

The
Burnt
Heart

MAE PIERCE

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Please Read: Content and Trigger Warnings](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. Adelaide](#)

[2. Logan](#)

[3. Adelaide](#)

[4. Briar](#)

[5. Adelaide](#)

[6. Jesse](#)

[7. Jesse](#)

[8. Adelaide](#)

[9. Logan](#)

[10. Logan](#)

[11. Briar](#)

[12. Jesse](#)

[13. Adelaide](#)

[14. Briar](#)

[15. Adelaide](#)

16. Briar

17. Jesse

18. Adelaide

19. Adelaide

20. Adelaide

21. Adelaide

22. Adelaide

23. Adelaide

24. Adelaide

25. Jesse

26. Adelaide

27. Adelaide

28. Adelaide

29. Logan

30. Adelaide

31. Adelaide

32. Adelaide

33. Adelaide

34. Adelaide

35. Jesse

36. Adelaide

37. Adelaide

Six Months Later

Six (More) Months Later

38. Lara

Thank You

Also By.

*To all the readers who search for that gut punch moment
and a grovel that lasts longer than one chapter. I got you.*

*I know I'm not the only twisted reader who likes a good
dash of angst with their HEA.*

*Let's break your heart and glue it back together again, shall
we?*

Please Read: Content and Trigger Warnings

Dear readers,

If you are searching for a lighthearted, warm fuzzy story please reconsider reading this book. The HEA in this story is hard fought and fraught with angst for the majority of the book. This story deals with heavy themes (detailed below) and if you are in a dark place with your mental health this may not be right for you.

If you are triggered by other woman drama or emotional cheating type behavior, this may not be a book you enjoy.

There is OW and OM drama in this book!

The characters in this book are not perfect, they are broken, flawed and in Briar's case, needs a frypan to the head at times. This story has heartbreak, and it will hurt but they work hard to earn their forgiveness.

I love spoilers and I want readers to feel safe so if OW drama or emotional cheating is a trigger, but you are still interested in reading, please see below for more spoiler details. Feel free to reach out and ask me any questions on my social media as well.

Content Warnings:

- Abusive foster parents, foster parent neglect.
- Other man drama (fake dating/no cheating)

- Touch aversion
- Anger management
- Violent intrusive thoughts
- Violence
- Gore
- Death via gun violence, motor vehicle and knives.
- Mutilation
- Scars
- Parent/child physical abuse (historical)
- Stabbing
- Infertility due to injury
- Mention of child sexual assault (historical)
- Attempted sexual assault of MMC (on page)
- Drugging
- Sexually explicit scenes
- Submissive scene with no aftercare
- Cum play
- Femdom
- Orgasm Control/Denial
- Degrading sex talk
- Choking via cock

If you feel something should be added to this list, please email me at: maepierceauthor@outlook.com

SPOILER ** SPOILER ** SPOILER ** SPOILER

The other woman drama occurs between Briar and Nicole.

Briar grew up with Nicole in the foster home and considers her a friend. He confides secrets about his best friends fears and Adelaide's infertility to her. He leans on her emotionally during stressful times, by having dinner with her and venting

about stressful situations. When Adelaide mentions how uncomfortable this makes her feel, he dismisses her feelings.

Briar has never been physically/emotionally attracted to Nicole. He allowed her to cross boundaries because of their past and a secret he holds. When he was younger there was a man in his life who abused him over many years and after this abuse he would spend time with Nicole. She was his shield from Logan and Jesse when they asked questions about why he wasn't acting like himself. But he never considered his relationship with her to be anything but that of a friend. He feels guilty because he used her in the past (as a shield) and this causes him to allow her to cross boundaries with him. He doesn't prefer her company or seek her out over Adelaide or think of her in lieu of Adelaide.

Briar **is** guilty of being willfully obtuse when it comes to Nicole.

There is a moment in the book in which Nicole drugs him and attempts to physically touch him. Briar is 100% an unwilling victim. There is another moment where he is ordered to reenact sexual acts with Nicole but it doesn't progress further than light touches. Both of these instances are horrific for Briar and not something he enjoys at all.

Prologue

Six Years Ago

I'd torn my dress.

A chill breeze gusted over the back of my legs, but I wouldn't stop running. The one thing worse than being called a butter ball by my future fiancé would be for my father's guards to find me with my ass out and face covered with tears. My thighs stung from my hasty escape over the wall. It only bolstered me further into the thick, overgrown depths of the abandoned Calder Place lot.

Fuck you, Raimondo Donato.

My heart had kicked in my chest when he'd strolled in earlier. Long and lithe, like a shadow. His dark brown eyes had bounced around the austere lounge, unimpressed. Raised by a wealthy crime family, the grandeur didn't move him. He'd tucked his phone in the pocket of his sharp suit and rolled his eyes at someone next to him. Perhaps he thought no one would notice him in such a large group. But my father trained me from a young age to notice the smallest details. Everything about my future fiancé was something I digested with a bitter aftertaste. He had many positives. Gorgeous and Italian. It also helped that our marriage would bring a crucial end to the enmity between our two families.

Hope had fluttered in my chest for a moment. Heartbeats tainted by the near silent snort he made when his eyes landed on me. Raimondo understood the lifestyle. I had hoped to bond with him over it. But it was clear he had already made his own assumptions about me. I discreetly tugged on the tight hem of the white lace dress. This hadn't been my first choice, but I'd spilled the wine I had gulped down ten minutes ago.

I'd hoped it would bolster my confidence, but instead, I'd had to careen up the staircase and squeeze into my second choice. The one my grandfather had clicked his tongue at because it highlighted 'certain assets' a little too well. Raimondo's dark eyes dipped to the soft swell of my breasts. His arrogant mask didn't heat. But my cheeks did.

He was unimpressed.

I might have my ample cleavage out, but given the chance, I could destroy this man. I imagined mussing up the coiffed hair and slamming it into the wall. I doubted those muscles had been tested on anything harder than a selfie.

Let's see how arrogant he was when Adelaide Orazio tore him a new asshole. My bitter musings were obliterated when I crashed into what felt like a solid wall. Oxygen blasted out of my lungs as I flew through the air and tumbled onto the ground. My hands flew out to steady myself and pain seared through me as they scraped on rocks hidden in the thick grass. My head spun as I fought to regain my control.

"Fuck me," I whimpered, looking up to see what had knocked me down.

Or rather, *who*.

My hands stung, and tears clouded my vision. A tall, broad man crouched next to me with his hands outstretched. His golden hair flopped over his forehead as he reached out. His wide shoulders curled inwards, as if he was trying to minimize his bulk. Thin blond stubble camouflaged a square jaw. There was an awkwardness to how he held his body, like he couldn't wield it with confidence yet. Timid, despite the striking features, he seemed to search for something, checking his hands furtively.

“I am so sorry,” he apologized, dark lashes hiding his ocean blue, apologetic gaze. “Guys, a little help!” he shouted over his shoulder, and I cringed as two other men appeared, wide eyed and open-mouthed. The first dropped to his knees in front of me with a soft noise. A mop of tight chestnut curls framed a fine-featured, tanned face. His eyes looked like new spring growth, swirling hazel with flecks of gold. He was all limbs and elbows as he took in my scratched hands.

“Jeez Logan, even in the middle of nowhere, you’re taking people out,” he chastised, and cupped my hands. “Are you alright?”

Behind him, the third man hovered on alert. Warm, dark eyes raked over me with none of the timidity or tentativeness of the other two. White teeth peeked from his plump lips as he met my gaze. There was a curious energy emanating from him. Something playful that invited me to let go of my heartache. He ran a hand down his clean-shaven face. As he stared at me, his smile grew wider, a silent encouragement I couldn’t take.

I shook my head, hiccupping on a sob. My insides were ravaged by the offhand comment said by a man who was so beneath me. It was laughable. He hadn’t even waited for my father to greet him before declaring that he wasn’t marrying a *butterball*.

He’d sneered afterward, teeth flashing before the room erupted in chaos. Gun muzzles flashed under a torrent of rising voices. A laugh echoed over the cacophony, someone from his camp. He’d thrown his head back in mirth, dark hair glistening under the low light. My personal guard, Jonah, had slammed his fist into Raimondo’s face. But I didn’t take the time to enjoy the sight of him flailing on the ground. Instead, I fled, choking on harried, humiliated breaths. Raimondo had managed to humiliate me in front of all the important people in my life. Now they would forever see me as a ‘butterball’ who wasn’t good enough for Raimondo Donato. How was I going to show my face again? I wasn’t a product to be moved around, nor a chip to be bargained over. I might have stood opposite that little prick in a virginal lace dress, but that was my one concession to my father. Everything else about this

deal was supposed to be on my terms. I was going to dictate how it went. But I'd stood frozen after he'd insulted me as all the bravado melted away. My weak sneer a front before I turned on my heel and as soon as I was clear, I'd raced for the back of the property. Hiked my leg over the wired wall as I'd run to Calder Place, I needed a few hours to regroup and put myself together.

Instead of managing to pull myself back into one piece, my dress was ripped, make-up smeared, eyes puffy and hands grazed.

"Are you in danger? Do you need help?" hazel eyes spoke again. His fingers whispered across my wrists. The sharp cut of his jaw was tight. Concern melted through his tender touch.

"No, just having a rough day," I replied in a croaky voice. He wrapped his arm around my waist and helped me to my feet.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Can I wash your hands for you? Logan knocked you down pretty hard." The residue of Raimondo's brutal rejection made me tense as he hefted me up. His fingers dug into my skin and nausea bubbled in my stomach. But he made no comment even when I angled to put space between us.

Exhaustion from the day had apparently wiped my usual sense of distrust away because I let him lead me to a gray, weather worn couch. I went to sit, but a noise in the back of his throat caused me to pause. He whipped his jacket off and looped it around my waist. He'd seen my panties. I was too exhausted to muster a blush in response. All I could do was stare numbly at him as he then proceeded to take his shirt and wipe my cheeks, giving me a glimpse of a bronzed, tight stomach.

"My name is Briar." He eased me into the seat. My ass landed on a spring that was pushing up through the thin, lumpy cushion. Awkwardly, I shifted closer to him. I eyed Briar's two friends warily as they loitered in front of us. Running his hand through his choppy blonde hair, the one they'd called Logan shot me an embarrassed smile. He

towered over my seated form, and I had to crane my neck to properly look at him.

“I’m Logan. Sorry for knocking you over,” he apologized again. There was a flash of blue before his gaze dropped to the floor again.

“I’m Jesse,” the last guy butted in, with a brilliant, white-toothed smile. The sports jacket he had on was faded and had two gaping holes at the elbow. He handed Briar a water bottle.

“I’m Adelaide,” I offered.

“This might sting,” Briar whispered, the bottle hovering over my palms. I let him do it, unabashedly staring at him. His cheeks flushed a faint pink under my stark perusal, and he hurried to pour the water. I hissed as it bathed my skin, biting the inside of my cheek as he dabbed with a cloth Logan had pulled from his pocket. As the dirt wiped away, it revealed only a few shallow scratches.

“You want to tell us what had you racing so hard you didn’t see Logan’s massive chest?” Briar whispered, searching my face.

My life is crumbling around me.

That was what I wanted to say. But I had a lifetime of holding my tongue.

“I had a fight with my boyfriend,” I diluted the reality of the situation. “Ex-boyfriend, I should say.”

I shrugged with a watery smile. Something about the way Briar was washing my hands stemmed the spiraling emotions inside me. I managed to snag the fried ends and tuck them away. I pulled my hands back and tucked my feet under my butt. It was then I noticed the dark looks on the boys’ faces. I stiffened, realizing too late how it looked. My dress ripped into pieces, scratches on my skin like someone had sliced their nails into me.

“Point us in his direction, please. I just want to talk to him.” Jesse cracked his knuckles. The lighthearted smile had vanished. He had one silver hoop in his ear, and it glittered

wildly against his dark skin. He flashed his teeth again, but the smile he offered was hungry with violence I recognized.

A laugh cascaded out of me at the incredulity of this situation. The idea of these three kindhearted guys rolling up to take on Raimondo was preposterous. They didn't realize I was more than capable of doing it myself. Given some time to regroup, I would destroy him. I didn't need anyone to do it for me.

"There's no need," I assured them, my chest glowing a little at their immediate protection. "I don't care about him so much as I hate the hit to my reputation."

"Your reputation?" Logan leaned on the nearby tree. It towered over us, its branches covered in vines. Unease flared in my stomach, I needed to change the subject.

"Why are *you* out here?" I asked, wiping the residue of tears off my face, careful to avoid messing with the scrapes. My heart was tender, but lighter than ten minutes ago. They looked shiftily, Jesse blowing a breath to the clear blue sky.

"We're celebrating our emancipation," he said, and shrugged at my quizzical look.

"Foster kids," Briar hurried to add. I didn't miss the slight stiffness that locked Jesse's shoulders and the way Logan's drooped. "The group home we were in is just around the corner. But we've aged out and have to get our own place. We're here saying goodbye. This lot was where we spent a lot of time growing up. It could get chaotic in the home." Briar's cheeks flooded red, and he made an embarrassed noise. "Sorry. I rambled a bit. You don't want to know our life story."

"Well, congratulations? Is that appropriate?" I leaned over to give Briar a little squeeze. He froze in my arms, and I pulled back with a grimace.

"Sorry, I'm a hugger. Should have asked you."

"Don't need to ask me," Jesse chuckled, wrapping his arms around me. Logan lined up behind him with a wink and pulled me into a brief squeeze. Jesse and Briar shared a shell-shocked look that I couldn't decipher. The sun crawled across the sky,

forgotten by the words that sprang up between us. For the first time in a long time, I didn't weigh every word I spoke. I still dissected every minute movement they made. But it was like collecting small, precious treasures. Briar twisted his hands together when he impatiently waited to interject. Jesse cracked his knuckles to diffuse the awkwardness. Logan tugged on his left ear when he considered an answer. They'd all sneaked surreptitious looks at my cleavage, but they hadn't made one gross comment or move that might make me uncomfortable. Honestly, the stroke to my ego was welcome. It wasn't until the light turned golden on the tree trunk that I stretched and stood. Father would be worried sick. I couldn't delay the embarrassing return any longer.

"Thanks for keeping me company. I would have been stuck in my head all afternoon and instead I made three new friends." I smoothed down the now grubby dress, reluctantly.

"Hug it out?" Jesse offered, opening his arms, and I laughed as he bundled me up. I softened in the cradle of his embrace, my high walls obliterated by the disastrous morning. But I didn't bother to erect them again, the drugging warmth from our connection too tantalizing to resist.

"Make sure you put some disinfectant on those scrapes, and if you need someone to help with an ex-boyfriend problem, we're the ones to call." Briar gave me a soft smile. I offered him back his jacket, which he protested. But I knew if I came home with a strange man's clothing tied around my waist, it would send my family berserk.

"Three new friends who can definitely use their fists," Logan added with a raised eyebrow. I walked back to the house like I was stepping on clouds. A silly little smile on my face that didn't fade even when father tore strips off me for my reckless behavior.

Three new friends who did not know who I was.

Adelaide



I looked down at my glistening nails. I'd opted for short, sharp tips with an opalescent sheen that I thought would go well with an engagement ring. How foolishly optimistic I'd been.

"Adelaide?" Jesse repeated my name, sounding concerned. "Did you hear what I said?"

Swallowing didn't budge the lump in my throat, and I choked as it dug into the sides. What could I say to the men I had considered family for the last five years. What words could ease the tightness of my chest. My tongue caught hostage by their duplicity. Jesse leaned forward, his warm gaze hooded as it roamed over me. Briar twisted his hands, a clear sign he wanted to de-escalate, usually preceded by him fleeing the room. My sweet boy detested conflict. Only Logan seemed unaffected. He even looked at his watch, angling his wrist down.

Breaking my heart was clearly cutting into the time they needed to get their new project started. The desire to create their own legacy had ramped up since introducing a new investor who had whipped them into a frenzy of activity. I didn't begrudge the months of late nights for all of them. The ones peppered with distracting phone calls whenever we were together. I hadn't even mentioned when they missed our anniversary dinner last month. I'd waited in the restaurant for

an hour before they told me where they were. When they deigned to return from their work emergency, they didn't apologize or acknowledge the day. Still, I let it go. I had put them through a lot worse. Their lives were always under the threat of danger because of me.

I knew my unusual career brought its own challenges. They'd had to suffer my absence many times, especially when my father's reputation was close to decimation last year. It was only quick thinking, rapid restructuring and a dash of luck that had kept him from being swept up in the police raids. I'd created the Orazio Foundation as a front. A glossy facade to cover up a myriad of darker happenings. But now it was my focus during the revamp of the Orazio reputation. We'd all been busier than ever working on our separate projects.

But I never expected this.

My heart was in stasis, forgetting how to beat. I looked at my nails again, mourning that I would never look at this color without their words echoing in my ears.

We want to break up.

"We love you Adelaide, since we were eighteen years old. But we need to explore ourselves," Jesse added, and I lifted my gaze to him. Hoping he saw the aching chasm gaping in my chest. He flinched, eyes dropping from mine. Coward. Words were still beyond me, stifled under a strangling sob that squeezed my heart. My chest shuddered with uneven breaths. How could they do this to me? Especially knowing how important tomorrow night was.

When Logan had scheduled lunch today, I thought it signaled something else. The next step forward. Foolish, stupid girl. They wanted to break up, to date other people. How could I have missed this? Glaring details leaped out at me, their chewed nails, the dark smudges beneath their eyes. I winced at the evidence I'd willfully disregarded. This moment reminded me of the calm before a bullet was fired. Loaded in the chamber, a split second of silence before chaos.

Then Logan said something that made pain sear through my gut.

“You know, you’re not the girl we fell in love with.” He waved a hand up and down, raising his eyebrows. A chill ran through me, and I jerked upright, as if electrocuted. I heard his words, but I didn’t believe them. He was staring at my body with a cruel tilt to his lips.

“You think I’m too fat for you?” I choked out, closing my stunned mouth with an audible click. Jesse and Briar both turned to look at Logan with horrified expressions.

“What? No, princess, you’re perf—” Jesse hastened to say, making a shushing gesture at Logan.

“Yes,” Logan interrupted, despite Jesse’s widening eyes, “You’ve let yourself go, and we deserve better.” His bright blue eyes froze me. The hurt turned violent in my stomach. But it blistered away under the rising heat of rage. It wasn’t the breakup, or the pitying way in which they were staring at me. Logan’s words jarred against me. Setting off an alarm that cut through the agony.

There was no way in hell that Logan would say he hated my body. Yes, I was curvy, but it had never been something I let rule my life. Not when my hips were the first thing Logan went for, gripping them like handles. They all adored my curves and thickness, but Logan was ravenous. He called me his siren. The only woman whose touch he could endure. The girl he would fall overboard for every time, to slam against the rocks for one tiny taste. For him to suggest this? I didn’t believe it and the flicker of remorse as he looked at his watch again confirmed it for me. There was something going on and I was determined to dig it out. But first, I had to get out of this house. My knees shook as I stood from the lounge. We’d picked out the huge sectional together. White and fluffy like a cloud. I’d thought we’d spend years cuddling there, but I was wrong. I could manage small breaths. Little pants, as I systematically retrieved the hurt feelings and shoved them into a box. Compartmentalizing was a skill I had cultivated since I was a child.

You didn’t grow up the daughter of a crime lord without learning this necessary skill. As I wrenched down my suitcase, I was grateful for it. My mind went blank as I hauled clothing

from my closet. I was only taking things I had bought myself. Another pile I made with clothes the boys had gifted me. I paused longingly at a blue summer dress that Logan had got me when we visited Italy before throwing it on the reject pile.

“Adelaide?” Briar hovered in the doorway. The tension and distance between us made my chest ache. I threw him a cursory glance before returning to the decimation of my closet.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be out of here within the next half hour.” I noted Jesse and even Logan had followed me down and were staring at me wordlessly. I heard Jesse sigh and thump his fist on the door frame.

“No, princess, you stay here, we’ll go somewhere else,” he insisted, and I leveled a scathing glare at him.

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your princess. I’m your fat girlfriend who you’re tired of sharing, right?” As I moved to my lingerie, I was pleased to hear their chorus of chokes. Gone was the green strappy set that Briar had gifted for me. A pang of regret hitting me. It was one of my favorites that he’d bought me for Valentine’s Day. The silk slipped through my hands, tainted forever. What did they gain from this charade? I was busy sifting through my memories to find clues I had missed.

“Sire—Adelaide, stay here, where you’re comfortable. We’re the ones who should go,” Logan coaxed. His voice was low and strained. I couldn’t look at them, I wouldn’t. My eyes rolled to the ceiling. I hid all the savaged parts of my heart, but the pain pressed against its confines. Determined to flood my body and turn me immobile. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing me break.

“Comfortable.” The word tasted bitter as it hit the back of my tongue. “What makes you think I’m comfortable here? I thought this place held our love, like a temple, but it turns out that was a lie. I don’t want to spend another second here. It’s a tomb of dead, rotting hopes and promises.”

My suitcase was close to overflowing. The last item I claimed was the dress bag containing the custom garment I’d designed for the Greenwich Bay Awards Night tomorrow. I

draped it over the bed with a soft sigh. I had been so excited to surprise my men tomorrow. Now that was ruined for me, too. Heat prickled against my back as one of them tried to reach around, to help me close the suitcase.

“Get out.” I spat through my teeth, ashamed of how my stomach quivered at the nearness of someone I had considered my soulmate. I craved their comfort and was met with blinding pain at the realization that it was no longer an option for me. But as I heard their footsteps retreating, I couldn’t help but sob. My fingers tangled in the bedcovers that had once held such joy and contentedness. I steeled my gaze through the haze of tears, hefting my weight onto the suitcase to zip it closed. With trembling fingers, I fished my phone out of my pocket and brought it to my ear.

“Should I say congratulations?” Lara’s voice brimmed with excitement.

“Lara,” I managed, voice thick with hurt.

“Oh my god, Adelaide? What happened?” My best friend switched, hearing the distress through the phone.

“I need somewhere to stay. Can I crash in your spare room?” My begs were raw.

I needed a place to re-group, and plot. I wouldn’t rest until I knew the truth, but first I had to put myself back together. She agreed, and I tugged the suitcase off the bed with a grunt. The slow drag was agony passing through a myriad of memories that suffused this apartment.

Five years together ended in the space of a sentence.

A chance meeting that had changed the trajectory of my life. Yesterday, I would have considered them my greatest blessing. Now it was all tarnished. Nausea churned my stomach as I burst out the front door, desperate to escape the place that had been my haven.

“Alright boss?” Jonah raised an eyebrow. He peeled off the wall, alert, when he noticed the enormous suitcase and dress bag I was carting behind me. I stalked past him to the elevator. My throat contracted for a moment, choking on the words that

wanted to come out. Jonah had been my bodyguard since I was eighteen. He was my shadow, seeing a side of me that barely anyone ever had. That didn't mean I was going to burst into tears in front of him. I hadn't lost my self-discipline that much.

“Change of plans. We're heading to Lara's.” I managed the cool, unaffected facade until Briar burst out of the apartment. He called my name urgently. Jonah made a motion with his hand, as if to stop the elevator doors from closing, and I shook my head. His beefy arm dropped, but it didn't stop Briar from sliding in after us, wheezing.

“Adelaide,” he breathed my name.

I focused on the gray steel of the elevator. The warped reflection of his anguished stare facing me.

“What?” Morbid curiosity controlled my tongue as I looked at the man who had broken my heart. Jonah shuffled in the back, not wanting to be privy to this awkward moment.

“I'm sorry, Adelaide. We never wanted to hurt you like this.” His fingers reached out to me. I jerked away, curling my lip like a rabid wolf. I'd tear off his arm with my teeth rather than accept his pitying touch again.

“What was this supposed to accomplish? Did you chase me down to soothe your conscience?” I dolled each word out like a blow, and it was gratifying to see him flinch. His hazel eyes shuttered, like *he* was the one in pain. I watched the floors light up and begged them to go faster. I needed to get away from him. Briar was my sweetheart, best with words and empathetic to a fault. His nature wouldn't have allowed me to leave upset. His moral compass would have screamed at him to follow me. Give me some misguided solace.

But he couldn't give me the comfort I wanted. Their rejection would forever bruise my heart. No placating words could soothe that hurt.

“I-I don't know.” His hand dropped. “I just couldn't let you leave... without...”

The elevator doors pinged open, and I clicked my tongue in disgust.

“Couldn’t let me leave without giving me one last parting jab?”

Briar tried to stop me from exiting and I dashed his arms away with a snarl.

“That’s not it at all, Adelaide. I love you—” Briar inhaled sharply. Tears pricked my eyes at the betrayal, but also the gall. That he could say those words to me, and they would have the same meaning. My heart wilted against its hard confines. I wouldn’t break.

“Clearly not enough.” I managed, watching him disappear behind the closing elevator door. Color drained from his tanned face with devastation scored through every line. Not the actions of someone who wanted to sow their wild oats.

It only strengthened my theory that everything wasn’t as it seemed.

Logan



The study felt cramped with the three of us jammed inside. But Adelaide had banished us from the bedroom, and I wanted to give her something. At least until we could fix everything. Time passed in slow motion, an eternity of holding our breath. Waiting to see if our harsh words had worked. Jesse had already sent the confirmation off to Harold, but he wanted further proof tomorrow. The Greenwich Bay Awards Night. He wanted to see in person that we'd broken things off with Adelaide, and we weren't just saying it to placate him. The lengths this old man was going to make sure we completed his bizarre stipulation made my stomach simmer with a well-earned unease. But the amount of money he'd offered?

It would get our business off the ground.

When Jesse brought the proposal to us, I balked. Why would I gamble with the love of my life? But I saw the bruises forming on Jesse's face and the desperate fever. Harold had offered an insane amount of money. It would have been easier to take Adelaide's support. But it would never stop the derisive whispers, side glances, and sporadic violence.

Orazio orphans.

The moniker haunted my dreams like invisible shackles. It was the truth. We were three orphans, with nothing and no one in our corner except for Adelaide. She'd already given us

everything. A fact that her goons never let us forget. Not within earshot, of course. Her father was the mastermind, and he always taunted us for not having our own legacy to stand on. Now we'd been given an opportunity to prove we weren't coasting on her coattails. Did I care about the gym as much as Jesse and Briar did? No. But I cared about them, and the future we were building. Adelaide would understand when we explained it all in a few days' time. At least, I hoped she would. She hadn't even slammed the front door when she left. The house already felt disturbingly bereft of our girl. Briar was chewing on his lower lip, his hands jammed in his pockets to stop wringing them.

"I can't—guys—fuck!" He shook his head. His lean frame darted toward the door. He was going after her. Jesse made a mangled noise but didn't stop him.

"If he ruins this..." he trailed off with a curse, playing with the silver stud in his ear. My stomach was churning so hard I had to sit down. I couldn't even think about the possibility of this not working. Because if it didn't? I would have lost the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Adelaide had slammed into me like a steamroller, so much power and speed that she had stolen my breath. Even five years later, I hadn't gotten it back. We'd been unceremoniously kicked out of our foster home. And we were glad about it, even if it meant we had to sleep at Calder Place. Instead of shivering in my threadbare sleeping bag, I had gone to sleep thinking about the beautiful, teary goddess. Her skin had met mine and I hadn't felt the rolling revulsion that always came from someone touching me. My chest had twinged with an inexplicable jealousy when she'd mentioned an ex-boyfriend. I knew the actual story now, but at the time I wanted to swoop in and protect Adelaide.

She didn't need our protection.

She didn't need us at all. Not like we needed her. That was the problem. She'd scooped up three wounded men and helped us start a new life. We'd barely scraped through school and now we had degrees to our name, careers and opportunities. If Adelaide hadn't intervened, it would never have happened.

“This has to work.” Jesse gritted his teeth. This was our last chance. I never would have considered it if we hadn’t tried everything else.

“And if it doesn’t?” I voiced my true fear. “What if Antoni still considers us scum? What if Adelaide doesn’t forgive us?”

Jesse strode over and clamped his hands on my shoulders. There were only three people whose touch I could tolerate, and two of them had just left. The house was silent except for our haggard breathing. Like we had run a marathon, instead of shattering the heart of our girl. Jesse’s eyes glinted sharp and mercurial. A dangerous combination.

“It will work. The old man will have no choice but to give us his blessing. The only thing he recognizes is power and money. If we can get this gym off the ground, I already have investors who are clamoring for it. And if we can snag deals with them? We’re made, Logan. Greenwich Bay has seen nothing like this. We can even use it to make Fostering Futures bigger and better as well.”

My insides didn’t agree, tossing with a violent vehemence. I wanted to believe his vision, an elite boxing gym that would become the epicenter of training and entertainment. He’d always been interested in boxing, and Briar was more than happy stuffed behind a computer crunching numbers. It wasn’t what I wanted, but I also didn’t have a choice. We were all working part time at a gym currently. We’d seen a gap in the market for a place that would provide top services. If everything went according to plan, we would be free of the violence that hung over our head. Our business would finally satisfy Adelaide’s father and he would have to back off. I focused on the aggressive grip of Jesse’s fingers, like he was an anchor in the storm that whipped around us. I couldn’t tamp down the clamoring in my ears, like a thousand warning bells.

“If this doesn’t work, if she doesn’t believe us, we’ve made a horrible mistake.”

Jesse slid aside his collar, revealing the jagged silver scar that nestled in the hollow between his shoulder and neck. The tendon in his throat flexed, and I knew he was remembering

the horrific attack he'd endured. One that had sent him to the hospital.

“What if the next time they don't miss?” He glared. “I'm *never* going to give up Adelaide, which is what they want. They want us running scared. But this is our way to prove we are something on our own, without Adelaide having to flash her credit card or name.”

Desperate creatures made reckless decisions, and we'd been scrappy strays all our lives. Antoni Orazio was right to hate us for his only child. She was intelligent, ruthless, and beautiful. She deserved partners she could be proud of. That would never happen if we didn't take this risk. We had waited years for Antoni to soften toward us. But if anything, he was becoming bolder. We had to do this, and if it meant putting my own creative dreams aside—so be it.

The door creaked open, and Briar slipped around it, dejected. His head ducked low and his limbs moved sluggish as he approached us.

“I'm an idiot.” He tugged on his hair miserably. “Somehow I thought I could convey to her that this wasn't what she thought, that if she waited a day, we would explain it all.”

Jesse made an angry noise.

“Of course, she doesn't want to hear from us. We broke her damn heart. We need to focus on getting that money, otherwise none of this is going to work,” Jesse paced.

“It didn't go how I thought it would,” Briar said, fidgeting with the key Adelaide had obviously left. My gut soured a bit more. She had meant it. She wasn't coming back anytime soon. Little did she know this would all be over in a few more days and we could smooth over the unfortunate need for the dramatic, if fake, break-up. Those warning bells chimed again, and my stomach dropped.

We would fix this. All of it.

“Did you have to make it worse by lying about her weight?” Briar leaned against the desk, looking lost. Not for the first time, I wondered what Harold's motive was. He insisted his

investors were only interested in the appeal of three handsome, single men. It made the prospect of an elite gym more marketable. The way he spoke made my head spin, like he was hiding behind placating words. But Jesse had convinced us both that it was worth the chance. For once in our relationship, we could enjoy each other without worrying that we might get shoved into a white van and taken care of. If Harold pulled his money now, we'd lose everything. And he knew it, hence his pushing for this baffling ask. He didn't have to know that we'd pick up with Adelaide as soon as the ink dried on his signature.

“Harold wanted it done by one. We were running out of time and Adelaide wasn't going to give up easily.”

I had seen her clever mind whirring, snagging all the unsaid tells and piecing them together. We'd gotten good at hiding our bruises over the years, but we couldn't hide our love. That was like trying to shield the sun. Briar chewed his lip harder, and Jesse cracked his knuckles.

“I don't know about that. She barely said a word, didn't even shed a tear.”

Unease made my knees tremble as I raked through the conversation, hoping to unearth some detail that proved him wrong. But he wasn't. Adelaide had been scarily composed, but the pain was clear in her eyes. It had been deep and agonizing, especially when I'd taken the low blow of her looks. My heart squeezed in my chest at the wince she'd made when I'd said those damning words. They couldn't be further from the truth. I had an aversion to touch, only tolerating it from the people I trusted. From the moment she'd careened into me, I'd known she was different. Her touch didn't bring the sensations of bugs crawling over my skin. It was warm, soft, the closest thing to home I had ever known. I was an animal for Adelaide's body. She was Venus, every inch of her screamed sensuality. I often felt the desire to get on my knees and worship her. When she ordered me to do just that, it was like slipping into ecstasy. I'd live on my knees when I spoke to her in a few days. This would be an uncomfortable blip that I could erase with my tongue and cock. There was no way she

could doubt the voracity of my need for her when I begged her to pin me to the bed. Control my pleasure, her long blonde hair tickling over me. It had been way too long. I couldn't remember the last time we'd been together, maybe a few weeks ago. The stress of everything had made days bleed into one. I shook my head, the rock in my stomach feeling heavy.

"Look, in a few days, we'll shower her with gifts and make it up to her. She can kick me in the balls as hard as she likes, if that's what it takes for her to forgive us." I assured myself just as much as them, needing the promise as much as they did, but my gut churned despite it. Jesse looked at his phone again and frowned.

"She's not replying to any of my messages," Jesse admitted, and I had to hold back a growl as he stared at his phone.

"Of course, she's not. She wants nothing to do with us right now. In her eyes, we just dumped her to go see other people. She doesn't know that we still love her dearly, but a dodgy bastard has our balls in a vice, and we need to play dirty to get ahead." I tried, but the frown only deepened on his forehead.

"She'll understand. We're taking a leaf out of the Orazio playbook after all. One hand on the table and one on the gun," Briar said with a tremulous smile, his attempt to joke falling flat in the oppressive silence of the apartment. My fingers twitched in my pocket, but I resisted the urge to text Adelaide. I was the last person she would want to hear from right now.

Everything would be fine. Everything would work out.

It had to be. I couldn't even think of an alternative. Because it meant indulging the screaming horror that boiled in my stomach. That we had made the worst mistake of our lives, and it wouldn't be an easy apology and instant forgiveness.

There was a reason Adelaide was the queen of the Greenwich Bay underworld.

She forgot no transgression.

She hadn't cried because she wasn't mourning, she was plotting how to destroy us.

I would let her crush me beneath her boot, beg her for it even. But I wouldn't let her go.

Adelaide



I was adjusting the strap of my high heels when I heard the bedroom door creak open.

“Oh,” Lara gusted a breath. “This was not what I expected to find in here.”

I looked up at her with a sardonic grin. A sleek column dress hugged her athletic build. Her dark hair gathered into a high ponytail that bounced as she looked me over with an approving nod.

I had thought she was a spy when I first met her. This tall, willowy brunette that kept turning up wherever I was. First in Pilates, then in my favorite cafe. It had been at the height of the crime sweeps through the city and I thought she was trying to get close to me. That she’d been trying to finagle a confession that the police had failed to do. Paranoia had driven me to confront her when we crossed paths at my local park.

She’d been unphased when I darted in front of her and demanded to know what she was doing there. Lara had looked me up and down, wrinkled her button nose and replied.

“Do I know you?”

My bestie had been in her own world so much that she hadn’t even remembered seeing me anywhere. She’d just moved to Greenwich Bay. One extensive background check later and another conveniently timed run in and I gave in. The

universe wanted us to be friends. I was so thankful to her after yesterday's shitshow.

"And what did you expect, Lara?" I asked, knowing exactly what she thought she'd find. Me in the fetal position, face puffy while I mourned the loss of my relationship. I stood, my hands finding my hips as I dared her to speak. She laughed under her breath, the panels on her dress shining in the light. She was my date for the night's event, my dearest friend and safe place after the boys had obliterated me.

"I thought I would get here early so I could peel you up off the floor and show those boys what they were missing." She admitted, and I swept a hand down my body, shimmying to move the myriad of fringes on the mauve dress. Lara clapped her hands and twirled her finger.

"Spin, you look beautiful, the dress is so gorgeous. Especially that fringe," she said, and I obliged, circling on my strappy heels and letting the dress move around me. A layered skirt and cutaway shoulder of long fringes sewn into a racy bodice. My considerable assets pushed together like edible delicacies. The back was low cut, diamante strands grazing my lower back.

Logan was a fan of nineteen twenties flapper girls, a kink I'd discovered after we'd gone to a burlesque show. He'd watched the girls divest themselves of their fringe dresses, eyes hazy. Afterwards, he'd taken me like an animal, mauling every inch of my skin with a hunger I missed. He normally preferred to let me have control of him in the bedroom. So, I'd had this designed as a nod to his proclivities, wondering if we might get a repeat of the same passion. My curves were a weapon in this dress, soft and deadly.

Now he could watch me and know it would never be for him to touch. He could stew in regret for his harsh words. Even if I knew they were only said to secure funding for their business.

Oh yes.

Whatever halfcocked plan they had decided upon had taken me all of five minutes to persuade out of my father. He certainly wasn't about to deny the truth from his daughter. Not

when he owed me for single-handedly saving our family's massacred reputation. I recalled the terse phone call I'd had.

"Father." I stared down at my phone cradled in my lap. I wriggled under the warm cream blanket Lara had tucked me into. She was sitting across from me, disbelief etched on her forehead from what I had confided. She didn't believe my boyfriends would do this either.

"Bambolina, if this is about Crimson Claw, I have it in hand." My father's rough voice sifted through the phone speaker.

"What, no. What about the Crimson Claw?" I was momentarily distracted. It wasn't often we heard about the motorcycle club that ran the southern corridor below Greenwich Bay. They were too busy brawling with their rival club. They had a reputation for hot-headedness. And violence.

"Sightings of them hanging around the fringes. But what was bothering you?" He was used to me calling over the past year with my 'strange requests' but he muttered the nickname with warmth. I'd always been a daddy's girl. Now that mom was no longer with us, we were closer than ever.

"Tell me, Father, did you have anything to do with the unusual discussion I just had with my men?"

He grumbled under his breath, still scandalized by the casual way I claimed three men as my own. It had taken many years for him to recognize that I would not capitulate into the ideal Italian principessa wife. Like my grandmother pretended to be. He had gone from hating Jesse, Logan and Briar to tolerating them, but had never given his express approval. It had been a point of contention, one that I had thought kept them from proposing. They wanted his acceptance, permission, even though I stated I didn't need or want it.

I had only wanted to be theirs.

What society deemed acceptable didn't matter to me. I thought they agreed with me. I'd considered us forever. A fluke fate had written in stone. Fairytales were laced with lies.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” his reply was slow, but his voice betrayed him. The slightest hike at the end, an imperceptible whine. My nostrils had flared, knowing him too well to allow him to lead me astray.

“You do, and you will tell me,” I warned, my fingers clutching the rug around my thighs. Lara scooted down the couch and tangled our fingers, squeezing. Offering her support. I shot her a grateful, if wobbly, smile. I hadn’t allowed myself to process yet, still stuffing my emotions deep down until I had no choice but to break. My mind was racing with a dozen different theories and the weight of them was overwhelming.

“Please bambolina,” he began, sighing harshly.

“Don’t pretend I am a child to be corralled. Tell me what you know,” I hissed, and heard the surprised inhale he made. I was usually a dutiful, respectful daughter. But not this time. I wouldn’t let him get away with playing games when I could bully him into telling the truth.

“Harold Donato. He has a son your age,” he conceded, through his teeth.

Raimondo Donato. Ray, as he liked to be called. ‘Taillight Ray,’ they whispered behind his back.

I sneered, baring my teeth to Lara as I dusted off the murky memory of his brutal rejection. Only son of the rival crime family in Greenwich Bay. I knew him alright; he was a silvery scar that marred my soul. Forgotten but still marked. Pain long wiped away, but not forgotten.

Eighteen, fresh faced and keen. His offhand comment had sent me fleeing over a wire trimmed wall. Right into the arms of my lovers. Deep in the depths of the overgrown lot on Calder Place, we’d crashed into each other. The courses of our lives melding together until Jesse’s fateful words yesterday. What kind of cosmic joke was being played on me to have that man involved in my breakup?

“He’s in a spot of trouble,” I hedged, my eyes focusing on the pulls of the blanket.

“Indeed. And he’s unmarried,” father said. The implications sending a myriad of pings careening through my mind.

Raimondo had flourished under the demise of our fledgling arranged marriage. The idea had fizzled in the face of his rude rejection. But a truce had been called at my insistence, for his disrespect. Our families existed in Greenwich Bay, understanding that anything past the Berwick Tunnel to the bay was Orazio territory. Ray had gone onto establish his reputation as a player, sleeping with anything that moved. With his face, it wasn’t hard, and he showed no signs of settling down. Unfortunately, he had a habit of drinking while driving. They had arrested him at least three times under the influence, and there were persistent rumors that he was behind the deaths of several missing persons.

It seemed he’d gained a proclivity for a certain way of dealing with traitors to the Donato family. But his delightful, creative way of killing others had caught the attention of more than one person and inspired the nickname “Taillight Ray.” He hadn’t been charged with anything, but it was only a matter of time. My spine tingled, and I barked an empty laugh, understanding what was happening. Now the idea of this butter ball was convenient.

“I would never accept him,” the tendons in my throat taut with conviction.

“Harold doesn’t, and he’s desperate,” father warmed to the story. “Would it be so bad? I know you care for those ruffians, but they don’t deserve you. Regardless, this method is better than the initial one I heard he was considering.”

My stomach dropped, and I couldn’t contain the moan that escaped my throat. People were disposable in this ruthless world. Had he intended more drastic methods for the men who had broken my heart? I hadn’t spent six years shielding them from the dangers of my world for them to end up hurt. Even if I hated them right now. Harold Donato needed an image overhaul. His reckless son had strolled too far into the spotlight, just like Antoni Orazio had. If not for me, he might be in prison. Why were my men mixing with the Donatos? Did they even know who they were dealing with? I had told them of

my past with Raimondo but had deliberately kept them apart from this world. Their childhood had been tough enough. I didn't want them to spend the rest of their lives in danger. Or for the pressures to affect them negatively. I had seen what happened to the people this world broke.

"Why didn't you tell me?" My voice cracked.

"I hoped they might resist. I suppose money talks. They certainly used enough of yours." Father sighed, sounding disappointed, which shocked me. He had always disapproved of my men, trying to dissuade me many times. Harold had found their weak spot. There was tension over me being the breadwinner of the family. Out of their own self esteem I had thought, rather than disapproval of the ill-gotten gains of my family legacy. But they'd never indicated they didn't love my strength as a powerful woman.

"Don't pretend you're not gleeful they threw me over. Not that it makes any difference. I won't marry Ray," I sneered, pleased I sounded controlled. Inside I was a tornado. Emotions whirling inside me with flashes of long forgotten memories.

"I know," father hummed. "Believe it or not, I was thinking of you. Harold was desperate enough to risk anything. They didn't know who they were dealing with. You kept them too far apart for them to realize who they were getting into bed with."

I thanked him and hung up, pulling up the timer on my phone. The clock counted down twenty minutes. My iron will faltered and I let the tears fall. The deep wound their words had torn was gaping. The hold I had on each emotion unraveled through my fingers, and I let them overwhelm me. My vision blurred, hands trembled, and my voice shook with rough sobs. Lara peppered me with comfort, but pain had me in its biting grip. Until my timer blared. I jerked out of Lara's warm arms and blinked at the ceiling. With a competence I had built over the years, I locked away the hurt, the betrayal, and the pain. My eyelashes stung as I sucked in a steadying breath. Then I locked the box with a decisive snap. It was put together once more.

Lara looked at me with narrowed eyes and I knew she was wondering what was lurking underneath my skin. Of course, she would expect me to be a mess. It would devastate any other normal person. But I hadn't the luxury of indulging emotions. You learn a second spent blubbering is a second that might endanger your life. I hadn't struggled to push down the press of emotions since I was sixteen years old. I'd hesitated too long and was lucky to escape with my life. This wasn't a life-or-death situation, even though my heart felt like it was being torn from my chest.

Tonight, I had to have ironclad control over myself. I hoped the three wouldn't attend tonight, but something told me they would. In all the drama, my nerves about the Charity Excellence Award had been forgotten. But that was the reason I was going after all. If I won, it would prove I had smoothed the Orazio reputation successfully.

They wouldn't take this away from me.

"I want them to trip over their tongues when they see me." I turned and adjusted my hem in the mirror. "What are my chances, do you think?"

Lara laughed huskily, her eyes flashing with appreciation behind me.

"Absolutely. Your bunch of dolts will drool all night long." She sounded confident. I ran my hands down my body, knowing it was true. They had made the biggest mistake of their lives by playing with my heart. I just had to keep my emotions in check to drive home their stupidity.

"How about a drink?" My lips were stiff as I forced them upwards. "I'm using liquid courage tonight."

I needed more, but a drink would at least help.

Briar



“I can’t wait to get this over with,” Jesse sighed, sprawled over the couch. Dark smudges shadowed his under eyes. I could feel my bags like bruises. Sleep had been elusive for all of us last night. I slid the silver cufflinks into the crisp, midnight blue dress shirt. Logan burst out from the bathroom, combing his hair back with a scowl.

“Where are you going? We need to leave in twenty to get to the awards,” he barked.

“I’m picking Nicole up, I’ll meet you at the awards.” I cocked an eyebrow, slinging my coat jacket over my forearm.

Logan stiffened, letting out a choke of incredulity. He eyed me like I’d grown two heads. Jesse sat up straight, mouth dropped open like he was struggling to find the words to reply.

“What?” I pressed, confused by their reaction.

“Please, tell me you’re joking?” Logan coughed; his fist thumped on his chest. Jesse cradled his head in his hands, seeing the perplexed expression deepen on my face.

“He isn’t.” Jesse moaned. “God help us. Are you kidding me? After everything Adelaide told you about Nicole. You think it’s a good idea to roll up with a girl she’s insecure about? Logan hired escorts. Faceless, nameless girls we can explain away. Girls who could be literal cardboard cutouts for all the interest we have in them. So tomorrow when we

smooth things over, Adelaide will understand. But Nicole? That's personal and insulting."

Logan chested up to me, looking thunderous. My stomach dropped, and I looked to where my phone was ringing, Nicole's number emblazoned across the screen.

"What were you thinking?" Logan said, teeth gnashing.

I threw my hands up, unsure of how to defend myself. My heart thumped with a steadily rising doubt. I hadn't been thinking at all. Nicole was like a comfort blanket. She'd been one of the foster kids we grew up with. In a house stripped of any nurturing love, we clung to each other. I'd broken off contact when we left, wanting to forget everything about that place. But she'd reached out a year ago, and we'd rekindled a friendship. Logan and Jesse had never been close with her, but I had. Nicole was my excuse to bow out from spending time with my inquisitive best friends. The excuse I leaned on when I was too low to get out of bed or I needed to recuperate. I'd used spending time with her to cover my depleted, broken energy. She didn't know how much I'd used her, and guilt raged in me for my duplicity. We were lost kids trying to survive one more day. I felt like I owed Nicole. She'd kept Jesse and Logan from asking too many questions, from digging deeper. I'd used her like a shield. We'd aged out and I'd abandoned her. But I'd been so eager to wipe my life of any reminder, I hadn't even considered her. Being her friend now felt like repaying my karma. Her life had been challenging since she too aged out, and I understood the terror. I'd lucked out meeting Adelaide. Nicole was still alone.

Adelaide had tried hard to befriend Nicole, but my girl could be jealous. I couldn't reveal the truth of why I was indebted to her, it would mean revealing the one thing I had never told anyone. Nicole was my friend, despite what Adelaide thought. She constantly mentioned how Nicole looked at me "like she wanted to suck my dick." More than once, she'd warned me that Nicole wanted to be more than friends with me, I'd laughed it off each time. Adelaide was everything to me, there was nothing that could shake my devotion to her. The moment I'd seen her bursting through the

weeds in Calder Place. Torn, lacy white dress, like an angel falling from the heavens. Her confidence was like tiny lightning bolts on the skin. You couldn't help but be exhilarated and intoxicated by her spark.

“Nicole was with me when you rang about Harold's ultimatum. I told her about his threats, and she offered to be my date. Honestly, I was grateful to have one less thing to think about.”

Jesse muttered under his breath. Rubbing his face like he could erase my comments if he swiped it vigorously enough. Harold wanted proof that we had broken things off with Adelaide, so attending the awards night with dates was his final stipulation. He was going to spread the news about his new investment. Three handsome bachelors were an easy sell, he'd assured us, and we needed all the support we could get. I latched onto Nicole's offer, knowing there was no attraction for me there. Now I regretted my decision, the optics were not ideal. My phone screen lit up again as Nicole continued to ring. Adelaide's twisted expression yesterday impaled my mind. She'd been so cold and hurt, rightly so.

“Adelaide won't see it that way. She'll see you showing up with a girl she'd expressly told you she didn't trust, a day after we told her we wanted to see other people.” Logan rolled his eyes. “Sometimes you are an oblivious idiot.”

Air suspended in my lungs briefly as I pondered Logan's comments. But in the end, I shook off my doubts and left to pick up Nicole. She opened the door with a wide smile, her phone pressed to her ear.

“He's just arrived Alex, I'll talk to you later.” She'd smiled to whoever she was on the phone too. I turned down the offer of a drink. My chest was too busy aching with a weight I couldn't shake. My lungs burnt no matter how much air I sucked in. Adding alcohol to that was not smart. Nicole had dressed in an off the shoulder tangerine colored slip with a slit that showcased one pale, slim leg. Two diamond barrettes pinned back her curly dark hair. They looked real, I wondered how she could afford them. Her one-bedroom apartment was bare of anything but the essentials.

“You look nice.” I offered, wanting to acknowledge the effort she was going to on my behalf. She slid me a warm look of appreciation, brown doe eyes trailing over me as she slid into the passenger side of my car. She reached across, her white nails caressing the length of my arm.

“Thank you, you look very handsome yourself.”

If I didn’t know Nicole better, I would have said she was blushing, her cheeks a dusky pink. But Nicole understood what we were doing, that this was fake. I hadn’t told her exactly why I needed a fake date, and she didn’t press me. It occurred to me she was acting as the shield for me again. Just like she had when we were younger, and I had secrets I needed to hide. It had been easy to fall into our routine from the younger years.

“How is Fostering Futures going?” She asked. When Adelaide started her foundation, she wanted a project that gave back to the community. I’d suggested something that helped teens who were like I had been, and Fostering Futures was the result. I loved the idea of the elite gym, but if we could leave a legacy of helping the foster kids that came after us? That would be my dream.

“Fantastic, I appreciate you volunteering last time.”

“My pleasure. You know I’m always happy too. The only good thing that came out of living in a foster home was my friendship with you.”

Nicole was a constant for me, listening to me vent, and always there when I needed a moment to regroup after the late nights and tension at home. With my hands on the steering wheel, I shot her a thankful smile. She’d been a rock for me, and I appreciated her friendship. She didn’t get on well with Jesse or Logan. Her humor was too sarcastic, and her opinions too pointed for them. In their eyes, she was a relic from a time they wanted to forget. They also judged her based on Adelaide’s concerns, telling me Nicole had designs on me when she was just a friend. My heart raced when we walked through the gilded entrance to the awards night, and Nicole slid her small hand through the crook of my elbow. I fought

the urge to pull away. She was my date, after all. The ballroom was thick with people, and I looked about for a familiar head of golden locks. Jesse slid in beside me, shooting Nicole a narrow look but ignoring her otherwise.

“She’s not here yet,” he muttered, guessing my thoughts.

“You’re allowed to enjoy yourself outside of *her* company, you know.” Nicole clicked her tongue under her breath, fingers tight on my elbow. “Why don’t we get champagne, Bry?”

I shuddered violently, knocking a soft squeak out of Nicole as I collided against her.

