the edge of two drawers, wrapping my fingers in his long locks as I'd done before. He developed a brutal rhythm, driving hard and fast, taking me like a crazed animal.

I could stay writhing underneath him for hours at a time. I wanted to spend the night under the covers, pretending we were just two people in love. How ridiculous was that? I longed to be the one who brought him coffee in the morning, fulfilling another round of our carnal needs before heading off the work. Every. Single. Day.

"Be careful," I managed. "I might be falling in love with you."

"You damn well better be."

He continued to fuck me, the sound of our combined heavy breathing assaulting my senses as the heat built between us to a combustible level. I was thrown into a beautiful daze, unable to think clearly. But he was driving away the horror and the fear, replacing it with delicious and much more sinful memories.

With every savage thrust, I was pushed closer to nirvana, but I could tell he was having a difficult time with control. I squeezed my muscles on purpose and he stopped moving altogether, pulling out until just the tip was inside.

“Careful, little woman. I play for keeps.” He pushed me back, tugging my bottom off the counter, rolling onto the balls of his feet then fucking me like a wild animal.

The breath was knocked out of me completely, my mind spinning given the switch in the angle. Within two seconds, I was pitched headfirst into a mind-blowing orgasm, panting like a crazed dog until I couldn’t hold back a scream.

“Yes. Yes. Yes!”

The climax was so powerful a series of electric jolts coursed through every cell and muscle. I couldn’t breathe for a full five seconds, maybe longer. The single orgasm morphed into another, one equally electrifying.

Then he slowed his rhythm, nipping my lower lip as he ground his hips against me. His cock was expanding, filling me completely. Only when I stopped panting did he pick up his rhythm once again, thrusting in long, even strokes.

Within seconds, I knew he couldn’t hold back any longer, every muscle in his body tensing. When he finally released, I sensed he was pushed into a nearly rapturous state.

As he filled me with his seed, I closed my eyes, allowing another smile to cross my face.

We clung to each other for what seemed like a full five minutes, learning how to breathe once again.

“Now, you need to take a shower, bad girl. You’re all sweaty.” He pulled out, glancing into the mirror then grinning. Then he lifted my arms from around his neck, untying me. Once I was free, he slipped the silk around my neck, wrapping it around and squeezing. “My bad girl.”

“So you’ve told me.”

As he slipped his cock back into his pants, I dragged my tongue across my lower lip. “Don’t do anything stupid out

there.”

He grabbed his jacket, throwing it on but the fact he left the tie pulled at the seductive strings inside of me. I tapped the end against my breast, drawing his attention. He narrowed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Then he purposely headed to the door.

“Party pooper. Don’t kill anyone along the way.”

When he glanced back at me, he wore the same sly grin I’d fallen in love with. Just like I had with the man. “You know me, babe.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

What I was actually worried about was believing our marriage would be real because the heartache was something I wouldn’t be able to take.

But the truth was I’d fallen hopelessly in love with him.

CHAPTER 26



*K*endrick

Love.

This was some shit I hadn't expected. Why would she fall in love with a cad like me?

Cad?

Where in God's name had that come from? I laughed and raked my hand through my hair after closing the door, staring at the group of men who stood inside the suite. Fuck me. I'd lost control with her at a time like this. There were bloodstains on the walls, for fuck's sake.

I forced my thoughts to what she'd told me about Ashley, then back to what I'd learned from Reno. What in the hell was really going on?

Mark glanced in my direction, and I could tell by the expression he wore that my display of affection with Suzannah had been duly noted. I had no qualms about fucking a woman in front of any of my men if it suited a purpose, but with her, making love to the stunning woman was a private affair.

I never wanted any man to look on her the way I did ever again.

Okay, so maybe I'd already lost myself in the woman.

I just wasn't used to feeling this way. I wasn't accustomed to feeling anything but around her, I felt everything. Every

breath. Every nuance. Every emotion. I was like some goddamn love-sick puppy dog and that wasn't acceptable.

I had some bad guys to murder for touching her.

"Who the fuck are these assholes?" I growled just in time to drag me from a point of no return.

"Dunno yet, boss," Mark said.

Exhaling, I glanced at one of the assassins and rage took over where relief and lust had been before. I'd never been so livid in my life.

Who would fucking dare come into a place I was staying and try to hurt the woman... I cared about? Whoever it was would die by my hands. And I'd make it painful.

I'd been truthful to Suzannah. The moment my foot had hit the parking lot pavement, I'd sensed something was wrong. My bones had ached from the knowing. I could swear I'd been able to sniff out the stench of blood. I hadn't been far off given the side of Mark's head had been covered in blood. There was no mistaking the glint in the light from the corridor just outside the room.

Two minutes longer and she might have been abducted or worse.

The thought ravaged what was left of my humanity.

I stormed into the living room, glaring down at the second man I'd shot between the eyes. He wore dark gray material, just like the other fucking asshole. It wasn't some trademark of a group of assassins but an attempt at blending in even under streetlights. Few people knew it but the color close to charcoal allowed for shadows to swallow a person almost in their entirety even where black could easily be seen.

That told me that the attack hadn't been random.

Unfortunately, there were too many candidates as to who was behind the ploy to take her away. Everything was possible from a ransom attempt to Carlos discovering I'd allowed his son and grandson to live. Although I didn't think the latter.

Even if Carlos was determined to get even, he would have needed more time to put a plan of revenge together.

That was unless he'd had me watched, another crazy test.

I made a mental note to find out. Right now, I was putting my money on Rutherford Warrington. His sudden glow of happiness right after the announcement had been an attempt at throwing me off guard. I was certain of it.

As I crouched down, I yanked out my phone, dialing Grayson. "We have a problem." The cleaning crew had just arrived. The place looked like a freaking tornado had gone through it, lamps turned over, furniture moved. Suzannah had put up one hell of a fight.

"What's going on?"

"Suzannah was attacked. I'm not entirely certain they weren't gunning for me. As a matter of fact, I think they were. I'm not supposed to be in town."

"That's an interesting way of putting it. I'm setting the scene now for the task you assigned. I'll be there as soon as I can." The man was always cautious on the phone, even though we swept them on a regular basis. At this point, taking any unnecessary risks wasn't in our best interest.

"There's nothing you can do here. Put your ear to the ground. Someone is talking and you know it. Whoever is behind this incident will brag. And find out everything you can about what Carlos has been up to as well as everything about Senator Winslow."

"First, you're playing with fire with regard to Carlos. I know what the man is capable of."

"Just do it!" I snapped, exhaustion and rage starting to get to me.

"Fine. Have it your way," Grayson snarled. "And this senator?"

"Find out if he was ever attacked. And anything else that seems pertinent."

"You must think I'm a goddamn miracle worker."

“We have an entire array of people at our fingertips, other who owe us favors. Put them to work.” I was running out of patience.

Grayson sighed. “Alright. Any bets on who attacked you?”

“I have a few thoughts I’m not ready to mention. Also use our contacts to check Rutherford’s phone records. I’ll bet he made a phone call or two to some people that might have a connection to Raphael Diego.”

“Tall order to find out but I’ll do my best.”

“And I want a conversation with the contact you mentioned first thing in the morning. Or I will hunt this man down.”

“Already made that phone call. Eight in the morning.”

“Just tell me where and I’ll be there.”

“I will.”

After ending the call, I slipped the phone into my pocket as I continued to study the body of the first asshole who dared touch my beautiful woman.

“I’m heading to the parking lot, boss,” Mark said from behind me. “There’s no identification on them.”

“Not surprising. They’re pros. As I expected.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s possible they were dropped off.”

Which was what I suspected. I rose from where I was crouched, backing him up by several feet. “When you’re on a job for me, you will never take your eyes off the ball again. Do you understand?”

He swallowed hard. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry. The asshole slipped out of the shadows. There wasn’t a car arriving or any sound up to that point. I’d just walked the area surrounding the courtyard. I don’t know where they came from.”

Sadly, I had a feeling they’d been sitting in the room prior to our arrival. Either that or they’d headed here after we’d left the reception. “Understood. Get your wound checked out, Mark. I don’t want it infected.”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Do it.”

He tried to smile and nodded. “I’ll let you know if I find anything suspicious.”

“You do that.” I walked toward the other fallen assailant, staring down at him.

“What do you want me to do with them?” another soldier asked as he shook his head.

I glanced at Butch. He was one of my most trusted men, a former soldier who knew his way around intelligence systems. “Take their fingerprints. Run them through the databases. I need to know who they are. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re independent.”

“That might take some time.”

“I don’t care. You have the suite. I’m getting another room for the night.”

“Then me and my team will get to work. The bodies?”

“Torch them. I don’t want any evidence they were here. And before I hunt the person who betrayed the woman I care about, I need to know how they fucking got in. If they used a key, it’s somewhere.”

“They didn’t use a key.” Butch handed me what looked like a black credit card with no numbers. However, I recognized it easily as I’d used it in my repertoire in days gone past.

“A universal key card. I thought most establishments had a scrambler to prevent that.”

Butch chuckled. “Only the ones with the higher level of security and the newer hotel chains. This isn’t one of them.”

Although the facility had recently been renovated, they hadn’t upgraded security. I was surprised. Maybe Rutherford had gotten careless in his old age. “At least that answers one question. Don’t let our contacts fail you. You know what to do.”

“You taught me well, boss. You’ll have something by in the morning.”

“Good.”

I glanced at the bathroom door and rubbed my jaw. We’d have one more night of peace before all hell broke loose.

But within twenty-four hours, this would be over.

Then I’d be in charge of what I’d heard called the new Camelot. I couldn’t help but grin.

With a beautiful queen by my side. What could be better? My grandmother had been right in all her prophecies and recommendations to the kid who’d been disobedient every chance he got.

One of the last things she’d said to me had been the most confounding, and something I’d laughed at, refusing to believe.

Now it was the one I knew I would live by.

“Koly vy znaydete te, shcho dlya vas nayvazhlyvishe, vy zrushyte nebo i zemlyu, shchob zberehty tse v bezpetsi, navit’ yakshcho tse koshtuvatyme vam zhyttya.”

When you find what’s most important to you, you’ll move heaven and earth to keep it safe, even if it costs you your life.

* * *

Suzannah

Warmth. I felt like I was floating. Maybe that was because he was holding me. I didn’t know a man like him could curl up with someone in bed and be happy. We’d talked. Really talked. He’d told me about his family, including highlights about his father as well as his role within the organization.

In turn for his brutal honesty, I’d told him about the black book, even showing him the contents. He’d praised me for

gathering it, which had strangely thrilled me. We really were more alike than I'd originally thought.

I took a deep breath of his aftershave and every cell in my body tingled. It was so odd to feel close to such a dangerous man. But I did.

I sensed I was trying to recapture the pleasurable moment I'd had only an hour or so before when he'd driven me to the kind of ecstasy only dreams were made of. It was funny that it seemed as if it was much longer. The shower had taken away some of the aches and pains, washing away the remnants of blood. And the scent of our sex, which I hated, but it had been necessary. When I'd walked out, the men in the room had pretended not to notice me, but I'd seen them glancing in my direction. They'd heard our foray into wickedness, which was completely inappropriate timing. But we'd had difficulty resisting each other.

Just like we had minutes before.

He'd grabbed our stuff, tossing it into our bags, and whisked us to the other side of the property.

At least he'd told me how the perpetrators had gotten in. I didn't need to worry about losing Jose in the nightmare.

Kendrick was right in that I'd bruise, but I'd survive.

And I knew I was lucky to be alive.

I rolled over, glancing down at him, studying the possessive and very predatory look on his face. "Nice choice. I like it here."

"Is this acceptable for the duration of our stay or would you prefer that I bought a house?"

I laughed and lifted my head, twisting so I could ease my hand under the covers, unable to resist wrapping it around the base of his cock. "Hmmm... I thought *we* would be purchasing a house."

His eyes lit up like firecrackers. "Then I'll schedule a meeting with a real estate agent."

"In all our free time. So, you're serious about our marriage."

“Aren’t you?”

I had to think about the question. “Let’s see what happens after the wedding.”

“We have a deal.”

“You might grow tired of me.”

“Not likely. And as I said, I’d prefer if we didn’t attend.”

“I’m the maid of honor.”

“How did that happen? What else haven’t you told me?” He growled and rolled me over, pinning my arms over my head.

“Ashley asked. I said yes. She said she was doing it to please my brother.” I struggled in his hold, trying my best to push him off me.

The suite wasn’t a carbon copy but an even more grandiose series of rooms. It had once been the living quarters for the owner of the winery and inn, a building set off by itself to the side, the view even more dazzling than any of the others. How Kendrick had wrangled getting it was beyond me. A part of me didn’t want to stay at the lovely resort at all, but I refused to allow my fears to interrupt what I was planning on doing.

Although taking my father down held less interest than it had before I’d arrived.

“Are you okay?” Kendrick asked quietly as he let me go.

“I’m fine.”

“Four ‘fine’s in the last hour. Why don’t I believe you?”

“Maybe you do know me too well.”

He slid off, shifting into a partial sitting position while I eased onto my bottom, crossing my legs. “What is it? What are you worried about?”

“You mean other than the fact someone else might try and kill me? Oh, I don’t know. Maybe that you’ll discover my own father wants me dead. There’s something insanely wrong about that. Isn’t there?”

“There’s everything wrong with that, but don’t jump to conclusions yet. The hit might not have been about you.”

“What did you do?”

He laughed and raked his hand through his hair. “I followed my conscience for the first time in my life. That might not have been my finest hour, but it felt damn good. However, not good enough to put your life in danger. Not ever again.”

“We need to go to the wedding. Whoever is behind this mess will show himself.”

“You’re sure it’s a he?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Actually, no, I’m not. Allow me do a little investigating for a change.”

He pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “That’s fine but if you place yourself in danger, you’ll learn quite a bit more about my disciplinary skills. Now, come here. It’s time to get some sleep. Tomorrow you’ll talk to your father and put the final pieces in place to take a rightful spot within his company. However, you won’t be going alone and you won’t be taking your little black book. That needs to be kept safe. I also have another meeting that might shed some additional light on the person responsible.”

“What if I don’t want anything to do with my father’s company?”

He kissed my forehead. “That’s your decision to make. However, I will be overseeing your father’s company and he will retire. That’s part of our deal.”

“Our deal. How could I forget?”

“Sounds like you’re unhappy with it.”

“It’s not worth dying over.”

His exhale was one of frustration. “Understood.”

“What about my brother and sister?”

“That remains to be seen. Go to sleep. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

That's where he was wrong. I had everything to worry about. I could feel it in my bones.

Shuddering from the sound of his throaty voice, I slid under the crook of his arm and just before he turned off the light on the nightstand, my gaze froze on his weapon.

This was the kind of nightmare that had no chance of a good ending, one that would strip away the closeness we'd shared.

Someone was going to die, only I had a feeling it might be the person I was holding onto. Then what would happen?

CHAPTER 27



*K*endrick

Mark had wanted to redeem himself. He'd told me that personally. I'd allowed it, which also wasn't like me in the least.

Maybe I was getting way too soft in my old age. Hell, I was nearing forty-three. Not close enough to retire from a typical business, but I'd grown weary of the game that assassins played. Maybe the next ugly truth after accepting that I was falling in love with Suzannah was that I wanted to settle down.

I had a house in Kentucky I barely spent any time in. I'd crash there, taking a shower and grabbing coffee. That was about the extent of my stay. I might as well be sliding under the sheets inside a motel.

The meeting was going to be civilized. It was something I'd insisted on. This wasn't about threatening the guy, merely having breakfast with a man who could provide answers.

As we walked down the sidewalk, I noticed Grayson had kept a smile on his face since he'd arrived at the villa.

"What the fuck is going on with you?" I finally barked as I confronted him.

"Maybe I should ask you the same thing," Grayson retorted. "You're not the same man I knew from a week ago. There's only one possible reason why."

“What do you mean?”

“You let Reno and his kid live. Hell, you gave the man two million dollars to skip town. He couldn’t stop thanking me, like I had something to do with your decision. Then you allowed Mark to keep walking without breaking his legs. Then I heard the guys talking about you fucking that woman of yours in the bathroom after she was attacked. I don’t know but I think you’re drinking the Kool-Aid.”

“Kool-Aid?”

“You know, the love bug potion.”

“Oh, for the love of God.” I scanned the street as we neared the diner.

“I think it’s great you found someone. I’ve been telling you that’s what you needed for years. Granted, I didn’t think you’d listen to a damn thing I had to say, especially since you’re making one of the biggest deals of your life. Did you see the front page of the *LA Times* this morning?”

“Not interested.”

“Well, your dad would be proud of you. You’re set to inherit the control of a huge empire. Coupled with the one your father left you and you’ll be one of the richest men in the world.”

“What if that’s not something I give a shit about?” I wasn’t asking him for an answer, but it was something I’d thought about since she’d said she wasn’t certain she cared about it any longer. The thing was I had no intention of letting her go.

“Then I’d say you found the right girl.”

His answer wasn’t necessarily one I’d expected to hear. Grayson was a man who thrived on the thought of power and money. I’d never heard him talk about his immediate family or his younger years. It was as if they didn’t exist to him. Meanwhile, my entire life had been family centric, much like Suzannah’s had been. We were truly cut from the same cloth, only she’d endured being treated like a second class citizen. The fact she’d acquired and kept a level of decency was something I respected, although it had made her an easy target.

That's why she was determined to prove that she could do everything better than her father. Admirable but not what she really wanted. I'd seen that the night before.

"Who is this asshole again?" I asked, peering through the window of the diner.

"His name is Spencer Abbott. He used to work for Rutherford Warrington."

"A disgruntled employee?"

"He got a better offer. That's all I know. Let's just say his current business works in the darker areas than when he was with the Warrington family."

I noticed a lone man sitting in the last booth. "Good to know."

"By the way. I heard the shit Reno said about Diego being dead. I checked. There's no information one way or the other."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me given he has no heirs. If he is dead, his top soldiers are trying to hold together the empire until they steal whatever they can from it. It may not be important."

"If you say so, boss."

"Let's get this over with. I need solid information on who the hell is behind this. Last night crossed a line. Someone wants me dead."