“It’s Bry now, is it?” Logan chimed in with a derisive snort, his escort date a step behind him. She was a petite brunette, with plump lips and batting lashes. He waved off her stretching hand with a curled lip and she retreated with a shrug. I shuddered at the nickname, trying to swallow the bile that rose in my throat. Nicole’s lip rose a little, and I reached down to squeeze her hip, hoping to halt the insult I could tell was brewing on her tongue. Her eyes widened at me, and I pulled away as if burned, realizing how intimate the gesture may have seemed.

“Let’s keep it together now. We just have to get through tonight, remember?” I reminded Logan and Jesse, spinning on my heel and stalking over to the bar. Nicole hadn’t let go of my arm, and it throbbed with her unwelcome heat. I didn’t want her close to me. I wanted Adelaide. Nicole was wearing a thick perfume that clung to the inside of my nostrils and muddled my thoughts.

“You know I hate being called Bry.” I reminded Nicole as she waved down a bartender. She ducked her head, chagrined. I knew my preferences were strange. What was so bad about a nickname? But I couldn’t handle it, not when it reminded me of him.

“Sorry, I was trying to lighten the mood. Two tequilas,” Nicole lifted two fingers to the barman, and I protested, closing my mouth as she pinched my forearm.

“If this was a date, I would insist on shots. I’ve always wanted to see what you looked like drunk.”

She winked at me as the bartender placed the two clear shot glasses in front of us.

“This isn’t a date,” I whispered, leaning close in case someone overheard us. Nicole inched closer still, her gentle exhale brushing my face. A soft smile quivered on her lips.

“Let’s just pretend you’re mine tonight. Wouldn’t it be nice not to share for once? To have someone all for yourself and not spread between two others?” She passed me the shot glass and waited for me to respond before she continued. I fought the urge to set her straight. In all honesty, I would share Adelaide with a million men if it meant I got to have a sliver of her time. But Nicole wouldn’t understand. Our relationship was unconventional. She wasn’t the first to dismiss it, thinking I was being cuckolded or brainwashed. Instead of arguing with her, I brought the shot to my lips and threw it back. The burn down my throat had me gritting my teeth and Nicole leaned into me, laughter exploding out of her.

“Oh my god, your face,” she teased, and I couldn’t help but chuckle as the sting faded slowly. Suddenly I felt a pull, my gaze snapping upwards and clashing with the green eyes of my love. They were dark with devastation. Her lower lip wobbled once before all emotions bled away. She was only a handful of steps away from me, but it was like an unbreachable chasm between us. Adelaide looked stunning in a dress that was very much Logan’s fantasy. A tease of soft, white cleavage, framed by her sleek golden hair. I noticed the hint of bags under her eyes, but she looked remarkably unaffected. Her focus left me and latched onto Nicole. Pure, unadulterated rage flickered over her features, and it amplified as she saw Nicole’s hand still hanging off my elbow. Nicole didn’t flinch. Her chin lifted and her eyes narrowed into a possessive glare. Was she leaning into the pretend role, playing the new girlfriend in front of the jealous ex? My stomach tilted on its axis, making the room spin.

“Let’s have another shot, Bry.” Nicole pointedly ignored my girlfriend. I froze, wanting to reassure Adelaide but knowing I

had to play the part of the asshole right now. Nicole raised her hand to my cheek and forcibly turned my focus away. My shoulder was stiff when I presented it to Adelaide. I couldn't speak with regret hogging my throat. Like I was on autopilot, and when Nicole pressed another shot into my hand, I swallowed without thinking. The burn in my throat was nothing on the storm in my heart.

"It's okay, she's gone now." Nicole whispered in my ear. Her hand rubbed dizzying circles on my back.

The back of my neck burned with the desire to look over my shoulder. I knew if I did, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from running to her, from ruining this elaborate plan. She was gone, but was it for good? I couldn't shake the horror that we had made a mistake. We had thrown everything into this desperate bid, but if it didn't work, there would be no coming back from this.

"Don't call me Bry. I'm serious. I hate nicknames." Nicole brushed off my biting tone, bumping her shoulder against mine.

"I got caught in the moment. Thought it might help Addy back off." Nicole explained. It didn't stop the sick, oily taint from spreading in my stomach. I slid onto a stool and tapped the empty shot glass on the sleek, black bar. Wordlessly, asking for another.

"Is that a good idea?" Logan leaned over with his arms crossed next to me. There was a frown on his face.

We both knew it wasn't but the idea of being in the room sober was untenable. The tiny glass mocked me in its innocuousness. Nicole clinked the base of hers against mine with a defiant look at Logan.

"None of this was a good idea." I replied, tossing the tequila down.

Did I mean the alcohol? Or this hare-brained plan I had agreed to? I let the alcohol fuzzy my vision, but nothing could erase the devastation on Adelaide's face. That would brand me forever.

Adelaide



“Keep walking, only a few more steps,” Lara coaxed. She kept a smile plastered on her face as she wove me bodily through the crowds. Her fingers dug into my arm, and I welcomed the sting.

That asshole.

Briar must have known how I would react to seeing him bring *Nicole* as his date. I focused on my breathing, grasping for the rampant hurt that skittered through my veins. I forced it down into a box to be dealt with later. My heart still pounded in my chest and tongue felt thick in my mouth. Perhaps I was wrong, this wasn't a charade my men had planned to appease an investor. Maybe this break up was real. It had been easier to believe they were being led by a man who had ulterior motives. One's that were significantly improved by me being single.

“Why would he bring her?” I muttered, and Lara made a soothing noise, not able to give me a reason.

“Because he's a complete moron who doesn't understand how easily he could lose you,” Lara let go as she delivered me to the bar on the other side of the room. She ordered us a Shiraz and looked around like she was my security detail instead of Jonah, who was lurking about somewhere. I'd spotted Logan and Jesse when I walked in, gratified to see someone clearly hired their dates. I didn't recognize their faces

and while they looked like lovely girls, it was clear they were being paid to be there. They had thousand-mile stares, too busy whispering to each other because Logan and Jesse weren't paying them a lick of attention. Logan had almost combusted on seeing me, which had plumped my bruised ego. His mouth had fallen open, and he'd almost dropped the beer he was holding. Then his throat bobbed as his gaze burned me up, smoldering and possessive. I had shivered, wondering if he might break this charade, snatch me up, and fail at their farce of leaving me. I'd brushed past them without so much as a glance, hoping the rejection stung.

That was before I saw Briar and Nicole. He had been whispering in her ear, laughing and smiling like he hadn't smashed my heart into a million pieces. It was clear they were there together. Nicole had driven that home like a sledgehammer when she'd put her hands all over him.

Bry. He let her call him that?

The small action burned my heart like an inferno. Briar hated nicknames, had a visceral reaction to all pet names the entire time we'd been together. Him letting her call him that hurt. And if this was part of the charade, why would he rub the girl who I'd felt uneasy about in my face? Briar didn't believe me, but I'd walked in on them once, late at night, when he'd messaged to say he was working late at the twenty-four-hour gym they used to all work at. I'd delivered him sushi and had found Nicole perched up on the reception desk while he typed away on his laptop. She'd been feeding him dumplings, holding out her chopsticks and letting him nibble off them. Of course, Nicole jumped off as soon as I arrived, irritated rather than flustered. Why had she been there? I'd asked as soon as she cleared out. Briar had rubbed his forehead and waved his hand.

"She's just helping Adelaide. I'm working on the projected finances for our business proposal. She knew I was here and thought to drop some food off for me."

End of discussion. His gaze kept drifting back to the excel spreadsheet, and I'd given up trying to get through to him. But it wasn't enough to soothe the blaring intuition that said she

was trouble. I had been welcoming initially. She had grown up with my guys, I wanted to know all about how they were before they met me. Nicole had shut down any effort to be my friend. Her tiny nose would drift up in the air, followed by snide remarks about spoiled, wealthy people. If she knew what I was capable of, she wouldn't be so pointed with her insults. But she was Briar's friend and I let it slide.

She knew I knew. Certain comments and micro expressions flew straight over my guys' heads, even Logan and Jesse, who were determined to dislike her for my sake. I recognized the look in Nicole's eyes when she thought no-one was watching. She loved Briar. But he wouldn't believe me.

And now he was here with her. She'd wasted no time glaring at me like she was staking a claim.

"Forget him. This is your night, babe." Lara clinked her glass against mine. I took a sip, letting the notes of oak sink into my tongue.

"May I offer my congratulations?" A voice cut through my shattered thoughts, and I looked to the side, straightening, as I realized it was Harold Donato. The head of the Donato family was an unassuming man. Tall and wiry, his face deeply creased, framed by thick salt and pepper eyebrows. They inched upwards as he turned a well-practiced smile on me. Behind him lurked his son, Raimondo. The softness of youth erased and hardened into striking sharp lines. Pitch-black hair glinted under the light. A thin smile graced his face, as well practiced as his father. He stepped around Harold and held out his hand. I let it hover in the air for a moment but relented out of curiosity, surprised by the callouses.

"Adelaide Orazio, you are the most beautiful woman in the room," he purred.

Lara snorted under her breath as he pressed a soft kiss to the top of my hand. Harold huffed at being put to the side, but I didn't miss the satisfied gleam in his eyes. I'd long since moved past the embarrassing rejection, simply pleased that our two families could exist in relative peace. This was everything he needed, and it was obvious he felt his plans were going to

bear priceless fruit. The older man stepped forward and pressed a kiss to my hand as well.

“My son speaks the truth, Miss Orazio. You are truly mesmerizing tonight.”

“Mr. Donato, Raimondo, it’s been some time since I’ve seen you.” I answered with a mocking grin. My body and soul were aching from the machinations of this man, and I was unwilling to play his precious pawn. Harold’s lips thinned, like this comment grieved him.

“Too long, and you’ve been a living angel for the Orazio family. The foundation is a wonderful contribution to Greenwich Bay. Where is your father tonight?”

If I didn’t know what he was angling at, I might have basked a bit more. The Orazio Foundation was the only reason my father wasn’t in prison. The new police chief had shaken our relationship with the force in Greenwich Bay. Chief Goldman had replaced someone who had been on our payroll. Slowly, all our bought police had been foisted out, and I knew it was only a matter of time before they turned their eyes on the cause of their corruption. Quietly, I had worked to better conceal any illegal activities and turn the focus on my philanthropic activities. When the inevitable sweep went through, the Orazios were untouchable. Tonight, they nominated me for my charity work. It was almost laughable, except that I thoroughly enjoyed it.

“So kind. My father is floating around here somewhere.” I’d told him to find a quiet place and stay put, not to engage with my guys if they turned up. Now, I was glad I’d given him the warning. I looked at Lara as she touched my arm.

“I need to touch base with Duncan about the project we talked about. Are you sure you want to go ahead with it? I’ll only be a moment,” she assured me, and I waved her away with a false sense of confidence. I wanted to clutch her back, hold her against me like a shield. But I was a big girl. I could handle this myself.

“I’m leaning toward yes, but don’t feel the need to hurry.” A curt nod let her know I was okay, and she reluctantly melted

into the crowd. I couldn't help but look across the room, cursing my weakness. Briar was where I had left him. Jesse and Logan had joined him at the bar, and they were chatting easily together. Nicole was still plastered to Briar's side while the other two dates had taken up stools and were scrolling through their phones. I turned, so I wasn't facing them. Embarrassment shot through me like a full body flush.

"Ahh, I must speak with him. I'll leave you two young ones to catch up. Miss Orazio, a pleasure as always." Harold said, with a coy tilt to his lips. Ray pressed his back against the bar, crossing his long legs in a languid show of confidence. His eyes followed Lara's behind as she wound through the crowd.

"So, how much do you know?" I asked him, enjoying the flare of surprise in his dark eyes.

"No pleasantries, Adelaide?" he drawled, and I arched an eyebrow at him.

"Last time we spoke you declared me a butterball in front of all those I loved and respected. Forgive me if I am not inclined to reminisce with you."

Ray winced and took a sip of his drink. He tapped the side of it with his finger, his silver rings making a tinkling sound.

"See, I told dear papa that you would not forgive me for that. I'm under strict instructions to charm you tonight. Apparently, he's paved the way for me to woo you. For what purpose? Not for me to know. I assume that should I be successful in seducing you, he will give me more information."

His tone was brutally honest, and he shrugged at the flicker of amusement that tugged at my lips. Casually discussing how Harold had systematically dismantled a five-year relationship should have chilled me. But the casual slump in his shoulders told me he didn't know the depths his papa had gone to.

"Don't tell me you aren't privy to what he wants for us. Aren't you the Donato heir?" I chuckled. He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes at me. He snagged a loose strand of hair that had fallen over my shoulder.

“I regret my rash, young self. I hope you know it didn’t have anything to do with you except that you represented a tie I didn’t want. Pops wanted that alliance. He saw the brightness in you and the potential as clear as a comet. If it helps, I’ve been paying for my defiance ever since.” Ray tugged on the lock, my skull hurting a little at the tight grip. “What would the world look like if I had realized my papa was wiser than I ever would be? I can still remember the look on your face, the complete mortification that my words had created. Your white dress was tantalizing, but you seemed so innocent. I was young and dumb, addicted to the women who fell into my arms in hordes. I was drunk more often than not, but to get married? It seemed like a death sentence to a horny eighteen-year-old.”

My nose wrinkled at the idea of Ray sleeping his way through a veritable feast of women. I didn’t know what to say. If not for him, I wouldn’t have met my guys. My ex’s. If he’d told me this last week, I might have felt smug and safe in the knowledge his dismissal had led me to the greatest and strongest loves of my life. But now? With the pieces of that relationship in crude shards around me, I let myself wonder what marriage would have been like to this man.

“Our families only found peace after you turned me down. If we’d married, it would have been war. I’d have strangled you before the week was out,” I decided. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

Ray flashed me a white-toothed smile.

“Oh, come now. I know you need three cocks to claim you. We could have had a world of fun together. I heard they dumped you, can’t say I’m heartbroken about you being back up for grabs.”

I rolled my eyes at his crudeness, used to being ridiculed for my relationship. He continued.

“But if you must know, papa hasn’t announced a succession plan yet. I have a cousin who is of age and very capable, as well as a myriad of others who could step up into my place. I meant what I said to you. The only worth he ever saw for me

was to marry you. Being the only true blood son of Harold Donato doesn't mean much, not with my unfortunate notoriety. We can't all be angels leeching out the darkness of damaged men like you, Adelaide."

I sucked in a surprised breath. Ray wasn't the heir. Or was this another trick? Trying to garner sympathy while they manipulated me into their grand plans. He'd mentioned his reputation which I knew I could assist him with. There was a long history of enmity between our families, but even we needed to combine our efforts against the authorities. I didn't have much time to ponder as Ray pressed his body far too close, lips grazing my ear. His words stopped me from kneeing his groin.

"Don't look now, but one of your goons is approaching. What say we continue this conversation on the dancefloor and waylay him?"

My heart leaped. Was it Briar? Coming to apologize for rubbing Nicole in my face? I looked up and sagged a little. It was Logan. He was plowing his way through the crowd with a determined stride to his gait. I snaked my hand down Ray's arm and entwined our fingers. Tearing my face away from the jealousy in Logan's eyes. I pulled Ray behind me to the dance floor. He didn't argue, letting one hand curl around my waist as he took back control and forced us to move in tandem. Had I been any other woman the closeness to his spectacular body may have roused me, but I was numb to other men. Three others had ruined me, and I was only just understanding the extent of their conquest. Ray fondled the tassels on my sleeve before gripping my hip again.

"This dress is something else," he murmured, spinning me around so it moved like a wave. "I must thank your exes after this. I doubt you'd have let me within ten feet of you otherwise."

"Don't you dare." A laugh escaped me, and I tried to stifle it. "Or do. I hope it's agony for them. They deserve it for falling for whatever leverage your papa has over them."

Ray reared back. His dark eyebrows arched high on his forehead.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Ray questioned, looking around the room to see where Harold was. His watchful eyes glinted from the back of the room with a small smile on his face.

“He’s the reason I’m single. For some hare-brained reason my ex’s accepted an offer from him. He only had one stipulation before he handed over an obscene amount of money. They had to break up with me. Why do you suppose he wanted that so badly, *Tail Light Ray*?” I said, digging my nails in. He grunted and narrowed his eyes at me.

“Don’t do that darling, you might excite me. Why would he want you—” realization dawned on Ray’s face, and he slowed to a soft sway on the floor. “I didn’t have anything to do with this, Adelaide.” He rushed to add. I swallowed past the knot that had formed in my throat. What a strange night this was, in the arms of someone who stood to gain so much from me. I wondered what the right step was to take. All I knew was things could never go back to the way they were before. I couldn’t let this stand, and no-one was going to meekly lead me to do their bidding.

“Our families had an unruly past, but that’s changed over the last few years. I don’t blame Harold. He has my respect, even though I might not like being mixed up in it, I understand his actions. I can be just as ruthless, and I intend to be.”

“Do you need a new lover, Adelaide?” Ray smirked, hauling me to his hard chest until my breasts pressed against him. He groaned, “I could learn to share, if that’s what you need.”

I was about to swat him on his perfectly coiffed hair when a choked cough made me look. Logan was standing beside us, glowering. His hands clenched into fists by his side.

“Can I interrupt?” he hissed through gritted teeth, and I knew he had caught Ray’s last comment. Ray’s smirk turned smug, and he ducked his head to whisper in my ear, “you’re welcome,” before releasing me with a longing look.

“*Grazie per la danza, Cara,*” Ray purred, lifting my hand to his mouth for a loud smack of a kiss. He strutted away like a peacock despite the black suit he was wearing. Logan took his place quickly, his fingers digging in where Ray’s had. Like he was trying to press his ownership into my skin again. My stomach swooped. I had always appreciated Logan’s touch, knowing how he espoused it from everyone else. Logan’s clear eyes bore into me, begging me to swim in their oceanic depths. But he’d already drowned me with his words, and I couldn’t let him do it to me a second time.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered. “Did you wear this for me?”

I wrinkled my nose. Heat poured off Logan’s body, and I had to stop myself from pressing against him. Muscle memory. Years of finding solace in his arms, but not anymore.

“Don’t do that.” I hated how strained my voice sounded.

His fingers convulsed on my hip. Remorse flashed over his features, brief but deep. Like my harsh tone had cut him. I hoped it did.

“Do what? Tell the truth?” he shook his head, shoulders rising to his ears.

“A day after telling me the exact opposite? I doubt your date would like it. Why does it matter if I had this dress designed for you? You said plainly that my body wasn’t to your liking anymore.” I huffed, searching the crowd. I spied his pretty date, who was looking around the room, supremely bored.

“Adelaide, I said those words for a good reason. Not the reason you think.” His lips barely moved, and his gaze scanned over my shoulder as if looking for someone. God, they were so terrible at this it was laughable.

“Your ‘investor’ would have seen you, so you can forget being sneaky. You don’t know who you’re dealing with, but go on, comfort me with vague entreaties and see if it works for you.” I snapped; my patience frayed. I stepped back, disentangling our fingers. Logan made a noise, moving toward me like he wanted to haul me against him.

“We just need to get through tonight.” Logan’s hand trembled by his side, clenching and unclenching. We were receiving strange looks now, the tension between us a palpable bubble.

“There is no *we*. Go back to your date.” I whispered harshly, glaring at him. Logan stared at me, lips moving like he wanted to say something.

“She doesn’t matter,” he admitted with a rush. His fingers reached through the fringe on the dress, like he couldn’t help himself. All around us, happy couples moved to the music. My heart cracked. We should have been doing the same, but they’d ruined us. I still couldn’t understand why.

“So why bring her? Why Logan? What did I do to deserve this?”

I couldn’t help pressing to see if I could make his resolve crack. Six years we had known each other, loved each other almost as long. But they’d put it all on the line, for what? A business idea? It made little sense, even knowing that was exactly why they were doing this. My chest was like an open wound, and I wanted to sink into his embrace. The comfort I so sorely needed was in his arms. If only I just leaned in and let it. But he’d slashed me open. This was supposed to be a night to celebrate my hard work, and they’d ruined even that for me. Pain infested me, smearing over everything.

“You deserve much better, Adelaide. You always have.” Logan’s jaw clenched.

“Is that why you interrupted me the second you saw me with someone else? You don’t want me, but no-one else can have me either?” I halted, wanting his answer before I was done with this farce. He flinched under my steady gaze. I knew there was no answer he could give to fix this.

I strode away from him, not waiting for an answer. What could he say to make this right? With Harold watching and holding his money over their heads. I knew they wouldn’t even try, not until they achieved their ridiculous plan. I pressed my hand to my chest, hoping the pressure would cut off the sharp pain that was destroying me.

“Adelaide!” Logan called, following me. A sob rose in my throat, flailing lines of emotion threatening to escape their binds inside me. I couldn’t allow myself to break. I was Adelaide Orazio, born in a dark world and raised, fierce, intelligent and strong. The rising tide of anger propelled me to spin on my heel, fueling me. Anything was better than the black lick of despair that wanted to drag me down under, never to resurface.

“What do you want?” I hissed at him, laughing coldly as I saw Jesse and Briar following, Nicole hot on their heels. I stepped deeper into the darkened hallway, not wanting anyone to see how they were failing at ‘breaking up with me’.

“Adelaide, are you ok?” Jesse’s narrowed gaze cataloged me, searching for the source of my distress. Wasn’t it obvious? It was them. Those who had promised to keep my heart safe and were instead squeezing the life out of it.

“I’m just perfect, Jesse, though I hoped we could get through tonight without this.” I waved my hands at the crowd of them. A shadow cast over me and I saw Jonah block the hallway, his legs wide and imposing. The huge guard was the best deterrent I had. He would at least keep anyone from stumbling over this mess.

“Addy, we just want to make sure you—shit.” Briar lurched forward, words slurred. Nicole caught him, sliding her hand under his coat jacket and helping him find his balance. His bleary eyes blinked, disorientated, like he wasn’t seeing me at all.

“You lost the right to check in on me when you broke up with me. Isn’t this what you wanted? Tonight is mortifying enough without having to endure this push and pull. You say you’re done but keep chasing me around this room. What’s a girl to think?” I made a shooping motion, sagging with relief as they moved to the side. As I passed, Nicole piped up.

“This is for the best Adelaide. They were all miserable with you,” her smile was pitying.

I froze.

“Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jesse growled, whirling on her with a glare.

“So, you don’t regret the fact that Adelaide can’t have children? Even though you always wanted to be a father?” She widened her eyes with surprise. A sharp noise escaped Jesse like he’d been punched in the stomach. Just as a strangled sob hurtled out of me. My arm cradled my lower stomach. I swore I could feel the puckered scars that lay underneath.

“You told her?” I whispered, voice cracking from the pain. Jesse sent a scorching glare to Nicole, who cowered a little.

“I would *never*.” He spat out, like the idea of it curdled on his tongue.

“Is that true, though? Is that the reason you...?” My voice wobbled and I could feel the bank of tears collecting on my lash line. Perhaps I had been wrong about their motives, but I couldn’t think clearly through the soul wrenching agony that destroyed my insides.

Jesse didn’t seem to know what to say, body coiled tight with anger. Logan gripped Jesse’s shoulder, holding him back as he lurched toward me.

“No, no, Adelaide, at the time I was upset. I talked with Logan and Briar about it just—” he stumbled.

“Logan wants to leave Greenwich Bay, but he didn’t feel like he could with your history and legacy here. Now he has the freedom to be a photographer like he dreamed. Briar is sick of sharing you with two other men. He wants a woman he can have fully.” Nicole rubbed her hand over Briar’s chest. His head had drooped to rest on her shoulder, and she gave me a triumphant smile. Briar didn’t say anything, his eyes pressed tight in a grimace.

“That’s not true. I want to travel with all of us,” Logan interrupted, shooting Nicole a deadly look. “None of this is your business.” He added, voice shaking. But she only shrugged, her lips carving upwards. The motion was like a knife to my stomach. A sensation I knew well, but somehow

this was worse. I'd suffered physical pain, but this was unbearable.

Darkness spun around me. How many more lies had they kept from me? Worse was to hear them from a woman I knew I couldn't trust. The tears I'd held at bay crashed forth, streaming down my cheeks in silent misery. Threads of pain paralyzed my body, and I sunk inwards. Words choked in my throat, so I focused on methodically tucking the agony away. I don't know how long I stood there, mute and blinking, while chaos erupted. Voices rose around me, a desperate cacophony. But I wasn't present. Conscious only of a steady buzz in my ear as I willed myself to become numb. I saw Jesse carving our initials into the tree at Calder Place. I felt the heavy, precious weight of Logan's hand in mine, how his face lit at the touch. Even after all these years, each touch was a gift, or it had been. I heard the rumbling hum of Briar's voice as he danced his fingers along the spines in a secondhand bookstore. I tasted wine, sweet spring rain and salt from skin. I slept a thousand nights safe in heavy limbed embraces. The memories blurred as pain threatened to collapse my knees, but I locked them tight. Refusing.

A squeal from a microphone cut through the haze of anguish shrouding me. The announcement that followed sent a jolt of shock through me.

"Congratulations to our Charity Excellence Winner, Adelaide Orazio!"

Everything I had worked so hard on had culminated in this. My family's darkened reputation made glossy and new. I had clawed my family's future back from the brink. My legacy was safe. Could anyone in this room achieve what I had? I doubted it. My gaze cleared, pinned on the men I thought were my soul mates. And the woman who had exposed their duplicity. I knew my worth. Just as I knew what I had to do. Ensure these men knew they were dead to me. My heart shriveled in my chest, poisoned by deceit.

"Jonah," my voice rose, sounding dead. My trusted guard lurked behind me, a stolid warmth I could trust. I looked at the men I had imagined my life with and gave them the first blow.

“These men are not to get close to me. They are a threat to my life. Understood?”

“Perfectly, Miss Orazio,” he replied, becoming my shadow as I stalked away. I ignored the stream of protests that exploded behind me. Pulling my shoulders back, I prepared to obliterate everything I had once held dear.

Jesse



“If you stand next to me a second longer, I will tear your hair out,” I hissed to Nicole. Her eyes widened in alarm as she blubbered onto Briar’s shoulder. How had everything gone so horribly wrong? Bile seared up the column of my throat. Nicole was whispering in Briar’s ear, but he didn’t respond. How could he, given the state he was in? His face was an alarming shade of green.

“You heard him. Get out of here before we destroy you,” Logan swore, yanking Briar over to him. Briar moaned and leaned on Logan. The viper had pressed shots into his hands this whole night. Not that he was off the hook, but I couldn’t turn my rage on him yet. I’d never liked Nicole, even in the foster home. She always watched too long and silent like she was calculating and filing away what she observed. Briar explained away my protestations, saying our humor clashed, and she was a sweet, nice girl.

Sweet and nice? More like evil.

With every secret she spoke aloud, my insides crumbled piece by piece. She’d peeled back things that should never have seen the light. She had no right to know anything about them. I wanted to curse Briar for bringing her tonight. Briar who could manage one drink before passing out. His body might be present, but his mind was addled right now. My fists itched to lay him out on the floor, but he wouldn’t even

remember why. Fiery rage surged in me, the burn familiar and welcome.

“Come on, Briar,” Nicole managed, watery and weak. I didn’t believe the tears for a second. Tearing down Adelaide was a win for her. She tugged on Briar’s arm, and I slapped it away, leaning close to her face.

“You’ve done enough snake. Get away from him.”

She must have heard in my tone I was seconds away from ripping her hair out. She heeded the rage bursting out of every pore because she gulped and backed away. Slinking through the crowd like the animal I’d called her. I glared at Briar, who moaned low under his breath. Nicole twisted our private confessions into the most hurtful weapons possible. But she didn’t get that information from nowhere.

Briar must have confessed it to Nicole.

My chest ached sharply, something I knew I had no right to. Some might think it karma, how this all crashed down around us. I sucked in a fortifying breath. Everything had gone to shit. Logan looked at me over Briar’s curls and I knew he was thinking the same as me. He hadn’t been able to stay away from Adelaide, not with her body so lovingly encased in a dress made for him. I didn’t blame him.

As soon as our girl stepped into the room, our plans went up in smoke. Nothing we did could repair the damage that had incurred. When she looked at us with her blank expression, it sent chills down my spine. It was like we were dead in her eyes. My mind raced for a way to put the pieces of our plan back together.

Adelaide was taking the stage, dabbing a tissue to her glistening eyes. Glamorous with her sleek blonde locks dripping over her shoulders. Anyone would attribute the emotion she was showing to the frosted glass award being passed to her. Not because her heart was smashed to bits moments ago. She hefted it into the crook of her arm, turning a wobbly smile on the crowd.

“Thank you so much,” she cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. This is unexpected and I’m so pleased to be here and have the Orazio Foundation recognized for its hard work. First, thanks must go to my wonderful support Lara, who has the biggest heart and a magnificent stash of snacks I know she keeps stocked just for me.” A ripple of laughter coasted through the crowd at her words. “I am making light, but the Orazio Foundation has been a labor of love. It’s been my b-baby. I couldn’t have done this without my wonderful father.” Even from a distance, I could see the hurt swimming in her gaze. I clutched at my collar, struggling to breathe. “This is only the beginning. I want to take this opportunity to announce our next project. It’s always been our goal to support those in need within the community. We want to create a Greenwich Bay to be proud of. Our next project is the revitalization of the vacant lot on Calder Place. We plan to build a community center that caters to our youth. The space has long been an eyesore, overgrown and forgotten. Full of broken promises, devoid of any joy or love. So, we are going to bulldoze over the mess and create a space to be proud of. The younger demographic is our future, and they deserve the best, and it’s time they get it.”

The room erupted in cheers, clapping, and whistling as Adelaide smiled and made her way off the stage. Her gaze found mine like a magnet and I saw the coldness there, like an icpick cracking open my ribs.

It’s full of broken promises, devoid of any joy or love.

“Calder Place?” Logan whispered. He looked dumbfounded, Briar wilted in his hold, lips pursed like he was trying to hold in vomit. Everything Adelaide had mentioned in her speech had been a thinly veiled shot, meant to maim us. It worked, as her words sunk in, my sturdiness faltered and I sagged.

“She wouldn’t.” I shook my head, dazedly. But I watched Adelaide meet Lara and bend to speak in her ear and I knew it was true. The calculated, stony mask on her face was familiar. I’d seen her use it all the time on anyone who dared defy her.

We had gone too far and eviscerated Adelaide, who still didn’t know that we had lied. But to tear down the place where our love had taken root? That was unfathomable.

Adelaide had bought Calder Place many years ago, vowing to keep it just as it was.

It was a dumping ground for people's trash, but to us it was our place. Vines had taken over the trees, and it looked like something out of a fairytale. The large tree in the middle reached its branches like a shield. We saturated every inch of the place in memories. The vision of Adelaide racing through the overgrown plants in her beautiful white lace dress flashed through my mind. It was like life had been on pause until she whirled into our hearts. The lot encapsulated our hopes, our tentative dreams. A burgeoning love that all three of us had felt toward a woman who seemed untouchable. Against all odds, love grew in her heart as well. For all of us. And it had bloomed in Calder Place. Stolen moments I hoarded like treasures. We'd even carved our names in the thick tree trunk, immortalizing a hopeful, passionate love.

If ever there was a place that captured us, it was Calder Place.

And Adelaide had just vowed to raze it to the ground. My chest constricted, and I stifled a wheeze. I couldn't seem to fill my lungs enough to breathe.

"Well, I wasn't sure you'd do it," came a voice from behind me. It took everything in me to face Harold when all I wanted was to sink to the floor. Our charming investor gave us a smile that was all teeth. His hands clasped behind his back, and he raised a bushy eyebrow at Briar's slumped form.

"I expect there will be no delays in sending the rest of your investment," I choked out. A fiery hatred burning through me toward the man in front of me. Misdirected self-loathing. There had been every opportunity for me to renege on his deal. Every step I had taken on behalf of this man had ended in misery. I wished I could put the blame on him, but he hadn't made me keep my secrets. He hadn't even forced my hand. The money he had offered had seemed like a miracle. The only way we could build the future we wanted with Adelaide. Harold hummed, tilting his head. My vision flickered with red hot rage as he clicked his tongue.

“Actually, I’ve decided to go in a different direction. Philanthropy is much better suited to my needs. I’m going to donate the money I offered you to the Orazio Foundation. No hard feelings, boys, it’s just business.”

“W-what?” Logan stuttered; the shocked words almost inaudible over the sounds of people chatting amiably around us. Harold shrugged, his eyes like hard, black beads.

“Do you know who I am?” He rocked on his heels. Briar made a low noise as he descended deeper into his drunken state.

“Of course, we know who you are, Harold Downer. But we signed a contract. You can’t do this to us.”

The crowd parted and I could see the handsome man who had been dancing with Adelaide sidle up next to her. Her face turned up, and she patiently accepted what were obviously effusive compliments. Harold followed my line of sight with a sigh.

“That is my son, Raimondo. I’m glad Adelaide is unencumbered enough to reconnect with him tonight.”

The bright lights were spinning, and I had to press my hand to my stomach to stem the nausea.

“I don’t understand.” Logan shook his head. The immense man looked like he had been whittled down to a shard of glass. Brittle, breakable. Easy to shatter.

“I’m afraid it’s a long story. But I must confess, my name is Harold, but Downer is not my surname. It’s Donato. That must ring a bell, surely.” The older man’s eyes twinkled, and he failed to smother a sardonic grin.

Fingers dug into my arm, so sharp that pain shot through my body. Logan moaned protestations, his weight tumbling into me.

Harold Donato. The head of the Donato crime family. The direct rivals to Adelaide’s empire.

My head whipped toward his son, still looming over Adelaide. Standing lecherously close.

Raimondo Donato, who had almost been her husband.

“H-how? Why?” I couldn’t manage full sentences. White noise was blaring inside my skull.

“The how of it was surprising,” Harold boasted. “I didn’t realize how pampered Adelaide kept you three. But you didn’t recognize me, and I couldn’t let the opportunity pass. Adelaide is the perfect woman, and I need her more than you do. Like I said, it’s business.”

I lunged toward Harold, intent on tearing his throat out with my teeth if I had to. Men in suits converged and muscled me back with ease. Harold tilted his head, like the sight of us breaking down in front of him meant nothing. He never had any intention of giving us the money. It had all been a ruse to make us break Adelaide’s heart. So, his son could swoop in to pick up the pieces?

My thoughts were fragments, broken into unintelligible pieces. There was nothing coherent about the words he’d just spoken. Part of me refused to even consider it because that would mean we had been played. Harold had used us to break the heart of the woman we loved.

“If you love her, let her go with dignity. She’s an Orazio, and she deserves better than three men who don’t have the legacy to match hers.” He had the nerve to nod before presenting his back, as if he hadn’t just gutted us.

The room spun, and the glamorous lights blinded my vision. We’d made a huge mistake. In our desperation to best Antoni Orazio, I’d let another monster take advantage of us.

“I’m going to be sick,” Logan muttered. We looked like mirrors of shock. Harold had turned my world on its axis with his blithe words.

“He tricked me. Tricked us,” My voice croaked as I watched Harold wade through the crowded floor and over to Adelaide. He kissed her cheek and crowed over the award nestled in her arm. This was all my fault; I was the one who he approached. Who fell for his proposal. How could I have been so stupid?

“How are we going to fix this?” Logan grabbed me again, like I somehow had magical answers on how to make this right. Raimondo and his lying father surrounded my girl, blocking her from view.

Like she wasn't even there anymore. Briar made a choking noise, like he was about to empty his stomach. I didn't want to leave, determined to speak with Adelaide and explain myself. I wouldn't let her go, not at Harold's urging. Briar retched again, loud and urgent.

“This isn't over. We need answers from Briar and Adelaide is too angry to hear anything we have to say tonight. We have no choice but to fix this tomorrow.”

Logan's mouth dropped open, aghast. Someone jostled against his shoulder and a grimace crumpled his face.

“You want to leave?”

“Of course not,” I hissed. “I want to storm over there and haul Adelaide over my shoulder. Or lock her in a room until she agrees to forgive us. But Briar is about to hurl, and Adelaide wants to plait our intestines to hang as decor. What do you think we should do?”

Logan's shoulders slumped, and I knew he agreed. As hard as it was, we had to walk away.

Tomorrow, we would make it right.

Jesse



1 Year Ago

“Oh-ho-ho.” One guy belly laughed as he unfolded the letter I’d shoved in my back pocket. “What have we here?”

He snapped open the letter, and I struggled under the weight of his friend pressing down on me. The three had ambushed me while I was out on my morning jog. I’d been carrying the letter to figure out what to do next. The sky was gray and overcast today, and strangely enough, there were no other runners this early in the morning. The three burly men had pulled me off the path, far enough away that no one would hear my cries for help. They crowded me like hyenas bunched together and baying for my blood.

“Give it back,” I shouted, but they shoved my head into the ground again. Dirt wedged between my teeth, and I spat it out, frantic but too late. He passed it off to the third guy with a nod.

“Take a photo of that. It could come in handy.” He strolled over to me, staring down with a calculating smile. “You didn’t listen to me last time. What does Miss Orazio see in you? When you clearly have shit for brains.”

I didn’t know his name, but we were well acquainted. Or at least, his fists were friends with my body. This wasn’t the first time we’d played this game. He hauled me up, and I cried out,

my ribs aching from the heavy stomp of their boots. The metallic tang of iron coated my tongue. I heard a low whistle, and my letter fluttered out of their hands onto the ground. My chest heaved. Now they knew. What would they do?

“I told you last time, just like I told you before that. You’ll never convince me to break up with Adelaide.”

The guard dropped his bottom lip out before shrugging.

“Boss won’t be happy about it, but I guess I’ve got an excuse to beat the shit out of you a little more.” He nodded to the guard behind me. My neck wrenched back, and a sharp sting made me freeze. The guard in front of me smiled. Sadistic fuck.

“We need some incentive, do we? Let’s see how brave a leech you are with a blade against your neck.”

He didn’t give me a chance to respond, balling his meaty fist and sending it straight into my stomach. I groaned, jerking forward, which sent another wave of agony through me. Razor hot pain stole my vision and warmth ran down my chest, seeping into my shirt. The guard cracked his knuckles and raised his eyebrow.

“Ouch, that looks deep. Bet you’re going to tattle on us to your girlfriend now, aren’t you?”

I spat, the red tinged glob seeping into the dirt.

“Fuck you. If Antoni wants me to break up with his daughter, he can beat the shit out of me himself. It’s not happening, no matter what you do to me.”

The guard let out a snort, exchanging sly looks with his two companions. I knew this wasn’t going to be a quick, furtive beating. This one was going to hurt. And as he swung his fist back again, the sharp metal noose of the blade cut me deeper than before. My whole body bruised under their unrelenting punishment.

All because of who I loved. Who I wouldn’t give up. This hadn’t been the first time they’d threatened me, but it was the first time I feared for my life. My body was locked in agony as black bled in, taking me with it.

3 days later

“You missed two of your shifts. What did you expect me to do?” Aaron rolled his eyes, scrolling on his phone. I tamped down the surge of anger that flooded my body, trying not to make sudden movements. “Don’t slouch against the counter, I know you think you’re a hotshot with your pipedream gym idea, but I run a professional business here. I expect my employees to be on time as well as welcoming. If that’s too much to ask, I’ll have to cut down your hours again.”

I adjusted my clothing to reveal the white bandage placed across my neck. Excruciating pain raced through my body, and my nostrils flared as I sucked in a fortifying breath.

“I was in the damn hospital,” I argued, but Aaron flattened his lips with displeasure.

“Put your collar up. We don’t need patrons thinking we encourage violence here. On that note, if I catch you talking to any of the boxers who frequent here again, you will be let go.”

I couldn’t even touch the violence comment because it made me want to throttle his smug expression off his face. If I wasn’t bruised all over, I might have stepped up to him, but right now, it hurt to breathe. Antoni’s guards had done a number on me. They’d left me bleeding and bruised in the park, unconscious. I’d lied and told Adelaide I’d been mugged. I hadn’t felt this impotent since I was a child and was facing off against my foster father. I had always defaulted to defending Briar and Logan, even when I was younger and clearly outmatched. Briar would take everything without complaint, and Logan would freak out if he was touched. It was up to me to protect them and I’d done the best I could. It wasn’t enough, just like now.

“How do you propose I stop them coming to me for advice, then? Because that’s what they were doing. If you offered proper lessons rather than how to polish muscles for Insta you might be more successful,” I bit out, my temper grabbing control of my tongue. My inner fire had led me to boxing, in school the gym teacher had pried me apart from the bullies

who were tormenting Logan and Briar. He'd commented on my right hook as he escorted me to the office, offered to teach me. Boxing had been the only thing I had to look forward to. When you're trapped in a miserable situation, when you can't do anything to help your friends, it's impossible for the emotions not to overflow. Aaron's gaze flicked to the near empty gym with a scowl. He leaned forward and jabbed his finger on the bench.

"You're done. Clear out your locker and leave. You've got five minutes before I make sure your little friends are fired too."

I didn't need to clear out my locker. I kept everything I needed in a bag at my feet. A habit I hadn't broken since living at the foster home. In case I needed to make a quick getaway. My past had taught me to act quick and it had saved me more times than I could count. I swallowed a curse as Aaron sauntered off, the popped collar on his polo shirt like a red flag to a bull. It took immense effort to lean down and grab my backpack. I clutched it in my hand and shuffled toward the door to find a lean, older gentleman holding it open for me.

"Are you alright?" His eyes flashed with concern as I let out a tight gasp. No, I wasn't alright. My father-in-law had beaten the shit out of me. I'd just lost my job, and I still had no way of making my idea a reality. Fat droplets were painting the street, and the drumming sound made me sink deeper. I was going to get soaked walking to the station.

"Yeah, fine," I sighed at the man who was still hovering beside me. A raindrop caught on the shoulder of his dove gray suit, and he shifted closer to me for shelter. I weighed my options. I could call Adelaide, see if she could send someone. But then she would ask why, and I'd have to lie about losing my job, about the extent of my injuries. God, I was such a fuck up. A leech just like those assholes had accused me of. Just once, I wanted to prove I was worthy. I could stand on my own two feet and be proud. Instead, I was hunched over, barely functioning.

"You don't look fine," he side-eyed me.

I grunted, letting my bag plop at my feet so I could wrap an arm around my waist. Every part of me ached right now, including my heart and soul.

“Is there something I can do for you?” My nerve endings were fried.

He ducked his head, the boyish chagrin looking out of place on his weathered face.

“You’re Jesse Stokes, right? I was coming to speak to you.”

I narrowed my gaze, immediately on edge. He held out his hands and laughed softly.

“I realize I’ve caught you at a bad time, but if you have a moment, hear me out. My name is Harold Downer. Do you know who I am?” I shook my head, slumping against the wall slightly. The rain was falling in sheets now. I wasn’t going anywhere for the moment.

“Maybe this is forward of me, but I didn’t get to where I am by not jumping on opportunities. Does the name Augie Black mean anything to you?”

I noted the Patek Phillippe that slid on his wrist before meeting his level gaze again. Of course, I knew who Augie Black was. They projected him to win the featherweight championship. An excellent boxer who I admired. Harold’s smile widened, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I’ve invested in his career. But Greenwich Bay is too small for such a star boxer. He’ll move, just like all the talent does,” I grunted in agreement. It was true. A sad fact, but inevitable. “I heard about your proposal for a new, world-class gym. Boxer focused, high end. Exclusive.” His eyes flashed as I perked up. “It sounds like everything I’m looking for, and I wanted to discuss investment terms with you. Augie could sponsor it and encourage his flock of rookie boxers there. I think it could be something amazing for Greenwich Bay. A legacy builder.”

A legacy builder.

Harold waited, eyes lazily tracking a car that slowed to a stop in front of us. A stately Bentley.

“How about this? Let my driver take you home and, on the way, you listen to my proposal. I want to help you, Jesse. You seem to have a tenacity that so many others are missing, my son included.” He gave me a mocking scowl as he waved me toward the car. The driver had exited and was waiting to escort us with an umbrella.

A legacy builder.

Everything I needed was suddenly right in my grasp. I couldn't believe my luck.

“I'd love that.” My insides bubbled with excitement.

I would not take another beating. Antoni wanted men who were worthy of his daughter, well I was about to create a legacy that would give me that. No longer would I be a leeching orphan, but a successful, capable partner.

We could create something worthy, with our own hands, and he wouldn't ever be able to accuse me of draining Adelaide dry again.

Adelaide



A persistent knocking on my bedroom door pulled me from my fitful sleep. I groaned, tucking my head under the covers in silent rebellion. I knew who it was and why they were here, but I wasn't ready to face reality yet. I felt like I was slowly coming undone at the seams, every shred of my world collapsing around me. How could I possibly get out of bed and pretend that everything was fine when inside I felt like I was drowning?

“Addy? Time to get up girl, you've had a weekend to wallow.” Lara rapped a jaunty tune on the door with her knuckles. I didn't reply, burrowing deeper as the door cracked open. A noise of protest escaped me as a weight dipped into the mattress. The covers jostled out of my iron grip. Lara peered over at me, and I scowled.

“Don't give me that look. You told me explicitly not to let you miss work today. You've had the weekend and I've kept everyone at bay like you asked. But it's time to show those boys they can't beat Adelaide Orazio.”

I tried to wrest the covers back from Lara, but she held onto them with a strength that belied her sympathetic expression. Her eyebrows inched up in silent argument and I relented, flopping back on the bed with a groan. I knew how I must look, but a three way break up and betrayal was enough of an excuse to be a hot mess.

“My current self is intensely angry at my past self.”

“Your past self is a bad bitch, just like your current self is.” Lara brushed a messy strand of hair back from my face. I blew out a breath, muscles groaning as I sat up.

“I don’t know how long I’ll take to wash this off.” By this, I meant the accumulated filth of wallowing in bed for two days.

“Take your time, but you have a visitor and I suggest you dress to impress.”

I froze, my eyes widening comically.

“Tell Jonah to send them away. I don’t want to see them.”

My heart surged against my ribcage. After two days of avoiding them, my three exes were the last people I wanted to see. I had to compose myself first. Eating endless bags of caramel popcorn and watching survival reality shows had done nothing to ease the panic inside me; though now I was sure I could build a shelter and fashion a spear if needed.

“As if I would let them near you,” Lara sniffed, seeming hurt I would even suggest it. “No, it’s a certain dark-haired gentleman, with a smile that could melt off panties.”

“Raimondo,” I sighed. What was he doing here? I rubbed my stomach to ease the flips it was currently doing. He hadn’t waited long to try to swoop in and take advantage of my newly single status.

“Why don’t you get dressed and see what he wants?” Lara suggested, and I pursed my lips. The bed had an indent of my body and I longed to fit myself into it. To forget outside existed. Maybe I could apply for the show *Alone*. I would rather freeze my ass off than deal with another man.

“Can I have my phone back at least?” I asked.

“Don’t be alarmed by the number of notifications you get. I had to turn it off to stop the constant vibrating.” She fished my phone out of her pocket and slapped it into my outstretched hand. “Another thing, do not engage.”

“More words of advice from past Adelaide?” I laughed hollowly, staring at the black screen. Lara shook her head,

wandering over to the door.

“It’s all me. Best friend advice I know you’ll follow.” She shot me a warning look. I heeded her words as the door clicked behind her. Turning on the phone and watching the notifications flood in. It was an overwhelming amount, as if Briar, Jesse and Logan had spent two days continuously calling and texting. I knew they had spent a significant amount of it camped out at the reception of Lara’s apartment building. Well, it was too little, too late. I flung the covers back and showered, scrubbing my skin until it was red raw. My reflection in the mirror was unrecognizable. Dark shadows sunk under bloodshot eyes. It wasn’t often I allowed myself to fall apart. Over the weekend I had let the emotions I’d stuffed down inside of me rise to the surface. Now I started the arduous process of stuffing them back into the box inside me. But as I stared at my reflection, dark thoughts flashed through my mind.

My fist slamming into the glass and the shards slicing through my skin.

I squeezed my eyes tight. This couldn’t be happening to me. A ragged gasp echoed around the tiled bathroom. I hadn’t had a thought like this for years. I grappled with my insides, breathing deep to dislodge the panic. My fingers trembled slightly on the cold counter. Perhaps it was a one off. I latched onto the idea desperately. I’d kept Ray waiting an inordinately long time, and he had made himself comfortable in my absence. Lara was sharing her crossword puzzle with him and his forehead puckered slightly.

“What can I do for you, Raimondo?” I cleared my throat, pouring myself an orange juice. A grateful hum escaped me when I realized it was my favorite brand, Orchard Hearth Juice.

“Thank you. I know I’m particular, but this juice is the only one that tastes fresh.” There was one place in Greenwich Bay that sold this juice, the markets at the Marina. Jesse used to make it his mission to get it for me before it sold out. The kindness of Lara made my heart all gooey.

Lara gave me a perplexed look. Anything she was going to say was interrupted as Ray jolted upright, flashing me a bright, warm smile. There was no tidy suit today, instead he was encased head to toe in black gym gear. Lara raked an unsubtle look down his muscular thighs, giving me a thumbs up behind his back.

“Good morning, Miss Orazio, Charity Excellence Winner, and woman my papa will not shut up about. I believe I insisted you call me Ray.”

“Ray, you wasted no time. I’d appreciate it if we could skip the pleasantries and you tell me specifically why you’re here.” Lara chuckled at my bluntness. Ray’s megawatt smile wavered, but he pushed through with a surprising persistence.

“No pleasantries again?” He tried to draw me in to his irreverent dance. But I was sick of men thinking they could flash a smile my way and get what they wanted. I let the silence stretch out uncomfortably long. Until even Lara shifted in her seat at the sharp awkwardness of it. His smile dulled, and Ray tilted his head.

“You can be quite intimidating. Has anyone told you that? But if you dislike polite conversation so much, I’ll tell you the reason I am here. I need help. My reputation has gained an unruly sheen, and for someone who deals in the shadows, it’s not good for me to have so much notoriety.”

“Taillight Ray,” I supplied for him, enjoying the slight wince he made.

“So, you understand. You were clever enough to flip the image of your family. The Donatos only escaped the raids last year because we called in every favor we had. But now the new Chief, Beck Goldman, is gunning for us. You’ve become untouchable, pristine, and reformed. So, he’s targeting us instead. If I don’t fix my reputation, I’ll be finished.”

“Should you be telling me this?” I tilted my head, more than a little surprised at Ray’s blunt honesty. He tapped his fingers on the island counter, shooting Lara a look, as if he had forgotten she was there.

“You can trust Lara.” I added. Lara had always been good at keeping secrets. She had slipped into my life with relative ease, and while she didn’t know everything about my work, she knew enough. Ray relaxed and continued.

“Papa told me to do anything to get you to agree. *Anything.*” He waggled his eyebrows, but there was a bleakness in his gaze. I had once been prepared to sign my name next to his, for the good of our families. I understood sacrifice, but the prospect of using Ray in the way he was offering made my stomach roil.

“Not interested,” I said firmly. Ray’s posture drooped and he flashed me a weak grin.

“Marriage is off the table. You don’t want my body. But I have something you could use. You’re not interested in dating, and if you were, I doubt I’d make the cut.” Ray gave a self-deprecating bark of laughter. “I’m not entirely brainless, and I imagine you want to show those three exes that you’re fine without them, right? With this face and our shared intimate history? It’s a combination that will drive those idiots wild with jealousy.”

A thrill of anticipation jolted through me. I had frittered away the weekend feeling sorry for myself, but also stoking a formidable fire of rage. My heart had been broken, and I wanted to make them feel the same level of hurt and betrayal. I took a swig of juice while considering the proposition. Ray quickly added his two cents.

“I thought perhaps we could work together on the Calder Place development you announced. As papa explained, he felt more comfortable investing the funds with you than rewarding your exes. It would give me some philanthropic shine and we could sprinkle a few pretend dates in. The public eats up a star-crossed lovers story and it would make it seem like you’ve already moved on.”

Harold Donato had already spilled the news about renegeing on his deal with my men. He’d said he couldn’t support someone who had broken my heart. He spoke these words with such gravity and a gentle shake of his head that if I hadn’t

been so overwhelmingly numb, I would have laughed out loud. It was almost comical considering he had been the one to push for us to separate. Harold Donato considered himself a master manipulator, and we were chess pieces for him to arrange. It worked on Briar, Jesse and Logan. All this pain for nothing. They hadn't even received the money they wanted. The effort he'd made to ensure I was single was alarming, and I itched to unravel his end goal. I could do that better if I kept Ray close. There wasn't anything the old man could do that would surprise me.

"I didn't work tirelessly to create my foundation for you to come in and tack your name to it," I sniffed. Lara caught my eye, jerking a thumb at Ray.

"He has some good points, though." Lara looked him up and down with unabashed scrutiny. Ray accepted the perusal with a wry smile, lifting his shirt to flash a sculpted stomach. "And he is very handsome. The combination of his history and his face would send your boys—" she winced under my sharp look. "Those *idiots* rather, into a frenzy. So, the question is, how petty do you want to be, Adelaide?"

The thought of vengeance warmed my insides as Ray dipped his head in thanks to Lara. I bit my bottom lip in contemplation. How petty could I get? As petty as possible, if I was honest. But I wouldn't risk all the hard work I'd done. The public police sweep on my father, the one where I'd saved his ass, hadn't been a one-time occurrence. Beck Goldman was incorruptible. He had promised to clean up the city and purge all crime from the streets. We might have a golden sheen to our reputation now, but if he dug any deeper, he might find our darker business ventures were still very much in place. I might take the Donato's money, but I wouldn't risk my foundation. But dating him? That might work. I stared at Ray, picking him apart with a methodical focus. He squirmed under my inspection but didn't move or protest.

Ray was handsome, infuriatingly so, and the public enjoyed a pretty face.

He could use some humility. My first order of business would be to investigate his inner circle and weed out anyone

who had loose-lips about matters that should have remained private. Like the fact that he had a penchant for ramming people's disloyalty into the tarmac.

Ray was also a self-proclaimed womanizer. Something easily reformable by pretending to be attached to him.

"I'm in two minds here," I mused aloud. "Trusting you would be foolish. I don't know you, and I certainly don't trust your papa. He thinks I'm useful right now. But when your reputation improves? Will I find myself under your tire?"

I held up a finger as Ray protested, his cheeks flushing.

"I don't like being manipulated. Why would I help him at all when he caused this chaos I'm in?"

Ray tensed, anticipating my refusal as he sat there waiting.

"But I am also a vindictive bitch. I'm proud and the people I trusted mutilated that pride. They didn't have to take the deal with your papa. There were a million other options that could have worked. They wanted a legacy so badly they threw me over for it. Filled with arrogance, they believed a few apologies would fix it. I am petty enough to want to make them pay."

An ache that wouldn't subside radiated out of my chest. I didn't mention the other lies and secrets I'd uncovered. Those I couldn't reconcile. The baby, the moving, and Briar unhappy with our arrangement. Replays of their confessions ran over my mind. I was bleeding internally from the hurtful blindside they'd foisted at me. The vindictive part of me wanted them to be hurting as badly as I was.

"I saw one of your little boyfriends yesterday, ex-boyfriend rather. He was looking like death warmed up."

Ray admitted, looking hopeful. I stiffened, a jolt of agony displacing the juice in my stomach.

"Who?" I asked, weak, despite dodging their calls all weekend. They'd even resorted to phoning Lara until she blocked them.

“Jesse,” Ray said, tapping the bench. “He tracked me down, told me to stay the hell away from you. So, I couldn’t let that stand, you see.” He winked at me. “Not to mention papa is desperate for me to swoop in now that he successfully broke you all up. Faking something between us will enrage those guys and get him off my back.”

I imagined Jesse grappling with his rage, it had served him when he was younger and took on the mantle of protecting his brothers. But his issues weren’t my problem anymore. I motioned with my chin, indicating he could continue. My phone was buzzing insistently in my pocket.

“You don’t owe me anything. But we could work well together, and both get something we want.”

I pushed my juice away, not able to stomach anything else. My exes would be at my work today and I knew we had to talk. The idea of them seeing me moving on so quickly appealed to me. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, methodically checking the myriad of notifications that had popped up. One had my eyebrows bunching together. A clear photo of three motorbikes, cruising down the wharf.

Crimson Claw Riders. What was the notorious motorcycle club doing in the city? I pushed the photo over to Ray. This concerned him as well. He pinched the photo and frowned. Perhaps it was time to work a little closer with him.

“Call your papa. If he’s so eager, he can make time to meet me at my office this morning. I won’t tell him about our plans, but I need to set some boundaries.”

Ray’s face brightened, and his body squirmed in anticipation. I cautioned him with a raised finger.

“I’ll help rehabilitate your reputation. If you help me make those three men, the sorriest they’ve ever been.”

My throat seared with bitterness, but I swallowed the acrid burn. I wanted them to be as brittle and breakable as I was right now.

“Pleased to be in business with you, Adelaide,” Ray smiled.

Logan



The Orazio Foundation was nestled high in a tall, sleek building in downtown Greenwich Bay. Flanked by an accountant and lawyers' offices, all of whom were on Orazios payroll. I let out a sigh, looking up at the glossy windows. The object of our obsession was in there somewhere. An itch I couldn't dispel ran under my skin. Two days. For two days Adelaide had dodged every call, text and effort we'd made to reach her.

To explain.

Short of scaling a secure building, we realized there was nothing we could do but wait. Each second that passed was another deep mark against me. Another minute that my soul mate was hurting, and I couldn't do anything to solve it. Now she was in reach and doubt had stolen my ability to move. I looked at the stately glass entry, my forehead pounding.

"This isn't going to work," I folded my arms. I looked at Jesse and Briar, noting their weariness and knowing I looked the same. It had taken effort to shower this morning, to swallow something other than coffee. We had no choice but to salvage the mess we'd made of everything. Jesse paced on the pavement, throwing his hands up. His lip curled at Briar slightly as he passed by his slumped form pressed against the side of the building.

“We have to try. She can’t avoid seeing us forever,” he argued.

Briar was silent, which was ironic considering how his words had got us in even deeper shit with Adelaide.

He’d been impossible to rouse the night of the awards. A dead weight we had to drag home. He’d woken in the middle of the night and gone straight to retching in the toilet. By the time the early sunlight rays of Saturday had made an appearance, he was nursing a violent hangover. We gave him no mercy, though, or time to recuperate. Pressing him about what Nicole had said to Adelaide. Aside from the few shots he’d started the night with, he had no memory. When we filled him in on the details, he’d crumpled to the floor. Turned pasty white and vomited again.

He admitted he’d confessed to Nicole about the private conversations we’d had. She’d always been a good listening board for him and slipping back into that teenage role had seemed natural. Flimsy excuses. When asked about whether he had gotten sick of our arrangement, like Nicole had alleged. He vehemently denied, looking like a corpse. The realization of what he’d done sank in and sucked the life out of him. It didn’t stop Jesse from planting his fist in Briar’s face. He’d wanted to do more, rage boiling out of him that needed an outlet. I had to haul Jesse off Briar and he’d left in a whirl of fury. To find Ray Donato and pour his anger into threatening him. There was a pit of desperation that churned in my stomach.

Briar looked up from where he had been studiously cataloguing the cracks on the sidewalk. His under eye was puffy and purple. Vision slightly impaired from the swelling. If regret was a physical weight, Briar wore it with silence. His shoulders dragged, face long and tormented. His right eye was glassy, pinned on the bustling street.

Jesse tired of pacing and made for the door. “Let’s go,” he ordered gruffly. His dark skin was ashen, lips chapped from being gnawed on. Briar and I followed, trailing behind, and I scrubbed my hand over my face. Orazio hired men dotted the reception area, recognizable by their militant stance and

almost violent aura. They masqueraded as security. But anyone looking closely would know they would do anything to protect their boss. I had always been grateful Adelaide was so heavily guarded. The offices were a recent addition, something Adelaide had fought hard for. Instead of lurking in the shadows, her foundation was bold. It commanded attention, legitimacy. Her father had conceded as long as she allowed the guards. There was a wordless change in their manner as they recognized us. Openly sneering as we moved toward the receptionist. My skin prickled knowing that news of our breakup had trickled through the ranks so quickly. I guess everyone knew by now how well we'd fucked up. Antoni Orazio had never liked us for his little girl, and he obviously wasted no time in letting everyone know our actions. We stood behind a plain clothed man who was arguing with the receptionist. He fidgeted with a metal badge on the counter.

"I only want to speak with her for a moment," The man said through gritted teeth. Jenny, the receptionist, fluttered wide eyes at him, humming in understanding.

"I hear you, Mister Goldman, but unfortunately Miss Orazio has no availability in her schedule today. Unless this is an official search, in which case I would require paperwork."

"It's Chief." The man ran his fingers through his graying locks, the motion agitated and jerky. "I've simply come to introduce myself," he declared, before muttering under his breath, "to make sure we are both on the same side."

I stiffened, recognizing the name. This was the new police chief. The one who had been lauded with cleaning up cities all down the coast and had made Greenwich Bay his new project. Incorruptible, with a moral compass of steel. He and Adelaide could never work with one another. Unless he wasn't as pristine as his reputation boasted.

"Of course, I can check her schedule. She may have an opening next month?" Jenny poised her fingers over the keyboard, lips spread in a congenial smile.

"No," the chief sighed heavily as he tapped a creased business card on the counter. "Give this to Adelaide Orazio

and have her call me as soon as possible.”

“I-I’m not sure when she’ll be able—” Jenny stuttered, snatching the card up. But Chief Goldman was already halfway to the door, his coat streaming out behind him. A guard brought his phone to his ear and spoke discretely, watching which direction the chief went in.

I gulped, looking at Jenny, whose smile slid off when she recognized us. Jesse pushed through despite the obvious cold welcome.

“Good morning, Jenny, how are you? We were hoping to see Miss Orazio. If you could let her know Jesse, Logan and Briar need to speak to her urgently,” his fingers danced nervously on the counter. My muscles screamed with pent up tension, like they were going to tear in half. Jenny peered through her glasses at us with a slight sniff, judgement obvious in her stare. Normally she would let us straight through, but even we weren’t delusional enough to think we still maintained the same privileges as before. It seemed everyone had formed an opinion about us, and it wasn’t positive. I didn’t blame them, but there was only one person whose opinion I cared about.

“Yes, Miss Orazio advised me you might request a meeting. You’ve got clearance for level ten.” She looked behind her, and two hulking guards peeled themselves off the wall.

“We know the way.” My brow creased as they herded us toward the elevator. One guard lifted his lip in a sneer.

“You’re not special anymore.”

We filtered into the elevator, and I rubbed at a sharp pain in my chest. This situation had morphed into something bigger than our grasp. Spiraling out of control and dismantling parts of my life that I thought were solid. It was like looking around and realizing my life was a paper background, torn into pieces by our actions.

“Everyone knew this would not last. Boss sure isn’t about to let you slink back in without you understanding a few things,” the other one spat down Jesse’s neck. Did he mean Antoni or his fierce daughter? Both could be responsible.

“What would that be?” Jesse asked as Briar twisted his hands. The guards cracked their knuckles in unison.

“You’re going to say your piece, then fuck off back to the sewers where you belong. Miss Orazio is too good for the likes of you. She was the only reason you had any liberties and now she’s rescinded them. If you can’t comply? We’ll be adding to your collection of bruises.”

They snarled wordlessly at Briar, who winced at the floor. The elevator journey was tense as it lurched upwards. I sucked in a deep breath as we piled out into the soft glow of the reception area. Adelaide had wanted it to look moody and elegant. I gazed toward the main wall by habit and slid to a halt. A dismayed choke escaped past my bloodless lips. My photo, the one I had taken of the Orazio’s estate in Italy, was missing. It had been a drone shot I’d taken on our first trip overseas together. Capturing some of the manicured landscape and the sharp cliff, the ocean spanning the horizon. In its place was a colorful abstract. I pressed my hand to my stomach, sure there was a slash across the tender flesh. The picture had been a gift from me for when she’d designed this space. Its absence said more than any words could. Adelaide was a stickler for details. She noticed everything. To systematically wipe such a trace of us from her life filled me with a sense of foreboding.

Over the weekend Briar had tidied the clothes she’d left behind, putting them back into her drawers so it would be neat when she returned. He’d realized all the clothing she’d left had been gifts from one of us. She’d taken nothing we had given her, leaving any favorites if it was something from our hands. Desolation seeped through me, and I sank into a leather armchair, unable to look away from where the intricate artwork lay.

“She’s in a meeting, apparently. She’ll see us when it’s finished,” Briar said, his tone making it obvious he didn’t believe the excuse. Instead, intent on making us sweat. He slumped onto the couch next to me. Jesse remained upright, pacing out his furious energy. I ran my hands through my hair again. The wait accomplished her goal. Each second made me feel that bit smaller. Not an arduous task, as I already despised

myself for how this had all played out. Our two buff babysitters leaned against the wall and glared at us periodically. Eventually, I heard the echo of heels on the tiles and looked up to see Adelaide escorting Mr. Donato out.

Her delicate hand lay lightly on his arm, her beauty almost too much to bear that my heart paused in my chest. She walked with confidence toward us, her ponytail swaying behind her. Her tight-fitting dress displayed her gorgeous curves gracefully. It was a modest number that covered her neck, but still managed to be elegant and sensual. Lara poked out of her office, glaring at us. We were glad Adelaide had such a loyal crew looking after her, I just wish it wasn't us she needed protection from.

"I appreciate you coming to me this morning, Harold," she ignored us to smile at the man who had set in motion our downfall. Desperate fools we were to fall into his trap. And we couldn't do a thing but watch as he puffed up, his lips twitching in barely restrained amusement.

"You have your hands full, but I have every faith in your abilities. Such a credit to your father, and it brings this old man some hope for the future," he pandered. Patting her cheek in a way that only older adults could do, without being patronizing. He sent us a mocking wink as he shuffled toward the door. Fury choked my throat. Both that he was there, and that Adelaide treated him so kindly. The room seemed suffocatingly full of security. Two silent shadows followed Harold out and Jonah came to stand behind Adelaide. We had known Adelaide's chief guard for six years, but you would never have known that by the way he looked straight through us. We were losing more than just Adelaide. I clambered to my feet, unable to stop myself.

"Adelaide," Jesse started, and she held up a delicate hand. There was a coldness in her eyes, a disdain that I never thought I would ever see her direct toward the three of us.

"Let's get this over with, shall we?" she whispered, as if steeling herself. Briar blew out a breath, sounding shaky. Jonah held the door open as she rounded her desk. The Charity Excellence Award was already in pride of place on her

shelves, but they weren't the only changes. Gone was the photo she kept on her desk of all of us. Taken at Calder Place, when she'd laid across our legs, smiling and laughing. The empty space gaped, jarring and wrong, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. Her gaze was like liquid ice, freezing off pieces of me. Her make-up artfully applied. No traces of discomfort. Only the bloodshot eyes belied her cool, collected demeanor.

"Can we make this quick? I have a big development to get started on," she jibed, knowing it would sting to mention the destruction of our special place.

"Siren, we need to tell you the complete story. The breakup was all a farce, orchestrated by the man you were just meeting with. We didn't know who he was when he offered to be our investor. He wanted us to break up with you before he would release the last of the funds he promised," I started, taking my cue from the others, who nodded in my direction. Jesse seemed too riled to put two words together, and Briar was drowning in shame and guilt. I paused, waiting to see how she might react, but she only rolled her eyes.

"I know all about the edict Harold demanded from you. Suspected it the moment you implied you weren't attracted to me. What could've driven you to make a deal like this? Did you expect you could call me the next day and smooth things over? That was your plan, wasn't it?"

I gulped, my fingers curling around the arms of the chair I was sitting rigidly on. I had expected her to rage at us, but this stole the words off my tongue. She knew everything, and yet she was still sitting like fury consumed her. I felt a trickle of relief that she'd not believed us, but if that was the case, why take down my photo and our picture? Why ignore us all weekend and refuse to see us?

"We've known each other for six years. Yet you didn't trust me enough to fill me in on your plans. Or perhaps you think so little of me that the pain and turmoil you caused didn't matter? What I can't understand is how you truly think you could just stroll in, and I would take you back. You chose money over

me. I was an afterthought. Someone you could coddle into submission with a few lukewarm apologies.”

I looked at Jesse, horror etched over my face. The assumptions Adelaide had made were wildly incorrect, but without the full story, she could never know why. It wasn't money we were hoping for. Ultimately, it was freedom, after six years of never knowing when one hit might be our last. This was our final desperate attempt after trying everything else. Every time her father's men beat us in the ground they taunted us, telling us to run home to Adelaide. To have her put a stop to the attacks. There had been so many times I had wanted to be honest. Like when she'd tend our bruises or question why we were moving stiffly. They would never accept us if we told Adelaide. We knew it, they knew it. And so, we'd kept Adelaide in the dark, trying to claw our way into something her father would respect. Jesse shook his head infinitesimally. My lungs squeezed tight with disbelief. Now was the time to be honest, and he didn't want to tell her everything?

“He wanted to pitch us to his circle as three, handsome single men. Said the aesthetics would sell better if we were unattached. We had to keep it between just us,” Jesse argued, throwing his hands up in agitation. Adelaide shook her head at him. Her eyes cut like shards of ice.

“You had to keep it between just you three, but that isn't true, is it?” Bitterness effused her features. “Someone else knew about it, and sure loved rubbing it in my face.”

She leaned in and looked intently at Briar, expecting a response. His tousled hair shifted to the side as he met her gaze, revealing the dark marks on his face illuminated by the overhead lights of the office.

“I-I'm so sorry Adelaide. I fucked up. On Friday, I had too much to drink. I don't even remember half the night,” he admitted, ashamed.

“I wish I had the luxury of forgetting. I would love to wipe the moment that worm mocked me for my inability to have children. But I can't. Did you forget about telling her that, too?”

What other secrets of mine did you whisper into her greedy ears?”

Briar let her words hit him like blows. Wincing at her tone, sharp as a whip.

“I know what it must have looked like, and I regret bringing her at all. I wasn’t thinking. But Nicole is nothing to me but a friend, an old friend. I slipped into old patterns and confided in her a few months ago when stress was eating me up. She was there when I needed someone to talk to, and I didn’t think it was hurting anyone. I love you, Adelaide. You are the only one I want. Jesse and Logan told me she said I wanted out of this relationship. She lied. I don’t know why she said it. I adore you. Only you and I would never choose to give up what we have.”

Adelaide scoffed, slumping back into her seat. There was a shade of vulnerability as her lip quivered, but she clamped down on it with her teeth and her chest moved with deep breaths.

“Except that you did. And I’ll tell you why she lied, *Bry*.” She rolled her eyes while Briar flinched, cheeks becoming pallid. “Because you might think of her as a friend, but she certainly doesn’t think of you that way. I warned you, I pleaded with you about her, and you discounted me. She shouldn’t have been there if you listened to anything I had to say. But you didn’t. You put my wants and needs aside. Just like you all did with this ridiculous bargain you made. You could have used my money for your gym, but you made a deal with a devil.”

I looked at Jesse again, begging him wordlessly to tell her about when he’d been attacked. About the threats and the ultimatum her father had given us. But instead, he let his temper whip out.

“A devil you are associating with now, and his son Ray?” Jesse’s eyes flashed with barely restrained fury. Adelaide raised her eyebrows.

“Unlike you, I know what kind of danger Harold Donato is. He was going to be my father-in-law once upon a time, you

know,” she reminded us, and I seethed in my seat. I didn’t like the reminder that Adelaide had nearly not been ours. If Ray Donato hadn’t rejected her, they’d be married now. I would have been deprived of the other half of my heart.

“How can we make this right, Adelaide?” Briar begged in a choking voice, sounding utterly broken.

“You broke my heart like it was nothing. Before humiliating me on Friday night with your schemes. It isn’t enough to walk in here and say sorry, it was all a ploy and expect me to fall into your arms.” She shook her head like she couldn’t believe the audacity. A chill went through me, a frigid sense of foreboding. She wasn’t going to take us back. She was already scrubbing the memory of us from her life, the artwork, the photos, and clothes.

“Siren, you are the most precious thing in my life. I love you more than anything,” I gagged on the emotion and fear clogging my senses. Panic clawed at my insides. Adelaide shook her head, her lashes rimmed with glistening tears.

“You love me, but you want to leave? Why did you never talk to me, Logan? Never once have you spoken to me about wanting to travel for your photography. I thought the gym was your dream.” Her voice was so small that I wanted to vault over the desk and take her in my arms, but I knew she wouldn’t allow it. Adelaide was guarded when hurt, and right now her shields were all the way up. How could I tell her the reason I was so desperate for our business idea to succeed? I understood why Jesse didn’t want to tell her. She was furious with us. If we told her about the threats, she might think it was us trying to manipulate her.

“Nicole made it sound like this burning desire I’d been swallowing, but it wasn’t like that. Yes, I wanted to experience other places, but not at the expense of what we have in Greenwich Bay. You are the most important thing to me, you, and the life we’ve built here together,” I pleaded with her to listen. But she shook her head again, not willing to hear the sincerity of my words. I rued the day I confided in Briar and Jesse about my wanderlust, about wanting to travel and take photos. It had been a distant dream for the future, something

that had never quite been in our grasp. Not with what Antoni kept threatening us with. Somehow, that innocent musing for the future had turned into a secret betrayal Adelaide was using to sever our connection. She turned to Jesse and a little sob escaped her. He didn't have my resolve. Racing around the desk to fall to his knees.

"Please, please, we can work through this. I can't imagine my life without you. I love you. So much, Adelaide," he begged openly, pitifully, and Adelaide put her hands on his shoulder, keeping him from leaning too close to her. My chest ached at seeing him brought to the floor in regret.

"What about babies, Jesse? You lied to me. Somewhere deep inside you is the desire to be a dad, and I can't wait around for that resentment to bubble to the surface. I can't give it to you. You've known that for years. You deserve to have someone who can give you the family you always dreamed of."

Jesse crushed his head to her knees, wrapping his arms around her legs. He babbled unintelligible words into her skin. I waited for him to tell her about the letter he received, but he didn't.

"Stop, stop, I need you to stop now." She pushed at his shoulders until he rocked back on his heels with his cheeks slick with tears.

"You're my family," Jesse continued in anguish. "You, Logan and Briar. Us. Together. That is the only family I have ever needed. I don't care if I have a biological child. We can adopt. We have time to decide." He was frantic now, fingers tightening on her knees while she looked up at the ceiling. For the first time, I saw the cracks she had been hell bent on masking. She hitched an uneven breath and glistening tears covered her cheeks. Rough swipes dashed them away.

"I don't trust you." Her words made me grunt with pain, cutting into me like a knife. "What other secret desires have you been holding inside that you're too scared to talk to me about?" She cried, looking at each of us. "Nicole wasn't wrong to assume you'd want to be with other people, Briar. I've only

known you three, and you barely saw what was out there. I think you were right when you broke up with me. There could be someone else out there who loves only you and can give you what you want. I'm an Orazio. Greenwich Bay will always be my home." She directed that to me, and I winced at the torment shrouding her green eyes. Her gaze slid to Briar next.

"I can't watch as you give someone else the things that should be mine. What you did with Nicole? You leaned on her and shared things that were none of her business. You call her a friend, but I can't help but think deep down you wanted what she gave you. Flattered by the undivided attention. You won't get that with me. I was clear from the very beginning that it would always be you three." Briar looked like he'd been hit with a mallet, stunned into silence with his mouth agape.

"I can't give you babies," she choked as she looked down at Jesse and her tears dripped onto her dress.

"Siren, we can work this out. Don't give up on us." My throat was so tight I could barely breathe. She shook her head. Her tears slowly dried an empty nothingness replacing it.

"Last month was our anniversary. We were supposed to celebrate at Reds. Do you remember what happened?"

It felt like my world had suddenly been upturned and judging by the expressions on Briar and Jesse's faces, they were feeling the same way.

"What? No—" Briar looked around as if waiting for one of us to refute the claim Adelaide was making. When we didn't, he pulled his phone out with fumbling fingers and scrolled through until he froze. I couldn't move. I didn't even remember our anniversary? What could I have been doing that was so important?

"We-uh-we met with..." Briar couldn't finish his sentence, his face drained of color. Adelaide gave an empty laugh.

"You mean Donato? You told me it was a work emergency when I could reach one of you. Another thing that wasn't worth telling the truth about, I suppose. I sat waiting for you for an hour on my own. Does that sound like something worth

fighting for, Logan? I think we've been rotting for a long time and one day you'll look back on this moment and be happy I didn't accept your apologies and set you free."

I rubbed my eyes, remembering the dinner Donato had booked and how insistent he'd been that he would provide investment, but only if we met him that night. He'd brought Augie Black with him, and I had been giddy with excitement. How could we have been so blind? We'd been trying so hard to save our future that we'd destroyed it. We'd let Adelaide down continuously, and now she had given up.

"We're so sorry Adelaide, please don't do this. We can work it out. If you just give us another chance, we can fix this," Jesse pleaded, still on his knees in front of her. She looked resolutely away, blinking rapidly. His fists ground into his thighs.

"I don't want this, Adelaide. I don't want to be free." Briar's voice was raw. None of us wanted this, not even Adelaide, but she didn't relent, only taking in a shaky breath.

"We're done. It's finished now. Don't make this harder for us all, just go. I'm not going to change my mind."

Jesse ground his jaw as he geared up to argue with her, but I waved a hand, motioning for him to get up. I yanked Briar out of his chair, his stupefied expression glazed.

"You can say you're done, Adelaide, but this isn't over. We'll never be done, and we won't stop until we prove it to you," I promised, and her eyes flashed with frustration. We moved toward the door like zombies, struggling to get our muscles to work properly. "Expect us every day, because we won't stop until we make up for what we've done."

"What about Calder Place?" Briar whispered, his fingers tight on the doorknob. My gut twisted at his question, and I looked at Adelaide, hope dying inside me at her blank expression.

"Please," I begged, knowing she understood what I was asking.

Don't destroy the place that held so many beautiful memories for us.

Don't wipe us away.

"It'll be better this way. A fresh start, like it never happened."

My chest twisted with a surge of agony, and I wondered how it didn't give out from the wave of pain that cascaded over me. Jesse slammed his fist against the doorframe and shot Adelaide a disbelieving look.

"You don't mean that." He stepped back toward her before I gripped the back of his jacket. "You wouldn't."

"You'll thank me when you meet the person who can give you what I can't." She sounded so lifeless that it made my heart break over again. How did we get here? There was no one else for me. Adelaide was woven into my heart and soul deeper than any words could ever touch. I would make her see the truth of it somehow.

"This isn't us giving up Adelaide, you know how determined I can be." I promised. The flash of pain over her face hurt me, too, but I couldn't relent. Her eyes reflected pain, mirroring her heartbreak and for a moment I thought she might relent. But the emotion slid away, replaced by a chilly detachment.

"Two months." Her chin jutted up.

"Two months?" we parroted, paused for her next words.

"Leave me be for two months. Forever would be preferable but I can see you haven't realized how serious I am. Prove to me you can give me what I want and grant me space. You owe me this, at least." Her lips turned down and she steepled her fingers on the table.

Space was the last thing I wanted to give Adelaide. I needed to press myself against her, imprint my apology through my skin. To suck the venom out of our betrayal with endless kisses and soothing touches. There was a brittleness to Adelaide right now, I knew if I put my hands on her, she might shatter. My stomach sank, a heavy weight taking over.

“It hurts too much to look at us right now. I understand, so we’ll make a deal. Peace for two months. But after that? Expect us at your door because we will win you back,” Jesse promised fiercely.

Adelaide’s jaw clenched, fire flashing in her eyes. But I dragged Jesse and Briar away before she could protest. She thought two months would make us change her mind, but I wouldn’t stop until I proved how wrong she was.

Logan



The house was quiet. Not the contented silence I used to enjoy with Adelaide curled up next to me. But one steeped in shame and regret. My skin itched in the confines of our apartment. The four walls closing in like a cell. Everywhere I looked there were reminders of Adelaide. From our photo frames to the ornate knife collection, she had failed to pack. It had been an anniversary gift from us, so I wondered if she would return for it. It seemed anything that had come from our hands was tainted now. Only a week had passed since Adelaide had left her key on the counter and walked out the door. The silence was eating me alive. I tucked my plane ticket in my jacket and hefted my backpack.

“Guys, I’m heading out,” I called down the hall, unsure whether I would get a response. I loitered with my carry-on. This was not a decision they agreed with, but we were all coping in our own way. This was mine. Luckily, they proved me wrong.

“I hope you get the middle seat.” Briar slipped out of his room and offered a short, grim smile. Jesse followed and slapped me on the back, the sting reproachful.

“I hope security pulls you aside for a cavity search,” Jesse joked. Disapproval loud between his words, but he held his tongue. We’d already argued about it, over and over. They saw me leaving as a betrayal. But I knew this was the right way.

Nobody could bully Adelaide into anything, despite what Jesse might hope. She would not give in to persistent badgering and there were only so many times you could say sorry. Eventually, it was about words and actions. Briar couldn't comprehend that this was part of my process.

My heart pulled me to Adelaide, no matter how hard I tried to stay away. Every corner of the city was a reminder of her—I wanted her so badly that my skin ached. I had gone my entire life without allowing myself physical contact, but now all I could think about was holding her.

“We promised we'd give Adelaide space. I'm not giving up on getting her back,” I reminded them, but I could tell the words didn't have any effect. Jesse and Briar thought I was running away. In a small, dark place inside of me, I suppose I was. Part of me wanted to prove Adelaide wrong. To satisfy the wanderlust and come back to her. Always come back to her. If the cozy pictures online had any truth to them, she was already dating Ray Donato. When I saw his arm wrapped around her shoulders, my heart stopped. I couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. They looked so good together, a beautiful, perfect couple. I couldn't stay in this city and see any more photos of her with him. It sent me down a spiral, knowing her father was likely ecstatic.

“Sure, keep in touch. Let us know when you get there.” Briar stared at his shoes.

“If you say so.” Jesse rolled his eyes.

“We need to give her time to miss us, to see that life isn't better without us—” I cut off with a curse as Jesse folded his arms over his chest. He didn't agree, and nothing I said would change his mind. “I want to go to her too. Do you think I enjoy seeing her with that idiot?”

“We're bigger idiots than he is.” Briar shrugged, self-deprecating.

“Jesse?” I needed assurance he would stick to the timeline she'd requested. He sneered, striding past me and opening the door.

“Two months. I agreed, even though I think it’s horseshit. So, you can run off with a clear conscience now. I’ll monitor our girl.”

The oppressive judgement followed me down to the sidewalk. A sleek, black sedan pulled up, and I jumped in, not able to relax into the leather seats. Was I making a mistake? I’d been on autopilot since our conversation at Adelaide’s office when she’d cut us into tiny pieces. I’d ushered the other two out, something Jesse had raged about later. He wanted to fight, to push back and Briar wanted to give up, to sink into the ground and wallow. I stood in the middle, trying to be the voice of reason. We had hurt Adelaide too deeply to expect her to forgive us. What we’d done had caused more damage than we ever expected. We’d been so sure of our love, so confident that the words wouldn’t penetrate, and our apologies would be balm enough. Our focus had been on the tantalizing taste of a future they had denied us for six years.

We were fools.

Worse than fools. We were arrogant.

It was our penance to shoulder the agony we were in right now. Destroying the heart of the person I cherished had gone beyond the fake break-up. We’d forgotten our anniversary and neglected her. It was unforgivable. So, we had to give Adelaide time and space. We owed her that. She’d insisted we were done, but I wasn’t about to let her slip away from me a second time. Two months we’d wait, give her space and let us re-group. Then we’d come at her with a vengeance. I knew what she was thinking, ever the strategist. She thought two months would be enough time for us to get used to life without her. To move on. There was only one person I would get on my knees for, and she would find out I was a bratty sub. I wasn’t going to do as I was told.

I couldn’t stay in Greenwich Bay when every part was saturated with memories of Adelaide. I’d be at her door tomorrow, forcing myself into her life. There was a second reason. I wanted to go to her and say with one hundred percent certainty that there was no secret longing to leave, to live anywhere except by her side.

I'd spent the plane ride mired in thoughts, nausea owning my stomach. The minute the wheels had peeled off the tarmac, intense doubt flooded my body. It was too late now. Greenwich Bay disappeared behind marshmallow clouds, but my tight chest remained. Briar got his wish. They crammed me into the middle seat. Someone sitting next to me had tried to strike up a conversation. My blank face and mute words soon had them turning to their phone instead. I didn't bother looking at mine. There was only one person I wanted to hear from, and she had blocked me.

Later that day, I followed Louis, a club manager, as we trailed deeper into the nightclub. My photography mentor, Chris, had set up the meet. I'd met him while working at the gym and he'd taken me under his wing. I fingered my camera bag around my shoulder.

"Is it built into the actual cave walls?" I looked around, wide-eyed.

"That's right, it plays off the natural acoustics. Wait until later when it really gets ramped up. Fucking transcendent man. Maybe we can unwind after having a few drinks? Lots of pretty girls here tonight." Louis smirked back, ushering me up onto the raised stage where the DJ was twirling a myriad of buttons. I struggled to smother my grimace, darting out the way of his swaying body.

"No thanks, I'm here to work and I've got a girlfriend."

"That figures," Louis laughed, flashing his pass at the security guard who let us by. We climbed a tight staircase until we came to a second level. The earthy roof of the cave was incredible from this viewpoint. The laser lights reflected off it beautifully. I pulled out my camera and changed the settings so I could capture the moody, otherworldly atmosphere. Louis clapped his hand on the metal railing.

"This is the best angle to give the client that wow factor they want. But once you're done here, take some photos from the stage, behind the bar even. We want this to look dynamic, capture some of the magic of this place. Any questions?"

“I’ve got it from here.” I fiddled with my settings. Louis clapped a hand on my shoulder. I swallowed a noise of disgust. The hard touch sending uncomfortable ripples through my body.

“Let me know if you change your mind about that drink, big guy.”

I shook my head at Louis as he left.

Not a chance. I was here to work. To keep myself from pounding on Adelaide’s door day and night. Chris had been sick of me moping on the doorstep of his studio and offered to set me up with some photography work. With our gym idea shelved for the moment, I was going to focus on what I wanted. Something that terrified me, but I owed it to myself and to Adelaide. The pay was negligible, but it was a step in the right direction. I had always wanted to be a photographer, and it was time to stop the lies.

I looked through the lens of my camera, imagining Adelaide swaying and shaking to the throbbing music that filled the nightclub. Sweat beading on her body as we danced against each other. She’d grind her plump ass against my dick until I threatened to pick her up and carry her off. Without thinking, I had already grabbed my phone.

Siren, I’m in a nightclub that’s in a cave. The music echoes all round, you would love it. But I’m not dancing. I’m not partying. I’m here as a photographer, taking photos for them to use for marketing. But I can’t stop imagining you here with me. No matter where I go, I’m always missing you.

Send.

My chest ached as I brought the camera to my face again. Losing myself in each frame, frowning as I tried to capture the beauty of this place. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I snatched it out with trembling fingers.

It was an unknown number. Adelaide?

“Hello?” I covered my open ear and strained to listen.

“Hey Logan.” My shoulders slumped as I recognized Chris’s voice. “Sounds like you made it there, ok?”

“Yeah, I just got started,” I shouted, the music making it difficult to hear.

“I won’t keep you, but I just had another opportunity pop up. How do you feel about the snow? A friend of mine who works at a ski resort is looking for someone to capture their refurb. Thing is, they would need you ASAP.”

I leaned against the wall, chewing my lip. It would take me out of Greenwich Bay and that was what I wanted.

“Send me the details.”

My heart was in Greenwich Bay. Although she didn’t believe it anymore. But this was all a layover until I could hold her again.

Briar



Logan closed the door behind him, and I immediately felt off kilter. Fear mounted inside me, and I worried there wouldn't be a resolution. Losing Adelaide would shatter me into pieces, and I had been too busy thinking of our future to stop fumbling the present. Now we were marinating in regret. Two entire months of inaction.

Jesse kept his eyes glued to his phone, scowling down at the illuminated screen.

"That look means trouble," I sighed.

"Logan can run away for two months, but I refuse to sit around and wait for Adelaide to fall in love with Ray Donato." He flicked me a heavy look. A shiver of apprehension ran through me. Did he honestly think that was a possibility? "Don't worry, I'll give her space. But I'm not taking my eyes off her."

He tapped the screen, a satisfying ping echoing in the room.

"She hasn't turned her location off. Deliberate, do you think?" His lips kicked upwards hopefully.

"If only, but unlikely." Adelaide hadn't done an update on her phone for six years. That was always something I had done for her. Jesse fisted his keys and set his jaw.

“Well, I’m going to check in on our girl. Don’t get too lonely without me.” He tossed me a salute and jogged for the door. I managed five minutes in our apartment before cracking. The quietness was oppressive. It felt wrong without all of us there. I snatched up my bag and jacket and fled. Somehow, my legs took me somewhere even more saturated with memories.

Calder Place.

I lay back against the trunk of our tree, below the carving of our initials. Wincing at the sharp twinge of pain in my chest. Soon this wouldn’t exist. Adelaide had pledged to destroy it, but in my feverish thoughts I held onto the hope that she would change her mind. From my bag, I pulled a glossy notebook and pen. The spine cracked as I opened it to the first blank page. I’d chosen it for the photo of a mountain on the front. I was looking up a steep rise of wrongs that I had to conquer. My fingers worried the edge of the blank page. The words I wanted to write bubbled to the surface.

Day 1

Dear Adelaide,

I’m sitting at our tree in Calder Place, near our mark. I miss you so much I can’t breathe. There is a sense of rightness here that I only ever feel when you’re in my arms. I’m an idiot. I have been trying to unravel where it all began, why we made these choices. You are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. From the moment I saw you, face streaked with tears, I was a goner. We were three ragtag boys who would never have been in the same room as you, except fate intervened.

I never felt worthy of you. A no name loser who had nothing to offer, except myself. Even the three of us together don’t amount to anything worthy of you. I wanted so desperately to prove I was someone who could stand beside you. My whole life I’ve been forgotten and ignored, my own family didn’t want me. We haven’t been truthful, and I want to tell you everything. The weight of these secrets is too heavy for me to carry any longer. I don’t want to give excuses, but you deserve the truth.

It doesn't make up for what we did, but I need you to know I'm not going to just apologize. I was afraid of losing you, and the cruel irony is that it ended up with me being alone again.

I closed the book, inordinately tired from the short words I'd written. But it was a step in the right direction. Adelaide deserved to see the true Briar. I'd been hiding a choking darkness from everyone. A twisted creature that squatted on my chest, fused to my very being. I let go of a shaky breath, my chest felt like it was gaping open, and my heart pumped vulnerably. Fixing the betrayal was one thing, but Nicole was another. The lies that she'd spewed had blindsided me. Now Adelaide believed I craved someone else.

All I wanted was her, but who was I? I had nothing to offer, worse I was tainted inside. But the way our lies had been dragged into the light had scarred me. I had to face my demons and admit out loud what I had never told another living soul. Adelaide had two months of space, and I had two months to sort my head out. I was going to write to her every day, to be honest in a way I had never been. This wasn't a time for bravado.

I had lost my girl.

I needed to strip to my core, right to the lanky, scrappy teenager inside who saw nothing worth loving. My stomach revolted at the thought of sharing these thoughts, but I rode the wave until it subsided. Not having Adelaide in my life again? That was a worse option. I was going to make myself a man worthy of her, and that started with these letters.

It started with making me believe it, too. I ran my fingers over the trunk of our tree, staring up at our carving. I fumbled with my phone, bringing it to my ear.

"Sandy's Tree Removal, how can I help?"

"I need to speak to someone about a tree." I inhaled a breath infused with determination.

Jesse



I pulled the cap low on my head, but the ruse was over. Jonah was staring straight at me with a scowl. Well, if he knew I was there, I may as well get a better view. I walked across the street and passed by the café window. My girl was smiling over her mug, captivated by the dark hair of someone I despised.

Adelaide was having coffee with Ray Donato.

My stomach flipped violently at the sight. Her muffin was uneaten, just crumbled up into smaller pieces on the plate. My breathing sped up. Was she sick? Even though I knew it was reckless, I turned on my heel and passed by for another look. It wasn't enough. I wanted to plaster myself on the glass and provoke her into interacting with me. Only my promise to Logan had me inching reluctantly away. She'd asked us for space, and I had to respect Adelaide's wishes. For now. Pushing would only make her hate us more if that was possible. A rough hand yanked my collar and Jonah growled in my ear.

"Quit it Stokes. I don't want to hurt you, but you can't be doing this."

"You can hurt me. Just let Adelaide see, it might get me some sympathy." I grinned, letting him see how unhinged I was. My insides were a jangled mess, a blistering storm that strained to break free and create havoc. He growled, marching

me away from the café, and released me with a jerk. His rough treatment didn't wipe the manic smile from my face. Jonah rolled his eyes and looked at the sky.

"Is this going to be a thing?" he sighed, gruff and low.

"Adelaide wants two months of space, but if she thinks I'm going to go that long without seeing her?" I snorted and Jonah scowled, carding his hand through his hair.

"So what? You going to try it on with me every time? Who's looking after your girl if I'm tied up scrapping with you? Give me a break, it's already hard enough now that she's spending time with Taillight Ray?" His bushy eyebrows pressed together, world-weary.

"He's a prick, right?" I leaned in conspiratorially. "Must have a secret drug problem or a rotation of mistresses. You'd prefer me, surely?"

Jonah grumbled to himself and marched back to the café. I trailed behind him, winding my fingers around my silver stud.

"Let's make a deal," he tossed over his shoulder. "I'll let you check on her, but if I see you, you're gone. You try to get close, talk or grab at her, deal is off. Agreed?"

He was tossing me a lifeline. One I didn't deserve. My lungs flooded with sweet oxygen. Like I hadn't taken a full breath since Adelaide had left. How far I'd fallen that even an unfettered glimpse of Adelaide was the highlight of my day.

"Done. Deal," I spat into my hand and held it out to him. Jonah's lip curled with disgust. Okay, I guess we weren't shaking on it. I held out my pinky, and he dismissed it with a derisive snort.

"Why'd you do it?" His gaze turned back to the blonde in the window, but his jaw was tight.

"Ask your boss," I sneered, veins hot with frustration. Logan wanted to tell Adelaide what had prompted us to take such rash action, but I refused. He wasn't the one whose life had been threatened. Antoni was still sitting on the information he'd read in my letter. I didn't have anything else to lose, but I didn't want to bring innocent people into this

mess. Desperate people make mistakes. But if we accused her father of violence, would she believe us? I didn't want to know the answer to that question. Her father was her hero. When you grow up in the foster home we did, you learn it's safer to keep things close to your chest. Even when you think you can trust someone, it might not be safe. I loved Adelaide, but I didn't know if I'd ever be able to shake off the fear that lived inside of me. I'd protected Briar, Logan and myself when we were younger, thrown my body on the line for them. But even honing my skills as a boxer hadn't allowed me to protect myself against the massive contingent of Orazio men. What use is an excellent right hook when you're knocked out from behind? Pinned on the ground by more bodies than I could shift. Antoni ensured it wasn't a fair fight, ever, and that haunted me. I prided myself on my ability to protect those I loved and in the end I failed.

"She doesn't believe any of that shit Nicole said, so what was the real reason?" Jonah pressed.

"I don't mean Adelaide. I mean her father." I ground my teeth. Jonah flicked me a flat look, but surprise flared deep in his eyes. "It doesn't matter. If I have to put my life on the line, I'll do it."

"Well, fuck off. Try again tomorrow."

I didn't linger, pulling back as the hulking security guard muttered under his breath. There was a lightness in my step, a purpose that had leached out since we imploded everything. I ducked into a florist and pulled out the piece of paper where I'd made notes.

"Hi, how can I help you?" the woman at the counter asked, trimming some stems. I hummed at the list I'd made.

"Do you have white tulips? I need a bunch of those, please." The florist gave me a knowing smile and slid a card over to me.

"Do you want to write an apology message to go with these flowers?"

I huffed a laugh. Of course, she would understand why I'd picked those flowers.

The internet said they meant forgiveness and new beginnings. The message I wrote wasn't an apology though, it was a promise for the future.

I'd take you to For Food's Sake, they have better coffee, and I'd order an apple crumble muffin to share.

I'd promised Logan I wouldn't approach Adelaide for two months, but I had no intention of letting her forget me. Adelaide could go out with Ray as many times as she liked, but I would always be there watching. I intended to let her know just how well I knew her. She wanted to go out with other guys? I'd be there every time, reminding her I could do better.

Every. Time.

It wasn't arrogance, just fact. There was no one outside of Briar and Logan, who knew Adelaide better.

By the time two months were up, I'd have a complete list of dates I had to make good on and I couldn't wait.

Adelaide



“Don’t move, I wouldn’t want to nick your skin.”

I ran the open blade shaver over my little rat’s cheek, testing the sharpness. Cross gulped, eyes wide with alarm. I tightened my hold in his greasy hair, yanking his head back.

“D-don’t you need shaving cream or something—ah.” He winced as I drew the thin blade across the smooth patch on his cheek. The tiny line welled generously, the blood smearing over his cheeks like war paint.

“No need for cream when I have something else plentiful.” I let him see my teeth. He would be stupid to consider it a smile. The blood dripped a wonky line down his neck, pooling on his smudged collar. I didn’t want to be here today. I had plans with a bottle of sauvignon blanc, and some trashy reality.

Happy birthday to me.

Instead, I was holed up in the cramped kitchen of Post Pizza. One of the best deep dish pizza places in Greenwich Bay, but it was empty today. The scent of dough lingered, permeating the walls. I rolled my eyes as Cross whimpered, trying in vain not to move.

“I-I swear. I don’t know anything.” His whine grated against my raw nerves. I clicked my tongue, wedging the blade under the curve of his chin. His pulse raced against the cold promise of the sharp edge.

“Now, now, Cross. You know that’s a lie, when my guys picked you up, you still had red spray paint on your fingers.” Cross blanched, and spluttered, but he didn’t feign ignorance again. I hummed, sliding the blade through the cooling blood and cleaning away the sharp bristles on his skin.

“How stupid do you think I am?” I brushed his greasy, tangled locks off his forehead. He shook his head, the whites of his eyes like a flag of surrender. But unluckily for Cross, I was in a terrible mood and he had given me the perfect outlet for my smoldering rage. It gnashed at my stomach, clawing into the tender skin.

“N-not s-stupid.” Cross stuttered, squeaking as I let the blade slip again. His chest heaved around a strangled moan, chapped lips jamming together. His cheeks were painted red, like the marks he’d drawn on the front of the pizza shop. Cross had been sloppy.

“But darling.” I nudged his head up, noting the dark bags under his eyes. “You must think I’m a complete idiot, if you thought you could get away with graffitiing a business under my protection. With a red and black wolf, no less. Now why would you do that, Cross?”

I needed answers. No one was going to get away with defacing my city with symbols of Crimson Claw. Cross trembled now, sensing the danger he was in, finally. This wasn’t the first time I had dealt with Cross, he had been involved in a string of crime in the lower east side six months ago, breaking into about five businesses. I had given him the choice to leave the city or pay. He’d chosen to leave, or so it had seemed. Now he was back. His handiwork being rapidly scrubbed off the window out front. I wasn’t feeling benevolent this time. I levered the blade, chewing on my lip with concentration. The scraping noise mollified the simmering rage. I had a flash of a memory, shaving Briar, and the rage flooded back in.

“Speak, goddammit.” I barked, nerves stinging with acid. I was wrung out, twisted, turned, and so tired. I missed my guys, especially on a day like today. My exes always made my birthday special and this was the first one we weren’t spending

together. My mouth longed for Jesse's French toast, extra whipped cream which he used to smear on my skin. Because I was the delicious treat. They didn't buy me expensive gifts, opting to lavish me with comfort. Bubble baths, champagne, rose scented oil massages. My skin tingled with the memory of how my birthday's usually ended. Debaucherous. I yanked at my collar, suffocating under the prickling heat. I flattened the blade under his jaw. His pulse fluttered like a baby bird. Weak and faltering under the claw of a hawk.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Please, just let me live." His tendons taut with terror. I hummed, pleased with his capitulation. I nodded, shaving him with a tenderness I didn't feel.

"Good boy. I promise you'll be alive when I step out of that door."

"I don't know who it was, but they sent me a message direct. Asked me to draw the picture they sent on this place. I never spoke to them, or even got their name."

The sound of the blade sliding against his skin was the only sound as I digested his information. I wiped the dark bristles on his shoulder.

"Check his phone." I nodded at Jonah, who snatched up the black rectangle. He frowned, flashing the message chain at me with pursed lips.

"Checks out, if he's telling the truth." Jonah tucked the phone in his pocket. He moved to the other side of the room, catching the glint in my eye.

"You did promise me you wouldn't come back to Greenwich Bay Cross. But money was enough to change your mind. You'd say anything to get out of this room, wouldn't you? It won't stop the next time someone dangles a chunky stack of cash."

Scrape, scrape, scrape.

Cross's ragged beard disappeared under my nimble blade. His throat bobbed and his eyes filled with desperate tears. They glimmered with lies.

“No, I promise.” He gasped, the sound wet. “I was broke, I needed money. But I-I learned my lesson. I won’t—”

I tapped a finger on his lips, cutting off his oily protestations. His eyes shifted around the room, as if he might be able to garner support from someone else. But Jonah and the two other guards stared back at him, with unfettered disgust on their faces. His bottom lip trembled.

“I hope the money was worth your life,” I explained.

Two guards moved to pin him down as he attempted to flee. His head tossed in my hold, the shaver blade cutting deep in his panic. His eyes rolled back as his chest heaved.

“You said you’d let me live.” His voice was a squeak.

My stomach churned with violence and I latched onto it with practiced ease. The thought of death didn’t frighten me. It was an exchange, like anything. Cross should never have stepped back in my city, he’d bargained his life away the moment he did. Our eyes met, and I let him see my intent. I made it quick, a mercy he didn’t deserve. Angling the blade and wrenching it through the artery in his neck. He made a feeble noise, wet with disbelief. I walked over to the door, wiping my soaked hands on my shirt. Cross’s fingers scrambled at his throat, the thick chokes he made were hideous. As I stepped out of the door, I looked back at him. It was incredible the amount of blood that could spill in the space of a few steps.

“I promised I’d keep you alive until I walked out this door. You shouldn’t have played with me Cross.”

Jonah smothered a laugh as we stalked out the back entrance.

“Clean the mess up.” I barked at the guards before we left. “Great. Now I’ve got to get blood out of my shirt on my birthday.” I made a noise of disgust.

“Fuck, even I got blood on me. Bastard was a squirter.” Jonah grumbled, sliding me a narrow eyed look, “is it really your birthday?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t hold it against you that you didn’t get me a present.”

“What? A body isn’t a present?” He joked. If I wasn’t in such a foul mood, I might have indulged him but all I wanted to do was go home and wallow. Jonah pushed past me as we neared my car. There was a white box sitting on the bonnet, with a black ribbon tied around it. Jonah inspected it, his eyebrows inching up as he cracked open the note and read what was inside. He checked the inside of the box before waving me over.

“Happy birthday.” He ducked his head, cheeks faint pink. I frowned, taking the box as I slipped into the car.

Happy birthday Adelaide,

Your birthday always reminds me of the most amazing times we had together, especially when I coated you in cream and licked it off. If we could be there with you tonight, know we would use all of our presents to make it one to remember. I know we’ll find our way back together and tonight we’ll be thinking about you.