"That's nothing new." Grayson laughed and followed me inside.

The diner was busy, but the ambient noise would hide a portion of our conversation. The man seemed antsy as we approached, immediately jerking to his feet. I waved him off and we all sat down.

"Mr. Abbott. I understand you used to work for the Warrington family."

"Yes, sir. I did. Since the time I was a kid. In his stables. Moved up to being what you would call his concierge." He laughed, his gaze constantly shifting to the diner's entrance. He was worried about being seen.

“Who do you work for now?”

“He prefers not to have his name tossed out in public. Let’s just say it’s a longtime rival of Mr. Warrington’s.”

“Okay.” I’d let that go for now. Whether or not it was of any importance would depend on the rest of the conversation. “You were told I’m seeking information on the person ordering the assassination of my father. Correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Spencer was nervous, barely able to look me in the eye.

“What do you know?” Grayson jumped in. “Tell him what you told me.”

“It wasn’t done for business. That’s what I heard.”

His words weren’t necessarily what I’d expected, or maybe what I’d hoped for. “A personal vendetta?”

“Something like that.” As the waitress came over, she didn’t bother asking before filling our coffee cups. His hand was shaking as he reached for the sugar.

I had a feeling the man was under duress or had been tasked to provide me with false information. Either way, he was a low man on the totem pole for whoever he was working for. “That means nothing to me. What have you heard about an attempt made on my fiancée’s life?”

Now his eyes opened wide. I could tell he was genuinely surprised. “I don’t know anything about that. I did hear there are some folks who want you dead.”

So the hit had been intended for me. At least we were getting somewhere. “By whom?”

He glanced around the diner. “By someone you’d least expect. Somebody that wants to take away Camelot.”

The fact he’d used the term meant someone had been paying close attention to the alliance made with the Warrington family. In my line of work, that usually meant someone had altered plans, which made them careless in their actions. That’s one reason they hadn’t realized I wasn’t inside the suite when the people they’d hired had attacked. I’d been right that

my sudden appearance had caused more than one issue. “Hired guns.”

“Yes, and no, I have no clue from where.”

“Does the name Raphael Diego mean anything to you?”

There was the glimmer I needed. He was more uncomfortable than before, swallowing twice. “Bad dude. Rumor has it he was to come into California, but he had obstacles. I don’t know anything about that.”

Obstacles. That either meant another cartel or law enforcement breathing down his neck. “You put that in the past tense.”

“Yeah, well, I heard he kicked the bucket.”

“Okay. Are his men in California?” I glanced at Grayson who had his eyebrows furrowed.

“On and off. You hear stories but I’ve never seen his soldiers. I’m not into his product, if you know what I mean. Look. I need to get out of here.” The man was even tapping his foot on the tile rapidly.

“Why are you so nervous?” Grayson asked.

“Because there are eyes everywhere, man. Everywhere. You’re not from around here. There’s more *business* that goes down in social clubs and fancy parties than you have any idea about. These people rule the goddamn world, not the fucking slimy cartels. Hell, you need an invitation just to shit. If you know what I mean.”

“Who runs this group of individuals?” I asked as he started to stand. Yeah. I knew exactly what he meant.

“A few families. Let’s just say politics ain’t what it used to be. There’s an old boys’ school that really runs the world. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. Even if the man is alive, Diego ain’t no fool. He knows better than to step foot in this area. Just be warned. Word on the street is that they don’t want you here either. I gave you what you wanted so do me a favor. Don’t contact me again. I appreciate the extra cash but it ain’t worth it. I like breathing.”

I took a deep breath and allowed him to walk away, glancing over my shoulder. The guy was nervous as hell. I was starting to connect the dots. He was right in that the power in this town was entirely different. That was something my father had known about.

Exhaling, I thought about Spencer's words regarding my dad. His death had been about leaving me a legacy intact. And I had a feeling I knew what had happened. That would be handled later.

"That was worthless," Grayson grumbled. "And I paid that fucker ten k."

"Not at all. Money well spent. In fact, I think I have my answer."

He furrowed his brow. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning I need you to delve into something else for me while I go to the meeting with Suzannah and her father."

"O-kay. Now, you have me curious."

"Come on. Let's get out of here." After getting to my feet, I yanked out a couple of twenties, tossing them onto the table. As I headed for the door, I thought about the scandalous liaison I'd had with my lovely bride to be. If my instincts were correct, it would appear I hadn't been the only one forming new alliances.

The rest of the charade would be exciting to unmask.

What had my father always told me? May the strongest survive. In this case, it had nothing to do with strength or the number of soldiers. It was all about mental aptitude. And who could play the game with more finesse.

I grabbed my sunglasses as soon as I walked out the door, the bright sun allowing a smile to cross my face. My phone rang and my gut told me it was Butch.

As soon as I looked at the number, I smiled. "What can you tell me?"

"Their identities were wiped, but I think I figured out who they were working for."

I allowed him to tell me and chuckled. Just as I suspected.
“Thanks, Butch. I’ll be in touch.”

“Good news?” Grayson asked.

“Another piece falling into place. Nothing more. Let’s roll.”

At that moment, we both heard a screeching sound, someone applying the brakes as the driver whipped around the corner. After that, an engine was gunned. I knew exactly what was going to happen. In a flash, a dark SUV careened into Spencer, the brutal hit knocking him several feet into the air.

And the driver kept going.

The game had just had a final twist.

I’d put the fear of God into someone.

Now it was time to put an end to the charade.

* * *

Suzannah

End game.

That’s what the love of my life had called it after returning from his morning meeting. Then he’d explained what had happened as well as his beliefs. I wasn’t certain what to believe any longer. What I’d come to realize was that I truly wasn’t the best game player. I didn’t have what other people called a poker face.

However, I could be a damn good actress, which is what I needed to be today. I was also competitive, which meant I refused to allow my father to win a single point in the volley. I considered this a game of tennis. I was certain Kendrick called it something else.

I also suspected that Kendrick was holding back information from me. Or perhaps he wanted me to determine and accept if my father was behind the charade. Maybe he was right in doing so if that was the case. If I wasn’t the one who

discovered it, then I'd harbor resentment. Maybe the sexy man knew me after all.

The parking lot of the set of office suites was full. It was just a typical day at the office. One of the few credits I could give my father was that he treated his employees well, the benefits better than most companies. Maybe he did have an ounce of care in his system.

A second car pulled in behind us, another one of Kendrick's soldiers keeping close eye on everything that was happening. I suspected there were others in the area, just like they'd been surrounding the hotel the night before and when he'd left for his meeting. Today, he was somber, his mind clouded. I'd seen it in his eyes, had felt it in his actions. Something was bugging him tremendously.

I wanted to tell him to join the club.

I'd selected a power dress to wear. Bright red. It screamed of control, which by its nature would threaten my father almost immediately. I even had my fiancé stop at a drug store so I could purchase my favorite and very daring lipstick.

Shocking vixen.

I pursed my lips, glancing over at Kendrick. He'd been lost in thought during the drive, constantly looking at his phone. Whatever Grayson had been ordered to find was the final key as to what was going on.

And who'd tried to kill us.

I still found it difficult to believe my father could stoop so low, but with billions of dollars at stake as well as his solid reputation, I couldn't put anything past him.

My father's office was the same one he'd had as long as I could remember, which had been one of the only surprises about the man. Granted, the building had been considered premier when built almost twenty years before and yes, my family owned the entire five acres it was positioned on. However, Dad had refused to change his office, other than purchasing an office chair here and there.

My brother, on the other hand, had acquired and renovated the corner space, taking up three offices. While I hadn't been to the location in almost four years, the moment I walked in, it was easy to tell everything had been renovated. Gone were the ugly chandeliers in the atrium that had reminded me of being inside a gothic mansion from days gone by. In their place were sparkling lights coming from almost every corner of the ceiling. And the artwork on the walls was fascinating. Avant garde.

It was definitely not my father's tastes. But it was Steinbeck's. Or was it?

"Remember," Kendrick said from beside me, his hand still on the small of my back. "State your demands and don't let your father rile you."

"I wonder when you'll stop underestimating me."

"Oh, my sweet. That stopped somewhere at thirty thousand feet. However, your father has an entire empire to lose."

That he did. Maybe I was still numb inside after hearing the person he'd met with had been involved in a hit and run.

And the SUV had won the round.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. Then I fingered the collar, realizing it was the first time I'd thought of it as something other than a lovely choker. "I can handle my father. You need to trust me."

"Perhaps that's the trouble. I not only trust you, I already know you far too well." He moved in front of me, adjusting the placement of the collar then grinning. "You look stunning. Edible."

"Don't get any crazy ideas."

"And don't do anything that will get you into trouble."

"You know I will."

"As I said, I know you," Kendrick stated with a gruff voice.

I tipped my hip, giving him a sly smile. "You don't know anything. Yet." As I walked through the now gorgeous lobby,

my heels clipping on the marble floor, I thought about what I'd told him the night before. I was fighting for control for no other reason than I'd been bypassed like yesterday's news. I would be perfectly happy living a normal life, not the epitome of Camelot. Besides, that hadn't ended well for the couple who'd first represented it.

The silly truth was that I would prefer the house with the white picket fence and tiny yard to a mansion with servants. Somehow, I doubted Kendrick would ever go for it.

At least the receptionist was the same person hired by my father when I was a little girl. As soon as she saw me, she squealed. She knew exactly the kind of girl I was. My hopes. My aspirations. My dreams. Patty had been my sounding board, a very special person, and other than my sister, the only person I'd missed after moving to Atlanta.

"I heard you were in town," Patty said with glee in her voice.

"Word travels fast."

"I knew you wouldn't miss your brother's wedding. You two have sparred over the years but it's an important event in his life."

I hugged her, realizing there was a pang of melancholy. Where Jose had been like a second father, Patty had been old enough to be a second mother; she'd listened to my woes about school and boys, my mother never finding the time. "Why weren't you at the engagement party?"

"It wasn't considered appropriate. You know your father."

"That's bullshit!"

She winked then noticed Kendrick, a bright smile crossing her face. "This must be the man who finally captured your heart. I knew all along Christian wasn't the one; you never brought him around to meet me, but I knew."

"And I knew what you'd say if you met him," I told her.

She offered a smile. She was easily able to handle my father and his mood swings given her good nature, but she was feisty as well. "It's a good thing you divorced him."

“Kendrick Gregory, Patty Wilson. Be careful, Kendrick. She’s a soothsayer. Once she touches your hand, she’ll know if you’re fit to be in my life.”

He lifted both his eyebrows, almost hesitant to extend his hand. The moment was actually endearing. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Oh, dear. I’m not a soothsayer, just a wise old woman that knows exactly what you need.” She grabbed his hand with gusto and oddly enough, her eyes opened wide before she walked closer. Her eyes never left his, searching for the man behind the mask he almost always wore. The expression on her face, the deep emotion had me locked in the moment. Her opinion had always meant the world to me. Perhaps now more than ever.

When she pulled away, there was a faint look in her eyes, an emotion I couldn’t read.

“What is it?” he asked, laughing.

“You’re a troubled man. Aren’t you?” she asked.

He glanced at me then said something else that surprised me. “I’ve always been.”

Patty nodded. “Yet you found your center. Suzannah. She completes you.”

If Kendrick was ever surprised, I hadn’t really noticed. At this moment, he was thrown into a state of mind where he wasn’t certain what to say. So instead of playing the game, talking about deals or how we enjoyed working together, he simply gave a one word answer.

“Yes.”

She looked away and nodded several times. I moved closer, touching her arm. “What is it?”

“It’s odd. I’ve never seen a man more in love with a woman.”

“Meaning what?”

She touched my face. “Meaning he would die for you without hesitation. That’s the kind of love I’ve always wanted for

you.”

“Patty. It’s time for the meeting with my daughter.”

My father’s gruff voice irritated the hell out of me. I turned my head, glaring at him. There were a half dozen emotions running through his eyes. Surprisingly, including pride. Then he shut them all down.

She winked at me. “I’m glad you’re fighting back.” Her voice was quiet, but there was mischief in her tone. “Knock ‘em dead.”

“Mr. Gregory. Please wait here. We won’t be but a few moments.” My father turned on his heel and walked off.

All I could do was sigh.

CHAPTER 28



*S*uzannah

I purposely waited to head to my father's office just to piss him off. He knew I was always punctual, a trait that didn't necessarily follow the rest of the family. He'd expected nothing less than me following my usual schedule and was fuming by the time I walked in, closing the door behind me.

"We'll be here as long as it takes, Daddy dearest."

He hated when I called him that. When he turned around, I could tell he was fuming for more than my purposeful tardiness. "State your demands and enjoy the rest of your day."

Someone had already pissed in his Wheaties that morning. "I'm surprised you don't have your guard dog here issuing sideline insults." Meaning my brother.

"I didn't let him know about the meeting. Besides, he's busy with Ashley's parents." He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at me, allowing his gaze to fall to the matching stilettos. Then he laughed but not in jest, in realization that I wasn't taking no for an answer.

Sadly, I had a feeling he'd been defeated long before I'd entered the room.

Now I was feeling sorry for the man who'd treated me like dirt?

“As it should be, Daddy. I’ll make this short. I know you’re a busy man. From what I understand, Kendrick explained that I want to be placed in charge of director of operations, my authority superseding Steinbeck’s. I realize it will come as a shock to him, but he’ll get over it eventually.”

He did nothing more than look at me. “You really think you’re going to get away with being a part of this charade?”

“Is that what it is? I know what you’ve done over the years, Daddy. I know the group of men you talk with, the methods of extortion you’ve used.”

The smug look on his face irritated the hell out of me. I’d been forbidden to bring my little black book with me, but I had made copies of a few pages just in case. I pulled them from my purse, sliding them across the desk. “In case you need incentive.”

For a few minutes, he didn’t bother looking at them. When he pulled them into his fingers, he almost smiled. “Perhaps Mr. Gregory was right in that you are more formidable than I cared to admit. Do you really want to destroy your entire family?”

The truth was that I had no intentions of using the information. “I just want what I’ve always wanted, Daddy. To be an important part of this family.” A full minute ticked by.

Then he opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a small stack of papers. “I had my attorney draw this up late last night. I think you’ll find the terms acceptable.”

His attorney. The man my father had spent more holidays with than he had with his own family. The man who’d been at my graduation in my father’s place. “I’m curious what Mr. Garrison thought about your sudden retirement announcement.”

“As you might imagine, he was surprised.”

I’ll just bet he was. That meant Mr. Garrison had likely placed a codicil he hoped I’d miss in the middle of the contract. It would be fascinating to find out if I was right.

As he slid the contracts across his expansive desk, I wondered how our family had gotten here. There had been good times in

the past, albeit the memories were starting to fade given I'd been so young. But they were there. That was before money and power had taken hold, dragging my father into hell, my mother soon afterward. She was happy as can be with her charity events and luncheons with her friends, a trip to Paris every other season or so, and no cares in the world.

I hadn't noticed before, but my father had aged significantly over the last four years, as if the edge of power had driven the blade into his heart and he was slowly being poisoned. At that very moment, I realized what I'd said I wanted I no longer did. While I glanced down at the papers, I didn't pick them up. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Everything was different now. Kendrick had done that. Maybe I should be eternally grateful.

"There's something we haven't talked about as of yet, Suzannah Lily." He only used my middle name when a conversation was about to get serious. "You don't need to worry about my involvement any longer. I'm retiring effective at the end of the month. I haven't told anyone else yet and I would appreciate if you would allow me to address our employees and the press. I'm happy to announce your involvement, but I need a little time to say goodbye."

Goodbye. It sounded more permanent. "What's wrong, Pops? You're not well?"

He raked his hand through his thinning hair. "According to my doctor, the stress is getting to me. Since you stepped up to the plate, I'll take that as a sign it's time to let go."

I wasn't certain if he was doing nothing more than playing another game. "Did you know I was almost killed last night?"

He jerked his head up, shock tearing through his system. My father had mastered the art of the poker face years ago, but this was something entirely different. He pressed his hand against his heart, stumbling backwards. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Kendrick saved my life. An assassin entered my room determined to kill me, just like Kendrick's father was gunned down. You didn't know?"

“Oh, my God, Suzannah. You may consider me a monster, but I would never hurt one of my children physically. But yes, Kendrick mentioned what happened to his father. I had nothing to do with it. Nothing.”

“But you had no problem hurting me emotionally and spiritually. Did you? You all but sent me away yourself and you know it.” I heard the anger in my tone and sucked in my breath. I wasn’t certain what getting angry with him over the past was going to do at this point.

He tried to smile but I could still see the look of pain in his eyes. “You were always the strongest and smartest of all of us, but you weren’t ready to run this company. You are now. I’ve watched you grow, keeping tabs on your success.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“You forget how many friends I have, Suzannah. Your boss is a guy I went to college with.” He was pleased with himself.

Was he kidding me? “You asked him to give me a job?” I was livid, more so than before I’d arrived.

He threw up his hand. “No. I did not. You remind me of him, full of morals. He told me in no uncertain terms he’d likely not hire you. But he was impressed with your resume. I won’t lie that when I found out, I was glad you’d landed a job where I could keep an eye on you. I was right to push you so hard. You’re not only a decent human being, but you’ve also turned into one hell of a businesswoman. I lost track of what I wanted when I was a kid, losing my morals. You never did. I’ll be proud to watch as you continue to allow this company to thrive. In the right way.”

I remained in shock for a few seconds.

“What about Steinbeck?”

His face clouded over. “There are some things you don’t know about your brother. We will talk about him after his wedding. I won’t destroy that for him.”

I wasn’t certain how to respond. I also wasn’t positive accepting the helm was in my best interest, even though it was being delivered to me on a silver platter. What I did know was

that the man was dying. Perhaps facing mortality had been the single thing his power, money, and influence hadn't been able to change.

I glanced down at the contract, taking it into my hands. "I'll get back to you on this, Father. As you might imagine, I need to allow my attorney time to go over it."

"Of course. Know that I do care about you, Suzannah. I always have. You were and are my bright shining star."

This hadn't gone at all as I'd planned, the fuel all but extinguished. I backed away, turning toward the door.