We love you always,

Briar, Jesse and Logan.

Things must be dire if they left Jesse in charge of writing the card, of course he would find some way to bring up cream. I opened the box, determined to be unmoved. My heart thumped painfully at the carefully arranged gifts tucked in box. Magnesium salts with dried rose petals, bubble bath foam, jade roller, even a candle that had the label ‘This smells like please forgive me’. It was kitsch and I wanted to throw it all out the window and let them shatter on the bitumen. Instead, I opted for shoving it to the opposite side of the car. But the mingling scents taunted me, promising to knead out the ever present tension riding my shoulders.

“Pull over.” I couldn’t do it anymore.

“Boss?” Jonah eased the car out of the thick traffic. He grumbled as I hefted the box, taking it over to the closest trash

can. The gifts tumbled out. I didn't want anything from them. Not presents, and certainly not memories. I wasn't going to wallow on my birthday, or let myself get trapped in thoughts of them like I had over the past few months.

Briar



Two Months Later

It was five minutes to our apartment, and I had no strength left. My mind was drowning in memories, as my feet walked unseeing. The rainwater dripping from the sky mirrored my sadness. I jostled the notebook tucked under my arm.

I'd tried to write about my past, but there was already so much ugliness in the pages. More than I could have ever imagined when I started writing my letters. I wish I could say that my self-loathing had lessened, but it only seemed to grow. An oiliness that smothered hope inside of me.

It had been two months since I'd seen Adelaide, and she wanted nothing to do with me or the others. Logan was due back today from another trip, and Jesse was out on a walk. We both knew that meant stalking Adelaide. Not that I wanted or deserved their company. I preferred the scathing lash of the voice in my head. I couldn't face the millions of regrets that I kicked myself with again today. Jesse's fixation on starting our gym had transferred into haunting Adelaide's footsteps. I still fussed with the numbers, not willing to let go of the opportunity yet. I poured myself into *Fostering Futures* and worked my shifts at the gym. It kept my mind off the too silent house. Then I dedicated time to writing my letters, trying to put into words my regret and sorrow for the pain I'd caused

Adelaide. I jotted down song lyrics and anything that reminded me of her.

Tonight was the night. Jitters twisted in my stomach. It had taken me a long time to find someone willing to remove a tree after hours. It would be worth it to save the carving of our initials.

The two months wait Logan had enforced was slowly killing me. My need for Adelaide was a pit of emptiness in my chest, a paralyzing agony. I spent most of my time wishing I could go back and change things, make different choices. I wanted to give her this journal when it was done, to show her I'd been thinking of her this whole time, respecting her space but never giving up on us.

I would never give up. I clenched my jaw, ignoring the dark stone in my stomach. It weighed down my steps, heavy and forlorn.

“Bry?” Nicole materialized next to me like my filtered memories had conjured her. I didn't react at first, not computing that my once friend could be here. My shock at seeing her wiped away the tremor of hearing her say my shortened name. She fidgeted with the cuff of her white button-up, her eyes wide with surprise. Oblivious to my mute silence. I hadn't seen Nicole since the fateful night when everything had fallen into ruin. When she'd lied about me not wanting to be with Adelaide anymore. Her betrayal stung so sharply, especially with the pieces of my life falling in shards around me. I had blocked her immediately, unable to reconcile the mixture of guilt and anger.

“Nicole,” my voice sounded raspy. She chewed on her lip, looking over her shoulder at a softly lit cafe. Her bag was resting on one table, sheltered from the rainfall.

“It's been so long.” Nicole tucked her dark hair behind her ear. “How are you?”

I took a deep breath. I knew I looked like shit. A listless appetite encouraged weight to slough off my neglected body. A patchy beard that I should have shaved but didn't have the energy or inclination to do so. My ability to care had

spluttered out the moment Adelaide kicked us out of her office. I was a piece of shit. I may as well feel like it, too.

“I’m not doing this, Nicole,” I muttered, but Nicole slid in front of me. Halting my effort to leave.

“No, please,” she begged. “Give me a moment to apologize. I never wanted to hurt you, Briar. Everything got out of control.” I wavered, and she gestured to the table. “Please. Let me buy you a drink and explain.”

Her earnest expression gave me pause. My emotions were already swirling from my anxious mood. There was a part of me that wanted closure from Nicole as well. Writing my letters had brought her to my thoughts often, how I had used her to hide my shame. But she’d lied inexplicably and played such a gigantic part in driving Adelaide away from us. The sun was setting over the buildings and the street lights flickered on. I would have one drink, get my answers, and leave.

“One drink,” I agreed warily, and she smiled gratefully.

“You want wine?”

“No. No alcohol.” I grimaced. She ducked her head, chagrined.

“I’ll get you a soda.” Nicole snatched up her bag and hurried inside before I could protest. I shifted in the seat, unable to calm the unease in my stomach. I eyed the menu to distract my racing thoughts. Nicole returned five minutes later. She was swirling the soda bottle, a wine glass in her other hand. Discomfort gripped my stomach like claws.

“It’ll fizz if you do that,” I tried to joke, and she ducked her head.

“It’s one of those kombucha drinks. Good for your stomach, but you have to shake them a little. If you see anything floating around, it’s totally normal.” Her laugh tinkled. She took a hefty sip of her drink and sighed. “I’m better equipped to spill my guts now.”

Nicole was sitting opposite me, and I didn’t realize how intimate it seemed. Her knees, encased in camel slacks, knocked against mine. I scooted back as far as I could,

increasing the vast space between us. She smiled ruefully at the movement, shaking her head.

“I hate that I lost you as my friend because of this,” she whispered. “So many years of friendship.” My chest ached at her words, a tightness from the woeful expression in her wide eyes.

“What did you think was going to happen, Nicole? You lied to my girlfriend about me not wanting to be with her anymore. You’re right, we were friends, and I thought I could trust you, but you ended up making things worse.” I chugged some of the kombucha down, clenching as bitterness coated my tongue. Pent up rage bounced around my body, finding no outlet. I glared at the table, trying to gain control. I had trusted Nicole when I was younger and had done the same when we reconnected. The resentment was masking a deep disgust at my own actions, but she had betrayed my trust as well. Nicole looked away, her eyes a reflective sheen. She toyed with a diamond pendant necklace.

“I swear to you, that wasn’t my intention. Your investor was hovering around, and I panicked, thinking he would hear what you were saying. I was only trying to play up the break-up and make it seem legitimate. That was the entire purpose of that night, wasn’t it?” Her lower lip trembled. “I truly thought I was doing the right thing. I know I should have kept my mouth shut, but I just acted on instinct. If I had known how much the things I’d said would hurt Adelaide, I never would have mentioned them.”

Sharp pain stormed my chest at the reminder of how I’d told Nicole things that were private. That was another of my idiotic mistakes. I had stupidly given her the weapon she’d used to cut down my love. I’d opened my mouth and spilled secrets that weren’t mine to tell. That was my burden to bear and my guilt to claim. I still heard Adelaide’s words about me leaning on the wrong person, and it made me want to vomit. I’d caused this when I looked outside of Adelaide for support.

“It was all pretend? You weren’t trying to make us break up so you could sweep in and have a chance at me?” I pressed,

echoing Adelaide's fears. Nicole's eyes rounded, a small, breathless laugh escaping her.

"What? Not at all," Nicole beseeched me. "You've never noticed me, and how could I have a chance with Adelaide around? She's so beautiful. I couldn't compare, even if I wanted to."

My forehead creased. Could this all be a mistake? Nicole glanced at the table, her fingers running around the stem of her wine glass. A subtle sign of hesitation was in her eyes, like she wanted me to disagree with what she said.

"Nicole, we grew up together, and I've always considered you a close friend. Any guy would be lucky to love you the way I love Adelaide. Sometimes I think about growing up in the foster home." I swallowed past a hard lump in my throat. "I leaned on you a lot throughout the years, but Adelaide is my reason. The strength that helps me want to move on from our past. You'll find someone who loves you like that one day." I tried to make her feel better, to wipe the morose look off her face.

"We were each other's safe space. It's just so hard to imagine someone who could understand. We spent all those days cooped up together, perfectly happy in each other's company. Each other's escape from the horrible world."

My lungs constricted, making it difficult to breathe. This was a dangerous line of conversation.

"Adelaide is that person. She knows everything about me and is my refuge from our shitty upbringing," I partially lied. Nicole didn't know the reasons I spent all that time with her, and neither did Adelaide. The idea of admitting the truth had me gripping the table, dizzy. I took another sip of the drink to steady myself. Hissing as the sharp, cold liquid invaded my mouth.

"I've missed you so much. One mistake and I lost my best friend. I know Adelaide has never liked me. I never thought you would let her jealousy of our friendship influence you. But you just cut me off, like I was nothing. You didn't even give

me a chance to explain.” She choked a little, taking a sip of her drink.

My ears rang, and I couldn't look away from her wounded expression. I had Logan, Jesse, and Adelaide, but Nicole didn't have anyone but me. She'd always struggled to make friends, and even in the years we spent apart, it appeared her life had only grown lonelier. She considered me her best friend, and I'd treated her like trash. Her confessions confused me. If she had seen Donato, it made everything else seem logical. I was beyond confused by Nicole's confession. It was my actions that compounded the pain. She'd parroted words I had confessed to her. I wavered slightly. Nicole thought I was a friend, but I had used her, without even caring about the effect it had on her. What if it had all been a misunderstanding?

“What you said made everything worse. I understand you were trying to play a part, but you went too far. I need to take responsibility for sharing private conversations with you. Adelaide has always been leery of our friendship, and I betrayed her trust, proved her right by confiding things to you that never should have been said.” I admitted, the truth of it hitting me. It didn't matter if Nicole said those things out of friendship or with ulterior motives. I still hadn't listened to Adelaide. Holding onto a misplaced sense of loyalty had made me dismiss her feelings about Nicole. I had so much to make up for. It was like looking up at that looming mountain peak again, two months of self-reflection and there was still so much I'd fucked up. Nicole gave me a small smile, and she leaned in.

“Can I give you a hug?” she asked softly. I put up a hand to stop her from shifting forward.

“No, that's not a good idea. I'm glad we talked, and you told your side of the story, but I can't be your friend anymore. Adelaide is my priority, and I have to show I'm listening to her.”

Nicole cocked her head with a slight furrow on her brow.

“I think it’s sad that you would allow her to influence you to cut off people who have been in your life for years. Who love and support you.”

I refrained from reminding Nicole that we hadn’t been in each other’s lives for many years. It didn’t make a difference. We had a history together and her perception of it was different to mine. I was her friend. She had been my shield. My stomach turned over violently, a wave of dizziness crashing over me.

“Can we finish this drink? For old time’s sake?”

I tipped my bottle. It was still half full, sediment floating in the bottom. This time, I didn’t hesitate, I made the choice I should’ve made in the beginning. To lean on my brothers and my girl. I pushed the drink away and shook my head. Annoyance crossed Nicole’s face for a moment, gone before I could even register it.

“I wish you nothing but the best, Nicole, but I meant what I said. I haven’t been a good man to Adelaide, but I’m determined to prove I can be. You might think it’s a drink with a friend, but I know she wouldn’t. It would hurt her, and that has to be my compass.”

Her shoulders sagged, but she masked the dejection with a valiant smile. Stepping out from the table, she swept her hand to the now clear walkway. Streetlights lit up the path, one of them flickering like a warning.

“If that’s what you want.” She sniffed, pressing her lips into a thin line. “Just know that I am here for you and always will be.”

What reply could I make to her earnest statement that wouldn’t give her hope? I opted for silence. My vision was clear for the first time in a long time. I’d spent two months wallowing when I could have spent that time planning how to win my girl back. No wonder it was so easy for Adelaide to move on and date other people. I reached down to grab my notebook when my elbow collided with something warm and hard. Nicole shrieked, and I whipped my head up, my arm covered in wine, and Nicole’s blouse soaked through.

“Oh, my god,” I cried out, grabbing a napkin and handing it to her to staunch the stain. Nicole gasped and then burst out laughing.

“You are still all elbows,” she teased, dabbing her blouse. The stain covered the entirety of her chest, making the material cling to her. I grabbed a napkin and sponged my arm, the damage less on my sleeve. There were a few droplets on the notebook that I hurried to wipe off.

“Shit, I didn’t mean to,” I groaned. Nicole looked down at herself with a hitched sob. She clutched the napkin to her soaked blouse, like it was a lifeline. She waved off the staff from the cafe who checked in on her.

“God, I’m a wreck. I’ve got a job interview in thirty minutes.” She slumped and dabbed at the stain ineffectually. “I guess that’s impossible. There is no way I can get home to change and back to make my waitressing trial.”

I winced at her pointed comment. It reminded me of the different worlds we inhabited. If not for Adelaide, I wouldn’t have the education and stability I did. Nicole hadn’t been so fortunate. The cycle of poverty clung to kids like us, who grew up untethered and downtrodden. I stared at the pavement with a clenched jaw, wishing the ground would swallow me up. Would the repercussions of my actions ever let up?

“My place is just around the corner,” I sighed, the lump in my stomach not letting me walk away without fixing this. I owed it to Nicole, not that she would realize how much. “You can shower and borrow one of Adelaide’s shirts. This is a peace offering, before we both move on.” She nodded, discarding the napkins on the table.

“Please, that would be great.” Nicole clutched her hands together. “I’m desperate for work, to be honest. It’s like there is nothing in the city. Every opportunity I get seems to dry up as soon as I say my name.”

I ignored the hint of accusation in her voice, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. The short walk to the apartment had my clothes sticking to my body from sweat. It made me uncomfortable, having Nicole in this space that was so

personal to me. She wandered around with eyes wide, taking in every detail she could find. Then she reached out to pick up a frame that held a picture of the four of us together and I made a noise.

“The shower is through here.” I ushered Nicole into the main bedroom ensuite, wanting to get her in and out as quickly as possible. My fingers shook as I opened the closet and flicked through some of the hanging clothes. I narrowed my eyes at the rows, trying to cut through the light-headedness.

“Here, jump in and get clean. I’ll leave a blouse on the bed.” I lay a white button-up, similar enough to her ruined one, on the bed. Nicole tittered, her finger popping open the top three buttons in quick succession. Her soaked bra became visible. I averted my gaze immediately as she continued to undress, racing toward the door.

“You don’t want to join me?” Nicole taunted. I didn’t bother to respond, slamming the door behind me. My heart thumped in my ears. My earlier nausea returned, sick pressure that needed an outlet. Thinking of Adelaide made the feeling subside, but the idea of Nicole in something of Adelaide’s had me sagging on the door. I felt like a fly wandering into a web. How could five minutes feel like an hour? I wondered as I looked at my watch in frustration.

“Briar?” Nicole called out, and I groaned under my breath. My stomach was cramping now. Was this guilt or something else?

“What is it?” I called through the door, hand resting on the knob.

“I need to tell you something. Can you come in?” Her voice sounded breathy.

Nope. No way. Absolutely not.

Alarm bells crashed against the sides of my skull. Even I wasn’t stupid enough to be alone in a bedroom with any other girl but Adelaide. My compass was swinging very clearly to the negative. Forget guilt and obligation, get far away from Nicole.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea—” I protested, but the door swung open, and Nicole launched herself at me, her lips flying toward mine like a missile.

Adelaide



Ray looked over his wine glass at me with a grimace. The candlelight flickered over the crisp white tablecloth, but to my blackened heart it seemed macabre instead of romantic.

“How am I meant to seduce you if you won’t let your inhibitions go with a little drink?” he teased, and I screwed my nose up. Scion was quiet tonight and Raimondo had insisted we take the window seat for maximum visibility. The quiet chink of cutlery and low chatter grated on my taut nerves.

“Gross. Let’s nix the jokes about sordid affairs for once.” I sipped my sparkling water. I wanted a drink, badly, if I was honest, but I couldn’t stomach much of anything lately. Sparkling water was the only thing that settled my permanently upset stomach. Ray snorted and sighed.

“It’s not an affair when you’re single *cara*. But I digress. While these meetings are fantastic for my rep, they have been hindering me in other pursuits.” I didn’t miss the sidelong glance he sent toward Lara. She’d insisted on coming tonight for moral support. Her hastily organized date with a man from her gym seemed to be going well. A fine silver necklace sparkled on her neck as she threw her head back and laughed.

“Was that a gift from you, by any chance?” I wondered aloud, the silent clench of his jaw confirming it for me.

I toyed with my silver entrée fork and sent him a narrow-eyed glare. The Donato heir and I had come closer over the past few months. Harold had officially named him heir, after my urging. It truly felt like the start of a new era in Greenwich Bay, in which both crime families could finally exist together. I had also become accustomed to his appreciation of Lara. So, I knew exactly what *pursuits* Ray was talking about, namely his dogged attempts to secure a date with her. Our fake dates meant he spent a lot of time in her company, vastly preferring it to mine. Not that Lara seemed to mind. She was enjoying playing hard to get.

“You get one warning, Raimondo. If you mess with Lara, I will ruin you,” I told him, and his throat bobbed.

“Impossible when I have to get through you and your brutish guard. But tell me, has Lara... said anything to you?” he fished, seeming nervous. I was on high alert.

“Who are you talking about? Jonah?” I slid a look at the burly blonde and was surprised to see him watching Lara. Ray gave a smug snort, tipping his glass toward me.

“My dear, you are off your game if you weren’t aware of his pining. It would be truly disturbing, but unfortunately, I understand his position.”

“Ray. Ray. Ray.” I clicked my tongue. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone and fallen for my lovely Lara?” I don’t know how I felt about it. Lara was my best friend, and I wanted only the most wonderful man for her. I don’t think the man sitting across from me could be that, but Ray had become a weird sort of companion over the last few months. Jonah was no better. He was certainly a good man but spent most of his time lurking after me. How would he give my friend the time and attention she deserved? Jonah shifted in the shadows, his eyes narrowing at the fit man across from Lara.

“Is that so surprising? Perhaps we can come to an agreement, like your exes.” Ray sighed, resting his head in his hand. A dull ache spread through my chest. Ray was usually careful not to mention the men who had broken my heart. A fierce sting forced a sheen of water over my eyes. I blinked it

away, grinding my teeth. I'd been an emotional mess for the last two months, since I'd said goodbye to the boys. Two months of subsisting, being tossed through wild swings of emotions until I was breathless. Lara said I was grieving, but it felt like I was dying. Last week I'd done a walk through on Calder Place, to confirm my approval before demolition and construction started. I'd seen our tree, with our initials carved into it. So deep, like a brand in my heart, the mark of them never fading. Not even time had lessened their proprietary hold on me. I never wanted Lara to feel one ounce of the agony I was in right now.

"Tell me one thing you like about her, apart from her gorgeous looks," I vetted, taking another sip of my water. Ray had ceased his blatant hook ups, or at least was incredibly discreet.

"She's funny. She's snappy," Ray sighed with a distinctly lovesick tone. "She won't give me an inch and it's getting under my skin. I could have anyone I want, and yet she won't even let me take her out."

"You can't have me," I reminded him with a smirk, and he rolled his eyes.

"Why do I spend so much time with the only two women who rebuff me so boldly?" he grumbled, taking a sip of his drink. I choked on a low laugh as a shadow cast over the table.

"Miss Orazio, Mr. Donato. What a coincidence to find you here," drawled an unwelcome voice.

Chief Goldman loomed over us, dressed in an ill-fitting gray suit. He wasn't alone for long. Jonah barreled through the crowd, slipping between me and the pesky police chief.

"I'm not going to do anything." He sniffed at my guard, which made Ray splutter with laughter as he leaned back in his chair.

"Except accost us at dinner. We're trying to celebrate our two-month anniversary." Ray tried to grab my hand, but I snatched it back like I didn't see the movement. He pursed his lips at having his fun spoiled.

“Is this how the police department spends its money? Over time for chasing down innocent civilians? Perhaps my foundation can assist with the reform of your department?” I tilted my head, enjoying the light flush that spread up his neck.

“I would have used more conventional means, but you seem to be an impossible woman to schedule time with,” Chief Goldman replied through gritted teeth.

“Do you want me to escort him out?” Jonah muttered into my ear, and I shook my head. We were already drawing too much attention, and I didn’t like the implications. We could use this to further clean Ray’s reputation. Having the Chief of Police share a congenial conversation would dispel the lingering rumors about our more nefarious doings. If Jonah dragged him out of here, it would do the opposite. There was a delicate power balance here.

“Surely you have enough on your plate that an innocuous meeting with me is unneeded.”

The flush rose higher as he struggled to maintain his composure.

“Cleaning up this city is not innocuous, and if your newfound desire for philanthropy has a drop of truth to it, you should be jumping at helping me.”

I bristled at his arrogant tone and the entitlement. Did he think he could shame me into helping him? He obviously didn’t understand the way things work in Greenwich Bay. He might wear a badge and stand at a podium preaching peace. But it was the Orazio and Donato families that kept that tenuous peace alive. One flick of my finger and I could raze this city to the ground, but he believed he was above that. All the previous Chiefs had understood the dance they had to do with the darkness, but Chief Goldman had let his moral compass blind him. I let a cool smile slide across my face.

“You overestimated your importance, Chief. Now, if you don’t mind, I want to return to my date.”

Jonah shuffled forward, but the stubborn Chief planted his feet on the ground.

“I want your assurance that there isn’t a gang war brewing. Crimson Claw Riders have been spotted around the city consistently for months. I know you know more than you’re letting on.”

Was he truly going to cause a scene in the middle of the restaurant? Lara appeared from behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. Chief Goldman turned, a snarl ready on his lips, but it petered away when he realized it was a gorgeous woman, not another guard. Ray and Jonah both stiffened at her arrival. I looked over to see her date tossing on his jacket with a disgruntled look.

“We’ve not met officially Chief Goldman.” Lara extended her hand. “Lara Miller. I work with Adelaide at the Orazio Foundation. I overheard you’ve been trying to book a meeting with Adelaide. She’s quite busy, but if you like, I can spare some time?”

Chief Goldman struggled to reply, his gaze wandering down Lara’s tight paneled dress and strappy heels. The whites of his eyes shimmered as he took her in with quiet surprise. He looked back at Ray and me, twin stoic expressions on our faces. The precariousness of his situation seemed to dawn on him. Lara spread her arm, inviting him to follow her.

“I know a lovely little cafe around the corner. It serves wonderful pancakes,” she coaxed.

“Call me Beck,” he rasped, lingering for just a moment. His hand rose, as if to run through his graying dark hair, but he reconsidered.

“Of course, Beck. Let me help you. It would be for the best.” Lara and I exchanged a look. I appreciated her interceding, but I didn’t want her to be drawn into any of the Chief’s impassioned pleas. The Chief followed her swaying hips with a dazed look.

“Follow them,” I instructed Jonah, wanting to know what could be so important that he would seek me out in such a public place. My guard didn’t need me to ask twice, his agitation obvious as he hurried after my best friend. Perhaps there was some truth to Ray’s theory about Jonah wanting

Lara after all. Ray tore his eyes away, tucking his clenched fists under the table and out of sight.

“Jonah won’t let anything happen.” I tried to comfort him. Ray stared out the glass window, tracking the rain drops that glided down. They looked like glistening diamonds, reflecting off the streetlights.

“Do you ever wonder if this is all worth it?” Ray sighed. I frowned at him, not comprehending his meaning. Was he questioning his role as heir? It was something I had never done. In my veins was an undeniable need for power. I wasn’t afraid to admit it. This was the only choice I had, but it was one I would choose myself. Ray shook his head and tossed back some of his wine.

“Don’t mind me, I’m in a strange, maudlin mood tonight.” His smile was thin.

“You won’t mind if I join you then?” Jesse loomed over us, and he was glaring at me. Hard.

My spine stiffened. What was going on today? Accosted by two people I had no interest in talking to. I suddenly wished I hadn’t sent Jonah with Lara. He would have dragged Jesse away like he’d done many times over the past two months. I’d caught glimpses of Jesse, enough to assume he was following me regularly. But Jonah had kept my exes from approaching me, and with their numbers blocked, I hadn’t had to interact with them at all.

“Jonah’s not here,” Jesse gloated, reading my thoughts. “He’s too busy with Lara.”

He snagged an empty chair from a nearby table and settled in between us. Ray let out a low whistle.

“You’re wasting your time.” The wild look in his eyes concerned me slightly. Ray was staring bug eyed over the table at me, trying to smother a smirk at my furious ex. Of course, he’d be enjoying this to the fullest.

“Time’s up and we need to talk.” Jesse leaned back in his borrowed chair, folding his arms over his chest. “Finally.”

“What are you talking about?” I feigned ignorance, my ribs rattling over the thunder of my heart.

“Two months, princess.” Jesse flashed his phone where there was a countdown reading *Time to Get My Girl*.

“I said everything I needed to say two months ago,” I countered, gratified that I could tamp down the ache at seeing Jesse up close. He looked handsome as ever, if thinner. His dark skin was smooth in the dim light. But there was a jitteriness to his manner. His knee bounced up and down.

“I’ve given you space. But that’s over now and I’m here to fight for you, just like I promised I would. I can’t walk away from you, Adelaide.” His jaw set mulishly as his eyes bore into mine. “I won’t.”

“Should I ahh-let you guys talk?” Ray interrupted with an amused huff.

“Don’t you dare,” I growled as Jesse grinned. No one was paying much attention to us, though some patrons threw a few discrete glances our way. My cheeks burned with indignation.

“Go or stay. It doesn’t make a difference. Whatever this is.” He waved his hands between us. “Isn’t fooling me. I know what you look like when you’re into a guy, Adelaide, and Ray here doesn’t get you going. No blushes, no coy looks, or soft touches. But you continue to meet with him every week. Why? You know there are an obscene number of photos and articles speculating if you’re the new ‘it couple’? Who are you trying to convince? Or is this all to make your stupid ex’s jealous? It’s working.”

My cheeks flamed at his outright accusation, annoyingly correct. Jesse was like a dog with a bone, and he wouldn’t let me wriggle out of this one. Also, how closely had he been watching me? What about Logan and Briar? I looked over his shoulder and couldn’t see them. Jesse’s eyes shuttered.

“Logan is on his way back, princess. He couldn’t stay in Greenwich Bay and not break the space you wanted. He sends you photos of all the places he’d like to visit with us. If you’d unblock him, you’d know that. He had to leave the city

outright because being this close to you and not able to be with you was too much to bear. Briar can barely function. He's down to monosyllables. And me? I'm angry, so damn angry. At myself and for this time we're losing with each other. Because I know that eventually we'll be together again, all of us. I won't stop until I make it happen. But I can't take it anymore. I can't breathe without you. Tell me what I need to do, and I will do it."

"You can leave." My jaw was tight. He couldn't hear my heartbeat thundering in my ears or know how much his words had shaken me. "I don't care what you're feeling. This is the consequence of your actions, and I don't owe you anything. I said I was done, and I meant it."

Jesse shook his head, only more determined. Ray lifted his glass to his lips, sucking up the drama like a vacuum.

"We'll never be done." He unfolded out of the seat slowly, like his muscles were aching. "You can keep me from you with Jonah, bulldoze Calder Place, go on farcical dates. But we will never be done. I hurt you," his voice dropped to a whisper. "I regret what we did more than anything, and I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. Let me heal the pain I caused you. There is more to this story, and you deserve the truth. We can fix this if you give us another chance."

"You can't heal someone when you were the one who broke them." I swallowed, wanting him to go, but knowing if I said anything more, he'd just dig his heels in harder. Jesse was as stubborn as me. Locked together by metaphorical horns. But I wouldn't give an inch. I waited for his argument, but it never came. Jesse's eyes widened, and he lunged in front of me. My chair overbalanced as his arm made contact. Air whooshed through my ears as I thudded on the ground, screaming in surprise. But before I could orient myself, a loud smash rang out and glass shattered around me. My neck burned as a shallow piece cut into me. Jesse groaned and his weight slumped down over me. His left hand fumbled over his arm, gasping as his knuckles turned white with pressure. Red bled through the tight grip of his hold.

He'd been shot.

If I'd stayed in my seat, it would have hit me.

My ears shrieked with the storming panic of patrons as they stampeded for the door. Jesse's body was a furnace against me, his weight pinning me to the ground. All around us were glittering shards of glass. A brisk gust of wind blew in from the shattered windowpane, sending a riot of shivers through me. Ray stared openmouthed for a moment before flipping the table and providing us some cover. I held Jesse in my arms as he groaned, blood warm over my fingers as I staunched the wound.

"Take my phone," I said through gritted teeth to Ray, fighting the panic that was surging through me. "Call Paolo."

Ray flipped through my bag for my phone and made the calls. No tremor in his barking tone. He was like me. There was no time to fall apart right now. This gross display of violence was a tremendous breach of respect. Whoever had dared to do this was about to feel the fire of the Donato and Orazio families on their head. Firing on the two heirs to the biggest crime families in Greenwich?

Big mistake.

Without meaning to, I brushed a kiss on Jesse's head. A habit ingrained over the years. Offering comfort to a man I had thought part of my forever.

"Does taking a bullet for you get me any brownie points?" he gasped, his lips ashen and trembling.

"Shut up," I ordered. But I let myself hold him a little tighter. My panic was easier to wrangle with his solid body pressed up against mine. He let out a soft laugh, wheezing as it moved his arm. I looked into his eyes, so close after being separated for so long. Pain burned deep in their light brown depths. I held his gaze, silently offering my support until his eyelids drooped and he went limp in my arms. I swallowed a sob. There wasn't time for this. Instead, I started picking up the threads of wild emotion within me, tucking them away in a locked box.

“Who could have done this?” I wondered aloud. Ray shook his head, glaring out the broken window into the darkness.

“Whoever it is, they’re dead.”

His shoes crunched over the broken glass as he leaned to look at Jesse’s arm. His fingers had slipped slightly as he fell unconscious. I had added mine to give him the pressure he needed. The hot, wet slickness against my skin was making memories rattle in the iron prison of my mind. The last time I held someone like this, it had changed everything. My fear must have shown on my face because Ray said, “It’s only a graze, he’ll be alright, Adelaide. We’ve survived plenty worse, haven’t we?” He joked. Jesse’s weight on me was suddenly oppressive. I had my hand pressed against his wound out of kindness, not because of lingering feelings.

“This means nothing,” I asserted firmly. Ray’s eyebrows inched up as if he didn’t believe me, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“How long until someone gets here?” I asked, turning my mind to the situation at hand. There wasn’t time to sift through old emotions, even if they strangled the air from my lungs.

I had to focus.

Briar



“Don’t fight, Bry. I’ve wanted this for so long,” Nicole breathed, straining toward me. My hands clamped around her slick shoulders, the wet tendrils of her hair brushing against me. I shuddered at the unwanted closeness. Desperate to put space between us, I pushed her backwards. She stumbled, eyes wide with surprise. The towel she had wrapped around her body didn’t offer enough coverage and my stomach turned violently at the sight.

“What are you doing?” I hyperventilated, my chest aching. Nicole’s bottom lip trembled, her fingers digging into the top of the cotton towel. She shook her head, advancing toward me.

“What does it look like I’m doing, Bry?” I flinched at the nickname. “We’ve been doing this dance for years. All those days we spent together at the foster home. You could have gone to your friends, but you chose me. I could read between the lines. If it wasn’t for Adelaide, we would have been together long ago, me, you and...what are you waiting for?”

“No, no, no,” I chanted, tugging on my curls. I must be the stupidest person alive.

“We were just friends,” I insisted, and Nicole tilted her head with a determined frown. She propped herself on the bed and I turned to grip the door frame, my knees sagging. Oh god. There was a half-naked girl in my room. How could I get her

out? I needed to stop this. It was a nightmare of my creation and idiocy.

“I know you better than anyone. I’ve never connected with someone like I have with you. Our conversations? We talk for hours, we like the same things, we love being in each other’s company. You chose me as your date for the award night. You could have hired some slut like your friends did, but you wanted me beside you,” she kept talking softly, her voice filled with wonder and excitement. “I’ve been waiting, and I knew today was fate. Our second chance. Don’t you feel it? Aren’t you feeling something right now? If you loved Adelaide as much as you thought, you’d be doing everything in your power to get back with her. But you aren’t. You’ve been walking around scribbling in that book for months. How can you say you love her when I’m the only one who knows what happened to you when you were younger?”

Nicole folded off the bed and moved toward me, but I ran into the bathroom, falling to my knees in front of the toilet. Her words bounced between my skull and my body reacted violently, vomit hurtling out of my mouth and coating the bowl.

What happened to me? What did she know?

“Oh my god, Bry,” Nicole gasped, rushing to put her hand on my shoulder. I flinched away, retching again.

“If you knew what happened to me, you would know why I hate that name. Don’t touch me.” I wrenched my body away from her trembling grasp, holding my hand up as she crouched in front of me.

“You needed time to process him choosing you. I was there through everything,” her voice was soft. “Tell me it didn’t mean anything, you turning to me while you were confused.”

Her words violently wrenched open the protective shield to my heart. Nausea blurred my vision, and I clung to the toilet bowl. My skin prickled with heat. What did Nicole know about what had happened to me? Her following comment cut through the desperate, clawing fear.

“Was it the drink? He said it would help, but you didn’t finish, so I had to improvise.”

A chill froze my limbs. Nicole’s eyes were wide and panicked. But what monster was lurking underneath her skin? She’d planned all of this. Spilled the drink on purpose. Nicole blinked, hurt clear on her face at my disgust.

“What are you talking about? What did you give me?” I whispered.

“It was just to help you Bry. You were so in your head. So obsessed with Adelaide. She doesn’t love you like we do. How can she when she fucks two other guys as well? She doesn’t deserve you. I was the person you used to turn to, and I waited for you to realize, but we recognize you needed a push.” A weird look glazed her eyes, and I shrank against the toilet. She was delusional. Nicole had taken every platonic interaction and turned it into a story of forbidden love. It shone from her gaze, bright and twisted. She truly believed our history was the beginning of a beautiful future. That there was love in what had been done to me. My stomach threatened to upend itself again, cramping sharply at her closeness. What had she put in my drink?

“Nicole, I don’t love you. I’ve only ever thought of you as a friend,” I croaked. “Whatever you think you know from when we were younger, it doesn’t mean I chose you. Adelaide will always be the one for me. I know you think it’s over between us, but I would never be with you in that way.”

Nicole jutted out her jaw, her fingers dancing along the tiles to brush my leg. I swallowed the sharp sting of bile.

“I can love enough for the both of us while your heart heals. Adelaide was jealous because she knew what we had was special. She could sense our connection. I’ve been waiting for you to wake up and see me. But you wanted to say goodbye. You wanted to end what we have for good.”

“Don’t touch me.” My elbow violently smashed into the wall as I jerked away from her. “Don’t call me *Bry*! If you knew what happened to me, you’d never call me that goddamn name. You’re not listening to me. You lied and manipulated

me, and I'm an idiot for believing you. But there will never be anything between us—ever," I shouted at her, gratified that my words seemed to penetrate the fog of delusion she'd wrapped herself in. A tear wobbled on her lower lash, glinting silver in the fluorescent light.

"What is going on in here?" I whipped my head up and saw Logan vibrating with rage. Nicole shrieked and pulled the towel to cover her bare legs. It had the unwanted effect of revealing her cleavage. The sight made me retch into the toilet bowl.

"Oh my god, Logan, I'm half dressed. Get out," she yelped. "Bry-Briar and I are in the middle of something." She tripped over the nickname, but I wasn't focused on that. It was the stark disgust on Logan's face. The betrayal and disbelief.

"It's not what it looks like," I blurted out, and he snorted. His suitcase was discarded behind him. How long had he been standing there?

"Are you serious Briar? What else could it be? She doesn't have any pants on," he roared and pointed at Nicole. "I want you out of this house. Get your shit and go."

Nicole sniffled and looked at me with glassy eyes.

"We need to finish what we were talking about," she tried, and I started laughing. A response of pure incredulity. Was this really happening to me? How did I even get here? I wanted to bludgeon my head on the tile walls and put an end to my stupidity.

"Are you serious? Get out," I hissed, and she reared back in surprise. "I don't want anything to do with you." I stood up on shaky legs, my stomach protesting, and pushed past Nicole. She made a plaintive noise, like she couldn't understand what had just happened.

"It's *not* what you think," I spat at Logan. My anger at myself bursting out at the wrong target. "I didn't touch her."

"Tell him how we kissed," Nicole's shrill voice insisted behind me. Logan mashed his hand over his face. I spun on her in a sudden fury.

“No, we didn’t. You tried, and I pushed you away. I never wanted you. Listen to me once when I tell you, I felt nothing but friendship for you and that is dead. I never want to see you again. Just get your stuff and get the fuck out before I call the cops.”

“Wait, w-wait for a moment. It might work soon,” Nicole sobbed. I darted out of her grasping hands. Unabashedly using Logan as a shield. “Don’t let them influence you.” I swore, not digesting anything she was spouting as I tried to get away from her. Being near Logan had my stomach settling, like he was what I had been waiting for. The cramping eased, and I fisted my hand on the back of his shirt. Needing the support of his solid back. My thoughts climbed over each other inside my skull, each clamoring for attention. The cacophony roared in my ears.

“How pathetic are you? I won’t ask a second time. Get your things and go.” Logan clicked his tongue.

“You never liked me, even when I was just a kid.” Nicole toed the carpet, stalling. Logan’s lip curled back, and he glared.

“There was always something off about you. But I tolerated your friendship for Briar’s sake, because he saw something in you. But I love being proved right.”

Nicole flicked him a blistering look before storming back down the hall. Logan pried his shirt out of my iron grip and glared at me. “I can’t wait for you to explain the clusterfuck I just walked into, but we need to get to the hospital.”

I froze, my feet cemented to the ground. The sick feeling rushed back, my stomach turning.

“Adelaide?” I whispered. A million scenarios cramming into my mind. “Is she—” I couldn’t breathe, my heart was leaping out of my chest with fear. Logan tossed me a look, half understanding, half disappointed.

“After what I just witnessed, I’m surprised you care,” he accused. Nicole re-appeared, thankfully fully dressed. But I didn’t care about her. All I cared about was whether Adelaide

was alright. My lungs were on fire, waiting for the blade to fall and end my misery. Logan searched my face, the stiff judgement softening as he seemed to find what he was looking for.

“She’s fine, but Jesse took a bullet meant for her. Luckily, it only grazed his arm, but he needs us.”

Someone shot Jesse.

It was so foreign, even knowing the danger Adelaide flirted with daily. It had never touched one of us before; she was always so careful to keep that part of her world separate from us.

I glared back at Nicole and gestured to the door.

“Leave, I won’t tell you again. If you ever come back here, you’ll see how serious I am.”

Nicole had tied her soaked hair in a low knot at the back of her neck. It dripped down on Adelaide’s blouse, the one I had lain on the bed. The fit was wrong, missing Adelaide’s generous curves. I opened my mouth to argue with her, to get her to take it off, but Logan was already ushering her through the door. She didn’t argue, only tossing one mournful look back at me.

“Get your phone,” he grunted at me, pulling his keys from his pocket.

An indescribable desire to hold Logan crashed over my senses like a wave. My skin prickled sharply at the absence of his touch. Logan was one of my best friends, and I loved him so much. Right now, our other brother needed us, so everything else could wait. My stomach churned, and I didn’t have time to ponder whether it was from whatever Nicole had given me.

I hoped Adelaide was at the hospital. It would be my first chance to make things right with her.

Jesse



Incessant beeping cut through my slumber, startling me awake. My nose seared with a harsh chemical smell. I wish I could say I woke up tough and in control, but the moment I got sensation in my arm, I whimpered like a little bitch.

“Hurts a bit. Don’t worry, it’s only a flesh wound.” A drawl drew my attention.

Ray Donato.

Sprawled in an armchair like he owned the place. He’d had time to change out of his crisp white button-up shirt and neat slacks into a plain black polo and jeans. I bristled at the sight of him. I had to swallow bitter acrid jealousy. Everything about him screamed suave. The way growing up with money seemed to add an invisible sheen. You just knew. Adelaide had a similar air, but it wasn’t haughty on her. They’d never had to skip meals, with their stomachs concave and growling. They had never had shoes worn through with holes, so that everything got soaked in the rain. Those things leave a mark. Invisible and insidious. I envied Ray Donato. He might have struggled in other ways. But poverty wasn’t one of them.

“What are you doing here?” I gritted through my teeth, preparing to haul myself up, when Adelaide shuffled through the door. She balanced two cups of coffee and had a brown paper bag tucked under her elbow. Her eyes flew open in

surprise at the sight of me. She stifled the reaction though, coolly handing Ray one coffee and the paper bag.

“You’re awake.” Her eyes crawled over me, and I noticed that while Ray had changed, she was still wearing the same clothes as she had on their ‘date’. Her blue silk blouse ruffled like she’d been curled up long enough to crease it. I breathed deep, uncaring if it made me look like a creep. There was the slightest hint of her sultry perfume, one that I hadn’t smelled in far too long.

“He’s hurting,” Ray shot me a smirk. I growled, prepared to hurl myself across the room. But the movement had me sucking in a gasp as pain radiated through me. I collapsed on the bed, eyes scrunched tight.

“Stay still, idiotic alpha,” Adelaide bit out sharply, a hint of worry seeping through. I opened one eye to see her leaning over me. She reared back, her cool, stony mask sliding back into place. She reached over and pressed the button next to my hand, her fingers brushing against mine.

“Princess—” I whispered, but she stalked away, perching on the side of the chair next to Ray. My stomach churned at the sight of them together. Dark and light, well matched. He knew it too, his smirk widening as he palmed her knee with his free hand.

“Thanks for the coffee, sugar,” he cooed, winking at Adelaide. She rolled her eyes at Ray’s obvious flirting and the familiarity between them killed me. I hadn’t let myself believe it was real between the two of them and I wouldn’t start now. It was fake, it had to be. If I wasn’t incapacitated, I would be off the bed in a second, choking the impudence out of him. Instead, I seethed in silence wanting to luxuriate in Adelaide’s presence but also battling the desire to send Ray to a dark level of hell for being near my girl. She pushed Ray’s hand off her knee with a scowl.

“Are you alright, Adelaide?” I asked instead, focusing on her. She looked worn. Her hair was mussed like she’d used her hands to scrape it back.

“Of course, do I not look it?” she sniffed, and I couldn’t stop the wide smile that crept over my face at her snark.

“You always look beautiful, but that wasn’t what I was referring to. Somebody tried to shoot you, that would rattle anybody.”

A slight flush rose on the apples of her cheeks, and I bit my tongue to stop triumphant glee showing on my face. Not once. Not in two months had she blushed like that for fucking *Taillight Ray*. He might be suave, handsome and understand her world. But she wasn’t into him. She might hate me, but she was here, had been here for a long time by the state of her and I still affected her. Relief made my muscles weak.

“It’s not the first time, and I’m sure it won’t be the last,” she replied, her game face back on. God, she was magnificent. I could eat her up all day with her spine of steel and bravado. “I’ve been waiting for you to wake up so we can talk.”

“How long was I out?” I looked down at my bandaged arm. Someone had put me in a hospital gown. I hope it was Adelaide.

“Only a few hours. You had no fragments, but I needed to be the first to speak to you.”

I leaned forward, my mouth almost salivating at the words of affection I hoped she might give me. My heart grew in my chest. Had she been waiting and worrying about me?

“We need to get your story straight. Like if you remember anything about the shooter,” Adelaide explained. I slumped down on the bed. Not what I was expecting. I guess getting shot didn’t give me any brownie points after all.

“For the police? Tell me what to say, Adelaide, I’ll do anything you want. In terms of what I remember?” I sifted through my memories, hazy with adrenaline. “They covered most of their face with a red and black bandana. It was the gun I saw and reacted to. I can’t be much help there.”

Her brow furrowed. I could tell she was thinking rapidly. Ray looked up at Adelaide with a sober expression.

“Did it have anything on it? Like a wolf, perhaps?” Her eyes bore into me.

“It could have been, I’m not sure.”

They seemed to communicate without words. I bristled at the sight, coveting his place but knowing I didn’t have the right to it anymore. Whatever message they relayed had Ray unfolding out of the chair.

“I’ll make the calls,” he assured Adelaide, and he slipped out the door like a shadow.

“Just tell the police what you saw, Jesse. They already heard as much from people at the restaurant,” Adelaide sighed deeply, crossing her legs. “I hoped you’d seen something more for us to go off.”

“You don’t have any idea who would do this?”

Was it someone who didn’t want any kind of truce between the two crime families of Greenwich Bay?

“Not yet,” she evaded, taking a sip of her drink. Her hand ghosted over her stomach, where I knew she was thinking about the attack she’d endured at sixteen with her mom. They hadn’t found that culprit, either. The encounter had left scars both on her body and in her heart. Not that she would ever admit it. She preferred to pretend her mom didn’t exist.

“They’ve obviously got a death wish if they think—” I started, but Adelaide cut me off. Putting her coffee cup on the side table.

“I don’t want to discuss it with you, Jesse. You aren’t a part of my life anymore and while I might have spoken to you in the past, you no longer get to be that person.”

I flinched. Her words hit me like a punch. Air became difficult to grasp, knowing it was all my fault we were this way. Adelaide picked at the armchair, avoiding my gaze.

“Look at me,” my voice was low and guttural. Her eyes glittered like hard emeralds as she slid her gaze over obediently. “I would have taken that bullet to the heart to save

you. You don't consider me a part of your life, but princess, I will earn my way back."

The material of the armchair groaned under the sharp pressure of her curled fingers. Her eyes scrunched closed, and I watched her smooth out the lines in her forehead. She flexed her hand. An innocuous movement to some, but I knew Adelaide. I knew the dark places her mind took her to sometimes.

"Are you having thoughts again?" I asked.

"It's none of your business," she snapped, curling into a ball on the chair. My stomach dropped at the thought of Adelaide suffering like she used to. With none of us there to anchor her. She would never accept my help, not in the place we were in now. My girl was proud, and she didn't need us. I'd always known it was us who needed her more. Adelaide sighed heavily. Silence fell over us like an oppressive veil and I waited for her to get up and leave. But she didn't. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her breathing evened out. Hungrily, I watched her with an ease I hadn't managed for two months. I could indulge in her, stare at her unhindered. I had watched her so often since she said she was done, but this was different. Adelaide to the outside world was steel, sharp and unbreakable.

Not soft. Never soft.

Few people had ever seen her like this, with all her walls and masks undone. She looked peaceful, unguarded. The sweetest buffet I could imagine. I gorged myself on her. Fed on her fluttering dark lashes, faded lipstick on gently parted lips, small hands curled up under her chin, the messy strands of blonde hair. It filled my soul more than any meal ever could, even though it was stolen. I was thankful for it. The pain in my arm dulled as I watched Adelaide. I wanted her closer, curled up next to me, but I would take anything, any scrap, any crumb.

"I got a letter from my birth mother." The words traveled over to her, tentative. Adelaide's inhaled sharply, telling me she hadn't been sleeping at all.

“Your birth mother? What did she—never mind...” Adelaide launched up before trailing off, her nose hiking toward the ceiling. She didn’t want to ask because that would mean she cared. I cleared my throat, determined to tell her any way.

“It was an apology. She explained why she had given me up and hoped that we could reconcile one day. She is married now and has two daughters. I have half-sisters.” The idea of me having siblings was something I still hadn’t processed. I’d received her letter just before Antoni Orazio’s men put me in the hospital. Everything went on hold while I waited to see if they would use my family against me. Being in Adelaide’s life wasn’t a danger to just me. He’d threatened my mother and her family as well. Another secret I’d kept from Adelaide.

“Are you going to meet them?” Adelaide asked softly, unable to help her curiosity.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and winced as it moved my arm. “She was only fifteen when I was born. Her parents threatened to throw her out if she kept me. She said she thought about me all the time but had so much shame about abandoning me.”

Adelaide’s hand pressed to her stomach. And I know she was thinking when her chance to be a mother was stolen from her.

“You should. At least one meeting,” Adelaide urged, giving me a brittle smile.

“Would you come with me, maybe? I’d love for her to meet my soulmate,” I grinned. Adelaide made a disgruntled noise, folding out of the chair.

“Ex-girlfriend. You can explain to her why you broke up with me.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. I loved the flush of red that filled her cheeks. There were so many reasons we had broken Adelaide’s heart. I wanted to tell her the full truth, but the enormity of it caught in my throat. What if she heard our story and thought us pitiful? Realized her father was right about us all along? Worse, what if she didn’t believe us?

“Is my wallet here?” I asked, remembering something.

“In the cupboard,” she replied, looking annoyed afterwards.

Hope swelled in me.

“There should be a slip of paper inside. It’s for you.”

Adelaide rummaged through the cupboard with a stiff back. I watched as she slowly unfolded the paper and read what I’d written. I’d been prepared to give it to her when I’d crashed her ‘date’.

Teppanyaki at Sese and a drink (or two) at the rooftop bar next door. I’d sent her one a week for each date she went on with Ray. I could do better than him, and I would. Now that two months were up. I bit back a curse as the door creaked open, startling Adelaide. Ray walked through, white teeth flashing, a look I didn’t trust at all.

Adelaide



“I found some friends,” Ray said, stepping to the side to reveal Logan, Briar and Lara. And Beck Goldman, the new police chief. The latter strode in like a panther released from a cage. I clamped down the surge of adrenaline and kept my face stony. He latched onto Jesse with a grim smile.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake, Mr. Stokes. I have some questions for you.” He pulled his phone from his pocket in readiness. Jesse waved a limp hand, seeming exhausted all of a sudden.

“I’m not quite up for questioning. My throat is still healing,” he rasped, rubbing his neck. The Chief’s eyes flashed with frustration. Jesse was a good actor. I’d give him that.

“You only sustained a graze on your arm, correct?” He scowled, eyes flicking to the bandage on his arm. He continued to rub his throat, reaching feebly for the glass of water perched on the side table. Lara wandered over and pressed it into his hand with a smothered grin. I swallowed past a lump in my throat at the white material wrapped around his arm. I’d spent five years making sure my world didn’t touch them, but it hadn’t helped. My neck ached, the shallow cut there a constant reminder of the attack.

“You want to speak to your friends, perhaps?” Lara prompted, looked down at Jesse. “Maybe I can keep you

company for half an hour, Chief. Jesse might feel up for questioning then?”

Ray tried to interrupt, but I clamped a hand on his arm. Logan and Briar had shuffled close to me, and Briar had a strange, slack jawed, euphoric expression on his face. The energy exuding off him was unnatural. I wanted the chief out so I could work out what was going on.

“Thanks Lara, that would be such a great help.” Jesse beamed at her, speaking normally. His injured act dropping for a moment. Beck grumbled as Lara ushered him to the door.

“So, he can speak? It’s obstruction of—” his indignant tone trailed off as Lara led him away. Jonah poked his head in with a pinched expression.

“Boss, should I make sure Lara is safe? You have two other men out here.” His fingers fidgeted with the door. I waved him off. Whoever had attacked me wouldn’t try again tonight. Not with the hospital crawling with our men.

“Good idea. Make sure that slimy cop doesn’t get any ideas,” Ray added, shoving his hands in his armpits to contain them. Jonah closed the door, and the room suddenly felt suffocating.

“Adelaide,” Briar breathed. “You’re here.” He inched forward, breathing shallowly like he didn’t want to spook me. The gold flecks in his eyes shone like glitter.

“I was just leaving.” I didn’t give him anything. All my vulnerable parts were behind thick armor. “Can you organize a ride, Ray?”

I fiddled through my bag, tucking in the note Jesse had given me. Bizarrely, Briar dropped to his knees in front of me, looking up with glossy reverence and wonder. His fingers inched out to fondle my calf. The unwelcome touch sent a frisson through my body, as if my skin recognized its match. He’d faded in the two months since I’d seen him. His brown curls disheveled. There were new lines on his face I hadn’t seen before. They were sunken hollows casting bitter shadows.

“Aw Jeez,” Logan muttered under his breath, marching over to haul Briar away, but the wiry man latched onto my legs. His fingers dug in with determination and he grunted as I attempted to shake him off.

“Get. Off. Me.” I spat, his touch grazing too close to something I’d rather forget. Pain and comfort in a twisted, broken mix.

“Let go of her Briar, please. We’re here to see Jesse and maybe we can get you checked out.” Logan slipped his hand on Briar’s collar and tried to tug him off. Ray let out an amused chuckle. Briar didn’t budge, gazing up at me like he was my supplicant. I was used to seeing Logan on his knees for me, but with Briar it was usually the other way round. Adoration lit his worn features.

“You’re so beautiful, so perfect,” he breathed.

I stared at him, forehead furrowed, trying to pick past the strange air that surrounded him. Logan apologized, tugging at Briar like he was a wayward dog. What was going on right now? He didn’t seem to register my unease at all. Briar was always affectionate, but even he must understand how this wasn’t right.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked. Pinching Briar’s chin in my fingers and wrenching his head up. He let me, a moan escaping his lips. Shock had me digging my nails in and I thought that would break through the giddy facade, but he only closed his eyes in pleasure. Briar might have been my sweetheart, but he didn’t get on his knees or submit. Ever. My stomach roiled at the sight, warning blaring through me.

“Briar.” Logan shook his head. “Come on, man. Sorry Adelaide, but I think he’s been drugged somehow. I have no idea what, but it hit him on the way here. He wanted to hold my hand and said it hurt when I refused.”

Ray froze, narrowing his eyes at Briar. All traces of amusement were gone. I cocked my head at him, alert to the change in mood. His shoulders rose in silent defense, as if he knew I noticed his change in demeanor.

“Poke your tongue out,” Ray ordered, almost vibrating with tension. Briar shot him a venomous look.

“I’m not doing a thing for you. I hate you,” he argued. Venom vibrated off him and my calves ached from the desperate clutch of his fingers.

“Show me your tongue, Briar.” I forced my stiff lips into a sweet smile. The enmity melted, and his tongue slipped between his lips immediately. The skin was fluorescent pink, like he’d been eating sweets. Ray reeled back, cursing under his breath. I frowned at him, reaching out to pat Briar on the shoulder absentmindedly.

“You can put it away now.” I stared expectantly at Ray. My stomach sank as he tugged on his hair.

“What’s going on?” Jesse complained. Logan glanced over and shrugged. All of us waited for Ray. His hand wrapped around the back of his neck, and he massaged it, but the stiffness remained.

“Ray,” my tone was laced with warning, and he sighed as if in pain.

“His tongue is pink,” Ray waved a hand, as if that explained anything. Briar’s fingers crept up to squeeze my knee, like he hadn’t registered Ray’s words at all.

“I love you so much, Adelaide,” Briar interrupted, still on his knees. I clicked my tongue, ignoring the flash of pain that followed his impassioned statement.

“Not now, Briar,” I shushed him but let my hand drop to rest on his shoulder. He sagged under my reluctant touch, dopey ecstasy melting him into silence. “What is going on? I don’t trust that face.”

Ray groaned, his eyes shifting to the ceiling. Frustration gnawed at me as he gnashed his teeth, unwilling to share what he knew.

“The fluorescent shade of pink? It’s a side effect of a drug called Cupid.” Ray flinched under my darkening glare. There was no drug called Cupid that I knew of. And there wasn’t a drug in Greenwich Bay that I didn’t know. I stood, crowding

him, my finger coming to press against his chest. Briar was still attached to my leg like a toddler.

“Explain Ray, quit stalling. I’ve never heard of a drug called Cupid, which is strange, given my heritage,” I hissed. The words were like a wire noose around Ray’s neck. He gulped.

“It’s our own creation. But it’s still in the lab. I don’t know how your boyfriend could have ended up on it. Where did he get dosed?” Ray looked at Logan, but I wasn’t done. My finger turned into a fist, and I slammed it on his chest with a growl. My ribs ached from the pressure pushing down on them, lungs pinched for oxygen.

“Are you kidding me right now? How am I meant to clean your reputation up if you’re flooding the streets with shoddy product?” My exasperated exhale whistled through the room.

“I don’t know,” Ray shouted, his hands gripped his head in panic. “Obviously, there has been a breach somewhere. But it seems mighty coincidental for all this to happen when someone tried to shoot us both. I’ll sort it out, but this needs to be kept quiet. Especially with his holiness out there, breathing down our necks.”

He meant Chief Goldman, and my shoulders crowded my ears. He was salivating for any reason to haul us to the station. This would be the perfect crime to implicate our families and unravel all my hard work. Ray sidestepped me as I glared. Briar tangled his fingers around the hem of my shirt, but I ignored his plaintive looks. This wasn’t Briar, this was a drug.

“I’ll come with you. If there is more of Cupid out there, we can combine our efforts to get it off the streets. This is the last thing we need right now.” I hooked my bag over my shoulder. I didn’t trust that Ray would do this right and there were too many variables to gamble right now. But Ray sighed, looking at me apologetically.

“Well, about that.” His smile was sheepish as he nodded toward Briar. “You’re going to need to stay with this one until it wears off. There’s a reason it’s still in the lab.”

Briar's face lit up with a beatific smile as my whole body stiffened.

"You've got to be kidding me. What do you mean, I need to stay?" Prickles stabbed at my skin, leaving a path of fire that threatened to explode. Ray's stupid face was looking like prime real estate for my fist. He gave me another sheepish look.

"Cupid amplifies feelings of attraction, love, and even friendship. It floods the user with endorphins and drives them to be close to the object of their desire. They become like a missile, locking in on the object of love. Unfortunately, it seems to create sickness, especially around someone the user doesn't like. Physical touch with someone they love can help manage the pain. Clearly Briar still loves you deeply, given his reaction." He gave me a loaded look. His lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile, but my thunderous glare wiped it clear. Briar pulled himself up and the warmth of his chest pressed against my back. Goosebumps erupted as his breath whispered against my neck. I couldn't stop the influx of worst-case scenarios that hijacked my mind.

Briar with a foaming pink mouth.

Briar alone and writhing in pain.

Briar calling out my name as he spat up blood.

I flexed my shaky hands to try and circuit break the hounding images. A breath shuddered out of me.

"Was this your stupid idea? How was that ever going to work?" I jabbed at Ray out of frustration.

"It's still being tweaked. Look," Ray sighed, his hand twisting the doorknob. "It's better for everyone if you stay close. He'll have a loose tongue for a while, another side effect. Might be an opportune time to ask questions."

I gazed at Briar, drowning in the desire and adoration that beamed out of his sapped face, and gave in.

Adelaide



I tucked my feet under my ass and scrolled on my phone. Anything to stop looking at Briar. His warmth filtered through me on the couch. My lungs hurt from the pleasure I derived from it. I didn't want this weakness. I shouldn't get enjoyment from his closeness. My fingers tightened around my phone, and I bit down on my bottom lip. The sharp spike of physical pain was enough to distract me from the overwhelming emotional hurt. As soon as this experimental drug wore off, I would leave. I examined him from the side of my eye. Briar's head tipped to the ceiling and his forehead creased slightly like his thoughts were fitful. Anchored by our entwined fingers. His curls had the faintest scent of his shampoo. How many times had we held hands like this? So natural, like puzzle pieces cut for each other. But I couldn't think about it. Too much had changed. He'd quietened down since we started touching. Unbelievably, Ray's advice had worked. Being in my old apartment was rough against my nerve endings. It felt like a lifetime ago that I'd sat on this very couch and had my heart ripped out. The agony was muted, time washing over and numbing the sting. But I didn't forget, and I certainly didn't forgive.

Yet. Here I was.

The glare of the screen taunted me. My stomach swooped like I was looking at something illicit. Instead, it was scores and scores of messages from Logan. Gnawing curiosity had

consumed me after the comment Jesse had thrown out. About him sending me messages. I'd unblocked his number, determined to scoff and harden my heart even further. Instead, it had the opposite effect. It was like a travel journal. He'd sent photos of a myriad of places, punctuated with brief descriptions. I stared at a beautiful photo of winding grapevines, with the sun setting behind them. The light streamed golden through the thick greenery, making it seem enchanted.

You would love the Sauvignon Blanc at this winery siren. I've bought a bottle to share, and I'll send it when I get back. The hotel I stayed at has high tea with macaroons, and you can get extra pillows. I checked x.

Clearly, the shooting had skewed my emotions somehow. Otherwise, I would never have allowed my heart to flip. I scowled in the low light of the phone. He'd been sending these messages for months, always describing what I'd like about each place. It was deceptively simple, but every few sentences he wrote showed me he had been thinking of me, and of how well he knew me. Frustration bubbled in my throat, and I swallowed audibly past a knot. The past two months had bled away, like water down a drain. I didn't give myself a chance to contemplate the organ thumping in my chest. It had been bad enough with Jesse. The persistent flowers and absurd date ideas he sent every time I met with Ray rankled. Each new flower bunch went straight in the bin, and I wouldn't acknowledge the stack of cards I'd tucked in my bottom drawer. I tossed my phone to the side with a huff. Was this the start of a new torture? Jesse had mentioned that two months were up, and he was coming for me.

When I'd tossed out the date, it had been out of desperation. My thick walls had been crumbling, and I needed space before I fell apart. I knew they wouldn't leave until I gave them something.

But I hadn't expected them to wait. I thought they would get used to life without me and realize they were better off. I knew

I was. *Liar*. I shook my head and clenched my jaw. It didn't matter.

They could fight all they liked. I wasn't about to let them in again. When it mattered, they had chosen money. Clenching my jaw, I glared at Logan as he sprawled over the couch opposite us. I should just leave, get out of here, but I couldn't make myself. I was wary of what reaction Briar might have, but a small part of me was soaking up the feeling of closeness. This was my secret weakness. I was still trying to kill the love I had in my heart for these men, and it was harder than I expected. I tried to smother it with anger, that I had in spades. But it made me sick too. It was exhausting clinging to the rage, especially late at night when I just ached to be held.

What I still couldn't understand, was why?

It made little sense and the number of times I'd turned the question over in my mind was dizzying. I just wished I could cut the love I still held out of my chest so I could move on and forget them. Briar squeezed my hand. His eyes still closed, he murmured.

"Don't you want to ask me anything?"

Logan slid me a loaded look as I clicked my tongue. Did I? What if the answers made the mess in my chest even worse? My hand was clammy in Briar's snug hold, but he didn't seem to notice.

"What could you say that would fix this?" I whispered. Omitting some of the truth. These men held my heart in a prison, and I didn't want to give them any opportunity to reach in and cause more damage.

"You can ask me anything, siren. I'm not drugged, but I'll answer."

Logan chimed in, and I sighed.

"You know, the last time I sat on this couch, I thought you were going to ask me to marry you. I can't understand why you would make such a reckless choice. All those years destroyed, for what? That's the part I can't understand. Why?" My voice cracked.

Briar made a noise of regret and turned his body into mine, earnest devastation in every line. My lower lip trembled, and I caught it with my teeth. Was it possible for a person's chest to crack open? The pressure made it difficult to breathe.

“Orazio orphans. Leeches. Punchbag parasites,” Logan reeled off a list of words. “Just some of the g-rated names we've been called. Some whispered. Some said right to our faces. Your father encouraged it. You know he famously disapproves of us. From the second you claimed us, he's been trying to break us apart. We were the dark stain that marked Orazios golden girl. What we did was the worst decision we've ever made. One I will regret all my days. But it was born of desperation. We took everything, the insults and beatings. But hurting you wasn't a decision we made lightly. It felt like the only option.”

My stomach twisted at his admission. What were they talking about? My father had always been hard on them, but he wouldn't do this. He didn't approve, but I'd always assumed it was the thought of his little girl with three guys that made him squeamish. Not that they didn't have a name, legacy, or wealth. Logan noticed my look of disbelief and shook his head, jaw clenched.

“Why didn't you tell me?” I accused.

“Family is everything to you. Your father is your hero. Honestly, Adelaide, we weren't sure you would believe us. If we told you and you had to choose between your family, your legacy or us? Would we really be your choice? All three of us still feel like we aren't good enough for you. We were afraid you might decide this was too hard. You wanted something conventional. So, we kept quiet, but it never stopped. It just got worse. Your father said the only way he would ever accept us was if we proved we were worth your love. That we didn't just take from you like parasites. His girl deserved a partner who could build their own empire, rather than bleed you of yours.”

My view of the world perforated, splitting at his crushed shrug. His daring gaze left me speechless. My tongue was thick and dry in my mouth.

I couldn't imagine my father ever saying something like that.

"Did he tell you this himself?" I cleared my throat. Logan shook his head with a derisive snort.

"His goons made it very clear that we were beneath his notice."

"How long has this gone on?" I wondered, and Briar squeezed our joined hands again.

"Before we even officially started anything together. We had visits from big bastards warning us to stay away from you, that you weren't the girl for scum like us. Remember when Jesse broke his nose? We said it was from boxing. But he'd been blindsided. Another set of guys your father sent to scare us away from you," Briar's voice sounded dreamy despite the brutal words he was relaying. I let out a strangled gasp. I remembered the day like yesterday. Jesse's nose had been swollen and his eyes blackened like a panda. He'd laughed it off, and I'd nursed him with tender devotion, my chest aching after seeing one of my guys hurting. It had been the moment I'd known I was falling in love with them all. Danger was a part of my life, and for the first time it had occurred to me it could touch them. Never had I suspected that it was already dogging their steps.

"I didn't know," I whispered, wondering how many other times they had hidden things like this from me. Nausea swooped around my stomach. I remembered every discolored mark on their skin through a different lens.

"Remember when Jesse was mugged?" Logan's gaze was intense.

A gasp strangled in my throat, and I massaged the tight column.

"I remember. But you're not saying..." I shook my head, unwilling to believe my father could do this.

"We didn't want to be a burden on you. People already talked about always needing our woman to sweep in and save us. It would have only exacerbated things."

“I would have listened,” I protested, lurching forward in frustration. But my thoughts curdled. What would I have done if they told me? Logan shook his head with a bitter smile. He could tell how the news disturbed me. How confused I was.

“All we ever wanted was a future with you. This gym became our way to get it. Your father would see we were successful in our own right. And yes, we were desperate and stupid, but the beatings never stopped, they only escalated. So, we kept secrets, we let fear drive us.”

“You could have told me.” The words were a hoarse whisper. Briar whimpered next to me, like he could feel the pain tearing me apart. I got my answer, but it hadn’t made anything better. It was sinking me deeper into agony.

“You’re right, we should have let you take care of it, like you always do. We should have let you protect and coddle us while your men snicker behind your back. Pride is a mighty armor for those who have nothing. We were trying to break the cycle. To prove we could be your equal. Instead, we got played.” Logan slumped onto the couch, pinching his nose. My fingers itched with the need to refute him. I’d never seen them as anything but my equals. But I realized not everything was as I believed.

If I’d let them be a part of my life fully, this would never have happened a part of me whispered with a spiteful twist to my stomach. They would have known who Harold Donato was immediately. But I’d let them be led like a lamb on a leash, straight into a wolf’s mouth.

“Logan? Can you get my book?” Briar nosed my arm. Logan left the room, and I looked down at Briar who was staring up at me with an expression of such contentment. I wish I could feel the same way, but being this close to him was torture for me. The hurt was ever present. It made all the sweetness of his touch sour. But I couldn’t look away from his face. They’d been hurt because of me. I’d tried so hard to keep my world from brushing against them, but it hadn’t helped. Another thought popped into my mind, one that had shaken me ever since I saw him and Nicole at the bar. In the light of

everything that had been admitted, it seemed miniscule. But I needed to know.

“Did you ever cheat on me?” I broke the silence.

“*Never*,” Briar hissed, raising until his nose was inches from mine. Regret cooled his anger. “Not deliberately. But I betrayed you, Adelaide. Nicole was only ever a friend in my mind, but I dismissed your feelings repeatedly. I never, ever felt love or desire for Nicole, or anyone else. I have made many mistakes, but I’ve never stopped loving you. The whole reason I’m in this—” Briar yelped as Logan smacked him on the head with a worn exercise book. He shoved it in front of Briar and gave him a loaded look I couldn’t interpret.

“Tell her about the letters,” Logan urged, and Briar blinked before looking down at the exercise book. “We’ve all been respecting your wish for space, waiting for it to be over. Briar is a complete idiot, but he’s your idiot. Read these letters before he tells you anything else.”

I held the book gingerly, putting it to one side with a look of suspicion. A wave of exhaustion crashed over me. I didn’t have the capacity to delve into any heavier confessions of an ex-boyfriend, even though the journal called to me.

“Please read it. In your own time, of course. It won’t make up for what I did, but I hope it will give you answers to questions you have,” Briar whispered.

I hummed under my breath, knowing that as soon as I was alone, I would devour it. Something that might soothe the gaping wound inside me? A clean break didn’t seem to lessen my feelings at all. Seeing their faces, especially in this space, which used to be ours, was a sledgehammer to the heart. Instead of running, maybe I needed to desensitize myself instead.

Exposure therapy.

“We miss you, siren,” Logan sighed from across the room. I bit back the words that rose in me. Weak hearts could be hardened. I might have missed them too, but I wasn’t about to admit it. His beard twitched as a slight smile crossed his face.

“You know, yours is the only touch I can handle. Being shot and drugged is out. Any suggestions? What would pull on your heartstrings the most?” he teased.

I let out a half laugh, half sob, shaking my head.

“I hate that this is how we ended,” I admitted, my walls turning brittle under the pressure.

“This isn’t the end, siren, I refuse to let it be,” he promised. The humor in his expression was replaced with intensity. Briar mumbled under his breath, and I looked down to see his eyelids drooping. Was the drug wearing off? I wanted to get out of here and recuperate. I was feeling far too weak, too swayed by their pretty words. But words were empty.

“What changed?” I asked, needing to know. “You were too afraid to tell me before, so much so that you made a deal with my family’s rival. Why are you so willing to fight for me now?”

“We were afraid if we told you, you might not believe us. Or worse, agree. Stupid us believed we could do it all on our own. But we ruined everything any way. Now we have nothing to lose. Siren,” Logan demanded, and I narrowed my eyes. “I’m yours, body, soul, heart. If it takes the rest of my life, I’ll prove it to you. Nothing is worth losing you.”

I sighed. Those words would have been everything a year ago. Now they were a testament to how far we’d fallen. The shrill echo of my phone saved me, and I snatched it up, hoping it was news about the shooter.

“Addy? Are you still with Briar?” Lara’s voice wobbled through the speaker. I gently jostled Briar as I sat up. He didn’t react, slumping into the couch further. I missed his warmth.

“What is it?” I bit out, not able to soften my brusque demand. Logan scooted to the end of the couch, frowning. I waved him down, there was nothing he could do, even if I allowed him to. “Isn’t Jonah with you?”

I had insisted Jonah accompany Lara back to her apartment after she sweet-talked Chief Goldman. She’d turned his attention convincingly enough that he hadn’t questioned why

Briar had been hanging off me as we exited the hospital. I owed my best friend.

“I’ve been trying to contact Ray for hours and he didn’t reply. After the shooting, I was on edge...” Lara’s voice wobbled again. I stiffened, on high alert. Not much affected my friend. She was a tough bitch.

“What?” I ordered, the back of my neck tingling. Had the Chief been intimidating Lara? She’d always taken my world in stride, existing on the edges but understanding how the danger lurked, always a threat.

“It doesn’t matter,” her breath hitched. “I’m not calling because of that. There’s a package that’s been delivered here. It’s addressed to you.” Lara’s voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s leaking, Addy, dripping red.”

“I’m coming,” I answered, rising from the couch like I’d been levitated. My pulse galloped in my ears for a moment, and I paused, shoving threads of emotion into the box deep inside me. I couldn’t be distracted right now. I needed to turn everything off.

Someone shot at me tonight.

Now they were leaving possibly bloody packages on my doorstep.

Nobody threatened Adelaide Orazio. They were about to find out why.

Adelaide



The lady's hand had been to a nail technician recently. She'd chosen a peach color, with white tips. Too bad someone had severed it from her body. Those responsible had nestled it on a bed of dried roses, just to give it a dramatic twist. Someone had taken great care to make it seem gruesome. It happened recently if the liberal spray of blood leaking from the packaging was any sign.

How did I know it was real?

Because Ray dipped his pinkie in it and tasted it.

"You're a feral creature." I wrinkled my nose at him. "Why, just why?"

He widened his eyes in bewilderment. I was crowded around the sagging box in Lara's kitchen with Ray and my father. I made a mental note to put a call into our cleaner. The red stain on her marble countertop was unacceptable.

"What? It smelled sweet, and we can't exactly call up the police for confirmation."

I rolled my eyes and looked at my father. He shrugged. The wrinkles in his face creased while his eyes danced.

"I would have done the same thing."

"See Adelaide?" Ray chuckled, and I slapped him on the shoulder. I'd raced home after peeling Briar's sleeping form

off me. As soon as I saw what was in the box, I'd called Ray. He'd answered immediately, something which had dimmed the light in Lara's eyes. Ray was in my shit books for now until he could explain what had happened between them.

"Quit joking around, this is serious," I admonished him, and my father's smile grew.

"Ahhh, you two have the same chemistry as my parents. I guess there is truth to the rumors about your romance, after all."

I choked and wheeled around, giving Ray a panicked look.

"Not if the note they left has any say in it," I recovered, shivering at the handwritten note. An angry, black slash through thick cream cardstock.

Hands Off.

Whoever sent this obviously objected to Ray and me 'dating' and thought this message would scare me off. Even if I had actually been dating him, it wouldn't have worked. Being told what to do usually resulted in me doing the opposite.

"Severed limbs couldn't keep me from proposing again." Ray sent me a leery wink.

"A marriage union joining our families? After the debacle at the hospital?" My father made a derisive snort from his perch. I wasn't surprised that my father already knew what had happened. Jonah was lurking in the shadows behind us. He or one of the other guards would have told my father everything. Including me leaving with my ex's. I wonder what he thought about that? I hadn't asked him about what Logan had told me yet. There were too many conversations I needed to have and not enough time. Including why Lara was currently holed up in her room, eyes red-rimmed from more than just the macabre package left on her doorstep. She couldn't move fast enough when I confirmed Ray was on his way over. I needed time to dig deeper into that. When my life stopped being threatened, I suppose.

“Do you want me to check on her?” Jonah muttered in my ear. I gave him a narrow-eyed look, but he gave me nothing.

“What’s with the interest in Lara suddenly?” I replied. His cheeks dusted a light pink and his jaw tightened, but he didn’t give me an answer. “Fine, check on Lara, but don’t push her.”

Ray watched him go with stiff, blatant jealousy.

“Whatever you’ve heard is probably exaggerated. Next time keep your—” Ray turned his bottled venom onto my father, gearing up to say something he’d regret before I cut him off.

“Enough,” I hissed. “I have had the worst day imaginable, and I need this sorted. It’s not a coincidence that they sent this the night we were both shot at. They might have hit me if Jesse hadn’t pushed me aside.”

Amazingly, my father looked to the floor, chagrined, and pulled his phone out to make calls. I huffed a breath, rolling my eyes at Ray, who was biting his fist in a mock show of awe. My phone pinged, and I flipped it over.

Are you ok, siren?

I growled. Why did I unblock Logan again? I didn’t want reminders of them. Not when I was dizzy with dwindling adrenaline. The thought of being in their arms was too appealing. I looked at the clock. It had just turned midnight. I wondered if Jesse was feeling alright in the hospital. Today demolition was starting on Calder Place. I tasted regret, bitter in the back of my mouth. So many memories were about to be destroyed, but I needed it. Perhaps it would kill some of the love my heart was clinging to.

“Fill me in Raimondo,” I barked at Ray, who was laughing under his breath.

“Raimondo, is it? She’s in a mood.” He sobered when I leveled him with a deathly glance. “Nothing yet, but I’ve got our best on it, just as I’m sure you do. The bandana could have been Crimson Claw Riders, but I don’t want to jump to any conclusions yet. Did Briar tell you where he might have accessed Cupid?”

I flushed. It hadn't occurred to me to question Briar about how the experimental drug had gotten into his system. The sight, smell and feel of him against me had short-circuited my brain. Stealing any logic it might have had.

"No, but add it to the list of coincidences from tonight," I sighed. "What did Harold have to say about it?"

Ray's fingers tapped erratically on the kitchen counter. "He's furious. The only good thing I've ever done is date you, apparently. If only he knew I hadn't even managed that." He muttered the last statement and flicked a quick look at my father, who was talking softly into his phone. "How is Lara?"

I slumped over the kitchen bench, giving up any pretense of control. I needed to be in bed hours ago. "Do you remember what I told you at dinner?" I blew out a sigh.

"This is different." His jaw clenched.

"I don't know anything except she seemed upset. But Lara will fill me in, so be prepared for me to ruin you." I stared him down until he looked away, cursing under his breath.

"It's complicated."

"Neutering a man is also complicated, but I'm sure I can work it out," I promised Ray, and he paled. "What could have changed in a few hours? You were begging me for information at dinner."

He didn't reply, and my father squeezed my shoulder.

"You need to sleep, my girl. This is being looked into, and you have Jonah and a handful of guys outside the building. Will you be alright here for the night at least?"

"Can you hang back for a moment?" I murmured. Exhaustion dug its claws into my back, but I wouldn't be able to succumb until I had answers about what Logan and Briar had told me. He gave me a curious nod and waited as Ray left. My phone lit up with another message from Logan.

We are here if you need us. Briar is sleeping and seems to be back to normal. In case you are worried.

A sense of relief freed my tight chest, and I scowled. I had been thinking about him, worried about him on a drug that I knew nothing about. Worried for Jesse, laid out and wincing from the pain of the wound in his arm. Clearly, I was delirious.

“Adelaide. Talk to me.” My father leaned on a kitchen stool. It was late for him to be dealing with this kind of drama. I searched every well-loved line of his face, trying to imagine him being the ruthless man my ex’s accused him of.

“Did you ever beat Briar, Logan, or Jesse up for being with me?” I blurted out. His thick eyebrows bunched together. The clock on my microwave flashed out of the corner of my eye. It was set to the wrong time, static since a power outage. That was how I felt, in a state of limbo. My heart was on ice, but every breath sent waves of sadness crashing through me.

“Oh honey, I did what I thought was best. It was when you had first confessed it to me and I admit I didn’t react well. They didn’t listen, obviously. But I wasn’t about to let three upstarts stroll in and take advantage of your wealth and position. I needed to know if what they felt was real or if it was a scam. I won’t apologize for that.”

My stomach dropped to the floor, my hands coming out to steady me. It was true?

“You saying you’d never accept them until they bettered themselves was the reason they broke up with me. They were desperate after the last time one of your beatings put Jesse in the hospital. I can’t believe you would threaten Jesse’s family.” I shook my head in disbelief. Father straightened with a frown.

“Look, if they’re using what happened six years ago as an excuse for their stupid deal with the Donatos they deserve my ire,” he scoffed. “If you’d trained them sufficiently, they would have known who he was.”

My head whirled with his words. None of the pieces fit together, jagged and bent. No matter how I tried to puzzle them together, it made little sense. Exhaustion tugged my eyelids down.

“I’m talking about a year ago.”

“I gave them all a solid beating six years ago when it first became clear my only daughter was sneaking around with not one, but three unsuitable matches. They took it well and stuck around, which I give them credit for. Do I like them? Not particularly. You’re a woman in a man’s world, Adelaide. Your grandmother and your mom struggled to find their place, and they weren’t expected to take the reins. It’s your life, but for the men who follow you? It’s hard to swallow that their queen has three guys in her bed and not one of them can even shoot a gun.”

My nostrils flared, and I shook my head. I wasn’t about to have this argument with him again. There was a reason I kept them separate from my world. But someone wasn’t being honest, and I was too tired to argue any longer.

“Did they get sick of being on the fringes of your life? You moved on pretty quickly to pretty boy Donato. You dating him is giving Harold a swollen head but I’m unsure. Orazios fall hard. The moment I saw your mom in that supermarket, I knew I was going to marry her.”

There were suitable and unsuitable choices for partners in this world.

My mom was unsuitable. Unaware of the dark underworld that flowed in this city. She had been a cashier at the local supermarket and my father had been buying flowers for a date. His normal florist had closed, and the supermarket was a last resort. He believed fate guided him there, through the lane of a woman whose smile was like sunshine bursting through thick gray clouds. He never went on that date, knowing in his soul that my mom was the woman he was going to marry.

“Perhaps I’m an outlier,” I countered.

“Your grandfather fell from the first conversation he had with your grandmother. I didn’t even need a conversation to know your mom was the only one for me. We can’t stop this world from hurting the ones we choose to love.”

“Luckily, I don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

I refused to acknowledge his argument. I had fallen for my guys from the first time we met, lost in the bubble of Calder Place. My father gave me a pitying look, reaching out to cover my hand.

“If that’s true, why do you care if I threatened them? If it’s your mom—”

His words sunk into a place where I didn’t want them. A place that made my resolve waver and heart weep for the warmth of three men who fit perfectly around me. Let them frighten away the ominous press of dark thoughts of my mom.

“No, I don’t want to talk about her. I need to sleep. Can we save the lectures for when I haven’t been shot at?”

My father pulled me into a crushing embrace. His hands stroked my hair, and it made me feel like a little girl again. When his arms were the shield that protected me from the world. Now the only protection I had was myself, and it was lonely and heavy tonight.

“Whatever you want. Sleep well.” His lips ghosted over my forehead. He didn’t tell me he loved me. We hadn’t done that since I was sixteen, in the hospital and I begged him not to. But his lips whispered it against my skin and my heart pulsed in reply. The door clicked behind him, and I knew I should turn the lock but couldn’t make myself. Thoughts moved as if slathered in molasses. My hand slid under my shirt and my fingers coasted over the raised scars on my abdomen.

Six years I had tried too hard to keep my world from touching Jesse, Briar and Logan. A knot filled my throat. I didn’t want this life to taint them. It was harsh, dangerous and cruel. Scenarios raced in, crowding my weakened mind.

Briar crawling toward me, his fingers scrambling to put pressure on my stomach.

“I love you.” His lips were glossy red. “I love you so much.” His hazel eyes turned wide and blue. Freckles painted the nose of a new face. My mom. The one face I tried not to think about. My teeth captured my bottom lip, clamping down.

“It didn’t matter, mom,” I muttered to the marble counter. “I couldn’t keep them safe. Just like father couldn’t keep you safe. I wanted it to be different. I didn’t want—” I trailed off, my shoulders hunching. The scars felt like insurmountable peaks I wouldn’t ever conquer. I dragged myself to Lara’s room and opened without thinking.

“Oh, my god.” I backed out and covered my eyes. “What the fuck?”

Lara had been straddling Jonah. Their mouths fused together hungrily. Still fully clothed, thankfully.

“Adelaide,” Lara gasped, and I heard a thump on the floor. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“You’re not eating the face off my bodyguard?” I peeked through my fingers to see a red-faced Jonah slipping down the hallway. Ray had been right about my guard, after all.

“Oh, get in here.” Lara grabbed my arm and pulled me in. Her back slammed against the shut door as she tried to tame her mussed hair. I eyed the rumpled bed distastefully, folding into her armchair instead. “Don’t look at me like that.” Lara’s hands covered her pink cheeks.

“I thought it was you and Ray?” I shook my head. “No judgement, obviously. I’m just surprised. I mean, Jonah?”

Lara threw herself on the bed and plumped a pillow nervously.

“You had a horrible night. You don’t want to hear this.” She ducked her head.

Lara looked freshly ravaged, but her eyes were also red rimmed, like she’d been crying. And under my perusal, they flooded with tears again.

“That’s it, I’m gelding Ray,” I promised, a violent undercurrent in my tone. Lara choked and clutched the pillow to her chest.

“No, please.” She wiped the tears. “It’s my fault. He was never going to end up with someone like me. Jonah found me crying, and he was comforting me.”

“Yes, I often comfort someone by shoving my tongue down their throat.” I raised an eyebrow as she flushed.

“No regrets. It’s been a weird night, with Beck and Ray? I’ll take Jonah’s comfort any day,” Lara sighed. “It’s nothing compared to what you went through.”

I was too tired to clock her using Chief Goldman’s first name. I didn’t want to talk about my night. Lara patted the bed beside her, and I slipped under the sheets with a groan.

“When I couldn’t get a hold of Ray, I was worried, so I called his papa. He outright accused me of trying to steal Ray away from you. He said I would never be good enough for his son and that you and he would announce an engagement soon.” She sniffled. “I don’t know when I fell for Ray. But he wouldn’t even pick up my calls. He sent me a text saying I shouldn’t have called his papa because he didn’t owe me anything.”

“Oh babe, I’m sorry. It’s been a stressful night. Let’s try to sleep and if he’s still an asshole tomorrow, I promise I will personally mutilate his genitals for you.”

Lara gave a wet chuckle, fingering the delicate necklace that ringed her throat.

“I feel so selfish. You’ve had the craziest night and you’re in here comforting me over boy troubles. I mean, kissing Jonah? What was I thinking?”

I didn’t answer, rolling over and pulling her into an embrace.

“I’m too tired to move. You’re going to have to put up with my snoring tonight.” My eyelids dragged down like cement in a river, drifting off in seconds. My phone lit up in the dark, but I didn’t pay any attention to it, dreaming of Calder Place and carving my initials into the wood.

Goodnight siren.

We love you.

We miss you.

Adelaide



I wished we'd never come to the beach. I should have trusted my gut and stayed home, but mom's pleading had swayed me.

"Stay with me, baby," her voice was wet, her hands pressing sharply into my stomach. I swallowed a noiseless scream. The pain was white hot, and it stole all logic and reason as I whimpered. Grains of sands like thousands of dark rubies, a garish treasure. Blood. So much of it. My eyes rolled backwards.

"No, keep your eyes open, Adelaide," her voice was like a whisper in the wind now, and I couldn't focus. Behind her, waves attacked the sand, foaming its fury. It's strange the things you notice when someone plunges a knife into your stomach. There was a gun an arms' length away from me and I scrabbled for it.

"You need to open your eyes," a voice reproached me, unmoved by the red stained sand. My head jerked, and I saw my grandmother behind my mom.

"How're you here?" I groaned, tears pricking my eyes at the sight of her. "You're dead."

She crouched down and frowned as her gaze swept over me. My grandmother was my mentor. She was as dangerous as my grandfather, and I had learned so much from her.

“I’m dying.”

My grandmother hummed in confirmation, her lip curling slightly at the hunched form of my mom as she staunched the wounds.

“You are. When you heal, you must promise to be more careful. I didn’t build my legacy so you could squander it with foolish choices.”

Sand scratched against my fingers as I dug them into the ground. I wanted to argue with her, to insist there was no way I could have guessed this outcome. The pain was blinding. I couldn’t move.

“W-when I heal?” I managed, confused. Wasn’t she here for me? My grandmother lay her hands over my mom’s slumped shoulders and her eyes glistened.

“Don’t hold it against her. She was always too pure for this world.”

I reached out, my shout carried away by a gust of wind that whipped sharp sand into my face.

When my vision cleared, my grandmother was gone and so was my mom.

“Adelaide!”

I jerked upwards, narrowly missing Lara’s head. My legs were tangled in sheets, and I kicked them off with a gasp. We were in Lara’s room. I must have fallen asleep beside her last night. The horrible, vivid dream played on a loop behind my blurry eyes.

“What is it?” I groaned. Jonah was hovering in the doorway, his hand at his waist.

“You were screaming in your sleep.” Lara smiled tentatively. “I couldn’t wake you.”

I threw my legs over the side and stood in one fluid movement. My fingers were shaking, and I knew what was coming. I needed to be alone. Jonah stepped to the side in an annoyed puff.

“Boss,” he growled.

“It’s nothing, just a bad dream,” I grumbled, slipping into the guest bathroom and locking the door. I turned on the tap, dangling my fingers in the cold water. Bloodshot eyes reflected in the mirror, and I ducked my head. Even if I closed my eyes, I couldn’t escape the barrage of thoughts that flooded me.

It was always blood. The thoughts that hijacked my mind weren’t real, but they felt like they were.

A silver blade glossy with red smears.

The sound like a punch as it sunk into my mom. Her body jerking on a silent cry.

An unsettled exhale clawed out of my throat. I lifted my shirt, where the raised scars tangled over my abdomen. They shimmered almost silver in the light, pale lilac, faded over time, but the pain was still fresh in my mind.

The thoughts pressed in. I made myself stare at my reflection, fingers inert in the frigid water. The ice of it shocked me, allowed the lines of pain to be gathered and stuffed away.

Logan’s eyes glassy as he lay in the sand.

Jerking backwards with the pop of a gun echoing in my ear.

I flexed my fingers, the slow stiff movements calming me. I hadn’t had intrusive thoughts like this for so long. But they were always worse when I was under stress. I whistled out a slow breath, restraining the exhale.

I needed control. Jonah thumped on the door again, a wordless check in. My cheeks flushed, and I pressed my icy fingers against them. My guard knew more than he should about how these thoughts affected me. I opened the door with a glare.

“Can’t I get a second alone?” I muttered, striding past his pursed lips.

“Do I need to make calls?” he persisted from behind me. Lara pushed over a glass of orange juice warily. I took a sip,

shoulders drooping slightly when the perfect burst of Orchard Hearth hit my tastebuds. My nostrils flared at Jonah's insinuation, and at the accuracy of his pointed words. Previously, whenever I'd had an intense bout of intrusive thoughts, I would reach out to one of my guys. The last time my thoughts held me in their tight grip like this was when I was convinced my father was going to be swept up in crime reform by Chief Goldman.

I couldn't call them. Even though every part of me wanted to.

Not one of them told me to get over it, to just try harder. They understood how hard it was for me. They all suffered in their own way, Jesse his need to protect at the expense of his safety, Logan being touched, and Briar trusting himself. But I didn't need them. I'd managed before I met them, and I would manage now.

"Like I said, it was a nightmare."

The oily lie was slick on my tongue, but I didn't need anyone worrying about me right now. I couldn't have them thinking I was weak.



My phone vibrated against my palm for the hundredth time this morning. My father wasn't happy with how we'd left our conversation last night and had been trying to reach me for hours. I shut it down with a sigh. I rubbed my eyes blearily, glaring at the hints of sun peeking over the horizon. Tormented by intrusive thoughts, I'd given in to the urge to read Briar's journal. Everything in my body felt heavy, like cement choked my veins.

He'd pressed so hard with his pen that bumps raised on the pages. I'd ran my fingers over them like braille, trying to absorb his confessions. He'd peeled himself open for my judgement. The words were rawer and deeper than I could have expected. I was too sleep deprived to process anything. Especially with the chaos I'd just walked into.

The Calder Place site was teeming with people, the steady rumble of trucks as they readied themselves to start clearing the lot. I adjusted the hard hat on my head.

“Tell me again.” I slanted a glare at the site supervisor, and his chest rose deeply as his eyes darted to the side.

“W-w-we didn’t realize anything was amiss until you came, Miss Orazio. Security said they’d alerted you last night and didn’t hear anything. They had the proper paperwork, so I figured it had been arranged in advance. It was getting demolished today. Honestly, it saved us a ton of time. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal?” My voice cracked like a whip and the site supervisor flinched. He scratched at his thick beard. “Someone accessed this site and took something that belongs to me. Not just anything, but a whole. Damn. Tree. Nobody heard or saw a thing? Get me footage and talk to Jonah about hiring more security. This project is not to be tampered with. Do you understand?”

I didn’t look my most imposing self with a hard hat on, but the man’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped, sufficiently cowed. My mask dropped as he scurried away, jerking his phone to his ear. I’d earned a sleep in after the night I’d had, but I couldn’t miss this. Picturing the tree that held mine and the boys’ carved initials falling to the ground had been heart wrenching, but it was necessary.

Everyone was here to work. They didn’t know they were getting ready to raze my history to nothing. How could these strangers understand that the ground they were steadily churning into mud had grown a love that I thought was forever? I crouched next to the severed tree trunk and swallowed the lump that was choking my throat.

The empty space of our tree split the fabric of my universe. For so long its branches had painted the sky and the gap it left was a hollowness inside of me as well. It seemed a silly thing, when the tree was going to be knocked down anyway, but I wanted to be here to watch it fall. Call it closure, or something deeper and weaker, but I had planned to be here, regardless. I

wanted to say goodbye in silence to the tree that was the heart of so many beautiful memories. My fingers itched to run over the initials we'd carved one last time. I hoped it might close the door that last night had jammed open again. One less link to my ill-fated love. But when I'd arrived, the tree was already gone. Someone had gone to the trouble of removing the tree in the middle of the night. The evidence of our history? Stolen. Who would have bothered? Jesse was in the hospital, Briar drugged and Logan busy being their caretaker. There was no way they could have organized this.

Could they?

But why would anyone else bother? The tree only meant something to the four of us. To the rest of the world, it was a gnarled footnote.

I felt robbed of my closure.

How was I meant to say goodbye now?

Adelaide



I looked at my security guard impatiently. He filled the doorway, hands tucked behind his back.

“And is there a reason you’re imparting this information to me, Jonah? As far as I was aware, you work for me.” I glared at my faithful protector. His jaw tightened as my words lashed at him.

“I figured it was unlikely you wanted to see his face,” he argued. “I’ve spoken to him, and he’ll apologize to Lara.”

I clasped my hands together and leaned over my desk. It wasn’t so long ago that Jonah was staring Ray down with a death stare. Now he was having chats with him about divvying up time. Since when did he become Lara’s mouthpiece? There was more to this story, but I didn’t have the energy to delve deeper. I knew Ray would be busy chasing down information, but I didn’t think a few threatening messages would have him turn tail. It had been a week since Jesse was shot, and the hand turned up on my doorstep. He should have expected it. Jonah might be on good terms with Ray, but I wanted a face-to-face explanation.

“Now you can swoop in and pick up the pieces. Was that your plan?” I raised my eyebrows. “In the future, don’t presume for me.” I flicked my glance back to the screen I was working on. A silent dismissal.

“My apologies, boss.” Jonah left with a stiff back. I blew out a sigh. All I ever heard these days was sorry and none of them helped my mood in the slightest. It wasn’t fair to take it out on Jonah. I knew that, but I couldn’t stop myself from scowling and snapping at everyone except Lara. I ground my teeth, frustrated that I wouldn’t be able to take out the clawing emotion on the Donato heir. I settled for sending Ray a brief text.

Coward ☐☐☐

I watched with a predatory smile as the three dots blinked and disappeared. That’s right, fucker, you should be scared. It was quiet on the streets, and it was just eye roll inducing. My guys had spotted two Crimson Claw Riders, but they’d taken the freeway around Greenwich Bay, heading further north. It wasn’t suspicious enough, but my father was convinced they were responsible. So many things were left unresolved, and the mounting tension was turning me into an ogre. Suddenly no-one in Greenwich Bay seemed to know a thing.

It had absolutely nothing to do with Jesse being released from the hospital.

His injury hadn’t kept him from sending another bunch of stupid flowers, daffodils, and a note that read, *Jumping Jacks and Arcade*. Jumping Jacks was a trampoline park, apparently somewhere more frequented by six-year-olds. I grinned stupidly as I imagined a date there. Thankful I was in the privacy of my office so no-one could see my expression. Jesse and Logan would compete to see how high they could get, and Briar and I would egg them on. It was a ridiculous notion. So why couldn’t I wipe the grin off my face? At least they weren’t here to see it. Jesse had somehow gained access to my schedule, obviously thinking I’d still be going out with Ray, like I normally would have. I scowled at the sunshine blooms, the scent of them filling my office like it was spring. There was no escape. He wasn’t the only one plying me with gifts. Logan had sent gigantic boxes filled with individually wrapped presents. All the things he’d seen on his travels that

had reminded him of me. I hadn't opened many. His telltale terrible wrapping skills had made my chest ache. The gifts themselves? A hit in my stomach, leaving me winded. Each one had me sighing, sending me spinning at how well they suited me.

Mint silk scarf

Dark cherry chocolates in the shape of roses

A collection of pocketknives, including a gorgeous metal dragonfly keychain that flicked out a delicate blade.

It was enough to slay a girl. If she was anyone but me.

Each perfect little gift, each date card and flowers and each page of Briar's journal were twisting my insides. And yet I couldn't stop myself from looking.

The journal. Oh god, the journal.

I'd thumbed through the pages so many times they were bent. It wasn't fair when someone had the key to your heart, and they used it relentlessly. But I had no control. It was taking everything in me not to lose it. I got a sick sense of pleasure from reading the agony Briar was in. The misery poured off the pages. But it made me angry all over again. What right did they have to be sad? They had done this. They were the perpetrators. It was their stupidity that had us in this situation.

I could so easily call them and end this apology tour. I could forgive them, but how could we ever go back to the way things were? The only course I had was to get over this. Short of tearing my heart out, I wasn't sure how I could do it. It had been months and my heart still pined for them. Blind to the scars they left, certain that if I just gave in, they would heal it all.

I needed to get laid. Perhaps the saying was right, to get over someone (or three someone's in my case) I had to get under someone else. I hadn't even considered dating, and it was one hundred percent not the smartest decision.

But the sweet scent taunted me, and the drooping petals enraged me. I had to do something. If I didn't, I was going to

snap. My thoughts had been stable throughout the day, but there was a pulsing in the back of my mind. A heightened sense of fear that an episode of intrusive thoughts could hit me. I needed to do something drastic.

So, by the time the sun dipped low, I was walking into a restaurant to meet someone new. Bless vindictive best friends who are happy to organize blind dates. My stomach simmered with a low level of interest. Not nerves, almost agitation. I spotted my date immediately and snorted under my breath. He wasn't anything like my guys, which was a good thing. I wanted something new, something different.

Carl Girsen was a dentist and a marathon runner who had a penchant for houseplants. He'd buttoned his starch white shirt tight against his neck. He tilted his head like a hawk when I entered, but there was no commanding heat in his gaze. I smoothed my hands down my thighs when he fumbled to stand. His knee smashing the table and setting the glasses of water trembling. He was perfect for what I needed tonight. A distraction from being chased by the ghost of my past relationship. When I strutted over, his eyes warmed. They flicked up and down my form, smile widening.

Good. I didn't want to play games.

"Carl, it's lovely to meet you," I purred, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek.

"Adelaide, it is my pleasure. When Lara rang and mentioned a date with her best friend, I couldn't believe my luck. I know you live quite an exciting life, so I'm surprised you'd be interested in someone like me. You look beautiful." So, someone had been reading the news. I was used to being recognized, but his comment set me on edge. His fingers dragged over the back of my neck as he pulled my chair out for me. I shuddered, lips thinning, but accepted the menu he handed over.

"Do you like Thai?" He wet his lips with a drink of water, smacking them nervously. "I probably should have checked before I booked this place."

"I love it spicy." Carl's gaze dipped to my cleavage.

Good boy. This was what I wanted, wasn't it? My mouth filled with a sour taste, and I took a sip of water to wash it away. I was out with a good-looking, nice guy and I was going to enjoy myself. That was the plan. Until Carl opened his mouth again.

"Well, here I am. What are your other two wishes?" He winked. Any chance of us hooking up erupted in flames. His perfect pearly white teeth flashed like he'd won a prize.

"What was that?" I asked, hoping that cheesy line was a one off.

"If you and I were socks, we'd make a magnificent pair," he countered, chest puffing up. A chorus of low groans sounded from behind me.

"Please god, tell me you didn't just use that line on the absolute goddess sitting in front of you?"

My mouth fell open as Jesse, Logan and Briar circled the table, glares pinned on my date. They loomed behind him in silent threat. Carl shrunk under their perusal, casting me a look of confusion. My heart fluttered, traitorous bitch.

"What are you doing here?" I looked over my shoulder to glare at Jonah. I specifically asked him to keep these three away from me. He had the nerve to shrug, not seeing them as a threat, obviously. Or he was still put out from how I'd spoken to him earlier. Either way, he wasn't doing his job, but he didn't react to my frown.

"Rescuing you from this dismal date." Briar shook his head as he appraised Carl. His cheeks flushed under the intense scrutiny, and he swallowed audibly. Logan leaned over and whispered.

"Scram." Logan's lip curled in a snarl. Coming from such a large man, it would have been intimidating.

I rolled my eyes, swallowing an indignant noise as Carl didn't hesitate. He snatched his wallet off the table and raced away with his gaze scraping the floor. I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms as Logan slid into the vacant seat and the other two pulled up chairs. The intimate table was now

overcrowded, and I bit down on my lip as Jesse's leg pressed against mine. He was moving stiffly, and he had bags under his eyes.

"Make yourselves comfortable, why don't you?" I drawled, waving down a server to order a drink. It couldn't upset my stomach more than it already was, and I needed something to help me get through this ambush. Now Briar's leg was pressing against my thigh. Damn manspreading assholes. They boxed me in and the warmth from their contact bled into me. I didn't like it. *I didn't.*

"You didn't come to see me at the hospital again. The arm is healing well. In case you were wondering." Jesse pouted, and I pursed my lips. The server took my order, unperturbed by the change in the seating arrangements.

"I wasn't," my voice was sharp-edged with frustration. I'd gone on a date to forget about these three. How had I ended up in front of them? "I'd appreciate if you left. I was in the middle of something."

Logan leaned back, shaking his head like he couldn't believe me. Briar's hand twitched toward mine, as if he still had the right. They were the ones crashing into my life and making my heart thump until my pulse echoed in my ear.

"Oh siren, *that* was nothing but a red flag to a bull. Three of them, in fact. We accepted the dates with Ray because we all knew they weren't real. But that guy? You would chew him up and spit him out in seconds. Just look at how he ran the second someone used a tone on him. No, you need more than a clean-cut gentleman. You need three men who can take everything you throw at them and give it back double. If we have to scare off every date who tries to take what's ours, we will."

Their gaze was hot enough to blister my insides, and heat pooled in my stomach. The way they were looking at me, like I was theirs to devour whole? It had been so long since I'd been fucked and damn if it wasn't seductive. My pussy perked up, pleased with the idea. Nope, bad kitty.

"You stalking me now?" I feigned indifference. Jesse let out a guffaw, kicking his legs long.

“Princess, I never stopped. I watched every single time you went out with that slimy Donato heir and each time I sent you a do-over date, remember? Well, you might not recall, but this restaurant was on my list of dates I promised you. Isn’t that fortuitous? So here we are, guarantee you’ll enjoy it more than your cheesy date.”

My lungs burned as I fumed silently. This wouldn’t end here. I had been hoping space would ruin them for me, but what if it wasn’t possible? How easily I could get up and leave. I should. But we’d be right back to the beginning again. Them chasing and me fleeing. Maybe I needed a different approach. No one could ever say Adelaide Orazio was a coward. I was also hungry and, if I was honest, a little curious. I lifted my eyebrows, a silent invitation for him to continue. Which Jesse did, tripping over his tongue in surprise. I didn’t miss the sharp inhale Briar made either.

“T-this place does a degustation, but with a twist. All the dishes are Thai street food favorites.”

I perked up, rubbing my stomach reflexively. Briar gave me a wide smile.

“Knew you’d love that. We already ordered it when we walked in.”

“Presumptuous of you,” I murmured, distracted by the first dish being placed in front of me. *Poh Pia Tod* with a chili sauce that had Logan’s eyes widening. I smiled internally, tilting my head at the dish.

“Try some of the sauce,” I urged, as Logan looked at the other two for backup. “Don’t look at them. You wanted to crash my date, so you better try it.”

Logan had zero tolerance for anything chili related. Even the mildest of spice would have him sucking down water. He dipped one in the sticky sauce and took a huge bite, cheeks puffing out. Even though he chewed quickly, the heat still affected him. His cheeks flushed red, and I couldn’t help but laugh. They all froze, even Logan, choking on his fist.