"I know you entered into an alliance with Mr. Gregory for the sole purpose of obtaining what you wanted within this organization, but I saw something last night in both of you. Just answer me one thing."

I took a deep breath. "What's that?"

"Do you love him as much as I believe you do?"

My father had always been observant, although his determination that feelings and emotions were a weakness was something I'd never forget. This was... another telling statement and a path I needed to choose carefully. It was funny to me how easy the answer was. "Yes. I do. With all my heart."

"Then you have my full blessing."

I walked out, uncertain how I felt at that moment. When I reached Kendrick, I couldn't read his expression, but his eyes explored mine, searching to find out if I'd gotten the answers I was looking for. "My father didn't try and kill us."

"I know he didn't," he said quietly.

"You wanted me to discover that on my own."

"Yes. You needed to."

I dragged my tongue across my lips, finding it silly that I wasn't certain how to react. After everything I'd been through, everything I'd learned, I had no clue what to say. That wasn't

like me in the least. But here I was, standing in my father's office. With a series of my signatures, it could be my office.

"My brother. He did this. Didn't he?"

"I think there's some things you need to know."

As he pulled out his phone, I had a feeling whatever he was about to show me would change my life.

I placed my hand on his, shaking my head. "I don't need to see my brother's betrayal."

"Trust me," he said. "Just trust me."

I lifted my head, noticing there were sparks of electricity coursing through his irises. And there was additional anger, but entirely different than before. Whatever he was about to tell me was likely as unnerving to him as it was to me.

"I do trust you, Kendrick. With my life and with my heart. Just don't fuck it up."

He grinned as only he could do and handed me his phone. Texts had arrived from Grayson along with photographs taken not long before. There was no denying what I was seeing.

"I'll need you to confirm the person on the left, but I know the other parties. I believe you do as well."

My father had been so certain that he was king of the hill that I'd been right in that he'd let his guard down. "His name is Jack Garrison. He's my father's attorney and his oldest friend."

And I suddenly knew what I wanted to do.

If only it could come to pass...

* * *

Kendrick

Pomp and circumstance.

Given my siblings had yet to marry and my best friends were all in the business, I wasn't used to attending a rehearsal dinner. It was one of those formal events that in my mind had no place. However, tonight was entirely different.

Hosted by the bride's family, the dinner was at a fancy restaurant in the heart of San Francisco instead of the heart of Napa Valley. Rooms had been secured for the night, complimentary to members of the wedding party of course. That included us.

Spencer Abbott's words filtered into my mind as we walked into the festively decorated location. The rehearsal itself had been stodgy, tension filling the room. At least it had only lasted thirty minutes. But in that time, I'd been able to observe certain behavior, making note of who talked with whom.

After showing Suzannah the pictures Grayson had taken, not every single piece of the puzzle had been fit together, but it was close. Through one of our contacts, my second in command had also discovered what I'd call the smoking gun. A meeting with one of the two men I'd killed inside our suite photographed for all eternity. The photograph had come from a bank across the street from their coffee shop meeting. One of the many things I loved about the business I was in was being able to access databases and secure systems often used by members of law enforcement and top-level security firms.

But this time, we'd gotten lucky.

I took a deep breath, savoring the moment of reclaiming control.

My lovely bride to be had insisted I send her the photographs. Somehow, I had a feeling my darling girl had something up her sleeve. Why did I admire her instead of desiring to admonish her behavior? Because we were truly like two peas in a pod. I half laughed given the expression that had floated through my mind. My mother had used it time and time again to talk about her relationship with my pops.

Why did it feel like I was turning into my dad? Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe all his preparations for me taking

over the business hadn't been for naught. The time for reminiscing was over. It was back to business as usual.

Before Suzannah and I walked into the private room, I pulled her aside, out onto one of the balconies under a set of twinkling lights.

"What are you doing?" Suzannah asked as she draped her arms around my neck, moving her hips in time to the light jazz music coming from the outdoor speakers. There was a coy look on her face, the very expression she'd worn almost constantly while on the plane. As if she held a secret.

As if she had life in the palm of her hand.

As if she was going to feed me to the sharks.

"Do you know I adore you, *krasyva, ale neslukhnyana divchyna?*"

"Oh, new wording. Does this mean I'm going to need to learn Ukrainian if we stay together? And what, pray tell, did you call me this time? Wicked witch?"

"Ha. Very funny. I called you my beautiful yet naughty girl. And there is no 'if' in the terms of the contract. You are mine for as long as I see fit."

"I noticed the codicil you added to our contract. Have you noticed, handsome yet arrogant man, that I've yet to sign it?"

I spun her around, dipping her then holding the position for a few seconds. "Semantics."

"Hardly. I'm in full and absolute control of the situation."

"It would seem you need a lesson in who's the boss. I'm glad I brought the handcuffs with me."

She laughed in a haughty way, although I could tell she was fully aroused. "That's never going to happen."

"It already has. You're wearing my collar." I yanked her into a standing position, jerking her against my heated body. The music turned decidedly Spanish, and I couldn't help myself, allowing a few Latin dance moves to roll through me. She laughed softly.

“If you think that turns me on in any way, you’re sorely wrong.”

“Your body betrays you. The scent of your desire is heavenly tonight.”

Suzannah pressed her hand against my chest, trying to push me away. Then she laughed when I allowed her to do so, backing away from me and grabbing a glass of bubbly as a waiter appeared from the shadows. “In your dreams, fly boy.”

I accepted the offer of a flute of champagne, waiting until the young man left before stalking toward her, eventually pushing her against the iron railing. “You have no idea what my dreams entail, lovely Suzannah. But you’ll soon learn.”

“I’m certain you’ll try. What are you going to do about your father’s death?”

I’d told her about his cancer diagnosis. She’d told me about her father’s heart condition. It would seem our lives correlated in several ways. “Before I leave California, I’ll need to make another stop. You are coming with me.”

“I... We’ll talk about that.”

Even in the darkness, I could see a shadow cross her face. “By the way, your receptionist told me several secrets. Juicy tidbits I might add. Blackmail material actually.”

“Oh, she did? I guess that means I’ll have to dig up some dirt on you. Didn’t you say you had a brother? And Paula is not my receptionist yet. I haven’t determined what I want to do.” Her face clouded over and some of the playfulness disappeared.

I allowed her to walk away from me, facing the railing and staring up at the twinkling stars.

“Patty cares for you very much and wants you happy. She told me you had a dream about the perfect little clapboard house with turquoise shutters, a lovely yard and a swing. I can’t remember if you would prefer two or three dogs and eventually, a passel of kids.”

“What if that were true? Would it bother you?”

I sensed she was fearful of my answer.

“Not in the least. Money suddenly means nothing to me. Things are inanimate objects. Through your eyes, I’ve seen what life can really offer.”

She threw me a look then laughed softly. “If only you meant that.”

“You might be surprised.” When she said nothing, I walked closer, using a single finger to trace the long line of her neck. “You neither want your father’s company nor to enter into the deal we made, at least officially.”

“I honestly don’t know. It all seemed like exactly what I wanted. Revenge tied in a neat little bow. Then I realized through your eyes that life has more to offer. I just need some time to figure out who I really am. A part of me wants to run the very corporation that was denied to me, turning it into something to be proud of.”

“Then do it.”

“Like I said. I just need some time. I copied some pages from the black book and showed him. He was embarrassed yet strangely resigned to owning up to his crimes. It struck me oddly.”

For the first time in my life, it felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart. “That’s because you’re a decent human being.”

“I appreciate that, Kendrick. I’m not the same woman I was when you met me just a week ago. I know that sounds hard to believe. Knowing that someone has been actively out to get my family, yours as well, troubles me greatly. What does that say about the legacies that were built for us?”

Everything had fallen neatly together with my father’s death. Our engagement announcement had added fuel to the fire. The limited knowledge about how I’d react had been used in a way that I found as brilliant as it was conniving, keeping me actively seeking personal revenge instead of paying attention to what was really happening. What the perpetrators hadn’t counted on was the meeting between Suzannah and me as well as our instant connection.

That had put a huge cog into their wheel, preventing them from easily finishing the twisted plan set in motion months before.

“Nothing that can’t be changed,” I told her, although that would be a tall order at this point in our lives. I gripped her chin, lifting her pretty little head. “I care about you, Suzannah. Perhaps more than I can understand and more than you can believe.”

“Do you love me?”

“I adore you.”

“But do you love me? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with only me by your side? Or is this all about winning at any cost?”

“Winning isn’t everything when you can’t be with the person who matters the most.”

She dragged her tongue across my bottom lip. “I almost believe you. I want to believe you. God, you have no idea how much I do. I love you, Kendrick. It’s crazy. I mean, I really don’t know you very well.”

“Perhaps you know more than you think you do.”

“What? That you drink your coffee black and prefer bloody steaks and potatoes to anything else? Or maybe that you’re an excellent dancer and speak several languages? Those aren’t what’s hidden underneath all those layers of yours. I want to know every fear and every joy, what you hope for when and if we’re lucky enough to grow old together. I want to know all your body tics, not just that you talk in your sleep.”

“I do not!” I teased.

“Oh, you do. And you snore too.”