“I’ve missed that sound,” Jesse said wistfully.

The food rolled in. The scent of spicy, delicious meals whirled around me. It was more than we could eat. The awkwardness fizzled as I gave in to the demands of my stomach. The beer I'd ordered loosened my shoulders. I leaned back in the chair and listened to the boys as they bickered.

"I don't remember that," Briar sniffed, his leg knocking into mine under the table. Jesse tossed a balled-up napkin at him with a scowl.

"Can you believe this guy, Logan? Two years of extra tutoring and he doesn't remember?"

"Yeah, you're the only one who graduated with a decent degree, so it must have helped you. I could barely string two numbers together with a calculator. Still can't." He held his fist out to Jesse, who bumped it with a smile. "They must have known it was a lost cause because lessons weren't ever offered to us."

"Alright, alright." Briar shook his head, a brown curl falling over his forehead. His grimace seemed deeper than the gentle ribbing warranted. There were hollow dips on his cheeks that I didn't remember. Briar pushed his cutlery on his plate, half bitten morsels left languishing. "I'm the smart one. Can we drop it now?"

"If you aren't smart, what does that make me?" I interjected. "I didn't go to college either."

"School can't teach you the skills you need. Anita was a better teacher than any school combined. That woman scared me so much." Logan shivered with a smile.

Anita, my grandmother. Her dark eyes never missed much, and Logan was right. I had learned more from my grandparents than any school could ever teach me. Especially how to be a woman in a world that demanded power and strength. She knew a dozen ways to poison someone. She and my grandfather were a lethal team, the pair who cemented the Orazio legacy in Greenwich Bay. On my eighteenth birthday, she'd gifted me a bracelet that unlocked a hidden needle. I could lace it with toxins and use it as defense, if needed. She found my boyfriends amusing, often taunting my grandfather,

Romeo, that she needed more husbands. They'd passed away within months of each other barely two years ago. The back of my eyes stung, and I took a drink to clear the knot in my throat. Logan's foot tangled with mine under the table. Jesse reached over and gripped my knee.

"Sorry princess, I know the anniversary is coming up soon." I focused on the firm grip of Jesse's hand on my knee, thoughts rising that I didn't want. But couldn't escape. I took a shuddering breath, needing to change the subject. Our connection soothed me, like my soul recognized theirs.

"It is." I could see they held back from pressing me, whether I would visit the greenhouse to pay my respects. It was going to be a challenging enough day without them there to support me. This dinner was a precarious balance. A truce for now. We finished with dessert, a banana pancake with condensed milk drizzled over the top.

"How was the recovery from Cupid, Briar?" I asked, and it was like I'd scratched my nails down a board. He winced and ducked his head, the other two stiffening. I was instantly on edge.

"Ray hasn't given me any updates. Do you know how you got dosed?" I added, the warmth that had built over the dinner slowly chipping away. Briar stared at the table, taking a fortifying breath before meeting my gaze directly.

"I know who gave it to me. It's a story that requires some explanation. Would you allow me to explain first, hold questions until the end? I don't want to keep anything from you, but this will sound bad."

He waited for my answer while the others glared mulishly at the tablecloth. Ok, so they knew what was going on. My heart rate kicked up a notch, not knowing what was about to come out of his mouth. I gave him a curt nod and Briar took a shuddering breath.

"I want to preface this by saying I love you, Adelaide."

He told me how he ended up drugged.

Nicole. Wine. Blouse. *My blouse.*

The words tripped off his trembling lips, color leeching out of his skin. Jesse squeezed my knee, and I shook his hand off. I was a fool, again. I'd sat through this lunch, nursing a warmth in my stomach that they didn't deserve. Nicole would have loved being in my old apartment, wearing my old clothes. Acid stung my throat, and I swallowed it down. How many more times would I let these men hurt me? The problem was my steel exterior was ineffectual against these three men. I had met them with my walls crumbling around me. They had slipped in the moment we locked eyes in Calder Place. I had always cherished it, felt it was fate, but now I wondered if it was a curse. No one else had the power to hurt me like they did. My heart thudded sluggishly.

"I let Nicole manipulate me. I didn't think." Briar's fist slammed into his thigh, and I would have laughed, but my throat was clogged shut. "Nothing happened, but she gave me that drug, hoping she could seduce me." He trailed off, noticing how I had frozen like shards of ice.

I hurt. My body ached as if his words had bruised me. Marring the tender, flimsy soul deep inside me. When would the indignities end? They'd torn my precious pride to shreds. How many times had I warned Briar about that woman? Each time he'd brushed it off, dismissed my concerns. He'd always held his time in the foster house up as his excuse. Nicole had been beside him in that dark time before he even knew me. I shook my head, drowning. Nicole had drugged him the same night I'd comforted him. If Cupid drew the user to the person they loved, it had backfired on Nicole. I dislodged the heavy knot in my throat with a thick swallow. The win was bitter. Nicole had proven me right in every way. No doubt she thought the drug would coax out long hidden desires.

But he'd come to me.

I'd held Briar, our hands wrapped around each other. He'd needed me on a cellular level, and if I was honest, I needed him just the same. I thought of the tormented pain in the journal, the raw honesty and regret he'd marked in ink. My pride was in tatters again. The bubble encasing our table was

mournful. They all knew the admission was not something I would smile and forgive.

I was Adelaide Orazio. Heir to the Greenwich Bay legacy. We didn't forgive in this family. We sliced under the knees of those who dared cross us. Until they were begging before us. My unreachable control snapped and the hurt I kept at bay flooded my body. My eyes stung and I looked at the ceiling, determined to maintain a steely facade. I reached into my purse and lay the dragonfly switchblade Logan had gifted me on the table with shaky fingers.

"Here, this will be quicker," my voice bled with hurt. The echo of it rocking through to the marrow of my bones. Briar knew. I wondered if he felt the level of hurt I did as he slumped in his chair. "Just cut out my damn heart next time."

"Siren—" Logan started. I cut him off. The blonde's nostrils flared, but his jaw clicked shut. Shadows sunk his features, anticipating my next comment.

"Briar wanted to tell me the night he was drugged, didn't he? But you cut him off."

Logan's face fell, confirming my theory. He didn't deny it. None of them had anything to say now. We were frozen in a twisted cycle of hurt. I needed to escape, so I could lick my wounds.

"The sick thing is this dinner felt right," my voice cracked. "I've missed you all so much and we couldn't even last through that without you fucking up."

I pressed a napkin to my lips, giving my shaky legs time to settle. Briar reached for me, but I shied away, the chair teetering on its legs as I stood forcefully.

"Please, Adelaide, I'm sorry. I've made a million mistakes. But I've never wavered in my love for you. I can prove it if you let me."

A silent snarl curled my lips, pinning each of them with a ferocious look. A wounded animal about to use its last ebb of energy to defend itself.

“You wrote you wanted to make yourself worthy of me. That was why you three caused all this, right?” I hooked my purse over my shoulder. “You’ll never be worthy of me.” Nausea churned in my stomach as my words sliced through them. Their faces fell like dominos, stark with raw pain, an electric agony. They’d hurt me once again, and I’d lashed out. I couldn’t find it in me to feel mercy. They had the key to my heart, access to my very soul. But they didn’t listen when I begged them to hold me gently. So, I would do the same. I knew them, their secrets and fears. I wanted them to feel an ounce of what was inside of me. Because that’s what we’ve devolved to now.

Trading hurts.

Adelaide



“S he would be so proud of you,” my father rattled out a sigh. I stared down at the dirt, my face a mask. There were no markers on the ground, but I could feel the energy of my grandparents next to me. I laid the loose, white roses on the brushed dirt. The air was thick, like cement in my lungs. Behind us, my grandmother’s greenhouse languished without her medicinal hand.

“At least they’re together.” My father cleared his throat, turning away so I wouldn’t see the glassy film over his eyes. I looked at the dirt in front of me. My grandmother had wanted to be buried here, next to her own father. At one with her plants. When my grandfather followed her only months later, he wanted to be with her. His wife. Their love shaped my view of the world. Fierce, devoted and deadly.

“We should decide what we want to do with this space,” I mused, curiously numb. My heart had reached its quota for agony and there was no more room to further mourn my grandmother. A slight breeze ruffled through my father’s thinning hair, and he nodded in agreement.

“Low priority at the moment. Any news on Crimson Claw?”

I waved off his concern. My thoughts whipped between heartache and blistering rage. The reclusive motorcycle club had cruised through Greenwich Bay again but evaded the men I sent to apprehend them. It was like they were taunting us,

crossing through both Orazio and Donato territory, never stopping in one place long. Just enough for the red brand of their club logo to be noted. A wolf showing its fangs. I had tried to reach out to their Club President, but they had ignored all efforts. There had been no more attempts on my life or macabre gifts, but I had a distinct feeling of being hunted. The back of my neck prickled almost constantly.

“Nothing.” My lip curled. “How they keep slipping in is a mystery. But if I see one more leather jacket, I might lose it. We run this city and they’re making us a laughing stock.”

“Peace, darling.” My father clicked his tongue. “They will have to make another move soon. What they didn’t realize was that it only brought the Orazios and Donatos closer together. Let them try when we’ve finally united.”

I hummed, my stomach still turning. My father was still under the impression that I was dating Ray and it seemed Harold and he were bonding over the idea of a potential marriage. Another problem I had to solve. Ray was still avoiding me, but I needed to tell him our arrangement was over.

Crimson Claw infiltrating Greenwich Bay hadn’t gone unnoticed by Chief Goldman. My sources told me he was furiously trying to tamp down the rumors of an outlaw motorcycle club taking up space in the city. Ray had fallen through the cracks, his dubious reputation glossy compared to the rough visage of Crimson Claw. Knowing the Chief was apoplectic gave me a small smidge of pleasure.

I turned my focus back to the unmarked graves of my family.

“Do you want to be buried here?” I tilted my head at my father, unsure how I felt about the grim graveyard the greenhouse plot was building. My father shrugged, eyes flickering to where my mom lay.

“It doesn’t matter to me. We are all just skin and bones at the end. I won’t be in the ground. I’ll be in here.” He reached over and tapped my upper chest. My pulse thumped in my ears in response.

He was right. I looked to the left where I knew we buried my mom. My grandparents? My mom? They all existed in my heart still. Some memories were darker and twisted than others, but they still existed. Nothing could change that.

“Besides, my mother would kill me a second time if I lay her to rest here and got myself a fancy coffin and headstone.”

I laughed, my throat feeling raw. There had been scarce opportunities to laugh lately.

“I have to get back. Keep me updated, especially if you get any more presents.” My father squeezed my shoulder before leaving. I had driven out separately, knowing I would need more time here. I wasn't quite ready to leave and face the tangled mess my life had become. Silver glinted on my wrist, the bracelet that my grandmother had left me. I wore it today in memory of her. She was guarded and blunt. Love from her came as tersely presented gifts. She didn't speak with affection. Her touch wasn't warm but measured. A storm encapsulated in a bottle. I had always strived to be just like her. The opposite of my mom. Who had been so soft this life had crushed and poisoned her. My father had brought a bunny into a world full of wolves and it had torn her to pieces, mercilessly. Thinking about her made me queasy, and I pressed my palm against my stomach.

I made my way over to the greenhouse. The interior was musty. Since my grandmother had died, I couldn't bring myself to visit often. All the plants were removed and without the vast array of greenery, it seemed lifeless. There was so much legacy on this secluded plot of land. Hidden on the outskirts of Greenwich Bay, shouldered by thick trees. Privacy was paramount when you grew plants that could kill. I swiped my finger over a mortar worn from decades of use. In six years, I had only brought Logan, Jesse, and Briar last year when we buried my grandparents. I'd made the same mistake my father did, falling for men who weren't ruthless like I was.

I had tried to keep them separate from my life as much as possible. So, they weren't put in the position my mom had been. I didn't involve them in the details of my life as an heir

to a crime family. It made sense to me at the beginning, but now I wished I had done everything differently.

My forehead pulsed. Too quickly, intrusive thoughts assaulted me.

Flashes of red tumbled in.

Dusty seateurs plunging into my chest.

A startled gasp escaped from me. I clutched at my head, unable to stop the barrage of gore, terror and blood that flooded over me.

“Stop,” I whispered fiercely. “Just fucking stop.”

There was no point pleading. I had to focus on relaxing. Filling my lungs with deep, slow breaths. To let the thoughts come without judgement. Not to twist, turn and rage against them. But I was already weak from everything. My mind was vulnerable. I clutched at the windowsill, cradling my head with my other hand. Outside the blurred glass I spotted a flash of color. White of my blooms, but also sunflowers. The white roses were mine, but the sunshine yellow? My hand went to my hip, and I cursed. I’d left my gun in the car.

“They’re from all of us,” a voice cleared behind me.

Logan lingered in the doorway, ducking his head at the force of my glare. What was he doing here?

“After dinner the other night, I’m sure we’re the last people you want to see. We thought all three of us would be overwhelming, so it’s just me.”

“You got the short straw, huh?” I kneaded my forehead. Logan took a tentative step inside, and the thoughts latched onto his tall form.

Logan being stabbed, his blood seeping on the floor.

His fingers curling out to me, soaked red.

I bit back a whimper. The intrusive thoughts hadn’t been this strong in such a long time.

“Being the one to see you is like winning the lottery, siren. Although I have a feeling Jesse might try to sneak a peek of

you later.”

“Casual stalking. Who said romance is dead?” I hunched over the sill, blinking at the filtered sunlight that streamed through. My body was flushed, and I had to fight the urge to sink into the ground. My tongue was too thick to lash out at Logan, my racing, suffocating thoughts too thick to deal with fighting him. I flexed my hand, the knuckles popped, but it didn’t help this time.

“Siren?” Logan’s forehead puckered as his gaze snagged on the movement.

Slashed wrists.

Crimson waves churning red into the sand.

Blood. Blood. Choking on blood.

I panted on an unsatisfying breath. I couldn’t stop the barrage of thoughts that gripped my neck like a collar. Logan’s arms wrapped around me, but I remained stiff, covering my face with my hands.

“Oh siren, I’m here. I’ve got you.” He didn’t ask me again. He knew. My guys were the first people to witness these episodes. When the thoughts became so strong, so violent, they stole my breath. I gulped, turning in his solid embrace and letting his warmth steal into my frozen veins. I needed the connection right now. The anchor to the real world. I had other ways of coping, but I didn’t want to cross the line. I was trying to give them up and failing. If I let Logan help me, in a way no-one else could, I worried I could never survive on my own. But the vividness of them made my body shake. None of my usual methods were working, and I needed to walk out of here, not crawl.

“Logan...” I swallowed. I couldn’t ask him directly, but he knew what I needed. His hands slid down my body as he dropped to his knees in front of me. His gaze hit the floor when I looked down, and a trickle of calm unveiled through me. He threaded his hands in his lap and waited.

“Ta-take off your s-shirt.” I cleared my throat, taking a step back. His fingers shook as he hooked them around the hem,

and he drew it slowly over his head. My heart ached at the sight of his chest. A light dusting of blonde hair trailed down his sculpted muscles. His abs contracted, like the laser focus of my eyes was a physical brush against them. I pressed the heel of my hands into my skull as I saw blood.

Pools of viscous life force, creeping over the wooden floorboards.

Logan's crystal blue gaze fixed like a doll's eyes on the ceiling, empty like glass.

I shook my head, trying to dispel them, when Logan chanced a worried glance.

“Did I say you could look at me?” I snapped, exhaling sharply.

“Sorry siren.” He was provoking me. But it worked. Stale scent of plants drifted in, my other senses turning back on.

“Who am I?” I walked over to a cleaning cloth and tore it into a thin strip.

“Master.”

Excitement shot through me at his soft tone. He was steadfastly staring at the ground, like the good boy he was. Logan wouldn't do anything to jeopardize this moment. I hadn't known how much I enjoyed this until Logan admitted my ability to control a room full of deadly men was such a turn on for him. Just my voice snarling a command had him twitching. I hooked the material over his eyes, knotting it solidly behind his head. It pinched his hair, but he didn't complain. The thoughts flitted in, but I could breathe again. I could feel them, acknowledge, but the urge to struggle against them dropped.

They weren't my focus. The man on his knees for me was.

“Good boy.”

Logan's nostrils flared as air gusted out of his lungs. There was a bulge in his jeans that looked uncomfortable.

“Unzip. Show master how much you want her.”

Saliva pooled in my mouth in anticipation, but Logan didn't move, his head jerking slightly as if he couldn't believe what I'd offered him. Frustration flared at his hands that lay slack at his side.

"I hate having to repeat myself," I growled, and he leaped to obey. Still, his mouth worked like he was deliberating on talking. I stiffened. Logan could only speak when spoken too, or if he wanted to use his safe word. He shucked his pants down as best he could while still maintaining a crouch. His thigh twitched when I lowered down, my hot breath puffing against his straining cock. A slight curve that jutted out of a nest of soft, blonde hair. Logan was large everywhere, except for his personality. He was reserved around those who didn't know him, content to let others decide for him. He hated to be touched, except by me. His cock jerked, as if he could tell my fingers were reaching for it. A soft, shuddering exhale escaped Logan's lips, followed by the merest whine when I dragged my nails down him.

Scorching hot, thick like steel. Heat pulsed between my legs at the idea of notching my hips and finding my own release. But this wasn't about pleasure.

This was all control. My mind was buzzing, quiet, and intense on Logan. There was a hunger inside of me that craved him whimpering, squirming and tormented.

"We haven't played Start or Stop in a while. Do you think you can guess correctly this time?"

Logan's hands crushed into fists on his thighs, and his abs rippled tight. He wanted this so badly.

"Yes, master." He dipped his head, tongue swiping over his thick bottom lip. I hummed my pleasure, taking him in my hand. I drank in his desperate groan, the way his head fell back at my touch. Start or Stop was a simple game. A devious one. I jerked Logan until he was close to coming and would ask him 'Start or Stop?' and he would have to guess what I was thinking. Start meant the game continued. I would continue to edge him. Stop meant I would let him come how he wanted to, by my hand, mouth or pussy. But if he guessed incorrectly? I

would bring him to the edge but pull away and ruin his orgasm. My chest heaved as I twisted my fist around his cock. He was already showing signs of reaching completion. The head was flushed purple and beaded cum glistened like pearls. I collected the precious drops, resisting the urge to taste, and used them as lube. Soft pants fell from his parted lips.

“Start or Stop?” I asked as his chest rose, shallow and quick.

I slowed my movements as he deliberated, the silence in the room broken by his ragged breathing. He nibbled on his bottom lip, taking longer than usual. His shoulders bunched about his ears when I made a noise of impatience.

“Start,” he blurted, frozen as my hand moved.

“Such a good boy,” I praised, his cheeks flooding red. He didn’t speak, but something like a moan came as his reply, tongue tangled with relief and pleasure. Power surged through me, my fingers tightening until he groaned again. Low and long. My clit throbbed at the needy sound. He was already squirming, his breathing choppy.

“Start or Stop?” I asked, surprised at how quickly he neared the peak again. It settled my churning stomach. Only I could give this to him. I had been Logan’s first. The only one of my guys who was a virgin when we got together. Part of me had always expected Logan to long for other experiences. Being someone’s one and only was a heavy mantle to balance. But knowing how he was repulsed by others touch had assuaged my fears. Sex between us was always special because it was a conscious choice. Tendons strained in Logan’s neck as he hesitated once more. My head spun, dizzy, knowing he was desperate for this game to continue.

“Start.” His chin hit his heaving chest.

“Right again. I’m so proud of you.” I squeezed his shaft, twisting my fist over his engorged head. I stole each one of his harsh exhales and tucked them in a box at the back of my mind. The heat of his tormented skin was like a brand, and I knew I could never remove it. I would not regret this. It had been my choice, and it didn’t change what we were.

I was still in control.

But then Logan surprised me. His hips thrust and his cock moved through my fist urgently. He rocked against my hand again, trying to command the movement. Disbelief crashed over me, like a wave. Logan didn't misbehave like this normally. For a moment, I was speechless, tongue inert with shock. Until he thrust upwards again, deliberate and defiant.

"Start or Stop," I spat out, slowing my movements. I let my hand trail down his reddened cock, teasing with my nail tips. He was blindfolded, but it was like he could see me through the faded material. I stared back, jaw tight. I wondered if he realized the mistake he had made.

"Start," he practically begged. A plea for me to continue. Logan wanted me to keep my hands on him, to prolong this illicit game. My head was clear now, the thoughts in control. My mind became a vault once more. Logan thought he could make me do what he wanted? He needed a reminder of who his master was.

"Wrong answer. I guess you won't get your choice today." I fisted his cock and jerked him with abandon now. He was so slick with pre-cum, hot and solid in my relentless grip. It would have felt so good inside of me, but now I had to punish him.

"Fuck, siren," Logan cursed softly, speaking out of turn. "Please, god."

I shook my head, even though he couldn't see it. I wouldn't just ruin his orgasm; I'd make him eat it too. My hand slowed, feeling him pulse in my hold. I circled the base of his cock with my thumb and pointed finger. Whisper soft and completely unsatisfying. Which was entirely the point. Logan's thighs shook as white release spurted out, frustrated and thwarted. Logan's head hung and his groans sounded like sobs. I held his hard length as come dripped over my fingers.

His orgasm ruined.

"I am the one who is in control. You disappointed me, so now I want you to clean up your mess and think about what

you've done," I scolded.

Logan's breath hitched as he tore the makeshift blindfold off and saw my hand held out to him. His tongue made quick work of the release coating my fingers. He sucked on my thumb, crystal eyes hard and devastated as he looked at me. This time he didn't rebel, his fingers collecting his wasted orgasm. He poked his tongue out and coated it with his own release. One eyebrow jerked upwards, as if to ask if I was happy. I groaned, pushing to my feet as he cleaned himself up. Between my legs was heated, tingling and frustrated itself. But there would be no release for me. I would wait until I was alone and shove my hands down my pants. My nose tickled with the scent of smoke and my head whipped to the window.

"Get up, something's wrong." I knew instinctively, without having to process it. Even the trees seemed to agree, leaves frozen and waiting.

"Siren? What is it?" Logan buttoned his jeans hurriedly and followed me to the door. The plot was empty, but I heard the rumble of an exhaust. One that I knew implicitly. The wheel squealed, unseen, but there was no doubting it was a motorcycle.

"Crimson Claw." My eye caught on another bunch of flowers by my grandmother's grave. Bright as freshly spilled blood. I choked on the insult. They had been here moments ago, and I had been too busy with Logan to even notice. I moved toward my car, determined to catch them somehow. I couldn't let this stand. But as I raced forward, Logan snagged his arm around my waist.

"Wait, don't go yet. The smoke—" his explanation was blasted away as my car exploded. A wave of heat thrust us backwards and we both slammed into the dirt. My ears rang, head dizzy as I tried to get to my feet. I couldn't comprehend what I was looking at. A blackened husk, spewing dark smoke and angry, licking flames that scorched the sky. Logan bundled me in his arms, head turned into the nook of my neck.

"Are you ok? Were you hurt?" He patted me down frantically. I shook my head, unable to look away from the

wreckage that had been my car two seconds ago. If Logan hadn't grabbed me, I would have been inside, or at least close enough that the blast would have killed me. My fingers dug into Logan's arms.

"I'm fine. What about you?" I turned to Logan and saw he had a slight gash on his forehead. It dribbled blood, like a tear down his face.

"I guess a piece of it caught me, but nothing else." He offered me a shaky smile. He coaxed me into his hold again, and I let him. I needed something solid to cling on to right now. But as we stood there, shivers wracked my body.

And they weren't my own.

Adelaide



“If I knew who did it I would have dealt with them already.” My sockets ached as I rolled my eyes hard. I’d managed to coax him into picking up a call, but now I regretted it. Ray hummed over the phone, the complacent sound rankling my senses. I knew he was about to say something stupid.

“Are you sure it was Crimson Claw?”

There it is.

I pinned my tongue between my teeth to waylay the expletives I wanted to drown him in. I paused in the busy street, shuffling until my back hit the side of the building I was passing. Jonah loitered behind me, scanning the crowds just like I was. I categorized everyone wearing red, dismissing them when my senses weren’t peaked. A man with a red cap pulled low over his head made a tingle crawl down my spine. I caught Jonah’s eye and jerked it toward him. Jonah’s eyes glinted as he moved in to investigate. My father wanted more guards on me, but I had refused. I didn’t want to give more reasons to doubt my leadership. He didn’t have a trail of muscle following him, because he had the skills to protect himself.

Just like I did. I wasn’t going to hide behind a pack of beefy men, not when I was more than capable of fending off almost everything that came at me. It required vigilance, the kind that

two hours of sleep didn't quite afford. But I wasn't going to tell anyone that I'd suffered from insomnia ever since my car blew up.

"It was Crimson Claw, or someone who wanted me to think it was them. Although I don't know why you would provoke that rabid pack."

"What did the note say again?" There had been a note attached to the offensive red blooms that had been left.

"The clock is ticking. Your time ruling Greenwich Bay is over."

Jonah disappeared around the corner briefly and I swallowed the tingle that arrested my throat. If someone wanted to accost me, now was a good time. I closed my eyes, but it didn't stop the red. Blood. Violence. Gore. The intrusive thoughts came hard and fast. I ducked into the alleyway and slammed into a hard chest. Hands snapped out to encircle my wrist, but I had the hard body pinned against the alley wall in seconds. My arm pressed upon the assailant's throat when I looked up and realized it was Jesse. His lips twitched in a bemused smile as he held his hands up in surrender.

"Morbid. So, they sent a mutilated hand and now they're taunting you through flowers. What is their end game here? Don't they know by attacking the Orazios they risk having you band together with us?"

I barely heard the endless chatter in my ear, distracted by the appearance of Jesse. My pulse galloped in my ears, a roar I had to wrench control from.

"I've got to go," I muttered, pulling the phone away to hang up. "Don't skip out on the event I just sent you either. If you don't turn up, I will cut your nuts off."

"Unnecessary violence—" my fingers trembled slightly as I swiped at the phone, silencing Ray's voice. He was still avoiding me in person, quietly terrified about how I was going to react to him messing around with Lara. My tolerance for stupid men was at an all-time low. I stepped away from Jesse, another one to add to the list. Did they not understand they

shouldn't walk up behind me? Especially when I was operating on adrenaline and a hair trigger. Jesse rubbed his throat without a hint of annoyance.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hissed, crossing my arms. Jesse always looked good in navy blue. He had on a baggy hoodie, and he readjusted the collar while he stared at me. My skin prickled under his unabashed perusal.

“Jesse?” I asked through gritted teeth.

He matched my stance, crossing his arms over his wide chest.

“You looked bothered. I wanted to make sure you didn't need some ‘assistance’. I know Logan is better at giving you what you need in those moments, but I can get on my knees. You can make me beg.” His eyebrow raised in challenge. “If you dare.”

My cheeks flooded with heat, and I resisted the urge to cover them with my hands. Of course, Logan would have told them what happened. Prying him away from me after the explosion had been difficult, especially now that he knew my intrusive thoughts were riding me hard. Logan hadn't said anything, but his heavy touch spoke volumes. He wouldn't press me, which is why Jesse was here. He was always better at getting through to me when I was stubborn. My chest ached, a reminder that I had to find a new way to cope. Six years I had opened my heart to these men. We had become so wrapped up in each other, shouldering each other's burdens.

“That was a mistake.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue. He knew they were a lie, just like I did. I tried to move past him, but he pulled a letter out of his hoodie and dangled it toward me. My gaze narrowed on the creased paper.

“I thought you might want to see this. The letter my birth mother sent.” It was the sheen in his eyes that made me snatch the piece of paper and skim it. She'd infused the ink with regret. One line snagged my interest.

I'm sorry for the years we lost, but now we have a second chance.

“I got this letter one day when your father’s men beat me. They threatened to track her down and destroy her, too. So, I haven’t replied, didn’t want to bring trouble to her doorstep. Not until I could get myself free of it.”

I shook my head, thrusting the letter against his chest. Jesse grabbed my elbow, pulling me until the letter was plastered between us. My heart leapt at the intimate touch. I’d been a thousand times closer to him over the years, bare and joined. But his sharp cedar cologne tickled my nostrils, firing a part of my brain that had been dormant. I had to breathe deeply until the urge to throw my arms around him subsided. My heart and body didn’t get the memo. Months had passed and longing had seared itself into my cells like a disease.

“I spoke to my father. He was adamant that the only time he warned you away from me was six years ago.” I gulped, tugging ineffectually on Jesse’s branding grip.

“You don’t believe me?” Hurt flashed over his face.

My silence spoke volumes, and his shoulders slumped. Jesse shook his head, as if trying to escape the revelation. I didn’t know what to believe anymore. My heart might still nurture our deep connection, despite all efforts to purge it. We were done. I would keep repeating it until it became truth.

“No excuse is going to make up for the hurt we caused, but I thought if you understood the mindset I was in,” he cursed softly under his breath. “I hoped it might make a difference. But you’re resolved, aren’t you, princess? Nothing we say or do will change your mind. I toss and turn without you in my bed, you know. I miss the small things, like your ass pressed against me under the covers. Even the sound of your footsteps. Our house is lifeless without your things tossed on every surface.”

A reluctant smile cracked my face. I was a slob. Unintentional, but undeniable. Briar had given up trying to make me neat. He was the one who kept my things tidy while my head was running a million miles into the future. I clamped my teeth around my lip, the pain an anchor from the misery that crested inside of me. I missed each of them the same way.

Things I'd never even noticed until I cleaved them from my life and had to live without their individual quirks.

"I feel like I've waited too long to reply to this. What would we even talk about?" Jesse sighed, releasing me from his iron hold. I slipped backwards as he folded the letter and tucked it away.

"This all sounds like something you should share with someone who gives a shit," I drained the wild emotion from my voice, not willing to let him see how much his words had affected me. It was impossible to erect protection against these men. Not when they knew every inch of me. I had to become someone else, colder and detached.

"You're right, which is why I'm talking to you," he chuckled softly, eyes twinkling.

"How do you keep getting so close to me?" I deflected, looking at the entrance of the alleyway. People passed by unassuming, but there was no sign of Jonah. A lick of irritation rolled over my shoulders, the muscles bunching tight. Jesse pushed off the wall with a shrug.

"Don't be angry with him." He interpreted my thunderous expression. "He knows I'm not a threat."

"How many times do I have to say we are done?" I fought the urge to stamp my foot. Something about his persistence made me want to have a tantrum like a two-year-old. I didn't wait for his answer. Nothing but time would heal the weeping wound inside of me. I had spent a lot of time healing from physical wounds. I preferred it to the endless ache in my chest. We hovered at the mouth of the alleyway, checking to make sure there weren't any obvious threats. Jesse's hot breath puffed against the back of my neck. Goosebumps sprang at the soft caress.

"Until the end of time, princess. Because I won't ever give up on us."

I couldn't answer. I'd heard their reasoning for breaking up with me, but it didn't wipe away the gash it'd left. Nor did it settle the fear that I had made a mistake thinking I could keep

my life from touching them. They had scars because of me. My words lodged in my throat when I saw a Crimson Claw rider crawl down the street, the exhaust belching obnoxiously. The rider folded off the bike with elegance I wouldn't expect from a biker. He pulled a helmet off to reveal ink black hair. His movements were stiff and furious as he strode into the cafe.

"Crimson Claw," I breathed, adrenaline heating my nerve endings. Jonah pounded down the pavement, his hand on his piece at his waist. He followed my line of sight with a curse.

"Boss?" he asked, pulling out his phone in readiness. Jesse made a noise when I shook my head.

"I'm dealing with this. Here and now. They think they can threaten me in my city? Let them do it to my face. You'll cover me, of course."

Jesse wrapped an arm around my waist, hauling me against his hard chest. He clicked his tongue when I protested.

"I'm coming. You need more than Jonah for backup." He slithered out from behind me, and my words shriveled on my tongue.

I didn't dignify his statement with an answer. Instead, I stomped across the street, muttering under my breath. So much for a clean break. I had fought too hard to keep them free of my world to let him throw himself into it now. A bell chimed as I walked into the cafe, the scent of pastries hitting my nostrils. Jonah fanned out to the side, dismissing the unsuspecting patrons and identifying threats.

"Dilly's Cafe was one of my date ideas, you know. They do great pancakes," Jesse whispered in my ear as I picked my way toward a table at the back. I weaved my way through the mismatched chairs with a growl.

"Shut it," I snapped at Jesse, his stifled laugh riling me further. The biker was sitting opposite a curvy brunette. Purple waves threaded through her locks. A deep scowl twisting his features. They were arguing, or rather he was spitting sharp words like blades while she sipped on a coffee.

“Julien, I know what I’m doing,” She tossed her hair back over her leather jacket, Crimson Claw sigil emblazoned on the back. Julien sneered, a white scar flashing on his upper lip. He leaned in with a frustrated growl.

“I don’t want to talk to you, Loanna. Bring Kinsley back. You won’t like what happens if you don’t.”

“Fuck you, I am Kinsley. Just because you can’t imagine me ever doing something without your express permission.”

This was the motorcycle club terrorizing me? The girl had a smudge of foam under her bottom lip for god’s sake. I cleared my throat, pulling my shoulders back. Things were about to get ugly.

“Everything is perfect, thank you.” Julien’s French accent was thick as he darted a dismissive glance over me. He thought I worked here? My veins were boiling, and I breathed through the indignation. The soft, smothered laughter of Jesse didn’t help my rankled nerves.

“I beg to differ. Want to tell me what the fuck you’re doing in Greenwich Bay?” I kept my voice low but bright, not wanting to draw a crowd. The brunette turned to look at me and her eye color seemed muted, like someone had painted it with milk. Was she blind? She grinned sharply, as if she knew what I was thinking.

“Excuse me?” Julien’s nostrils flared in his proud nose.

“Don’t play like you don’t know who I am. Your Crimson riders have been stinking up my city for too long. You should have made sure the car bomb blew me up properly, because I won’t stop coming at you until your club is in ashes.”

Kinsley covered her mouth, catching a high-pitched giggle. At my darkened expression, she flapped her hands.

“No-no, it’s not what you think,” she rushed to say, smiling apologetically. “I am totally scared and suitably threatened, or I would be if I knew who you were and what you were talking about. Can we start again? I’m Kinsley, president of the Crimson Claw Motorcycle Club.”

The girl had the cheek to stick out her hand as if I was going to pleasantly make her welcome. I exchanged an incredulous look with Jesse. He shrugged, leaning over to shake her hand heartily.

“I think it’s best if we step outside.” I knew my tone meant business, but Kinsley spluttered her disagreement.

“Oh, I absolutely would love to, but you see, I’m only in Greenwich Bay to meet someone.” Her bright smile trembled when I didn’t answer. Julien used my silence to add his opinion.

“Are you kidding me, Kinsley? You can’t go gallivanting about the country without us. You need protection.”

I leaned over the table, plucking the cup from her hand and letting it clatter on the saucer. The liquid sloshed out, and she made a soft noise of dismay. She looked so soft and sweet, I wanted to crush her.

“I don’t want to get in the middle of a lovers tiff, but I wasn’t asking. Step outside. Now.”

“You heard her,” Jesse growled, his dark tone firing electricity through my spine.

Damn, that sounds way too good.

Thankfully, the Crimson Claws seemed to understand the urgency and abandoned their table. How was this girl the president of Crimson Claw? Their reputation was cutthroat killers, known from the mountains to the bay. This apple cheeked, tiny girl couldn’t be their president. Was this a game? Rubbing it in my face about being the heir to the Orazio legacy? I bristled. If that was the case, I would show her exactly who she was dealing with. I was born an Orazio, but I had earned my role. We herded them across the road, into the alleyway Jesse and I had been in moments ago. Jonah blocked the entry, and I saw a flicker of uncertainty coast over the girl’s features. Her emotions were entirely visible.

“Can you repeat what you said earlier?” Julien crossed his arms, trying to maneuver Kinsley behind him. She huffed a

breath and refused his protection. “We know nothing about an explosion.”

“Cut the bullshit.” My tone was venomous. “I suppose you don’t know anything about a severed hand on my doorstep, either?”

Kinsley stumbled back into Julien’s hold, her face turning pasty white. Her eyes rolled back alarmingly in her skull as she bent over and hurled. The splatter half covering Julien’s leather dress shoes. A strange outfit for a biker and even stranger reaction from a president of a hardened motorcycle club. Julien dragged Kinsley up, his hands under her armpits.

“Breathe, *mon chère*.” Julien rubbed circles on her back as she heaved in gusting breaths. “She doesn’t like gore.”

My eyebrows punched together, unable to comprehend what was happening. None of this made sense.

“I’m Adelaide Orazio. My family runs the crime in this city. Recently, I’ve been targeted. Someone tried to kill me twice and left a—” I refrained from mentioning the hand when Kinsley retched again. No one could fake this level of acting. Julien looked forlornly at the vomit coating his shoes. The stench of it made my nose wrinkle. “Coincidentally, all of this came about when Crimson Claw were noticed hanging around the city. I don’t know what fight you are trying to start but trust me when I say I’ll finish it.”

Kinsley winced, her shapely lips turning down in a cartoonish grimace.

“Crimson Claw had nothing to do with it. We’ve got our own problems to sort out. Starting a turf war is not one of them.” She cradled her stomach tenderly. Julien dipped his head, humming in agreement.

“What can we do to prove we had no involvement?”

Jesse scratched his head from beside me. I didn’t trust them, but I didn’t believe them capable of the calculated attacks on me. Kinsley sniffled. Only Julien’s tight, protective hold kept her from crumpling to the ground.

“I want you out of my city.” I raised my eyebrows. “And I don’t want to see another Crimson bike on my streets. Get it? You want to head up the coast, you go around.” It would add another hour to their journey, but Kinsley didn’t even seem bothered. She popped a little shrug, nodding like a bobble head.

“Can you give me until the end of the day?” her voice rasped like the bile had scorched it on the way up. The strange filmy eyes blinked hopefully. Something shifted behind the innocence. Her gaze seemed to intensify, like there was the weight of several other eyes looking at me through her. “I truthfully am only here to meet someone.”

I shivered, wanting an end to this bonkers interaction. The girl was tiny, but my body reacted like I was looking at a predator. As if there was something inside of her that should scare me more than I realized.

“You have until midnight tonight.” Her relief was instantaneous.

“Thank you.” She pressed her hands together, Julien’s arms wrapped around her waist. “You do not know how important this is.”

I let them pass, wondering if I was making a mistake. Because if they weren’t the ones who attacked me, who was? Who else could have the ego to think they would get away with attacking the Orazios? Kinsley stumbled as she reached the mouth of the alleyway and when she turned to look at me, her eyes glinted with that heavy, searing weight again.

“Adelaide, you should know your future. It’s not a weakness to reconcile. It’s inevitable.”

I didn’t reply, watching Julien guide her across the street, muttering in her ear like he was scolding her. Jesse skulked in closer to me, grinning widely.

“It’s inevitable.” He swept his hands between us.

“Don’t start.” I wagged a finger at him with a sigh. I didn’t have time for this. I needed to find out who was behind these

attacks. Watching the diminutive back of the Crimson Claw president, I was sure they spoke the truth.

Weird, confusing truth.

So, who was after me? Had they tried using Crimson Claw as a front? That kind of calculation made my stomach clench, but I had to indulge the possibility.

Before it was too late.

Jesse



“Still can’t believe you got a hand job,” I grouched as we wandered into Lara’s apartment building. The attendant at the reception desk smothered a frustrated glare as I approached. Our arrival was not unnoticed by the two guards leaning against the walls. One of them picked up his phone immediately.

Tattletale.

Had I been making a nuisance of myself? You bet. But I wasn’t about to stop.

“Don’t do anything stupid and make me regret telling you.” Logan looked pointedly at my scabbing fists.

“Should we be concerned?” Briar added, and I waved them off. Anyone would want to let off steam if they had lost the love of their life. If I was letting my emotions out in unproductive ways, it was better than shutting down like the other two. I hefted up the bag containing the Orchard Hearth juice onto the desk. It was fresh from the markets this morning.

“Can you deliver this to Apartment 110?” I asked. The elevator pinged, and Jonah strolled out with a scowl. Unsurprised to see us.

“You can’t keep showing up here,” he grunted, looking at the juice and sighing.

“I’m helping you out.” I grinned, unperturbed. “You know what she’s like in the morning if she doesn’t get her fancy juice.”

Jonah snagged the bag in silent agreement.

“Thank you,” Briar said.

Jonah nodded and hesitated before saying, “She thinks Lara has been getting it for her.” He jerked his head to the juice. I shared an amused look with Logan and Briar before shrugging. It didn’t matter to me what Adelaide thought, as long as she had what she needed. Delivering the juice helped settle the part of me that wanted to care for her.

“We’ll see you later on.” Jonah jerked his chin up, taking the juice with him.

I didn’t know what he meant until later that afternoon when we were setting up the gym for Fostering Futures. Our old high school hadn’t changed since we slunk through their halls. Sagging gray paint and faded posters plastered on the wall. A relic from a time when hope reigned stronger than apathy. I flicked at the corner of one, boasting about an after-school study club. All I remembered from school was keeping my head down and running out the door at the end of the day.

“Didn’t you break Jason Frankim’s nose in here?” Logan snapped out a folded chair and added it to the row. A low chuckle escaped me. Good times.

“He deserved it for fucking with you.” Logan might have the bulk to protect himself, but with his touch aversion, it was torture for him to fight. The sweaty, violent press of skin immobilized him. A group of guys at school discovered it and enjoyed toying with him. I’d defaulted to scuffling with the brutes at this school until they finally worked out not to mess with us. Briar wandered over, not looking up from his clipboard.

“How’s the numbers looking?” I peered over and saw a bunch of unfamiliar names. A glow filled my stomach. Fostering Futures had been Briar’s idea. He wanted to help kids like us who were stuck in foster homes that didn’t give a

shit about them. Adelaide had been our soft place to land, but so many kids didn't have a dark angel out there waiting to scoop them up. Fostering Futures ran every second month, and we ran different classes each time. Lessons that we had needed when we aged out. How to budget, how to open a bank account, how to cook basic meals, and how to write a resume. I saw so much of myself in these kids.

“About twenty here today. Five are new.” Briar blew out a proud breath. His permanently morose mask brightened just slightly before he caught sight of something at the door. The glimmer in his hazel eyes winked out, replaced with searing pain. His fingers tightened around the clipboard until it creaked under his unrelenting assault.

“What is he doing here?” Briar hissed. I whipped around to see Adelaide walking through the door. Heavy black combat boots echoed over the floor of the gym. The form fitting, black tights and sweater highlighted her sleek, blonde hair. My heart cracked, surprise and delight at seeing her shattered as I noticed who trailed in her wake.

Ray Donato.

He took in the gym with a wrinkled nose, shoving his hands in the pockets of his gray sweats. Even dressed in athletic wear, he looked out of place in this gym. Quaffed and shiny, too perfect for this sad space. I was moving before I realized it, my fists itching. Damn, my knuckles were just healing. But I guess I was about to rip them open on Ray's perfect face. When I was younger my anger always came from a place of helplessness. It was the only way I could wrench back some of the control in my life. Now I was struck with a similar feeling, a desperate sinking in my stomach. I had no right to the roiling, sharp jealousy underneath my skin. But it flooded me and my default reaction was to launch myself on Ray, take it out on him.

“She brought *him*?” I clenched my jaw. Adelaide flicked a brief look at my tight face, cataloging the barely restrained rage. Ray snorted under his breath, only riling me further.

“Ray is going to take over my self-defense lessons today.” She rocked forward and lowered her voice. “There is press with me, so behave. Ray gets a plump to his reputation and Fostering Futures will get the attention it deserves. I think we can put aside our differences for the kids, don’t you?”

She swept past me, ignoring the shocked and broken expressions on Briar and Logan’s faces. Jonah and Ray took her instructions as she set them to work setting up exercise mats. I clapped a hand on Briar’s shoulder, offering wordless comfort. It was empty and ineffectual with Adelaide close, but untouchable. Logan balled his fists to his side, blowing out a frustrated breath.

“God, I hate his smug face.” He scowled. “Can you punch it for me, Jesse?”

I snorted, busying myself with setting up. My jaw was aching by the time our foster children came in. Teens ranging from thirteen to seventeen. We had a team of volunteers scattered around the room, passing out instructions.

“Oh, my god,” one girl squealed. “That’s Ray Donato. Wasn’t he featured on *GBUrban Pulse* last week?” My teeth cracked over the sound of their titters. Briar motioned everyone in, explaining the two options for classes today. Self-defense classes with Ray and budgeting with him. Briar maintained a blank face as everyone moved toward Ray. Adelaide worked with him, making Ray take on the role of an attacker. Ray reached out and twirled Adelaide’s hair, shooting us pompous grins. His arms were pressed around our girl, and I swallowed a growl.

“I heard you were offering a Ray shaped beating. Whenever you’re ready,” Briar muttered, glaring pained daggers at the entwined couple on the mats.

“I would love to, but that might ruin the photo op.” I jerked my head toward the photographer, who was eating up the display. “The only positive is the amount of exposure this should hopefully give us.”

“Positive.” Logan shook his head, cracking his head from side to side. Briar grimaced.

“I had to pick up more than one extra shift at the gym to afford to put on a class this month. Anything that will help us keep this program running will help. I just wish it didn’t come from—” He waved his hand, frustratedly toward Ray and Adelaide. Watching the suave man put his hands all over my girl was like a knife to my chest. I couldn’t watch it anymore, or I actually would put my fist through Ray’s face. Jonah was exiting the bathroom as I stormed down the corridor.

“What?” I was in the mood for a fight, and his slight smile tipped me over the edge.

“Nothing.” He tried to move past me, but I slid in front of him, offering a mocking smile.

“Go on, don’t hold back on my account.”

The amusement dropped and Jonah shook his head. But I didn’t move, the frustration whirling inside of me baying for blood. Jonah looked at my fists, scarred and scabbed. He sniffed.

“That’s sloppy. You should know better.” His words tipped the animal that prowled inside of me, and I launched myself at him. But Jonah had me slammed up against the wall, his thick fingers wrapped around my throat. He squeezed in warning, nothing showing through the blank expression.

“Stupid. Reckless. You’ll get her killed if you can’t deal with your anger. I’m not your goddamn enemy. Who took your juice up for you? I let you trail her like a shadow, and don’t say shit. I’m trying so hard to help you idiots and you can’t even do the bare minimum.”

He let go of me with a disgusted curse. I rubbed my throat and let out a gravely laugh.

“Wow, Jonah. I’ve never heard you talk so much.”

“The only thing Ray has over you is his name and practice. You could change one of those things. I’ll even teach you idiots.”

He stared at me, but I didn’t understand what he was saying. The hallways seemed to shrink in on us. The mention of Ray’s name hit a raw wound inside of me, the part that didn’t feel

good enough for Adelaide. The small child standing in front of a locked fridge with a growling stomach. Who didn't want to be weak anymore, but powerful and unbeatable. In control, rather than controlled. Ever since we lost Adelaide I'd been spiraling in that familiar space, powerless to change the things I needed to.

"What are you saying?" I narrowed my eyes.

"You want to be with Adelaide? You need to be an actual part of her life. The only way the teasing will stop is if you prove you can handle yourself. I'll teach you to shoot, fight, whatever you need to put your bruised ego away."

I froze, the cool wall seeping through my back. Adelaide had never wanted us to be involved in the darker side of her world. We'd already been through enough, she'd assured us. But I always wondered if she was ashamed of us. My heart lodged in my throat.

"She doesn't want us to," I muttered, and Jonah let out a low bark.

"If that's what you want. I thought you'd do anything to get her back." We both froze as Adelaide walked into the hallway, her eyes widening as she looked at us. Her nostrils flared as she strode past us. Her sharp scent washed over me as she strode into the bathroom. Jonah shook his head and left. I couldn't move, indecision tossing at my insides. Did Adelaide want us to be like Ray, but she was too afraid we couldn't do it? It had always been something I had accepted. But now I needed to know. I pushed off the wall and ducked into the bathroom. Adelaide was washing her hands.

"This is the ladies," she sniffed. My body ached with want for her, skin tingling for her mark. Underneath my skin was the sharp prick of a thousand knives. The torment was inescapable. Unless I pounded it out on someone else's face. Unless my knuckles broke under the pressure, blood like penance. But nothing could compare to Adelaide's touch. I spun Adelaide around and melded her to the bench. Her pupils dilated and her plump lips fell open in surprise. My hands

clamped on her hips, and I hoisted her up, my body settled between her legs in moments.

“I wouldn’t recommend it.” Her jaw clenched, but she didn’t immobilize me like I knew she could. The heat from her thighs was luxury, more than I deserved. But she didn’t fight me like I expected.

“Why did you keep us separate from your work? Were we not strong enough? Did it shame you to have three guys who couldn’t protect you the way you deserved?” The rawness in my voice must have given her pause because she shook her head. The indignation slipped for a moment. Her hands hovered in the air before pressing against her stomach. The scars bothered her, a reminder of her mom. She hadn’t been a part of Adelaide’s world either. It had been the end for her.

“It wasn’t anything like that.” Her fingers clutched at her shirt, scrunching the material. Her eyes flashed at me, momentary lapse in judgment recovered. She shoved at me until I let her down. I cracked open, all my mess, fears and insecurities spilling out on the cold white tiles of the bathroom. Adelaide was trapped between me, and the bathroom bench and I leaned in, dizzy for the comfort I knew only she could give. She wriggled against me, soft and lush curves that my body responded to. My mouth slanted over hers, swallowing her abrupt shocked gasp. Her taste exploded over my lips. Velvet butter and brown sugar crystals dissolved on my tongue. I angled my head, ravenous for more. Deeper. Desperate. She didn’t return the kiss, but her fingers scraped the back of my neck. I shuddered as she gouged them in, the bite welcome. Until her teeth clamped on my bottom lip. She was ferocious, tearing at my skin like I’d torn her heart. I could taste the venom in her bite, the warning. Her hands shoved me away, and hot metal flooded my mouth.

“Don’t touch me again.”

She didn’t run from the room, turning to wash her mouth and adjust her hair. It was perfunctory and cold, the way she wiped me off her body. I mourned it, even as my lip throbbed with the sharp sting of her ownership.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I apologized, hand curling out and hovering in the air. She looked at me through the mirror.

“All I ever wanted was to love you. It was you who ended it.” Her eyes flicked to my scrunched fists, the wounded knuckles. Her expression softened. The regret hurt me more than her teeth. “Move on Jesse. You were right to end things. We never could have survived. Find a sweet girl who will tend your bruises, not give you an opportunity for more.”

She left me staring at my reflection. My tongue prodded at the scarlet mark on my lip. It burned at my questing. Adelaide thought there was someone else out there who would suit me better. Someone safe and soft. Did she not know I would do anything for her fire? Everything I had done had been to keep us together. I smeared the blood with my thumb. Hypnotized by the proof of my vitality. How could I bleed when I felt so dead inside? I thought of Jonah’s words and the numbness became resolute. I ground my teeth.

There would be no moving on. But I would try something different. I needed to find Jonah and accept his offer.

Adelaide



Lara pried the lid off the ice-cream tub before we'd even left the store and I gave her side-eye as she juggled the treat and fished a spoon from her handbag. The sidewalk was crammed with people, but she didn't seem to struggle to dodge the incoming crowd and also load up her spoon.

"We're doing this, are we?" I asked, as she dug in with a determined look. Her lips wrapped around the raspberry swirl, and she moaned with low delight.

"Addy, I need this," Lara declared as we walked from the corner deli back to her apartment building. I protested as she angled the spoon my way before giving in. Cold, velvety ice cream coated my tongue. The spoon slipped through her fingers, but she snatched it up with abnormally fast reflexes.

"Woah good catch. This ice-cream is yummy," I agreed, "but why do you need this? I'm the broken-hearted one. The only broken thing you have is your vagina from all your many men who want to hit it."

"Pretend to girl boss this break-up all you like, missy, but I am not above smothering my feelings in frozen dairy. How do you juggle three men? It's exhausting."

I snagged her wrist with a huff, stealing the lump she was about to eat. It had been a week since I saw Jesse and my feet felt unglued from reality. Kinsley's eyes haunted my limited

sleep. Her words about reconciliation dogged my steps. Inevitable my ass. There was no strength in giving up. I searched for the pain inside of me, a reminder of what I was fighting so hard against. But I was numb. Perhaps the hurt had become too much. My brain discarded this one, in favor of more present threats. The strange president of Crimson Claw had kept her word. There had been no trace of them in the city. It should have been a comfort, but constant nausea plagued me. Something big was coming, and I was still hung up on three guys. But I didn't need anyone, especially not in the early hours of the morning when intrusive thoughts won. Too bad I was a liar. That's the thing about broken hearts.

They don't heal linearly.

Each day brought new challenges, but never relief from the emptiness inside of me. I alternated between being strong enough to power through the ache, to wanting to crawl under my covers. Emotions weren't weakness, I knew that logically, but I hated them all the same. Lara reminded me to be gentle with myself. But I didn't know how to be gentle. I had been raised to always keep my emotions in check and now they flailed about uncontrollably. Lara mistook my silence for hurt and snagged an arm around my waist.

"Sorry, I'm being bitchy. I'm so glad we have each other. You know you mean the world to me, right? I was lost before I met you." Lara rested her head on my shoulder. I caught Jonah sneaking a look back at Lara, longing written in every line of his face. My guard had it bad.

"I know, you're the best friend a girl could have," I sighed. I would get through this. One day at a time and my weight in ice-cream.

"Don't think I didn't miss you talking about three men," I prodded Lara's waist. "I know you're in a better place with Ray and Jonah. Do you have another mystery man in the wings?"

Lara shoved a spoonful of ice cream in her mouth, and I rolled my eyes at her evasion.

“Lara,” I warned. I stepped over a jagged crack in the path. If she thought she could get away with not talking by eating, she was sorely misinformed. The steadily rising flush on her cheeks piqued my curiosity.

“Honestly, I’m impressed. Has someone been taking notes? Just don’t get your nails done and expect a proposal unless you’re one thousand percent sure. But let me guess. Jonah already hates Ray. So, this newcomer must be also causing tension. Unless they don’t all know about each other?” Her lashes flickered. And I let out a scandalized gasp. “You know I won’t rest until you spill everything, right? You’ve been a busy girl.” I looked ahead to Jonah and closed my mouth. It probably wouldn’t help Lara’s situation if I blurted it out on the streets. She rolled her eyes good-naturedly and put the lid back on the ice cream.

“What? No ice cream? Am I being punished?” I gave her a wry smile as she disentangled from me and set to twisting her hands together. The light jibe melted away on my tongue. Anyone could see that joking about this wasn’t helping.

“You always said you knew pretty much straight away that they were your guys,” Lara breathed deeply. “That there was something in your heart that called out to them. What if I felt that, but the guys as a group could never work? Too many secrets, too many differences.” The fabric of her calico bag bled darker on the bottom as the ice cream melted against it. I tried to imagine a world in which my guys weren’t friends, and it didn’t exist. They were nothing without each other, and once upon a time I had thought they were nothing without me.

I certainly felt like I was nothing without them. It wasn’t one heartbreak I was nursing, but three. The absence they left inside of me was a gaping maw I was frightened wouldn’t ever heal. To contemplate having the same arrangement, but with three men who didn’t like each other. The potential for heartbreak was even higher.

“Lara, unless you’re dating a Crimson Claw, I think they could get over it. It’s their greatest test. If they hate each other and they’re still willing to put aside their differences for you. You’ll know if it’s truly real. Look at you, girl, mending

bridges with your powerful pussy.” I smirked as she covered her face with her hands.

“This is ridiculous. How is this my life?” she spoke to the sky.

“Don’t ask me.” I shrugged. “I guess I’m a bad influence on you. In more ways than one.”

If I didn’t have Lara, I don’t know how I would be coping. I thanked whoever oversaw things that they’d sent her in my path, repeatedly, until I got the message. She had a heart of gold and was magnanimous enough to include me in that warmth. Lara gave me a quick wordless hug.

“Any guy would be lucky to have you. But if they don’t treat you like the queen, you let me know and I can have a little chat with them.” I cracked my knuckles and winked.

Lara’s laugh was sharp, and it echoed down the almost deserted street.

“You’re a good friend, Addi. Ray will think again before crossing you.” I still hadn’t forgiven the charming Donato heir, but it was Lara’s love life. He knew what would happen if he messed around with her heart again.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you avoiding my question, by the way. Who is this other guy you’re falling for?”

Lara stuttered, hiking the bag strap up over her shoulder. Her knuckles turned white over the material, and I narrowed my eyes. Up ahead, Jonah stiffened, and Lara’s shoulders slumped as I dropped my intense gaze. We had almost reached Lara’s apartment building, and I craned my head to see what had caught his interest. He barked into his lapel, and several men melted out from the shadows, forming a barrier around us. Jonah jogged back, face grim.

“What’s going on Jonah?” I asked, subtly moving Lara behind me. Jonah’s eyes flicked over her before he answered with a hefty sigh.

“I’m confirming, but there is someone in the apartment’s lobby building. Someone you will most definitely not want to see.”

I cocked my head in confusion, stomach churning with anticipation. The long, tense moments stretched my nerves as we waited for more information. Could it be Kinsley from Crimson Claw? Heat surged in my blood at the idea of her dismissing my clear warning. Had her soft stomach all been an elaborate act? Had she come to rub it in my face? It wasn't difficult to track where I was staying, but I had made sure Lara's apartment was entirely secure before she'd moved into it. Her connection to me, even through the legal avenue of my foundation, made her a target. It wasn't inconceivable that someone would accost me in the lobby, but it told me a lot about their intelligence. Jonah stiffened, clearly getting a response from one of my guys.

"Who?" I rocked on my heels, unable to stop moving. But from the look on Jonah's face, I suddenly knew.

Nicole.

I pushed past him, ignoring his sharp curse. The tall sheets of glass were illuminated from the inside, highlighting the sleek marble lobby. There was a green wall, dripping with ferns, and she stood in front of it. A guard was patting her down, while another rifled through her handbag. My nostrils flared as I attempted to tame the sprawling rage that scratched my insides.

"You've got to be kidding me," I hissed under my breath. Lara's shoes slapped as she raced behind me, her sharp intake of breath loud in my ear.

"This bitch," Lara gasped.

"Instructions?" Jonah pressed. He gave nothing away with his expression, emotionless and blank. But deep in his eyes, I could see a spark of anger. Nobody was pleased to see Nicole. There was only one reason she was here, but I hoped I was wrong. If I wasn't? She was about to find out what it means to come up against Adelaide Orazio.

"Oh, I can handle this. If she's been checked for weapons, let me at her." A hunger clawed in my stomach, but it wasn't nourishment it needed. It craved revenge. I wanted to tear strips off her pretty face. There were years of pent-up rage

toward her passive aggressiveness. But I didn't have to cool my temper out of respect for my boyfriends anymore.

"She's clear." Jonah stepped out of my way as I strode past him. A grim smile thinned my lips, and I slammed my way into the lobby. The confrontation with Crimson Claw hadn't fed my need for violence, but this would. Strangely, now I was thankful for the confession Briar had made. I wasn't walking in blind, but I still couldn't believe this girl. She smirked as I got closer, shaking out of the guard's hold.

"Let her go. This won't take long," I ordered them to stand down, which they did immediately.

"Hello Adelaide, I hope you're doing well?" Her voice was sweet, but I knew it was an illusion. She'd been like this the entire time I'd known her. Everything she said held hidden barbs, ones that my guys had never realized. From the very first time I met her, she had been dismissive and rude, all with a smile on her face. I wondered if part of it came from not understanding who she was messing with. To the public, I was a philanthropist. The rumors about my family's true legacy were difficult to prove if you weren't in my world. It was better this way. She wouldn't realize who she was sparring against. Not until I had her head between my teeth, ready to crush her to pieces.

"Nicole, I'd hoped to never see your face again." I opted for no pleasantries. She had never given me a chance to befriend her. Why should I pretend now? She might think we were rivals, playing on the same level, but she had never even been in the game. It was time she knew exactly that. She confirmed my thoughts when she pursed her lips and pulled something out of her handbag.

Predictable.

It was my blouse. She clutched it in her hand like a trophy. I hadn't worn this one in years, the color washed me out. My aching chest loosened at the knowledge that Briar hadn't picked just any piece of clothing. He'd taken something he knew I didn't care about. It would have been worse if he'd

given her one of his shirts. The distinction he'd made amounted to a bit of peace. But I clutched onto it.

"I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd return this. It's your blouse. Briar gave it to me after I showered in his bathroom." She dangled the material from her pointer finger. Lara muttered behind me, voicing all my internal thoughts. I didn't look away, holding her smug gaze until her eyebrows pressed together. Did she realize yet? That she wouldn't get the reaction she was hoping for?

"That old thing? Briar told me all about how you spilled a drink over yourself on purpose. But not before you drugged him, right? Don't worry the Cupid worked perfectly when I was there to hold him later that night. Did you think he wouldn't tell me? That what happened between you was anything but a pathetic attempt by you, again." I jerked my head at one of my guards, and he grabbed the blouse. "I haven't worn that blouse in years. But honestly? I don't want anything that has touched your skin. I'm very much like Briar in that respect. He doesn't want you touching him, either."

I jerked my head, and the guard balled up the blouse, tossing it in the trash.

Nicole made a strangled snarl before taking a shaky breath.

"You are so self-important. You don't even know what's going on around you. Sit on your pedestal for a little while longer. Things are moving so fast in Greenwich Bay that one day you'll see how stupid you've been," Nicole played at taunting, but she lacked conviction. It reeked of desperation. Trying to land a mark when she'd already been given the death blow. But her words piqued my interest.

It sounded like she was talking about Adelaide, the Orazio crime family heir. Not Adelaide, the lauded philanthropist with a squeaky-clean reputation. I had intended on having her escorted out, tired of playing with unworthy prey. But now I'd let her talk her way into a confession.

"Oh?" I tilted my head. "That sounds like a threat."

My gaze beat down on her, unrelenting intensity and rage. I hope she was felt it lick at her bones, scorching away her flimsy ego. She was surrounded by *my* men, in *my* town. I wasn't afraid.

"You don't even realize you're being moved around like a chess piece," she sneered, but again, it lacked conviction. Her gaze unfocused as she looked past my shoulder, taking in the situation she was in. Surrounded by hostile people who supported me. I laughed, empty and done. Who did this woman think she was?

"Let's be honest. If we're talking chess, I'm the queen. You're just a pawn."

Nicole's cheeks flooded pink, and her eyes turned to hateful slits. She didn't like that insinuation.

"Briar and I have something special. Even years apart, he trusts me. Only I could get close enough to have him confide in me. I know secrets about Briar you couldn't even comprehend," she insisted, changing tactics. "When we were younger, he came to me. You might have had his heart for a little while, but he'll come back to me. I know he will."

Something about her words sent goosebumps erupting, but I didn't react. I sifted through them methodically, the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

"There is something about Briar," she sighed wistfully, the sharpness draining out of her voice. "All the evil that has touched him never tainted his heart."

"He's pure," I agreed. Briar's time in the foster home damaged him. But he didn't lock himself up tight like Logan did, or rage like Jesse. His heart wasn't wrapped up tight with concrete walls. Instead, he was alarmingly vulnerable, sensitive and open. He'd been the first of the three to say he loved me. The first to throw his arms open and declare himself mine, no matter what.

I loved that about him.

He'd taught me so much about accepting and expressing love. I bit down on my lip; the pain distracting me from the

surge of longing that flooded my body. I still loved Briar. It was impossible not to. Even after everything, I could still picture his sweet face, obscured by curls.

“You could never have had him.” I jerked my chin up. “He’s mine and always will be.”

Oh.

My possessiveness surprised me.

Nicole wanted to argue. Her puffed-out cheeks were full of protestations. I could tell by the mulish look in her eyes she didn’t believe me.

“Call him,” I demanded. She didn’t reply, her mouth locked thin and white. Her body trembled with a barely contained frustration. “If you could have him so easily, he’ll pick up, won’t he? It’s not like Briar threw you out on your ass.”

“He blocked me,” Nicole admitted through gritted teeth. She’d wanted to drive me to tears like she had at the awards night. She had torn me down gleefully with her stored secrets. But she didn’t get the satisfaction this time. Instead, she teetered on the edge, blinking rapidly. But I couldn’t hold back. She’d come at me first, now I had to finish this. I had to crush her under my boot. Her words from earlier were off and I needed her unbalanced so she would expose herself to me.

I casually fished out my phone and punched Briar’s name. Swiping to make sure the speaker was on, but it didn’t even ring twice.

“Adelaide?” Briar answered hurriedly. “Are you alright?”

“I need you.” I looked pointedly at Nicole, whose lip had the audacity to tremble. The spite had drained out of her, and in return, so did my fight. I didn’t want to hate Nicole, but she’d given me no choice. There was some part of her that believed Briar and she were star-crossed lovers, that given the chance, he would choose her.

“O-of course, anything, Adelaide. Oh god, anything. Tell me.” Jesse and Logan converged on the line, their voices mingling with concern. I could imagine them crowded over the phone, fighting over who was holding it.

“Can I see you? I’m hungry.” I couldn’t back down now. Not until Nicole understood reality. Not until I destroyed the delusion she’d concocted in her mind. Their gasps of delight mingled through the speaker.

“I could book Gino’s. Or, or Jesse said he’d cook? What do you feel like?” Briar was breathless with excitement. I almost felt a little guilty. Almost.

“He can cook if he likes, but that’s not what I’m hungry for,” I purred. “I want you, all of you.”

Their collective gulps echoed in the apartment lobby. There wasn’t a sound except for their labored breathing. Two red spots crowned Nicole’s cheeks, and her chest floundered with uneven breathing. Was I going to take it this far? Lara obviously thought I needed a voice of reason, sending me a *what the fuck* look. But Nicole thought we were on the same level. She wasn’t even in the same league.

“Do you want me?” I asked silkily, feeling like a cat toying with its prey.

“Siren,” I heard Logan groan. I wondered if he was imagining our time at the greenhouse.

“Adelaide, we are dying for you.” That was Jesse. I could hear the smile in his voice.

Briar spoke, and I saw the moment Nicole’s illusion shattered into slivers of tainted memories.

“You own me, Adelaide. Whatever you want of me is yours.”

My body tingled. Despite all the betrayals and pain they’d caused me, I was still human. I had my own needs that had been neglected except for my vibrator. I could have all three of them right now. No strings. No promises. They owed me and no one else knew my body better than they did.

Picking up strangers was difficult when you were paranoid everyone was trying to kill you. I had three men I knew could have me begging in minutes. It made me feel powerful.

“I’ll call you back. I’m just dealing with a little pest problem,” I hung up before they could reply. Nicole’s shoulders rolled forward, and a splash of water hit the shining lobby floor. She had made me cry once, now I had returned the favor. But I wasn’t quite done with her.

“I think I made my point.”

“You won’t be able to speak by the time he’s through with you.” Her anger loosened her tongue.

Gotcha.

“Look, I’ve got a booty call to get to,” I waved my hand. “So, let’s wrap this unpleasant encounter up quickly, shall we? You can start by elaborating on who the fuck is pulling your strings. Because something tells me you’ve been a bad girl.”

Nicole’s eyes widened.

“Shit,” she breathed, looking past me to the exit. As if I’d let her make it that far.

“Start talking,” I ordered.

Adelaide



The lobby of my former apartment building was barren. I clutched the calico bag with melting ice cream like it was keeping me from coming undone. Every feeling within me seemed to be contorted like they were dancing in a tornado, thrashing inside of me. I fought to contain and restrain the mental chaos engulfing me, as if I had no control over it. My entire body tensed up, and I concentrated on expanding each of my fingers outwards, feeling each tendon stretch and pop with every flex. Anything to distract myself from the implications of what Nicole had confessed.

“You ok, boss?” Jonah asked, reaching around me to press the elevator button. I’d been standing there looking at the silver doors like a statue. His gaze flicked to my flexing fingers, and I hurriedly tucked them away.

“Just impatient.” I shrugged, turning away from him and cursing under my breath. I had to get it together. But how? The words Nicole had spilled were still fresh in my mind and paranoia was pounding at my back. I took out my keys, sifting through them with shaking fingers. They dropped to the ground, and I cursed again. The elevator slid open, and I hurried out, Jonah loping at my heels.

“Are you going to tell me what she said?” Jonah pressed, leaning down to pick up the keys, holding them out with his eyebrow arched. I shook my head vehemently.

“Do you know where Lara is hiding out?” I changed the subject. Once I’d coaxed Nicole’s surprising revelation, I insisted Lara go somewhere safe. If Nicole was at her apartment building, it meant they knew where she lived. She hadn’t argued. Small mercies.

“I’m going to call Ray.” She’d slid her phone out, and I’d lunged at her, the phone clattering to the ground.

“No.” I’d shaken my head. “No, not Ray. No one who is connected to the Orazio or the Donato families. Do you know anyone else who you trust enough?”

Pink filled her cheeks, but she’d nodded. I was glad I didn’t know where she was going when I put her in a taxi. But now I was being assaulted with thoughts of Lara, captured and tortured. Blood. Always covered in blood. Jonah ground his teeth together, hesitating before answering.

“I have an idea,” he conceded, as though it hurt him.

“Will she be safe there?” We were standing outside my apartment now, and I was desperate to prolong this moment a little longer. Jonah gave me a quick nod.

“She couldn’t be safer.”

His terse statement made my shoulders droop. But my heart still galloped like a wild mustang. Kicking into my chest until I swore my ribs cracked. I swallowed past a knot in my throat.

“I want guards outside, in the foyer and you outside the main door,” I ordered. Clawing at what I could control. Jonah’s forehead creased, knowing it was overkill for what I normally asked. I’d even argued about Jonah initially, wanting to prove I didn’t need the protection of anyone. It had been hard growing up as a woman in my world, especially with my grandmother as my role model. She didn’t rule in the light, like I would eventually. But her power stretched this whole city.

“I can help you better if you tell me what has you spooked?” Jonah whispered, and I rounded on him. Searched the face of my loyal guard, looking for tiny tells of deceit. His forehead

creased, eyebrows inching upwards into his hairline. The blatant perusal unsettled him, and he took a step backwards.

“Everything is fine,” I insisted, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Okay,” he drawled, pulling out his phone and growling orders in a low voice.

I wanted him to ask me again. One more time, pick at my terrible facade. Everything Nicole had told me, once I’d cleared the room, bubbled on the tip of my tongue, scalding hot. I wanted to spit the words out for relief. But what she’d admitted made me question everything. Even my guard, whose loyalty I’d never suspected. Sweat made my dress cling to my back. For the first time in my life, I felt hunted. I’d thought I was one step ahead of everything that had happened. Too easily, I’d believed Crimson Claw were the ones who had caused all the danger. None of it had truly thrown me. But this? Jonah flicked me a curious look, phone pressed to his ear. Could I trust him? I wanted to say yes, but my instincts were shaking. A heavy silence stretched out, only broken when I slammed my fist on the apartment that I had once called home.

“Siren.” Logan beamed with surprise when he opened the door. I was struck with a sharp yearning to throw myself in his wide embrace, a cocoon. The pleasure on his face drooping when he widened the door to see Jonah standing beside me.

“Let me know of any movement downstairs,” I said to Jonah before closing the door and locking it. I took a shuddering breath, giving myself one last chance to collect myself.

“Adelaide?” Briar was standing in the entryway, golden flecks in his eyes glinting. Filled with longing. Damp curls brushed his forehead, one lone drip trailing down his cheek. It dropped onto his pressed white shirt, seeping in like a shadow.

“I need to talk to you,” I brushed past him, breathing in his clean, minty scent. His face fell at my cool entry. After my phone call they had expected a horny Adelaide, not one who was a step away from losing it. I flexed my fingers once, before I caught myself, but felt the prickle of their sharp gazes on my neck. I wasn’t doing a good job of hiding my agitation.

“Princess.” Jesse’s head whipped up as I walked into the kitchen, his waist encased in a frilled white apron. He strode over to me, not reading the vibe I was giving off, and bundled me into his arms. Or perhaps he knew, unconsciously, that I was desperate to be touched. To have this burden shared. His lips collided with mine and I softened against him. My raging fear screwing up my control. His touch was soft but determined, and I let out a quiet whimper. The sharp edge inside me softened at his familiarity. But when his tongue flickered at the seam of my lips, I pulled out of his grasp with a pant. Jesse’s eyes were molten hot, and he advanced on me again.

“No.” My hand flew up, clearing my rough throat. “I’m sorry, I’m not here for that.”

The fire in his gaze faded, and a crease materialized between his brows as he waited for me to explain. There was a palpable tension in the air, and all it would take was one nod from me and they’d push away my doubts. All the scenarios that inundated my mind could vanish with mere movement of my head.

“You said you wanted us.” Logan frowned, and I shot him a look, pointing to the couch. They didn’t move, and I sighed, taking the lead. I sank into the soft dove blue blanket, running my hand over the material. The too big couch took up the open plan room, but it had been perfect for all of us to sprawl out together. The cushions welcomed me like a lover, and I closed my eyes for a moment of respite.

“I wasn’t being exactly honest.” I crossed my legs and waited for them to take a seat. They shuffled with barely concealed disappointment. Crestfallen, like kicked puppies. Jesse undid the apron with a stiff jerk, balling it up and tossing it on the bench. He sat and glared at his hands in frustration, but not at me. As if blaming his appendages for being foolish enough to believe it would be that easy. They were done up in their best clothes, primed and sprayed in cologne. The familiar scents made my head thump. Garlic too. I flicked a look at the kitchen, seeing all the ingredients for my favorite

seafood fettuccine. Jesse noticed how I sniffed the air with a rueful shake of his head.

“I’m making homemade garlic bread with my own baguettes.” He rubbed his palms down his thighs.

I replied with a sigh, whistling with frustration. They thought I was here to make good on my promises, to sate my appetite on them. Dressed just the way I liked them. The apartment smelled recently cleaned, so I knew Briar had gone over it with a meticulous hand like he always did. I spied the bunch of flowers on the side table, tied with a white satin bow. On the shelves, candles flickered, and the speaker was crooning out a sensual mix.

Honestly? I’d rather jump into bed with them than spill the secrets I’d learned tonight.

“Could I have a glass of wine?” I asked, desperate to prolong everything. Logan pursed his lips before stalking to the fridge. His knuckles whitened around the neck of the chilled chardonnay. My favorite.

My fingers itched, but I tucked them under my thighs. This was hard enough without them knowing I was teetering on the edge. Logan pressed the glass into my hand, his touch lingering. Their faces were copies of each other. A mixture of hurt, sadness, and confusion.

“You’ll forgive us if we’re a little slow.” Logan crossed his arms. “We thought you were here for us.”

My nostrils flared involuntarily. A wave of indignation overtook me. I clenched my jaw and brought the glass to my lips. Trying to ignore the fine tremble it made, I swallowed half of it. Being angry was better than being scared. Anger I could harness, a stallion I had ridden many times. Fear was a wild beast, one that stalked me from the shadows. Its paws clawed the ground, threatening to churn me to pieces under its feet. I latched onto the blistering well of anger inside me instead.

“Poor babies. Thought you were going to get your dick wet, did you? Well, don’t let me stop you. I’m sure you could find

any girl willing if you put the call out,” I snapped, my temper reacting to more than their words. Rage coursed through me, and they were a convenient outlet. Briar’s head jerked back, and he shook his head.

“No,” he argued. “That’s not it at all.” He shifted on the seat uncomfortably. “Ok, it’s a minor part. But we were hoping this was a chance to romance you, to show you how much you mean to us. There isn’t a girl alive who could live up to you.”

“Or dead,” Jesse added with a wink. I stared at him in confusion, and he hastened to add. “There isn’t a girl dead who could take your place either.”

Briar groaned, and I took another fortifying gulp of wine. I stood up, walking to the middle of the room, my fingers strangling the glass stem.

“I want to get back together,” I whispered.

It was the last thing they expected me to say because they froze like statues, eyes widening like saucers. Logan dragged a hand down his face, making a muffled noise. Before I clarified, they were on me, glass falling to the ground as they wrapped me in their arms. Surrounded and supported, something I had always adored. Briar cupped my face and kissed me, sweet, his lips tasting like mint. My head spun as he sipped on me, feeling fingers on my hips, my ass, my hair. Logan pushed him to the side with a growl, his lips sliding to take Briar’s place. He wasn’t gentle, but ravenous. Like he’d been saving all his affection, and it slammed into me like a dam had burst. Jesse sucked on my neck, his teeth scraping the length of it, his chest plastered to my back.

I shuddered in their careful hold. Their touch was tentative yet starved. Clutching and soothing, soft and hungry. I couldn’t say no. My body heated as they coaxed it alive with something other than fear. The questing strokes rerouted the anxious buzzing to roaring need. Jesse pushed Logan aside, nipping at my bottom lip before his tongue swept into my mouth. Dizzying.

Nicole’s admissions had wormed their way under my skin. Rendering me small, fallible, and foolish. She’d called me a

pawn and after what she'd admitted. I could see it, feel it rotting inside of me. Putrid failure, blackening my confidence. I let myself sag in their hold, needing a second to be weak. Everything I'd trapped deep inside me simmered to the surface, choking me with the enormity of the repercussions. Their touch was a shield from whatever lurked outside. Their lips on mine wiped it all away. My skin was on fire, and I was out of control. We were live wires, electrocuting each other with touch. They cycled through, trading turns plundering my mouth.

"We've missed you," Briar muttered into my neck as Jesse hiked my dress up over my hips. I didn't reply, Logan's lips stealing any words I might have made. I moaned as he palmed my breast. Fingers teased the line of my panties. A silent question. I widened my legs, knowing it was a mistake, but too desperate to care. They were offering me a bridge away from my worries. I took it.

"Fuck, so wet for us," Jesse's voice was guttural as his fingers teased. He glided around my clit, groaning into my back. His hardness pressed against my ass cheeks. I wriggled once, intent on ending this before it crossed a line I couldn't come back from. But Briar unbuttoned my dress, pulling my bra down with a growl. His lips closed over my nipple, tongue bringing it to a hard peak. Logan kissed down my neck. His breaths were hot and ragged in my ear.

"Need you. My siren. Drowning without you," he whispered, fingers tattooing the compliments onto my skin. Before he took my mouth again. "Let me please you?"

All the while Jesse was stoking the heat between my legs, my arousal letting his fingers own me easily. I looked into Logan's clear blue eyes. He saw the indecision there, the wobble of my swollen lip that I tried to hide.

"It means nothing. Just pleasure," he lied to me. I could see how the admission pained him, but I let him do it. I was selfishly taking now, needing something I couldn't return. My heart skipped in my chest, a shield of bones. This wasn't love. I would repeat it to myself until I believed it. I could stop at any moment. Logan exhaled sharply at my infinitesimal nod.

He dropped to the floor so hard his knees crunched. But he didn't notice, shimmying down my drenched panties. His hot breath puffed for a moment before he parted my lips for his questing tongue. Jesse chuckled in my ear as I let out a breathy curse.

“That’s right, princess. We’ll fuck you.” He turned my head, groaning into my mouth. Briar pinched and rolled my nipple between his fingers. I trembled on the fine line between pain and pleasure, letting both the sensations have me. Pinned between three hard bodies. I let the restraint drop. Let myself be free.

“I have dreams about fucking your tits,” Briar admitted, trailing open-mouthed kisses over my sensitive skin. The visage of Briar thrusting his gigantic cock between my breasts made me shiver.

“I want to choke this pretty throat on my cock.” He muttered, his hand circling my throat and squeezing. My knees wobbled at the suggestion; it wouldn't be the first time he'd done it. I might have Logan on his knees for me, but Briar was the dominant one. My throat ached as he squeezed a little tighter, muttering obscene promises against my skin. I gasped as Logan lifted one of my legs over his shoulder and suckled my clit. It pulsed in his warm mouth. My lungs emptied on a moan, one that Jesse tried to swallow. I took his bottom lip between my teeth, appetite turning desperate. His eyes flew open, darkening with lust.

“Break the skin, princess. It’s yours to do what you want,” he offered. Logan’s moans vibrated against my pussy, his fingers digging into my thick thighs. They were shuddering around his ears now. Briar turned my head, clamping it between his hands. Our kiss hurt. Like we were trying to press our bodies together into one. I sobbed, my tongue fighting with his. Months hadn't lessened what was in my heart. But the depth of feeling was threaded with betrayal. Each roll of lust and love came with a slice of pain. Their kisses smeared the hurt and promised to wipe it away. I clutched at whoever I could reach, digging my nails into their skin. I wanted to rage

like I had never allowed myself. To mark them as deep as the invisible marks they'd left on my soul.

"It means everything. I'm sorry, Adelaide. But this could never be nothing," Jesse muttered apologies as he lavished attention on my breasts. I wasn't listening. My war of tongues with Briar was stuttering as I tripped over the pleasure Logan built. I reached down and palmed at the straining lump in Briar's jeans. I stared unseeing at the ceiling, lungs aching from gasping sobs. Logan pushed me over the edge, and I stiffened, sobbing again. I tingled, my sensitive nub pulsing under Logan's flat, soft tongue.

"So beautiful." He looked up at me, beard soaked with my arousal. Jesse pressed in close, hips jerking his hardness against me. I'd damn well crossed the line. I'd obliterated it. My stomach clenched. Sick, sick, sick. I spiraled.

"Wait," I rasped, trying to push free from their hungry embrace. I stumbled out, my panties locked around one ankle, body thrumming. I yanked my bra up, cheeks flaming. "It's not what you think."

I rounded the couch, putting some distance in between us. My body tingled with the echo of their hands. They circled like starving predators, and my chest banged at how I'd used them.

"Siren let's forget words for the evening," Logan promised, and my thighs clenched together at his voice, thick with desire. I smoothed my dress over my ass with shaking fingers. I gripped the back of the couch to stop the room spinning.

"Just let me—" I gasped, wincing at the tightness in my chest. I waved a hand at their concerned steps forward.

"I spoke to Nicole," I blurted out. The confusion was back, the wariness. I shook my head, not wanting to continue but knowing I needed to.

"She tried to lie about you, Briar." I stumbled over to sit on the couch again, waving them away when they tried to sit near me. "She came to rub that blouse in my face. But she messed up. She admitted something to me that made my neck tingle.

She's been working with someone. There was a reason she came back and reconnected with you."

It hurt to breathe. My lungs protested the air in them. Every inch of me ached for more of their touch. I wondered if I looked as disheveled as they did. Cheeks stamped red and hair askew. Briar shrank down, sinking into the couch. The confident man who had whispered filthy things in my ear disappearing.

"What?" he whispered.

"She was getting paid. Someone hired her, Briar. They wanted her to get in between us. To break us up. Her employer had been planning this for a long time. When they couldn't get you to cheat on me, they offered you all the money instead. We broke up because of a situation they manufactured. Everything with Crimson Claw. It was all to make sure we weren't together. They even supplied Nicole with the Cupid, hoping she could convince you to cheat. They wanted me unattached. So, they could step in and—" I shook my head, my throat constricting.

"What are you saying?" Jesse asked, slowly dropping next to Briar.

"Who are you talking about?" Logan whispered, his face turning a deathly shade of pale under his beard. My lip quivered. I hesitated too long, and Jesse leapt in.

"Ray Donato. I knew he was an slimy motherfucker, but even this is unbelievable." The name made me flinch. I still couldn't believe it myself.

"I don't know if it was Ray or his father. But someone from high in the Donato family hired Nicole and put her up to this. They knew about her history with you. But whoever it was, they want me with Ray."

"That makes no sense." Logan argued. "What about the Crimson Claw at the greenhouse?"

I shook my head. After my meeting with Kinsley at the cafe, we had been in further communication. She'd rang and reconnected with a bright, blissfully innocent tone. Insisting

that ‘girl bosses’ need to stick together. There was no way she was involved. There wasn’t a ruthless bone in her body. But someone had pounced on the chance to use them as a threat.

“I was never dating Ray. It was always fake,” I admitted, my shoulders hiking up when the boys’ noisy exhales reached me. Now they knew the truth. “But only Ray, Lara, and I knew about our arrangement. I think everything that has happened was done with the purpose of driving me into his arms. Everyone knows I hate being told what to do, and being told to stay away from Ray? They wanted me to do the opposite. Crimson Claw was an opportunity to combine our efforts and make me believe we were stronger together.”

The admission festered in the room, and I looked at the three men across from me. Understanding carved through their features, and Jesse ground his teeth.

“So, you don’t want to get back together?” he accused. Sharp pain twinged through my chest. Guilt. When Nicole had admitted someone had been paying her to insinuate herself into my relationship, it had frightened me. I didn’t know who I could trust right now. So, I’d run to the three people who could help me. I needed them. But I also felt safe with them. I should have never let them touch me again. Now my nerves tangled under my skin, knotted with guilt at my selfish actions. I pushed aside the nausea and nodded, my chin lifting.

“I need to flush out who is behind this all, whether it’s Ray or his dad. Nothing will enrage them more if I end up back with the guys they worked so hard to cleave from my side.”

Pain, crisp and bitter, made them sag. The glow of their touch felt oily on my skin. My knees were watery with regret. I swallowed bitter bile, letting my walls drop. I was vulnerable right now. Hunted. My usual methods wouldn’t work in this situation. Despite everything, I knew they would protect me, help me. Buried under the hurt were three hearts who beat in time with mine. They had sung together in unison just moments before.

“Will you do it?” I asked, prepared for them to turn me down. I flexed my fingers. In and out. In and out. But their

answer surprised me.

“We’d do anything for you, Adelaide. But you need to tell us what is going on. Starting with your intrusive thoughts.”

Adelaide



Six years ago

“What are you thinking about?” Logan asked, smiling down at me.

There was the slightest breeze in Calder Place today. I shuffled closer to Logan as a determined gust rippled past us. Only because the wind gave me a chill, not because I wanted to steal some of his warmth. My thighs soaked up the warmth he exuded, luxuriating in it.

“Remembering the day, I came back. I’m so glad you were still here.” I bumped my shoulder against him, sharing a smile. After Ray had humiliated me and I’d crossed paths with Briar, Jesse and Logan. I couldn’t stop thinking about them, returning to find them curled on the decrepit couch. Logan had been sprawled on the ground in a sleeping bag.

“Glad we were homeless?” Logan reached out and squeezed my knee. Heat fluttered in my stomach at the friendly touch. *Friendly touch*. I scolded my heart, which thumped harder, oblivious. They’d tried to hide it, but the reason they were in the abandoned lot was because they’d aged out of the foster home. The streets were cold and dirty, but still kinder than the care they’d received there.

“Not anymore. How is the new place?” I blushed, something I did often in their company. It had become routine to see the

boys at least every second day. I'd come to Calder Place and one or all of them would be there. It was easier for me to slip away here without my security following. I would read books, watch movies on a phone or even play cards. It didn't matter. As long as we were together. Lately they'd been splitting up, like they were rotating days with me. I liked the one-on-one time, but I missed us together as a group. There was something magic about it. Heaven was being pressed between these three men. Logan stared at me; his lips softly tipped upwards.

"What?" I whispered, and he moved closer to tangle his finger in my hair. The soft movement sent off tingles down my body. The lucky lock swung when he let it go. My vision swirled, narrowing in on his lips. They looked so soft. I ached to kiss him.

"Nothing," his voice was hoarse.

"Tell me." Our lips drifted closer, and he searched my face for something.

"I worked out what it is about you." He cupped my cheeks with roughened hands. "You're a siren. Designed to destroy men with your beauty, your intelligence, your spirit. I can understand why men used to throw themselves overboard."

For a man who was quiet and guarded, his sudden admission made me gasp in shock. My body trembled with the need to do exactly what he asked. I laughed in disbelief, but he caught my hands, threading his fingers through mine. His clear blue eyes drilled into me.

"I can't do this with many people. I don't know if you've noticed," he whispered. He looked down at our hands, almost ruefully. "Jesse and Briar are the only other people whose touch I can handle."

I had seen Logan flinch away from touch since I met him. Even his fingers grazing against someone else bought an expression of disgust on his face. But it was the shocked, awed expression that Briar and Jesse shared every time he touched me that convinced me.

"I noticed, is there a reason?"

Logan half shrugged, his thumbs stroking my hands. Logan liked to touch me constantly, as if the luxury of it sustained him.

“I came into the foster system when I was nine years old. I don’t even have any memories from when I was younger. All I know is that people touching me makes me feel like I want to tear my skin off. It’s the most intense, crawling, uncomfortable feeling you can imagine.”

I tried to pull my hands out of his firm hold, horrified he might feel that from our touch. Logan made soothing noises and held tight until I stopped wriggling.

“You ran right into me the day we met. I should have recoiled. If it were anyone else, I would have. But touching you feels so right, so peaceful. I would give anything for just one taste of your perfect lips.”

He stared at me with such intense hunger that my breath swelled, frozen in my lungs.

“Logan...” I wanted that too, but nausea rolled in my stomach. If I kissed Logan, that would be it. I couldn’t think of Jesse or Briar’s lips against mine. Lately, all I did was imagine them lying me down, stripping off my clothes and taking me. My heart was caged, caught by three men who I had stumbled upon. They’d become my best friends. I couldn’t imagine life without them. They were what I looked forward to, their messages and presence. I didn’t realize how adrift I was until I had them anchoring me. But as time went on, I realized what this feeling was.

I liked them. All three of them. I was falling hard for three different guys.

Briar was sweet and comforting.

Jesse made me laugh and challenged me.

Logan took my worries and made me feel safe.

They all gave me something different, puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. Our friendship was growing into something more. It was hard to deny the small, lingering touches. The

heat that built from sitting close together and eyes filled with want.

But I desired all of them and that wasn't possible.

I pulled back, everything screaming in me to stay. A flash of frustration and hurt flattened Logan's lips. Like he regretted being honest with me. I wanted to clutch at his curling hands, reassure him. But if I touched him, I knew I wouldn't be able to say no to the more he was offering. It wasn't fair of me to play with them like this. These feelings were cruel, and I shouldn't encourage them.

"I should go." I gathered my things. Threads of emotion swirled wildly inside of me, and I grabbed at the frayed edges, stuffing them behind the impenetrable walls in my mind. This couldn't happen. I wouldn't break up their friendship.

"Adelaide, don't," Logan's voice cracked as he scrambled to his feet. The sweet, perfect moment shattered, and I knew it was all my fault.

"Say hi to—" I swallowed. "—Briar and Jesse for me." I tossed a conciliatory smile before racing down the well-worn path back to my house.

I didn't want to say goodbye. But what I felt for them was spilled sunlight, warm, glorious and fading as it set. I had been seconds away from kissing Logan. If I did that, it would ruin everything between the four of us. I couldn't pretend what I felt was innocent anymore. I had to put a stop to it before we all got torn apart. They'd already suffered enough. If I let myself have what I wanted, it would mean they would become a part of my world. That scared me as much as the tender emotions blooming in my heart.

Everything about this led to disaster. It was better to walk away.



One month later

I wondered if their hearts ached as much as mine did right now. The cowardly way I'd run pinched like an unshed cocoon

over my skin. I couldn't move on. Stuck in the murky no man's land of feelings that I hadn't even voiced.

"You're not concentrating," my grandmother's clipped voice drew me back into the room. Her diminutive stature didn't make her thinned disapproval sting any less. I sighed and waved a limp hand at the pressed biscuit base.

"I'm sorry." Her thin hands held out the mixing bowl as I took over stirring. Her lips flattened as she eased onto a stool at the kitchen bench.

"You haven't had your head on right for a month. How do you expect to hold the respect of the men who work for you if you can't stop mooning over a boy?"

Three men. I wanted to add, but it wasn't the time or the place. My grandmother's words stuck like sand in a crevice, rubbing and itching at vulnerable, unreachable places. Her black hair had streaks of gray now, but she was still fierce. She kept her emotions locked tight, only visible when she truly lost her temper. Anita Orazio wasn't warm. Not like my mom had been. Warmth didn't keep you alive in this world, not kindness or sweetness. Only strength.

"I apologize." I dropped my head, wiping it clean of emotion.

"You are worth ten of that pretty boy." My grandmother softened slightly. "Don't let his foolish words get in your head. I'm glad the marriage didn't happen. Our family doesn't need to be joined to *those* people."

The Donatos. In my grandfather's reign, there had been all out war between our families. It would continue to simmer until we found some common ground. Our reach was too powerful for them to destroy. I didn't care about Raimondo Donato. He was an arrogant ass, and his ego would be his downfall at some point. I hadn't given him a second thought since he unceremoniously rejected me. What would my grandmother think of Jesse, Logan, and Briar? She hadn't approved of my mom. Even though she cried as we buried her at the greenhouse. She'd swiped a tear away as if it offended her. Looking at my father like it was his fault.

“Should never have put a weapon in her hand. She didn’t have the spine for it.”

Is that what my grandmother thought when she looked at me? A soft hand, one who would break before she could wield control of Greenwich Bay. My jaw tightened as I ground my teeth. I had my future to think about, my legacy, and the only thing stuffing my head was three men. I was a mess. Even if I could choose, which I wouldn’t, they didn’t belong in my world.

“How did you know you were in love?” I changed the subject. My grandmother’s dark eyes slid to the doorway where my grandfather was leaning. He raised a gray threaded eyebrow.

“Yes, my wife, when did you know you loved me?” He strolled in, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. She bristled at the action, her lip quirking slightly.

“When I didn’t want to poison him to death anymore.”

My grandfather let out a low chuckle, peering at the slice we were putting together. He eyed it warily.

“Are these safe to eat?”

“They’re not laced with poison. I insisted we bake something we can enjoy for once,” I teased, the heaviness in my chest shifting slightly. My grandfather rubbed his hands gleefully while my grandmother grumbled under her breath.

“There’s no sense of preservation in this younger generation, Romeo.” He patted her shoulder in commiseration, winking at me over her shoulder.

“I can handle myself just fine,” I insisted, stirring the mixture until my arm ached. She pursed her lips. I heard shouting, waving off my grandparents when they followed me.

“We’re looking for Adelaide,” voices clamored insistently, and I heard security shout for them to back up. Voices I hadn’t heard for a month. That I missed like a gaping chasm in my chest. I spat out an apology to my grandparents and ran.

“If you don’t step off, you’re going to get a bullet,” the guard warned as I raced through the entryway.

My heart stuttered seeing Briar, Logan and Jesse standing with their hands in the air and a gun leveled at them. They turned widened eyes on me. I pinched myself discreetly, wondering if this was another dream. Bittersweet moments that only worsened the ache.

“Put it away. They’re friends,” I hissed, acutely aware of how they deflated at my words. The gun lowered with a flicker of annoyance.

“They’ll have to submit to a search. They snuck onto the property and weren’t vetted.”

I sighed apologetically as Briar scuffed his ratty sneaker on the stone entry.

“Will you submit to a search?” I asked them. I hadn’t seen them since that day with Logan. When we had almost kissed. I blocked their phone numbers and avoided Calder Place. Jesse stretched out his arms and let the guard pat him down. The sight of them was like a kick in the chest. Warmth flooded my empty heart. I wanted to smile, to ask them how they were. But they bristled with a stand-offish energy. Even though they were the ones who had tracked me down, now they wouldn’t meet my eye.

Longing swelled under my skin, tightening it until I made a soft noise. I missed them so much.

But that was the problem.

I missed *all* of them. Which is why I had to cut them off. It was only going to get messier. I didn’t want to get in between their brotherhood. They were the only family each of them had. To step between them was wrong. But I couldn’t choose. My greedy heart wanted them all.

It was madness. But now they were here.

Jesse finished first and strode toward me, ignoring my protests. His arms flung around my waist in a tight hug. He tucked his nose into my neck and breathed like I was the oxygen he needed. I trembled in his embrace. The clutch of

him around me settled a fizz that had simmered under my skin in their absence. I led them up to my bedroom, reeling that they were here. I turned, ready to apologize for ghosting them, when Logan cut me off with a swipe of his hand.

“You didn’t give me a chance to do this the day you raced off.”

He grabbed my face between his hands and planted his lips on mine. My hands fisted his shirt, gasping into his mouth. He tasted like a storm. Lightning, thunder and whipping wind. Darkness and flashes of light. I was drenched in the feel of him until a cough startled us apart.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I scolded Logan, looking at his pinkened lips. “You shouldn’t be here. How are you here?”

My chest ached as I sucked in a huge breath. I didn’t want to do this. I couldn’t choose and too many people were going to get hurt. There was no world in which I could have what I wanted. Even if I could look past the three of them, my mom flashed into my mind. This world had broken her. And she had broken me. I never wanted to put someone in the same position.

Silence strengthened the smug expression creeping across his face. Briar and Jesse didn’t look angry. In fact, they seemed pleased. Jesse fist bumped Logan with an affable grin. A frown smashed my eyebrows together. Had I misinterpreted everything between us? Jesse reached forward and snatched my hand to his chest.

“She’s not getting it.” His teeth flashed. Like I was a slow meal he was set to devour. I tried tugging my hand out of his tight hold, cheeks flaming. “Do I need to kiss you as well?”

“I’m confused.” I shivered as Jesse rolled his thumb in little circles on my skin. The slow motion crumbled me piece by piece.

“Tell me why you cut us off. Is it because you might have feelings for us, too?” he asked gently. There was a promise in his eyes, banked heat that sizzled against more than my skin. It begged me to lean in, catch fire, scar myself on bright,

beautiful flames. I bowed my head, and his fingers convulsed around mine.

“All of us?” Briar clarified, looking hopeful rather than disturbed. My throat dried, slow to understand. Jesse’s thumb pressed down on my rapid pulse, a fluttering rabbit in a tightening snare. The bite of the trap didn’t hurt though, it was euphoric.

“Yes,” I admitted, waiting for the disappointment, bargaining, or anger. Instead, Logan thumped a hand on Briar’s back and gave me a giddy smile. They converged on me, Jesse holding tight when I tried to retreat. “I know it was shitty to block you, but I can’t help the way I feel. I would never get in between you guys.” I kept my other misgivings to myself. That would require admitting who I was.

“Adelaide, hear us out. What if we wanted you in between us?” Jesse insisted with a wink, and I narrowed my eyes. They seemed to hang on my very breath, eyes gleaming with the spark of a thousand stars. I shook my head, trying to make sense of what they were saying.

“I want you, Adelaide. From the moment we met, you’ve dominated my thoughts.” Briar’s nostrils flared. “I know Jesse and Logan feel the same. So, it’s your choice. But don’t run because you fear breaking us apart.”

My heart swelled, hopeful, and tender with the opportunity to have everything I had wanted. There was still the pesky problem of them not knowing who I was, or how dangerous my life might be to them. They weren’t asking me to marry them. My lips tingled from Logan’s kiss, and my stomach flipped. But what they were offering? It seemed inconceivable, almost taboo. My cheeks heated at the thought of us, pressed together in the bed behind me. Jesse chuckled softly, as if he read my thoughts.

“You don’t mean it,” I argued, a feeble attempt. One they brushed aside with a snort. Briar reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. He searched my face with a soft smile.

“Is it so inconceivable we want to be with you?”

I made a soft noise. I should shut this down right now. March them to the door and order them to never return. But the words were wisps, ungraspable, no matter how desperately I clutched at them. Because I didn't want to. Was this how my father had felt? When he'd seen the round cheeks of my mom and her innocence? This knowing. He had to have her, like I knew I did them. My stomach was concave, growling with feverish hunger for their taste. My toes curled on the carpet, a final, foolish attempt to ground myself. This was a mistake. Bound to end in someone getting hurt. Someone getting killed.

But my father had put a weapon in his sweet girl's hand and made her wield it. I would do the opposite. The promise was a collar. One I thought tamed the danger that loped on their heels. It gave me the stability I needed as I curled my free hand toward them, urging closeness. I was Adelaide Orazio. My father's mistakes wouldn't repeat with me.

"You don't know what you're offering me." My mouth watered; their bodies so close it was dizzying.

"Can't we try?" Their matching gazes didn't waver. A hunger ached so sweetly inside of me. I longed to dance in the rain of their unsaid devotion, to let it soak through my cotton clothes and coat my skin. Longing for everything that was carved in their faces. Open, vulnerable, and desperate for me, too.

"I want you, so badly," I admitted, and their relief was instant. The tension dropped out of their shoulders, replaced with heat.

"Are we about to have a group hug? I want to press up against my girl." Logan waggling his eyebrows. I tossed my head back, tumbling into his waiting hold. What did that make the three of them? My men. My boyfriends? It felt too ineffectual, too small for the universe of stars in their eyes. I knew they would string them across the sky for me, anchor me to them for a millennium. The collar tightened around my throat, becoming a noose. But their lips promised sweet oxygen, relief and safe harbor. The dark shadow that had plagued me since I'd cut myself off from them faded.

“Before we do that, can I ask you a question? What’s with the gun toting guards? Are you some kind of princess?” Jesse joked, his hand stealing around my waist like it belonged there.

I shrugged sheepishly.

“Kinda.”

Logan



Adelaide Orazio was an inferno. Her disapproval licked heat over my body, the hard emerald coals of her eyes scorching. Tie me to a pole and give me to her pyre. I wanted to die with the taste of ash coating my tongue.

“If you don’t get out of my office, I will call security.” Adelaide’s tight jaw was the only sign she was close to losing her temper. She might have come to us, begrudgingly, for help, but this wasn’t what she’d asked for. But we only needed one opening. A tiny crack in her steel facade. Enough to wedge our fingers around her jaded edges and slip inside. I rocked back on my heels, hands tucked behind my back. The ache on my ring finger pulsed like a heartbeat. But I ignored it, widening my eyes to Adelaide in mock surprise.

“Siren, you invited us for lunch,” I insisted. Loitering in her office doorway.

She hadn’t.

But nobody else knew that insignificant detail. The news Adelaide had taken back her three worthless boyfriends had been masticated and spat out in disgust by a majority of those who knew her already. The wide-eyed stare of the receptionist had followed us as we each kissed her cheek this morning. Dropping her off at work was discussed as a good way to ‘soft launch us’ as Adelaide called it. Intense curiosity had met us, and stoic disapproval emanated off the guards. But no surprise.

It was clear someone had told them we were back together again. Jesse pushed past me with his hands jammed in his pockets, too eager to play games. Briar took the seat opposite Adelaide. We all ignored the hissing sigh of exasperation.

“I have work to do.” She rubbed her forehead. We knew she did, which was exactly why we’d come. Adelaide wasn’t going to stop until she found the person who was coming for her. Rest, sleep, even food would be put aside in favor of catching them. My cock jerked in my pants as I recalled the desperate taste of her mouth. A devouring. She’d swallowed pieces of me and there was a hollow ache where the absence lay. Fear had driven her into our arms, and I wouldn’t let go again. What she’d admitted made the base of my skull throb. It was our fault she was being targeted like this. We let our fears and insecurities out and made the worst decision of our lives. Left her vulnerable.

“Princess, do you know what day it is?” Jesse rifled through his bag and pulled out a silver picture frame. He swiped the corner of his shirt over the silvery fingermarks marring it. Until it was pristine, untouched. It held the photo of all of us at Calder Place. The one she’d removed. Jesse angled the frame on her desk, with a satisfied sigh. Adelaide’s shoulders hiked up around her ears and she growled.

“The day you give up on us?”

“Never,” we hissed in unison. Briar thumped his fist on his thigh for emphasis.