“Well, you snort when you laugh.”

As if proving me right, she did just that, her laughter floating into the air even as she placed her hand over her lips. “Oops.”

“It’s adorable. Everything about you is adorable and so alive. I want nothing more than to shower you with gifts, share every

moment with you. Holidays. Birthdays. And rocking chairs when we get too old to walk. That's what I want."

"But do you love me?"

By way of answer, I crushed my mouth over hers, enjoying the way her body melted into mine. As I thrust my tongue inside, she rose onto her toes, arching her back and pressing her luscious breasts against me. The taste of her was always sweet, but tonight it was pure nirvana. I sucked on her tongue, shifting my hips back and forth, capturing every moan she issued.

Only when I heard applause did I break the kiss, nipping her lower lip before allowing her to lift her head. She smiled, her expression dreamy then rubbed my thumb across my lips. However, there was no doubt that my inability to say the words caused her pain.

Maybe I was afraid of them and what they'd mean. Or maybe I wasn't certain I could give her the love she needed. She deserved much better than a man who'd cripple her emotionally.

"While I know the color would look good on you, I doubt you want to go into that room with lipstick on."

"Oh, I don't know," I told her. "I like the honor of owning you."

God, I adored the way she laughed, the lilt that would forever haunt me. I'd managed to capture a stunning little bird, but she didn't belong to me. Not by a longshot. It wouldn't be fair to clip her wings.

Look at me, gaining a conscience after all this time.

"What are the plans for the evening?" she asked, pushing herself away once again.

"Fact gathering. I'll issue the crushing blow later." When she winked, I shook my head. "Why do I know for certain you have something up your sleeve?"

"What if I do? You trust me. Right?"

"With most things. What are you doing?"

“Let’s just say we might have a little floor show.”

I cocked my head, taking a single long stride and wrapping my hand around her throat. “Be careful playing with fire, my exquisite flower. Your soft petals will burn within seconds.”

“You’re going to need to trust me. Oh, and keep Senator Winslow occupied while I play maid of honor. Can you do that?”

“Only if you tell me what you’ve done.”

She laughed and kissed my lips. “Not a chance. You’re going to need to wait and see. We’ll just call it an eye-opening experience.”

“I assure you that I will punish you later.” That meant she was prepared to make a scene of sorts.

“Promises. Promises.” She sidestepped me then winked. “I think it’s time we head inside. But I assure you this will be over within thirty minutes.”

Before we walked inside, I took a deep breath and glanced at the stars.

Wondering what the future could hold for a bastard like me.

CHAPTER 29



*“**T**here’s a natural law of karma that vindictive people, who go out of their way to hurt others, will end up broke and alone.”*

—Sylvester Stallone

Suzannah

There was such a thing as karma. Bad karma to be exact.

That’s what I’d believed my entire life anyway, only I’d been certain that would happen to my father. In a way it had, but perhaps he’d learned before it was too late what was most important.

Family.

Or maybe I was the one who’d been given that gift. Whatever the case, I couldn’t allow my family to be railroaded into destruction. That wasn’t what I was made of. It was something I’d realized by being around Kendrick. Those closest to me would call me crazy, including my girlfriends who’d heard me bitching about my family over the years. But if I was crazy, then so be it. To me, it felt like I’d found my center, at least to a point.

I wanted more out of life. I was finished running away from who and what I was. Sadly, what I remained clueless about was whether I could combine my business aspirations with

being involved with a dangerous, ruthless man running an empire of his own. Could we combine forces? Maybe. Maybe not. It would all depend on how my father and brother reacted over the course of the next hour or so.

Yep. I wanted the whole thing, including the white picket fence and all. Did that make me a sappy sucker? I would wear it proudly.

As my fingers disengaged from Kendrick's, I could hear a slight growl erupting from his throat and it sent shivers down my spine. Then I headed for the happy couple who stood arm in arm, although I sensed a tenseness in my brother that was a bit more unusual. I'd learned how to be conniving from the best, my father a master of bravado and sophistication wrapped around a dazzling hint of evil.

I winked at my sister, who had a smug look on her face on purpose. Then I threw a rather stern look in my brother's direction before squeezing Ashley's arm, whispering in her ear, "Are you excited about entering into the family?"

"Absolutely. Just imagine the damage we can cause." Her laughter was perfectly polished. If only it weren't as fake as her boobs. I noticed Kendrick was actively engaged with Ashley's father. From what I could tell, their conversation was lively. However, my handsome man constantly searched for my whereabouts.

"Well, you know what they say. Things can often change on a dime."

Ashley narrowed her eyes, a hint of nervousness sparking her twinkling eyes.

Good.

She should be nervous.

I moved toward my sister, giving her a hug.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" she asked. "Is Steinbeck okay?"

"I think he's relieved," I told her quietly. "He didn't like the arrangement any more than I had with the guy Daddy set me

up with. I hadn't realized just how manipulative my father had been with his firstborn and heir to the throne."

She laughed. "I could have told you that. If you'd listened to me. Are you staying in town, big sister?"

"Yeah, although I need to end my life in Atlanta. That might take a little time." I couldn't help myself but to glance toward Kendrick. The look in the man's eyes was positively thrilling, my pussy throbbing almost immediately. When I gave him a slight nod, he broke off the conversation, slowly headed in my direction.

"Kendrick is the perfect man for you. Strong. Handsome. To coin a sappy phrase, he completes you."

Serena's words made me blush. Yes, he did. Then why did I think it in my best interest to nullify the deal? I mean, it wasn't really legal anyway. There was nothing holding us together except for our scheming plan.

And the most insatiable passion possible.

My mouth was suddenly dry as butterflies swarmed my stomach. Just being near the man made me lightheaded.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family. It's time to continue with our celebration." My father was beaming, but at least this time, I knew what was behind the twinkle in his eyes.

Evil thoughts rushed through me as my father ushered everyone into the private dining room. Kendrick took my arm, leading me to the assigned places at our table. As soon as we were seated, two waiters entered the room, filling sparkling flutes with expensive champagne.

My father remained on his feet, giving a short presentation about why we were there. Then he immediately turned the moment over to me. As I rose to my feet, I glanced at Steinbeck, who said something to Ashley before scooting back his chair.

"Tonight is about the celebration of family," I started. "It was something I didn't appreciate or understand very well growing up. My dear brother and I weren't close, always combative in everything we did. While we competed in school, with sports,

for our parents' attention and vying to be the top dog in a company my father built from the ground up, we forgot how important family truly was. It took a mystery man on a plane to remind me of that."

There were several murmurs from the groomsmen and other bridesmaids, who sadly had no idea what was about to occur. Then I continued.

"The Warrington family has always been powerful and unfortunately, that placed a target on our backs. We were fair game for our enemies to try and bring us to destruction. When they couldn't do it through typical methods, they resorted to more nefarious ones, including pitting us against one another. And it almost worked." I threw a sly look to Steinbeck who rose from his chair. "But it didn't."

"What is going on?" Ashley asked as she lifted her head, immediately searching her father's eyes. Senator Winslow was already furious, as if he knew the hammer was about to come down.

"Dear brother of mine. Will you do the honors?" I continued.

"Certainly, fabulous sister. I will be happy to. Unfortunately, there won't be a wedding, although we will continue to party after two of our guests are taken into custody," Steinbeck said and on cue, police officers entered the room. It was good my father was very close with the head of the department. With the evidence Grayson had gathered along with some follow-up from my father, convincing the chief to make a couple of arrests had been easy.

"What the hell is going on?" Senator Winslow demanded as he jerked to his feet, tossing his napkin.

I couldn't help but notice Ashley was on the verge of tears, or so she wanted everyone in the room to believe. Bullshit. She was a master manipulator.

Kendrick tugged on my arm and I sat down. Then he leaned over, wrapping his fingers around my knee and nuzzling against my neck. "What did you do, bad girl of mine?"

“Exactly what you’d do. It would seem you’ve rubbed off on me.”

“Mmm... Maybe that’s not such a good thing.”

“My sister is right,” Steinbeck continued. “We almost lost ourselves in a competition that doesn’t need to exist, fueled by an enemy. Helped by a man my father trusted. How does it feel, Mr. Garrison, to betray an old friend?”

Almost everyone at the table gasped, Jack jerking to his feet. “I did no such thing.”

“I assure you that Steinbeck has proof, Jack. Sit the fuck down. The show’s just beginning,” my father said with absolute authority. Jack had access to information, everything he wanted. He’d also had connections, including back in Kentucky. He’d been the one to convince the DEA that Kendrick was as guilty as his father, putting the heat on him to try to dissuade him from continuing in California.

They didn’t know my fiancé very well. He never backed down from anything.

“That stops today,” Steinbeck continued. “Given my sister was almost killed, the Warrington family can’t go on with this charade.”

It was true that pictures were worth their weight in gold. Seeing Senator Winslow and his daughter over the course of a few months trying to railroad both Steinbeck and our father was disgusting. Ashley had never loved my brother, but I could learn something from her acting skills. She was truly brilliant at faking it.

As the PowerPoint presentation began, I bit my lower lip, tingling from the way Kendrick was stroking my leg. Even the photograph of the senator meeting with the assassin had been included, evidence the police already had.

“You are such a naughty girl,” he whispered a few minutes later.

“Yes, I am. And you love that about me.”

“Baby, I love you for the woman you are inside and out.”

The words were some I'd longed to hear my entire life and as I turned my head, I could tell he was being serious. A single tear slipped past my lashes.

Maybe the future looked bright after all.

* * *

"I can tell you have something else up your sleeve," Kendrick said as he joined me on the terrace of our hotel room. He handed me a glass of wine and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt complete.

It also felt good to be home.

"But I'm not wearing any sleeves," I teased, which prompted him to smack me on the butt.

"You know what I mean." He leaned over the railing, studying the lights of the city. "You now have everything you want including control of your father's company."

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"That means I'm sharing the duties with Steinbeck. We agreed that he'd stay on as CEO."

"You didn't consult your business partner."

"You might have a deal to be the parent company, but the details have yet to be worked out," I told him, purring afterward. "We are still enemies after all. There will need to be attorneys involved and you know how that goes."

"Yes, we'll burn lot of collective funds when we could handle the transaction with a simple handshake."

Even in the moonlight, I could the glint of mischief in his eyes. "I'm appalled you would think that way."

We both laughed. Then a moment of tension settled between us.

“How’s your brother? Holding up?” he asked a few minutes later.

“Steinbeck is a strong man, very much like our father. He also had a strong sense of how the business should change. I think he’ll take us in the right direction after Daddy retires.”

“Is this what you want, Suzannah, vice president of operations?”

“I have neither the drive nor the qualifications to run the company in its entirety. Steinbeck was raised, groomed, shaped, and disciplined into the life and in truth, he loves it. I just never took the time to realize how much so. The hospitality end is where I always wanted to be. To that end, I’ve decided I’m going to move into the villa at our little hotel. I love it there.”

“Our villa, huh?”

I turned toward him, brushing my fingers down his cheek. “That’s the way I look at it. A safe haven after you saved my life.”

“What about the house with the white picket fence?”

“Maybe one day. When I get settled.”

His brow furrowed. “I know you need time, Suzannah.” He reached into his jacket, hesitating before pulling something out. Then he backed away from the railing, placing the glass on the table. “However, we have a deal. Up until now, I’d intended for you to honor it. Period.”

“One forged in anger and the need for revenge.” I was shocked that he was still going to try to hold me to it.

“True.” He tapped the folded papers against his other hand.

“Very true. There’s no need for that any longer. Is there?”

I was shocked when he ripped the contract in half. “You don’t want us to remain in business together.”

“Not like this.”

There was an edge to his voice I hadn’t expected. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I think you’ve said plenty. Don’t you?”

Oh, my God. Once an asshole, always an asshole. “Does that mean you’d like your ring back?”

“Hell, yes. I spent a lot of money on it. We were just using each other.”

I was so floored I had no idea what to say, shaking when I placed my wine beside his on the table. Then I had to look away, refusing to let him see me teary-eyed. “This was nothing more than a business arrangement to you. Wasn’t it? The passion was just a goddamn perk. You’re right. You used me. My God. I was such an idiot.” I yanked at the ring, shocked my finger was a little swollen. When I finally yanked it off, I threw it at him without thinking that we were several stories in the air.

We both watched in slow motion as it flipped several times, heading for the edge of the terrace.

“Oh, shit,” I hissed and slapped my hand over my mouth.

He reached up like some star baseball player catching a long ball a split second before it turned into a homerun, snatching it in his massive palm. “Oh, shit is right.” Then he pounced on me a split second later, grabbing my left wrist. “Woman, you are a pain in the ass at times. You jump to conclusions. You have a caustic mouth, and you refuse to allow anyone to talk when you’re determined to be right. You need a hard spanking.”

“What are you doing?”

“Taking things into control. Suzannah Lily Warrington, my bratty yet absolutely stunning woman, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Not for business. Not for revenge. But for family and love, honor and respect. Until karma decides that it’s time for us to part?”

I sucked in my breath, snorting at the same time. Then we both laughed even though the tears wouldn’t stop flowing. “No caveats? No codicils in a contract?”

“Oh, there will be rules, my darling. You will surrender to me body and soul.”

After giving him a saucy smile, I waited to answer on purpose.

“Your answer?” he growled, growing impatient. “The words ‘harsh discipline’ come to mind.”

I counted to five and was unable to hold back any longer. “Yes. One hundred percent yes.” After he placed the ring on my finger, I threw my arms around him, capturing his mouth. The taste of him was tangy and delightful, my pussy aching to have his cock nestled inside.

Within seconds, I knew his impatience was increasing. He broke the moment of intimacy, tossing me over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I demanded in a haughty tone.

“Giving you exactly what you deserve.” He paraded me through the small living room into the bedroom of the hotel, humming as he headed for the closet. I couldn’t tell what he was doing other than searching for something. Then he turned on a light by the bed, planting me on my feet. “Remove your clothes.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You heard me.” He wore an evil grin, which sent an array of tingles down my spine.

I chewed on my bottom lip then eased the dress over my head, taking the time to place it over the arm of the chair. When I stood in only my thong, he lifted a single eyebrow. “Fine,” I grumbled, sliding my panties to the floor then kicking out of them.

“On the bed on all fours.”

“Why?”

“Because I told you to do so.”

“You’re mean.”

“You’re right.” His grin widened as I pouted my lips.

But I did as I was told, crawling onto the bed, tossing him a hateful look over my shoulder. That’s when I realized what he’d retrieved. Handcuffs. Oh, my God.

“I can see I’m going to need to provide you with regular discipline.” He wasted no time, shackling one wrist with the cold steel, placing the other part around a rung on the bed. Then he patted my bottom. “Fortunately, I just happened to bring a wooden paddle with me just in case.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t kid about business or rounds of punishment.” He continued to hum, taking his time to yank off his jacket. Then he returned to the closet.

I was mortified, my cheeks already stained bright red. As soon as he pulled out the huge piece of thick wood, I knew for certain my bottom was going to be the color of my favorite lipstick within seconds.

He smacked his hand then nodded. “Yep. This will do nicely.” His grin remained as he walked closer. Then he issued one brutal crack after another, not giving me any time to adjust.

Tears instantly sprang to my eyes, yet I couldn’t help but smile. The man knew how to drive me utterly insane with need. Even the sound was enticing, hard wood slapping against my bottom. Who knew harsh spankings could be so sexy?

With every hard strike, every touch of his fingers, I fell deeper into a peaceful bliss. I was lucky in that I had everything I’d ever wanted in my life.

The wonderful job I’d dreamt about.

A family I couldn’t wait to learn more about.

And the man of my dreams. All because of the Mile High Club.

It was something I’d highly recommend.

CHAPTER 30



*O*ne week later...
Kendrick

“Are you certain you don’t want me to come in with you?”

I exhaled as I pulled into the parking lot, throwing the gear into park. Then I turned my head toward Suzannah. I was still marveling in her beauty. She was even more beautiful than she’d been before, the woman positively radiant. We’d spent the week together handling aspects of business and getting to know each other better. I had to say, they’d been some of the most memorable days I’d ever experienced.

She’d also spent time with her mother and sister, learning to tolerate her mother more than she’d originally wanted to. Then her mother had nearly driven her crazy talking about our upcoming wedding.

Little did the woman know we had plans on eloping to a tropical island.

“This is something I need to do, ending a chapter.”

“I understand. I’ll try and be a good girl while you’re gone.”

“You know what happens if you don’t. Perhaps I should handcuff you to the steering wheel.”

“That won’t keep me from getting away. You forget how resourceful I am.”

After throwing open the door, I cut the engine and snagged the keys. “You’re right. How silly of me.”

“We need to work on our trust issues,” she cooed. I sensed she noticed the weapon in my holster, which up until today I hadn’t carried. There was no need to disguise who I was or the family I’d come from. Her father had been forthcoming over the course of several meetings, providing details of how merciless he’d been over the years.

He and my father should have remained friends. They were very much alike. I was happy to see Suzannah had allowed herself to get closer to him, although they’d never be bosom buddies.

We were building a form of Camelot. After several discussions and a fair share of arguments, a course had been tentatively laid out about shifting our combined businesses into the future.

And into very legal endeavors. It would seem I was headed toward becoming a law-abiding citizen.

All because I’d taken a commercial flight.

I chuckled and closed the door, staring at the entrance to the jewelry store. Talking with Carlos would be difficult, possibly even dangerous. Enough so, I’d instructed Grayson to follow us to the location. I glanced over my shoulder before heading inside. He remained in position, ready to react if anything out of the ordinary occurred.

Carlos was behind the counter with a customer, but I sensed sadness in the man when he lifted his head.

I glanced at the various cases, admiring his work. This would be the last time I was in his company. It would be the best for both of us, but I would always value his training and his friendship. Through Suzannah’s help, I’d realized that my life had been two-dimensional. While the bloodshed had seemed normal, now I knew better. I’d tasted the land of the living and needed more.

That meant cutting old ties. Hopefully, the man allowed me to walk away. If not, my soldiers would step in.

As he finished up his business, I thought about the original deal made with the vixen who remained in my car. The truth was I'd enjoyed it, but the possibilities of the future were so much better.

After the customer left, Carlos locked the door behind the man, sauntering toward me more slowly than he normally would. "I wondered when you'd stop by. Come. We'll have a drink together."

"Sadly, I don't think this is a time for celebration, Carlos, especially given you're mourning the loss of your other son and grandson. Yes?"

He lifted his head, studying my eyes. Then he smiled. "The woman made you soft. It's what I suspected."

"You were testing me. I'm curious as to why. As far as the woman, Suzannah allowed me to view the world entirely differently. And to show me what's most important. Just as your beautiful wife did for you."

"Yes, well, my wife is not doing very well as you might imagine. Her despair is thick with hate."

"Only you can decide to change that, Carlos, by telling her the truth. That's something else I learned the hard way. Lies and deceit will only bring tragedy."

"You want me to tell the woman who bore my children that her husband hired someone to kill his only remaining son? That would crush her."

"As I said, I learned a very valuable lesson over the last month or so. Truth is more important than the need for vengeance. I wasted far too much of my life exacting revenge for other people, including my father. Including you. When it came time to seek revenge for myself, I learned it was for all the wrong reasons. I almost destroyed the best thing that's ever happened to me because of it." I could tell he was searching my eyes, trying to figure out if I knew what he'd done. Then a spark in them brought a strange smile to his face.

"You're a wise man, just like your father, Kendrick. Perhaps more so."

“I’d like to think so, but life has a way of challenging our beliefs. Doesn’t it? What happened? Diego is dead. Isn’t he?”

He laughed. “Yes, he is dead.”

“You wanted to throw me off so you concocted a story.”

“I wanted you to leave it alone. That’s what your father wanted. He didn’t want you or your mother to know.”

“That’s why you told him a favor would need to be paid. Jesus.”

“You were the only one I could stand the thought of ending my son’s life. I regretted the moment I told you to do it.”

“Yet you tested me.”

“And I wanted you to fail,” Carlos said. “God help me for what I’ve done.”

“God can’t help you now.” The quiet settling between us was worse than it had ever been.

“Your father came to me six months ago asking me to end his life. As you might imagine, I laughed in his face. Then he told me why. I still said no, reminding him that any form of suicide was against God and a mortal sin. He laughed of course given our professions. But he realized what I was telling him. That he needed to think about what he was saying. So he did. Then he returned two months ago, letting me know his cancer was inoperable, begging me to end his life with respect and honor. As has happened in many countries over the years.”

“Yes, the unwritten rule that no man in a leadership role would be seen wasting away to illness or disease, instead choosing to go out in a blaze of glory.”

“He told you.”

“He said that’s how our grandfather died, choosing when and how. It didn’t dawn on me that he’d take the same path. Then again, he hadn’t told me he was dying. I’m curious as to why Diego didn’t follow that path.”

“Diego was an evil man, believing he was the devil reincarnated. Your father knew otherwise. He didn’t want you

or Marcus to know how sick he was. You know how much pride your father had.”

“So you agreed.”

Carlos smiled. “I didn’t tell him one way or the other. I also didn’t take his request lightly.”

“Why hire Gunner?”

“Because he hated your father and I allowed that hatred to be used. I’m an old man. I have no desire for additional bloodshed. I figured you’d find out it was Gunner and that would be that. I had no idea the situation would spiral out of control.”

“It did because you refused to do it yourself.”

“I’m a brutal man, Kendrick. You know that better than anyone. However, killing the godfather of my children wasn’t something I could do.”

I hadn’t known my father had been asked to be his children’s godfather. I guess I had a lot to learn about my father and his legacy. That wouldn’t continue when Suzannah and I had children. I turned my head. I was thinking seriously about bringing children into my world. She had influenced me. “He did his job, but he almost killed Marcus in the process.”

“I heard and for that I’m terribly sorry. You never send a boy to do a man’s job.”

We looked at each other for some time. Then I headed toward the door. “You have a beautiful grandson. Perhaps someday you can find your way back to each other. In the meantime, let it go. Do you hear what I’m saying? An eye for an eye. It’s done.”

“He’s alive.”

“My choice and one I do not regret. However, you will leave him alone. If you do not, I will return.”

He issued a single nod of respect. I yanked out my sunglasses before unlocking and opening the door. As the bright sun cascaded across the convertible, I felt as if this was the beginning of the rest of my life.

And I couldn't wait to get on with it.

* * *

Three weeks later

Just outside Louisville, Kentucky

“What are you doing? The bumps in the road are going to kill me.”

I grinned as I glanced into the rearview mirror. I'd forced her to lie down in the backseat, promising to punish her if she dared raise her head. She'd almost freaked when I'd suggested a blindfold, threatening to take a serrated knife to my gut. Somehow, I'd believed her.

Bringing her home had been another cathartic event, my mother immediately embracing her as if a long-lost daughter.

We would split our time between California and Kentucky in our combined effort of running the businesses. My bride to be would also handle our wineries here in thoroughbred country. Splitting our time would allow us to enjoy two different lifestyles.

It was time to reveal the one in my hometown. “Shush. We're almost to our destination.”

“There better be refreshments is all I have to say.”

“Maybe but there's definitely the perfect spot to dole out a round of discipline.” I couldn't help but tease her. And it felt damn good being able to do so.

I pulled down the long gravel driveway and she moaned from the additional bumps in the road. The girl was more than a handful.

“I will get you for this!” she chimed in, as if I needed a reminder she was a naughty vixen in disguise.

I finally pulled to a perfect stopping place, the view of Taylorsville Lake spectacular this time of day. After cutting

the engine, I was surprised she remained quiet and in position. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Uh-huh. Why does that terrify me?”

“We need to work on our trust issues.” I grinned, repeating the same thing she’d said to me. Then I climbed out, lifting the front seat. “You can sit up now and open your eyes.”

She did, giving me a harsh glare. Then something caught her eye as I knew it would, her lovely mouth opening wide. I offered my hand, helping her onto the driveway. When she pressed her hand over her mouth, remaining silent, I was surprised.

I moved behind her, wrapped one arm around her waist. “You don’t like it.”

“What did you do?”

“You mentioned to Paula you wanted a perfect little white house with a turquoise door and shutters. Granted, it’s not that little and I took the liberty of purchasing property with lake access, but it’s as close I could find to what Paula described. Oh, complete with a wraparound front porch and a swing. Which, by the way, will be a perfect setting for all those spankings I’ll need to issue.”

When she said nothing, I tensed. This was unexpected.

“In addition, there’s plenty of room for our little family to grow. Perfect for a puppy or a couple kids.”

She finally pulled away from me, moving to the front porch. I watched as she took the stairs slowly, running her hand on the seat of the swing. She lifted her head and I could see tears streaming down her face. Then like a bolt of lightning, she flew down the stairs, jumping into my arms, her squeal able to light up the entire universe.

“I love you, Kendrick Gregory. You captured my heart.”

As I swung her around in the air, I was able to feel freer than I had my entire life. As if a spell had been broken. As if the darkness had finally faded away.

And in a strange way, I had a feeling my father was looking down on me with pride in his eyes and love in his heart.

Family.

There was nothing like the feeling of being at home.

And very much in love.

The End

AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

The Don

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

The Consigliere

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

The Underboss

When Francesco Arturo helped me escape an unwanted arranged marriage three years ago, I didn't know he was the underboss of the most powerful mafia organization in New York.

I was just an eighteen-year-old virgin on the run, and he was the handsome savior mesmerizing me with eyes the color of the Aegean Sea before carrying me off to his bed to make me his.

He could have taken my innocence that day, but he didn't.

I gave it to him.

But this isn't a fairy tale. When that perfect night came to an end, I was still the daughter of a Chicago crime boss with a father set on marrying her off to whatever vile man paid the most.

Now he's finally found a suitor for me, but there is something the brutal bastard doesn't know.

I already belong to someone else, and he's coming to take me back.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

Cruellest Vow

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Twisted Embrace

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured Innocence

When Mattia DeLuca paid my father handsomely for the right to claim me as his bride, it didn't matter that I wanted nothing to do with my own Cosa Nostra family, let alone someone else's. Long before he put a ring on my finger, my own screams of climax told me I was his forever.

Even when I ran away, hoping to leave my family's mafia world behind, I always knew Mattia would track me down one day and take his belt to my bare ass before taking me to his bed again.

But when he came for me, it wasn't just to punish, ravage, and then wed me.

It was to rescue me.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

Required Surrender

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Demanded Submission

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Compelled Obedience

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

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BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

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King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Depravity

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his

arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Savagery

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Malice

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

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Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

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Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Morally Gray

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch.

Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

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Vicious Intentions

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

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BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Snake

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

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Maverick

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

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BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

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BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK WOLVES SERIES

His to Claim

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

His to Possess

Stone Keeler is a six-foot-four hunk who could win any girl's heart and then make her scream in bed, but as he claimed my quivering body for the first time the look in his eyes was terrifying.

It was dark and savage, as if at any moment he might lose control completely and take me like a beast takes his mate, mounting and rutting me and marking me as his with every brutal climax.

I ran from him... but I couldn't stay away for long.

Not when I belong to him already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

Buy on Amazon

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

Buy on Amazon

ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

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