“No can do, siren. Today is your standing lunch with Raimondo.” I snagged the napkins Jesse held out and made space for him to arrange the takeaway containers. Adelaide looked at her phone and a crease dipped her forehead before she smoothed it away. But her fingers trembled until she clutched them into fists. My chest burned. Had I ever seen Adelaide scared before? No. Not even when her car exploded. The flames that had been made to consume her had mirrored in her eyes, opening a gateway to hell. Her life had almost become untethered, and she was ready to fight. Now she picked up her phone reluctantly and flicked through her notifications.

“I forgot,” she murmured. “I’ve been so busy today.”

“We know.” Briar flipped the containers around and gave Adelaide the fish tacos one-handed. “We come bearing food as your backup.”

Her phone sliced through the tension with its shrill demand. Blaring down my ragged nerves. Adelaide’s brief jump was smothered as she answered, grim.

“Yes.” She cocked her head, curious and bold as a crow. “No, send him up.” She pulled her shoulders back, bracing herself for a fight. The weight of it sent the barely there tremors through her body. It was something most people would miss. Not us. The three of us exchanged determined nods. Adelaide thought she had to endure this on her own. We needed to prove she could trust us.

“Eat, siren.” I nudged her container, but she shook her head with a grimace. She flicked back her blonde hair, taking her frustration out on the glossy locks.

“Can’t,” she admitted. The word too timid for someone swathed in courage and power. She didn’t move, except for the dart of her eyes. We were all left waiting and choking on the silent passing of time. My throat tightened in response, wanting to reach out and grip her shoulder. But I couldn’t. I looked at Jesse and he whipped out our second back-up plan.

“I got donut balls as well, from Sweet Buns, your favorite,” Jesse coaxed. He unraveled the bag with a flourish. The scent of cinnamon and sugar wafted out, the bag tepid with its bounty of soft dough. Her face lit up. My heart eclipsed at the sight as she shoved two in her mouth, looking like an adorable chipmunk.

God, I love her.

We all heard the elevator ding and the warm call Raimondo made to the front desk.

“Addy, why is everyone so damn tense today? Something happen that I don’t know about—Oh.” He froze in the doorway, his stupid, handsome face morphing with confusion. The trim, dark suit he wore emphasized the shadows of his

cheekbones. Sharp and lean. “I didn’t know you had visitors.” He invited himself in without confirmation, heading toward the corner of Adelaide’s desk. I shot up from my seat, planting my ass down instead. We traded a look. His was dry amusement, a slow smile creeping over his face. Mine, unmoving, a silent snarl as he shrugged and plopped into my empty seat across from Adelaide’s desk.

“Ray.” Adelaide licked her cinnamon sugar covered fingers. Her stature regal, as though balancing a crown, no glimmer of the anxiety that she had shown earlier.

“If I was a lesser man, I’d feel a bit hurt. Is my date being usurped?” Ray joked, frowning when she didn’t match his playful energy. That’s right, fucker. No more Adelaide smiles for you.

“Is this about Lara?” Ray bit out, low, and gruff. “You of all people should know what it’s like to have your parents disapprove of who you spend time with.”

Jesse barked an empty laugh, slapping his fist in his palm. Like a bull, pawing the ground and begging to gore the man. But Adelaide held his leash, and she only shrugged.

“It’s not going to work out between us, Ray, fun as it was. I’m still in love with my guys. There is too much history between us. They’re my soul mates. No matter what my family might think.”

The words hit Ray, flinching softly, like he’d come expecting the lashing. In an unspoken cue, Briar, Jesse and I displayed our left hands prominently. Ray was no fool. His gaze flickered to my ring finger, noting the fresh tattoo that was inked on all three of us. A black band that met in the middle of our fingers with an elegant calligraphy of the letter A. When the needle had bitten my skin, it had felt like penance.

“You got married?” Ray’s eyebrows shot up like a rocket as he leaned over to examine Briar’s tattoo ring. Adelaide choked, bending over her desk and coughing. Her eyes watered as she thumped her fist on her chest. Mouth gaping with frozen denial. But a strangled noise escaped instead. I

leaned over and rubbed her back as Jesse handed her a glass of water. Her scent curled around me like an opulent greenhouse bloom. Sultry and rare. Her eyes bugged as she got a closer look at our tattoos.

We'd been without our girl for months. Enough time to flagellate ourselves for our decisions. Circumstances had stopped us from claiming her in the way we always wanted. We'd felt tied to them. Not anymore. My heart hammered in time with the woman in front of me, and if I had to endure everything horrible her father had promised? I would. Because nothing was worse than losing Adelaide. This wasn't a time for spoken apologies. Words were wind, changeable and transient. The mark on my skin was permanent, and like a photograph, something solid Adelaide could hold on to.

"Yes, like Adelaide said, we're soul mates." My fingers curled around her chin, directing her gaze to mine. Her pulse thumped under my fingers, wild with disbelief. I spoke out loud, but my words were for her only. I had never been effusive, and her eyes flickered with that shared knowledge. Touch had always been my way of showing love. It was hers alone. My fingers pressing bruises into her skin. The drive of my hardness inside her perfect heat. She was underneath my skin, painted into my soul. But she didn't welcome my touch, rightly, so I had to declare myself. The words might whistle right past her, but I would speak and speak again. Until they became a gale.

"Even if Adelaide never forgave us, we would love her until our end. Permanent, enduring. This isn't a ring that we can discard when things get too hard. It's our promise to you. We are yours, always have been, always will be. Ever since Calder Place. Your name is already etched on my heart. That's not to dismiss the hurt we caused; we have a lifetime of making up to do. But we'll do it together."

Adelaide managed a thin smile, her fists shaking in her lap. Tucked out of Ray's sight. Her eyes flamed with an anger some might interpret as passion. I knew better. She was trying to tame her tongue. I felt the echo of its sting like a whip on

my back, knowing she would tear strips off me as soon as we were alone.

“We love you so much,” Briar choked. His hand trembled in the air, ignored. Ray whistled slowly in shock as Briar let his hand fall to his lap. Adelaide lashed her hands together on the desk. As if to prove she was unaffected. But the rigid line of her body gave her away. Adelaide wasn’t trembling, but only from mammoth effort.

“You’re smart to elope. I don’t think your father will take this well.” Ray’s eyes flicked to Adelaide’s finger, and he cocked his head. “Where’s your ring?”

My fingers drank in the line of her stiff spine, carved the furious steel path of it. The warmth of other people’s skin made me recoil, but I had missed the soft, lush feel of Adelaide. She felt like violet painted dawn, light spilling over drowsy life, stirring it awake.

“Adelaide deserves the biggest, shiniest rock alive.” Jesse showed his teeth, a challenge. “It’ll arrive soon, won’t it, Adelaide?”

Our girl had no choice but to nod, words still escaping her. I might have pitied her, backed into the corner as she was. But I couldn’t find it in me. I’d wanted to bind myself to Adelaide from the moment I saw her. Lung freezing desire, I struggled to hide when I was near her. Soul shaking want spilled from my body. I was shocked over the pleasure her touch brought. I had tried to touch women before her. Ran my fingers down the soft swell of cleavage. Sank my hold into fresh scented hair. But the touch was sour, jangling my nerves until they screamed. My throat tightened until I gasped on choked breaths. Sweet scents turned acrid in my nostrils, the hair curling as if singed. Their touch was noise. Clamoring at every sense, overwhelming it until I had to pull away.

Adelaide’s touch buzzed over my skin. Lulled me like the lap of the ocean or a soft spring breeze. She took me to a million places, and all of them were home. Six years in, I didn’t fight it anymore. Adelaide was my siren. I’d let her drown me before I let her go. She was a daughter to a ruthless

crime lord. It was time for us to become the men she needed. Sometimes that meant taking what we wanted. Our girl. Ray stretched out in the chair; lips thinned with suspicion.

“Can I talk with you alone, Adelaide?” Ray asked. He tapped his fingers on the side of the chair. Hard, impatient taps. His languid pose dripped away, the warm welcome he expected was not forthcoming. He didn’t falter under the collective hard glares aimed toward him. His fingers danced as he stared at my girl. I wanted him speaking to her alone over my dead body. But I didn’t have the right. Adelaide cleared her throat.

“Anything you want to say to me, you can tell me in front of my—husbands—”

Ray’s amusement intensified. This was a man who wasn’t often told no. The arrogant tilt of his chin put me on edge. But he was entirely too casual to be the one behind everything that had happened.

“No secrets, huh? Do they know about our fake dating, then?” His smirk was a slash.

“It was obvious,” Jesse scoffed. “I already told you as much before I got shot. Remember?” Jesse pressed, hoping to fluster the Donato heir. But he only rolled his eyes, waving his hands in a placating manner.

“Still got you all twisted up though, didn’t it? Enough to earn her forgiveness. But I wanted to talk about Lara.” He paused, eyes flaring wide as Adelaide leaned forward and slapped the desk.

“What’s to explain. She already told me what you said, but I warned you. You had your chance, and you blew it,” Adelaide snapped.

“I panicked.” He looked pained at admitting it in front of us. “Turns out I’m no better than these stooges of yours. Pops threatened her, and not in a charming, lighthearted way. Said I could have all the whores I wanted, but there was only one girl he would accept me settling down with.” He pinned Adelaide with a sharp look. “He’s going to take you eloping hard, by the

way. Us ‘dating’ was his dream come true. Then that hand turned up, and he started insisting I fucking propose to you. I thought I could smooth it over afterwards, explain it to Lara when I got him to see reason. But things spiraled and I was worried about her ending up in a ditch. You know this life. It’s not that big of a stretch.”

I looked at Adelaide. Her face was shrewd and calculating. She was hearing everything in between the lines of what Ray was saying. And his regret-soaked expression looked genuine to me. Her shoulders relaxed a fraction, the tension dropping. Perhaps she could relate. She’d kept the three of us at arms length over the years. Something we had tolerated without questioning. I didn’t want to ask her why, because it might mean hearing she didn’t think we were worth being in her world.

“It’s better if you let her go,” Adelaide informed him and Ray slumped in his chair, scrubbing a hand down his face. A dark flash of pain crumbled his features, hidden beneath his palm. My fingers ran down Adelaide’s back, but I didn’t relax. Ray could be an excellent actor, Adelaide sure was. “Besides, we have bigger issues to talk about. Like if you are the one orchestrating these attacks on me?” Blunt as ever. My girl heaped her accusation like a sack of cement. Ray winced under the weight of it, choking out an incredulous laugh. It withered on his lips when he realized she wasn’t joking.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” His handsome face creased with affront. Briar hissed, and Jesse reached up and clipped the back of Ray’s head. His slick black hair stuck out to the side, and he hurried to rectify the unruly strands.

“Greenich Bay has been dangerous lately, hasn’t it?” Adelaide smiled smoothly. “Almost as soon as I agreed to involve myself with you. Shooting, dismemberment, bombing, drugging. Crimson Claw, supposedly.” She marked her fingers and tilted her head, waiting for him to give her the answers she wanted. His cheeks flushed a frustrated red.

“I know. I was there for most of those,” he attempted to drawl, but his tone was too clipped and tight to feign ease.

“That’s right, you were.” Adelaide blinked, deceptively casual. Like a circling shark. Quiet, elegant almost, until they tore your arm off. “I had an enlightening conversation with a friend of your family. Her name is Nicole. Does that ring a bell with you?”

Ray shook his head, clenching his jaw.

“She told me some mighty interesting things about how your family employed her. How she was supplied with your drug, Cupid. Still no recollection? You never came to me with any explanation about how the drug found its way out of your lab.”

Silence hung thick in the office. I kept my touch light on Adelaide, ignoring the churning anxiety ruling my stomach. It had no place right now.

“If you’re accusing me of something, come out and say it.” Ray pursed his lips and added. “I thought we were friends, Adelaide. This is feeling very much like an interrogation.”

Her shoulder blades bunched together, the movement rippling under my fingertips. But Adelaide’s face was stone.

“I thought we were friends, too. But there are no friends in this world, are there? Allies, enemies, and fools who think they can rise above it all. Do you think I’m a fool?”

Ray tossed his hands in the air, biting off a frustrated noise. Jesse leaned into him with his teeth bared in barely concealed violence. Only Adelaide’s restraint stopped him from tearing into Ray.

“Perhaps I’m the fool. Clearly you don’t know me at all. Now tell me what has you riled up. Speak plain and quick. Your husbands might be content to scamper at your heels, but I am an heir in my own right. My slice of this city might be small, but it’s mine, dammit. I don’t know anyone named Nicole, and I’m not plotting to hurt you. I thought we were working together.”

Adelaide drummed her fingers on the sleek wood of her desk. My throat tightened at the bare skin of her ring finger. Our failure. It was the last thing I should be thinking about,

but I'd wanted to marry Adelaide for years. Craved our ring on her finger. But we had to deal with Ray first.

"You rejected me when we were younger, publicly humiliated me rather than marry me. I always—"

Ray threw his head back and groaned, his fingers raked at the dark strands, agitated.

"How many times must I—" His complaint cut off by Adelaide's stern hiss. She planted her pointer finger on the desk and jabbed at it.

"Shut the fuck up. I wasn't done speaking. Didn't your father teach you not to interrupt your betters?" she sneered, provoking him into a sullen sulk. "Because that's what I am, as you so aptly reminded me. Your slice of Greenwich is miniscule. But mine? It spans north to south, east to west. Except for your tiny pocket. Which you could have had, but you ruined it with your flapping lips. What did your father do after you refused to marry me years ago? Did he agree with you in private? Tell me what happened."

Ray folded his arms, his cheeks thick red, almost plum with indignation.

"He beat the ever-living shit out of me. What else would he do?" His gaze flicked to the ceiling. "He never forgave me for messing up the arrangement he worked so hard for. Don't you worry. I still have a scar on my shoulder from his displeasure."

Adelaide hummed thoughtfully, her gaze never wavering from Ray. He squirmed.

"We aren't kids playing at marriage anymore, Ray," her tone was conciliatory, soft and almost apologetic. "I'm not that girl you called butterball, and I won't be manipulated. So, I want you to go back to whatever hole you crawled out of and think about this offer. You become my man. You have my back."

He didn't respond, his arms falling slack at his sides, wary.

"I don't want to hear from you again, unless it's you swearing fealty to me." Adelaide lifted her chin, glorious strength. My heart thumped double time with awe. Steel and

fire. She was strength and fury. Ray launched to his feet, shaking his head.

“Fealty?” he clarified, stifling a noise of surprise. “I’m the Donato heir. Why in the world would I do that, Adelaide? You’re deranged to suggest this.”

She shrugged.

“Someone wants us married. Or me dead. Think about who that might be and choose a side. It’s me or it’s been nice knowing you, Ray. I’ll see you when the battle begins.”

“Battle begins?” Ray waved his hands in the air, the cords of his neck straining. “What has gotten into you? You’re talking like we’re enemies. I thought we were good. This isn’t medieval times where we charge across the battlefield at each other.” He cursed, looking at Adelaide like he didn’t recognize her.

“No, we slink through the shadows. But someone always ends up dead, don’t they? It won’t be me,” she promised, her hands grazing her stomach. I knew she was thinking of her mom.

I interrupted before their words cut too deep. Adelaide abhorred feeling bested, and the manipulation had been eating away at her. Not knowing if Ray was involved was messing with her head.

“Adelaide has spoken. You can go now.”

Ray hesitated, waiting to see if Adelaide would say anything more. But she stared him down, sharp and deadly like an arrow, until he turned on his heel and stormed out. Adelaide waited until she heard the ping of the elevator doors closing before she launched up, her chair teetering toward the wall. She yanked at my collar, looking furious. The tips of her nails bit into my skin, bittersweet kisses. My lashes fluttered to my cheek in involuntary pleasure. Her rage felt good against me.

“Ring tattoos?” her voice rose to a harsh whisper, mindful of the charade she’d put in place. “You’re out of your minds. I ought to put a bullet in your head because you’re clearly unhinged.”

My smile wobbled, threatening to widen in the face of her beautiful fire. My skin blistered, buckled and warped in delicious agony. Her flared nostrils warned me off. But it was impossible. Her fury didn't frighten me. It was mostly bluster, part of the mask she wore to the outside world. She shoved me away and dropped into her chair with a ragged sigh. My chest tingled where her touch had grazed. Words faltered on the tip of her tongue. Her throat moved like they were too tangled to push out.

"Marquise cut, white gold, size 7," she bit out through gritted teeth. "That's what I want." Her eyes flashed, as if expecting an argument. Adelaide crossed her arms. "If we're doing this, we're doing it right."

"We know," Jesse soothed, eyes shining. "We have Julio making one custom for you. But can we show you something first?"

We each pulled a ring box from our pockets. The velvet corners on mine were worn from being rubbed over time. I flipped it open, a speck of a diamond with a white gold band. I cringed at the sight. The ring was a sad offering to a woman as glorious as Adelaide.

"We bought these within six months of each other. It was almost two years ago. We've wanted to marry you for a long time. We asked your father for his blessing," I faltered as the memory of it hit me. Shame prickled hot down my spine. "He laughed at us. Said he'd never give his blessing to three men who couldn't scrape together a decent ring between us. We were unsuitable, always would be. His daughter deserved the world. How could we give that to you? We were leeches, sucking everything good out of you. Every time he sent his men to beat us, they said the same thing."

Adelaide closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring. My chest ached with shame. We should have been able to give her everything she wanted. But we were three scraps who had slipped through the cracks, poor, unskilled and broken. The only jewel we'd ever found was Adelaide, and she deserved better than us.

“He hit us right where it hurt, bringing up all those old insecurities. If we gave you these rings, would they ridicule you? We wanted to marry you, desperately. I wish we’d done it then, so you didn’t doubt how we felt about you. But his words were a worm in our heads, and we couldn’t stop thinking about it. We needed prestige, the proof that we were worthy of you. We wanted to give you a ring you would be proud of, to be men you could claim without people pitying you for how useless we were. How useless we are.” My head drooped, not able to meet her blazing eyes.

“We wasted so much time putting stock into reputation.” Briar shook his head.

“We let everyone else influence us. The threats against us and my family scared us. But we should have come to you.” Jesse shook his head with a sad smile. “No one else’s opinion matters. Only yours. So, we’re going to wear these rings proudly until the day you decide you want to marry us right back. However long it takes, even if you move on with someone else, we’ll be waiting and hoping. Because, Adelaide, you’ve always been it for us, and that should have been our only focus. If you forgive us, know that it will be.”

Adelaide picked up my ring and her eyes shone bright in the light. They glimmered with a sadness I knew I echoed.

“A year ago, I would have worn your rings with so much pride. I like bling, but I love you all more.”

She said love. Not loved. Perhaps it was a slip of the tongue, but I snatched the spark of hope it gave me.

“I know, siren. I hope we can earn your forgiveness and your love back, so one day you feel the same again.”

Adelaide didn’t answer, just closed the ring box with a sigh. She held it in her hands, like she wasn’t quite ready to let go of it yet. Then snorted when her gaze brushed over the tattoos.

Mine throbbed slightly, but I welcomed it. It was a bold move by us, but that was all we had left. And it satisfied a part of me that had felt off balance since we messed up. I meant every word that I said. Adelaide could move on, but I couldn’t.

I wouldn't. I knew Briar and Jesse felt the same. The rings were a declaration, evidence of our devotion.

They entwined us together, whether she wanted us or not.

Adelaide



I rolled my shoulders and cricked my neck, grimacing. Briar hummed along beside me, his barely contained exuberance rubbing my frayed nerves. Drained didn't come close to touching how I felt right now. Exhaustion infected my marrow. It was only sheer stubbornness that kept me from curling into a huddle on the floor. I couldn't stop looking at the tattoo on Briar's finger. It didn't seem real. The tiny diamonds they'd offered me had been cheap and small, but an obsessiveness rose in me, like a dragon coveting a hoard. I groped for the anger that should burn me up, but I wanted to laugh. And cry. I meant what I said. If they'd asked me with those rings, I would have said yes. I liked luxury. I wouldn't apologize for that vice. But the rings they'd gotten me were honest, they were enough. More than enough. If father had welcomed them with open arms, we wouldn't be here. But he'd mocked them, made them feel small. My hands clenched into fists by my side. He was going to hear from me soon, the full force of my anger and disappointment.

When I'd met my guys, they'd had a duffel bag between them and matching chips on their shoulders. Those weren't easy to smooth. My life had its challenges, but not when my next meal was going to come. I'd never suffered from a lack of anything. But the gap between us was insidious. They'd grown, despite my efforts. I had blithely thought a home with me was enough to heal their scarred pasts. My head thumped

with guilt. It didn't cross my mind they might feel so tainted by their background. That their shame would have driven them to desperate lengths. I wanted to turn back time and snatch up the ring, I wanted a do over.

Hindsight had taken the wind out of my sails. Cracks had fissured the vision I had of our perfect relationship. It was an illusion. We'd been making missteps for years until we tripped and broke everything we'd tried to build. Our palace had wobbled on unsteady foundations. Our hidden fears had broken us down, no matter how we tried to pretend otherwise.

I turned the key in the lock, ignoring the way Briar's heat warmed my back. Jonah shouldered past us smoothly, raising an eyebrow at Briar. He'd heard me sniping at them for the past week and I knew he didn't buy the reconciliation for a second. He'd been with me too long to believe the mediocre acting I'd managed. A rough exhale escaped me. The apartment glowed black and soft amber. Flickering shadows leapt up on the walls. Lavender tickled my nostrils, hanging heavily in the air. Soft music played, inviting me further into a darkened cocoon.

"You didn't think this would work, did you?" I berated Logan as he met me at the door, my eyes adjusting to the low light.

"Think what would work?" Logan asked innocently, putting his hand on my back and steering me forward. My feet felt like weights, and I struggled not to scrape them across the floor. Briar and Jesse waited with a glow in their eyes. My hackles rose instantly. Jesse breezed over and kissed my cheek, squeezing my hip, and Briar did the same, brushing against the corner of my mouth by mistake.

"Sorry." He grinned, no remorse.

Jesse jangled his keys, tucking them and his wallet into his pocket. Belatedly, I realized they were all dressed to leave. So, I shot each of them a look. *The* look. In the past, we'd exchange words like bullets until our mouths were centimeters from each other and the anger would turn quickly to passion. I relished the cut of my nails down their backs, the explosive,

undeniable connection. Logan reached out and squeezed my shoulder, lips twitching like he knew my traitorous thoughts.

“I will castrate you if you touch me again. What are you planning?” I shrugged out of his hold, desperately needing some distance between us. The hardest thing about this fake dating was pretending I wasn’t horny as hell. But my words did the opposite of what I wanted. He only grinned salaciously.

“Siren, if it gets your talented fingers down my pants, I will gladly accept.” He winked as I struggled to smother a groan. I hadn’t expected this angle when I had fled to them after speaking to Nicole. The tattoo had been ridiculous enough, and I wouldn’t even acknowledge the burst of inexplicable warmth it gave me. They wouldn’t stop until they chipped away at me. They were machines, and it felt like they would never give up, not until I forgave them. I enjoyed the flowers and the gifts, given up on stopping them. But I didn’t budge. I didn’t soften. Because I didn’t know who we were anymore.

“Don’t worry, we’re going out,” Jesse urged me into the lounge room. “We know you’re stressed and tired, so we organized a spa night for you.”

When we walked into the lounge room, I saw the couch was shifted back and a massage table set up. A lady was there with everything she needed to take the stress out of my body. My jaw dropped open, and I slammed it shut immediately. This was exactly what I needed, exactly what I’d been craving. My shoulders cemented to my ears with tension.

“This is Olivia. She’s fully vetted, and Jonah will be here, of course.” Briar jerked his head to my hulking guard. He parked himself against the wall, nodding at my guys. I hadn’t told him what was going on, and the distance between us was tangible. Olivia stepped forward with a congenial smile and introduced herself. I scanned her face for any sign of duplicity, but she just passed me a sheet on the clipboard.

“Fill this out, Miss Orazio, and I’ll have you feeling relaxed before you know it.” I clutched at it, blank faced. I knew my guys could see the shock.

“You organized this for me?” I waved my hand feebly.

“You’ll push yourself until you break. That’s what makes you so special. But we can see the toll it’s taking on you. So, us boys are going out and you’ll have the whole place to yourself, quiet, relaxing and hopefully rejuvenating.” Logan said with a boyish grin he couldn’t mask. Giddy like they had missed tending to me. I linked my fingers behind my back to hide their trembling. My heart thumped painfully in my chest. This was what I wanted. There was no more dwelling, no more talking to be done. It was up to them to show me they could be better, and they had learned from their mistakes. They had told me this, they were coming at me with everything, and I welcomed it, the bitter part of me dared them to try. Desperately I wanted their efforts, even if I wouldn’t admit it out loud. But this? It was hitting me in my weak spots.

“I’ve made you lasagna and a garden salad. It’s in the fridge when you’re done, and you want dinner.” Jesse hooked his thumbs in his pocket, rocking on his heels.

“I’ve set up that reality show you love, the one with the multiple wives, so you can watch it after if you feel like it,” Briar added, flinching like he’d considered reaching out but reconsidered. My skin ached, feeling the desire like a caress. Was there anything better than carbs and mind-numbing reality TV?

“I—uh—” My eyes bounced between them “Thank you, that’s... thoughtful.” I cleared my throat, dazed.

Logan stepped up to me and framed my face with his hands. “Anything for you, my siren.” His lips took mine. I knew he was taking advantage of Jonah being in the room, and I couldn’t even hate him for it. Devious, tricky men, planning this for me. I kissed him back, surprising myself with how needy it was. I had to break it off before I embarrassed myself, peeling away with a pant. Briar took his place, kissing my cheeks, forehead, nose with tender promises until I turned my lips up for him to press a soft kiss on those too. His lips were warm velvet, soft enough to make shivers cascade through me. I was stunned when he stepped away. The ease of being close to him was natural. Jesse didn’t kiss me at all, just nuzzled and

wrapped me in a snug embrace. His teeth scraped down the column of my neck. I stumbled back, my ass hitting the massage table, and they didn't wait for me to say anything more. They were halfway across the room before I called out.

"Where are you going?" I asked, curiosity wrenching control of my tongue.

"Therapy, princess," Jesse admitted, all hints of mirth gone from his face. "Have been for the past month. Being apart from you was the wake up call we all needed to sort out the shit in our heads, we want to be better. Growing up the way we did has messed us all up, and if we're ever going to make this work we need to face our past." He flicked a meaningful look at Jonah, changing his words to make it seem like I reconciled. But I knew what he meant. My throat closed, imagining my three guys digging through all the painful parts of themselves. For me. What would a therapist say if I went? I shuddered, not brave enough to even think about it. Yet they had, so I wanted to know more.

"Maybe you can tell me more about it later?" I asked, slipping out of my shoes. They looked stunned but their words of agreement tumbled over each other. I don't know why I said it, but it was too late to take it back.

"You know I'll never turn down a chance to talk to you, Adelaide," Briar said. I had to look away. He kept his face so open and vulnerable it destroyed me. I banished Jonah from the room and stripped down for the best massage of my life. Ninety minutes of pure bliss where my muscles converted into jelly. I thanked Olivia profusely, my words slightly slurred, folding onto the couch. Jonah brought me over the lasagna, a plate of his own in his hand. Jesse had set aside something for him to eat as well.

"He's an excellent cook," Jonah grunted as I flicked on the TV. Trashy reality blared out, and I sighed, tugging a rug up over my knees.

"I could eat a whole one of these," I agreed. I inhaled the meal, pouting a little when I was done. Jonah took my plate with an eye roll and returned with a bowl of sticky date

pudding, butterscotch sauce, and ice cream. I groaned. Jesse was pulling out all my favorites.

“Did you speak to Lara today?” I smirked as Jonah’s head whipped toward me from my side eye. “Did she tell you where she’s staying?”

Her secrecy might have stung if I had time to contemplate it. Lara insisted she was safe. That was the main thing. Jonah scraped his spoon on the bowl, scooping up a drop of ice cream. He let the white liquid plop back into the bowl with an almost resigned sigh.

“She told me,” he admitted with a roughened voice. She was finding her heart in these men. I should be happy for her, and I was. But when my life was in limbo, I was greedy for her. She had always been mine. Now she belonged to someone else. I raised an eyebrow at him, waving my hand.

“Not happening,” he grunted.

“I’m your boss. You’re required to share these things with me. Right?” My lips curled. He scrubbed his hand over his face, a beleaguered action he repeated often in my presence.

“If that’s true, are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Jonah probed gently; eyes pinned to the TV. The flicker of the scenes reflected in his unblinking stare.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I stuffed my mouth with dessert. But the taste was too cloying, like the lies I’d been forced to surround myself with. I wanted to spit them out, to let myself lean on his silent invitation.

“I’ve been by your side for years. Watched you with your guys a million times. Even when you were bad, it wasn’t like it is now.”

“Things change,” I evaded, miffed that he’d noticed a difference and his lips quirked up.

“I haven’t had to stuff my ears with earplugs since you ‘reconciled’ and ‘eloped’, so I don’t think I’m wrong. You’re up to something and they’re so desperate to prove their love they’ll dance any tune you ask them to.”

I gagged, dropping the spoon in my bowl.

“Please tell me you didn’t just allude to my sex life?”

“What sex life?” He grinned, still watching the television. My quiet guard lifted one shoulder, but it was stiff.

“This is very unprofessional,” I sniffed. Reaching over to snatch at the bowl in his hand. “No pudding for you.”

Jonah muscled it away from me and shook his head. When he finally looked at me, I could see the raw hurt that ticked through his jaw, hooded his eyes.

“Forget that. Just keep me in the loop. You know me, boss, you can trust me.”

I ground my teeth, hesitating too long. Trust was hard at this moment. This was my life on the line, and I couldn’t let anything slip until I knew the truth. He shook his head, clearly frustrated with me.

“You won’t tell me shit, but they obviously know.” He waved his hand to the door, where my guys had left hours before. “You trust *them* to have your back more than me?”

Logan, Jesse, and Briar knew as much as I did about what was happening. Did I trust them?

Yes.

With my safety, with my protection? Yes. I admitted it to myself, recalling the load that lifted when I’d told them. It had been dizzying, having the burden shared. They took it without complaint, took everything I gave them. Yes, I trusted them, even after everything that had happened. I knew they would have my back. Jesse took a bullet for me. Where was Jonah when that happened? I wanted to trust him, but there were too many instances where he could work against me. I was sure Harold Donato was behind this, but I still hadn’t heard from Ray. That I had allowed him so close to me chilled my anger. I had to be strategic, like they had been. A part of me was happy to pass myself over for their keeping. To be held in their hands. Some deep part of me knew they would always have my back.

It was my heart I didn't trust them with.

Jonah clenched his jaw, bothered by my continued silence.

"Message received, boss." He shook his head, stiff as he passed me to the kitchen. But he paused and looked back at me. "You'll always have my loyalty and respect, Adelaide, no matter what. My pride stings a bit that you don't include me in your inner circle, considering how long we've known each other. But do me a favor. Those guys would do anything for you. Hell, Jesse took a bullet for you. So, keep them close. Whoever is coming at you will have to go through them and me."

He left the room, and moments later, I heard the front door open and shut. It was a soft click, reproachful. Like I hadn't earned the full force of a slam. His quiet disappointment was more than enough to rankle me. Jonah was so irritated with me he'd taken up the post outside. I couldn't blame him. He was a man of few words, and each one was weighty. I hated hurting him, he was part of my inner circle, but right now I didn't trust anyone. Paranoia had taken control of my mind, and I couldn't apologize for that. It was what kept me safe, alive. I knew deep down Jonah understood that. My mood had soured, though, the heaviness of my current situation sinking in. I wondered where the boys were. I missed the distraction of their presence. My feet drew me down the hall to Briar's bedroom. I hadn't been in any of their rooms for months. Being back in the apartment still felt strange. A mixture of comfort and prickly unknown, like the fabric of the place had shifted, and the air changed. It was heavier in my lungs.

Maybe I was just different.

Briar wore the same cologne, had for years. It was Carolina Herrera, Bad Boy. A gift from me, tongue in cheek because there wasn't a bad bone in his body. He was a consummate rule follower. The spicy scent filled my nostrils as I sank into the bed. The sheets were pulled tight, his bookcase organized by genre, overflowing. I curled up on his bed and looked at his bedside table. He had his journal there. He still wrote me letters, leaving the journal out for me with a note when there was a new one. My gaze wandered to the wall opposite his

bed. A strangled gasp choked my throat when I saw what was hanging there. I vaulted out of the bed, racing over, so I could look at it closely. A wooden square, the sides smoothed and varnished. In the middle of it was a rustic heart with our initials. Jesse carved them years ago, wanting to mark the first time we made love. He wanted to mark the place we'd met, where we'd shared so many of our firsts.

Our tree from Calder Place. Removed, before I could demolish it. I reached out and ran my fingers over the groove of the carving. My chest hurt, too full suddenly. Ribs couldn't contain how my heart swelled. Somehow Briar, or all of them, had preserved the etching. Squirreled it away to hang in view of his bed. Every night he could go to sleep looking at it.

“Adelaide?”

I turned to see Briar. His fingers curled around the doorway, tension tight in his long, elegant fingers.

“You stole our tree,” I blurted out, and he huffed a surprised laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“You were going to knock it down, I believe, and I didn't want to lose the memory of our beginning. It's too important.”

He shuffled in, watching me carefully. I let my finger trace the groove on the wood, sifting for the words I needed.

“Do you know how damn angry I was when I came to Calder Place and saw it had already been removed? It shouldn't have even mattered. My site supervisor looked at me like I was losing it. He didn't understand why I wanted a tree I was going to cut down. I'm glad you saved it,” I admitted. The warmth from Briar's arm pressed against mine and we both stared at this symbol of our love.

“Me too. I needed something to give me hope. To remind me of the good times. Bonus is, I always go to sleep thinking about you.” His smile was lopsided.

“How did you do it?” The wood felt cool under my hand, and I laced my fingers behind my back. The sight and feel of it hypnotized me. Briar sighed, ducking his head at my movement.

“It doesn’t matter. Would you stay for a moment, talk to me?” He could see the way I was leaning toward the door. Muscles coiled in readiness to flee. I perched on the end of the bed instead, as if I needed to prove I could. Briar settled beside me, picking at his nails. I waited as the silence drew taut like a bowstring. He carded a hand through his dark curls, the flecks in his eyes golden.

“I’ve learned a lot, starting therapy. We’ve apologized for the hurt we caused you, but I haven’t apologized properly for the other things I’d done. Not enough.” He looked grim. “You were right about Nicole, but I didn’t listen to you. My therapist called it enmeshment, but it’s more complicated than that.”

His skin was sickly pale, blue tendons scrawled under his skin like knotted ribbons. My palms were clammy, so I forced them into fists. It was the last thing I expected him to say.

“I’ve never thought about her in that way before you or after. Never wished I was spending time with her. I never thought about her outside of when she contacted me. There has been no one I’ve ever felt like that about, except you. There never will be. But I confided in Nicole. I told her private things about our lives, about you. I crossed a boundary, and I hadn’t even realized. Leaning on Nicole was a habit I cultivated in the foster home, for more than one reason.”

“You dismissed me every time I mentioned her. That destroyed me, Briar.” I picked at my cuticles. I couldn’t look at him. The gold in his eyes had always felt like treasure. I couldn’t drown in it right now. The pain was there, ever present, but it didn’t flood me like it had in the past. It created clarity. Let me see him with clear eyes, with logic. His shoulders bowed, and he nodded, shrinking further.

“I didn’t listen to you, you’re right. I’m sorry. When I was in the foster home, there was a...” His voice roughened and faltered. He cradled his head, tugging on the end of his curls. Wet breaths echoed in the room.

“I feel you killed what we had, bit by bit, no matter what I said,” I admitted, throat tight. “You all broke up with me, but we were falling apart before then. I just stood by and let it

happen. That's not me. She was able to get in between us because we were already broken."

My voice broke and Briar surged forward, clutching my hands in his. Desperate heat pulsed between us, throbbing like an infected wound. There was poison in us that needed to be leached out, but how?

"She didn't get between us. Please, Nicole isn't anything to me but a shield. I don't know how to do this." His fingers trembled, hooking around mine like he needed the comfort. Gold and green flashed, forest at dusk. "It was a summer storm. I remember the crack of thunder. The raindrops made goosebumps on my skin. Huge suckers. I thought I was having an allergic reaction to the rain." He sniffed, head drifting to the side as he sunk into his memories.

"What does this have to do with Nicole?" I said, clenching my jaw. Briar's hands trembled in mine, the only sign of his anxiety. His smile was almost serene, and he let out a shuddering breath.

"Just let me get this out. I've been holding this in for years. But I can't let it fester and ruin anything else in my life. I was walking home from the skatepark. Jesse and Logan had been grounded for taking food out of the fridge. So, I was all alone. Easy pickings." He mused, with a curl in his lip. "A car pulled up beside me. He offered me a ride, which I took, because what fifteen-year-old thinks they're a target? His name was Alex, and he didn't take me home. At least not until he was done with me."

His fingers went limp in my hands, and I looked up. Caught his gaze, each fleck of gold in his eyes dulled. Briar's attempt at a smile was a grimace, twisted into something grotesque at my shocked expression. My chest burned with an inferno.

"Briar," I whispered, but he shook his head rapidly.

"He came back the next week with paperwork that proved he was a state appointed tutor. I'd been accepted for extended learning, apparently. My foster parents didn't care. I was one body underfoot. They couldn't get me out of there fast enough. I tried to fight, at first. But he promised he'd 'tutor' Jesse and

Logan as well. So, I did what he wanted. I gave in so damn easily. Let my mind go somewhere else. I needed to escape.” My breath hitched on soft sobs as he continued. “Afterwards, I found it hard to pretend. That’s where Nicole comes in. She was always by herself, quietly reading. So, I did the same. I told Jesse and Logan I needed down time after learning. But, I—I needed—I needed a moment to rebuild myself.”

“How long?” I didn’t want to know. My temple throbbed with a violent heat. It pressed in on me, made me want to gnash my teeth. Briar flinched, and I realized I was squeezing his fingers too tightly.

“Until we aged out. Alex offered to get me someplace to live, but I’d rather die. I’d spent years using Nicole to shield me from Jesse, Logan, anyone who wondered why I wasn’t acting like myself. I always felt guilty about it. She thought we were best friends, and I was just using her like a port in a storm. Then I sailed away and never gave her a second thought. When she popped back up, it felt like a chance to be her friend for real. To atone for when I was younger. But I just messed that up as well.”

He shrugged and made a half hiccup, half sobbing noise. I cracked inside, and I hauled Briar toward me, smothering his choked exhales with a desperate embrace. He bowed in my clawing grip, fingers snagging on my clothes.

“I’ll kill him,” I promised through my teeth. My blood rushed like acid through my veins, and I gripped Briar’s head, looking deep into his downcast eyes. The shame was potent, an oily residue on his soul.

“I tried so hard to forget. When I met you, it felt like a sign, a shot at redemption. You looked at me like I wasn’t destroyed on the inside. I pushed it all down. I wanted to be perfect for you. To be someone you would be proud to love.”

“I am proud of you,” I whispered to him, fiercely. “What happened wasn’t your fault. I need you to know that. He preyed on you, a child. You’re my perfect Briar.”

“He used to call me Bry or his sweet Briar Rose,” Briar whispered into my neck, his warm breath tickling. “That’s why

I hate nicknames. It reminds me of him.”

My veins surged with the need for vengeance. My nostrils flared wide as I tried to calm myself.

“I understand. I understand,” I chanted, wanting him to know how his secret hadn’t changed what was in my heart. What would always be in my heart. He was mine. I let a wet breath shudder out into his curls before pulling away. His arms tightened momentarily, like he wanted to stop me.

“Thank you for telling me. You can trust me. I know we’re not—we’re not together. But I will always love you, no matter what.” There. I said it. What had never lessened inside of me. Briar needed my love right now. His lashes brushed his cheeks as he dipped his head once. Small, too small. Like he didn’t believe what I had admitted.

I scooted off the bed and over to his bookcase, ignoring the sharp inhale he made. I ran my fingers along the spines until I saw a book that caught my eye.

“Do you want to read together?” I asked, making myself comfortable on his bed. He hissed through his teeth, like the offer caused pain. Before shooting off the mattress and grabbing the closest book.

“Can I sit next to you?” he asked tentatively. I moved to the side in silent agreement, and he pressed in beside me. The room was silent except for the slip of pages between fingers. My chest was still aching from our raw conversation, but there was a lull, a comfort in the in-between. In the cramped space of the pages, I felt the spark of something I had thought long dead. I barely recognized it.

A wish, a dream, a once in a million chance.

Hope.

Adelaide



“Don’t worry about me,” Lara teased. I could hear the inaudible murmur of a voice, distinctly frustrated. Over the video call, she’d pressed herself up against a wall. All I could see was gray paint and the corner of a chipped wooden frame. Lara laughed at my inspection, distorted.

“You could—” I started, and her indulgent smile fell.

“Let’s not get into it, Addy. I’m safe, and you have far more important things to worry about.”

I chewed my bottom lip, in an effort not to press her. Low-level anxiety had become my norm, and it wasn’t in my nature to let things go. I don’t think she appreciated the Herculean effort it took for me to stay silent. I was being overbearing right now but couldn’t help myself.

“Maybe when all this is over, we can re-visit.” I couldn’t keep the probing tone from my voice. I only needed one clue. One measly clue and I could track down where she was staying.

“With the boys? Or without?” Lara drawled. She was still annoyed about my ‘elopement’. Not buying it any more than Jonah did. I hoped it seemed believable to those who weren’t in my inner circle. It had certainly felt real when I woke up in Briar’s tangled embrace this morning. His hard cock nestled against the crack of my ass. A rush of heat flooded me. I’d

fallen asleep while reading and we'd ended up pressed together, like magnets. Since he told me about what had happened to him when he was younger, we had been reading together semi-regularly. But I could not deal with waking up next to them. My body didn't understand why it couldn't indulge.

"Any news?" I changed the subject. Lara had reached out to Ray at my behest. There had been nothing from him, and the silence was making my skin crawl.

"Nothing, but why would he message me?" Lara scoffed, and I looked at my computer screen with a scowl. Ray hadn't reached out to her. Ray hadn't reached out to me. Did that prove he was in on this? I needed a drink, or ten.

"Just keep that burner on you. He probably doesn't trust it's your number," I sighed. We shared our heightened paranoia. You didn't grow up in this world without cultivating a hypersensitivity to everything and anything. I drummed my fingers on the desk. Even with the stress, I hadn't been overwhelmed by dark thoughts lately. I refused to think of why that might be.

"Let me know if you hear anything," I sighed and tossed my burner phone on the desk.

My actual phone rang, a shrill sound that had my heart hammering.

"Father," I answered. My mind was miles away.

"You haven't been returning my calls." He had the nerve to sound disgruntled.

I paced the length of my office, my skin crawling with excess energy. If I didn't deal with it soon, my heart might implode.

"Well, what did you expect? Our last conversation was unproductive." I wrapped an arm around myself while father sighed. Failed to keep the hurt from my voice. I had confessed about my 'marriage' and asked him to tell me the truth about whether he rejected the boy's desire for his approval.

“I was shocked. My daughter has a pseudo elopement with *three* men who are not worth one iota of her time. My only child shames me in this way. Give an old man some grace. It’s a lot to stomach. Did they force it on you? Do they have something they are using against you?”

My chest stung, cheeks flushing at his accusations.

Did they force it on me?

Technically, yes, but it wasn’t as though he hadn’t seen us together for years or hadn’t heard me talking about the future with my guys.

“Has anyone ever forced me to do something I don’t want?” I said coldly, frustrated with this conversation already. “I don’t know why I am the one being required to give grace. You lied to me about having them threatened and hurt. Concealed it like you did laughing at their wanting to marry me. But I’m truly sorry to be such a source of shame to you.”

“You know what happens when we fall for someone outside of our world.” His desperate sips of air belied his disapproving tone. Pain flared hot and quick through the center of my heart.

“They’re not mom,” I argued, pressing my hand to my chest. I had acted like they were though. The realization made me suck in a sharp gasp. For years, I had kept them separate, fearing they would do exactly as my father warned. “They’re not,” I added, for my emphasis, rather than his. Because they were survivors. I should have trusted them, but I’d been led by my fears.

“I only want to spare you the heartache. Haven’t they given you enough of that?”

I grappled with his blunt statement, not sure how to argue my point. Jesse took a bullet for me, but they had all been steadfast. *So far*. My thoughts hissed, making their own argument.

“It’s not your choice, but mine,” I deflected. Putting my doubts in an airtight box for later.

“It’s my legacy you’re putting in danger by associating with them.” I heard a muffled noise, like he’d thumped his fist on

the table.

“Do you regret mom?” My hand drifted to my stomach and the scars there and my heartbeat drummed frantically in my chest. Father sighed and there was a beat of silence before I continued.

“It’s our legacy and I can make my own choices, endure my own heartbreak.” I added softly.

Loving is risking.

There was no escaping the pain of love. It blistered through your defenses, burrowed into your soul. It could tear you apart and piece you back together. A heart could take it all and still feel. The scars leading to a level of love that was deeper than you could imagine. Love wasn’t surface level. Not if it was real.

“Do I want them for you? Of course not. But I never roughed them up, apart from once six years ago. Whatever poison they’re dripping in your ears, you need to be careful. You’re my baby. I want the best for you. A future where you don’t have to worry about someone coming for your crown. I thought you were spending a lot of time with Ray Donato. He is a better choice, feckless and hot-headed, yes, but you could control him. It would be so good for the two families to unite. This antagonism has been building since my father’s reign. We could end it.”

My spine tingled with a warning, and I chose my next words carefully.

“You mean I could end it. Ask Harold if he’d be happy for Ray to become a fourth husband. Would that please his machinations? I’ve already proven I can handle a cocky dick.”

Father blustered, muttering in Italian under his breath.

“If you want a truce, write it on a piece of paper and sign it in blood. I told you I would never marry Ray, not after he spat in my face when we were younger. That disrespect is unforgivable. I spent all that time with him to help rehabilitate his reputation. You know, like I did for you? For the Orazio name?” I left out the bit about making my exes jealous.

“A piece of paper can be torn up, but a child? Two prestigious bloodlines combined. Just think about it *bambolina*, those ruffians already proved they would accept money over your love. I’ll offer them whatever they want to leave again.”

I covered my mouth, sure that the rising bile would splatter over me. The sting forced my eyes closed, and I breathed through the sour sensation that crept up the back of my nostrils. His words were laced with a fervor that wasn’t his own and I knew they hadn’t come from him. Could I even trust my own flesh and blood right now? How could he suggest such a thing? It was abhorrent to bring new life into the world under such cold calculation.

“Perhaps you should consider who has been dripping poison in your ear. Because my father would never suggest I bring a child into this world to satisfy a grudge. Besides, it would be impossible,” I croaked, massaging my chest. I thought of my mom and the guilt which had driven her to an early grave. “Considering I can’t have children.”

I ended the call with a choked sob and dropped on my knees in front of the trashcan. I heaved until a pool of acid spit filled my mouth, and I hocked it up with a growl. My phone lashed its demands, the sound ringing in my ears. There was no way in hell I was going to answer it again.

It had to be Harold Donato.

Ray might crave power, but he didn’t want it so badly to have a child with me. Why was Harold so eager that the only solution he had was to knock me up? He wanted me and, by extension, the Orazio family tied to him irrevocably.

Why go through all this? Just to get me married and pregnant? I had toiled my whole life to be accepted in a world which wanted me reduced to a womb.

My stomach roiled again, and I gripped the side of the metal until the cold cut into my hands. My eyes watered as I coughed, but there was nothing else for my stomach to propel. I’d skipped breakfast, not able to think about food. Bitter sharp

nausea washed over me. Until arms banded around me, strong and warm. Chasing the shadows cobwebbing my mind.

“Siren?” Logan said with alarm, the back of his hand covering my forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Jesse swore, crouching down to search my face. I managed a lukewarm smile, wiping the back of my hand over my mouth. A featherlight touch danced down my arm. Briar was holding a paper bag, frowning.

“Close the door.” I didn’t want anyone to see me like this. Logan tucked his arm under my armpits and hoisted me over to the plush couch in the corner of my office. Jesse slammed the door shut, hurrying back to me.

“Some water?” Logan offered me a glass, tipping the cool edge to my lips as the length of his legs pressed against mine. The churning emotions stubbornly resisted my efforts to contain them. I had to be logical. But all I could think about were the scars on my stomach. Logan cast me frequent looks, but he didn’t press. Their silent support made me wilt.

“We brought sushi. Thought you’d be hungry and figured you wouldn’t have gotten lunch.”

My stomach grumbled, and Logan gave me a wry smile, getting up to bring over the small bag. I motioned at the desk. Jesse poured out the soy sauce in a separate container, the way I liked it. My eyes pricked with tears. These simple moments felt like paper cuts. Shallow on the surface, but searing pain. It hurt being around them, knowing they wanted what we had. They knew me better than anyone. But not all my secrets. Briar brushed a curl off his forehead with barely hidden agitation. I thought of his confession. How the words had trembled on his lips. Still, they’d fallen, and it had healed a part of me. I understood so much better where his blinkered opinion of Nicole came from.

“Are you unwell?” Logan tilted his head. I patted the lounge, encouraging them to sit. We used to sprawl over this couch, with me nestled in one of their laps. There wasn’t room or forgiveness enough for that. Briar and Logan dragged over chairs, and Jesse stole the seat next to me with a wink.

“I was speaking to my father. He wants me back with Ray so we can have a baby. Apparently, that will solve all Greenwich Bay’s turf wars.” I snorted.

“You told him?” Briar led, quickly putting two and two together. I closed my eyes to another crippling wave of nausea. I pressed against my stomach. The scars there were only the beginning. My lungs burned as I denied them oxygen. My father had never known the full extent of my injuries, nor that they were by the hand of his wife, my mom.

“He didn’t take it well?” Logan pressed. I shook my head, attempting a laugh but let it gutter out. This was harder than I thought to admit. Now my father knew, partially, I wondered if he was thinking about my mom. If he now regretted her even more.

“I told you I couldn’t have children. But I never told you why. There was a close call when I was about fifteen. Someone slipped past our guards and almost attacked us. My father put a gun in my mom’s hand afterwards. She might have been innocent before she met him, but he was determined to turn her into something she wasn’t. She tried so hard to learn how to protect herself, and me if needed. One day she was struggling to practice, and I took the gun from her. Perfect bullseye, three of them. I think that was the day she realized. I wasn’t ever going to be like her. So, she...”

Jesse’s hand landed over mine, where my fingers flexed. Our relationship had changed from that day on. Her smile dimmed, turned into something brittle. We avoided each other, both of us understanding we had little in common. Until she tried to ruin me.

“Take your time,” he murmured.

“When I was sixteen it happened again, we were alone and there was so much blood. Everyone always assumed we were attacked. But that isn’t the truth.” I let out a strangled laugh sob that sounded more like drowning. “Mom snuck into my room at five am and dragged me out of bed. She wanted to go to the beach. I didn’t want to go, insisted we needed guards, but she was smiling. For the first time since I could remember,

she was giddy. We shared a picnic, tucked in the dunes. It felt special. She'd been so withdrawn, and now she was like her old self. But it wasn't real, her mind had broken."

I lifted my shirt and ran my hands over the scars on my stomach. They waited for me to continue.

"She was smiling when she stabbed me. Mom kept repeating that it was the only way to stop me from bringing more evil into the world. She almost killed me. My own mom took away my ability to have children. Before I passed out, her laughter rang in my ears. Like she was free."

Jesse's arms wrapped around me, and he hoisted me onto his lap. I protested, a feeble attempt he brushed away with the click of his tongue. Jesse pressed his forehead to mine, breath fluttering over my lips. My fingers clutched at his shirt, pulling him closer. His warmth was a reminder. They were still here.

They weren't her.

"Adelaide." Briar whistled low and agonized. The pity made me haul Jesse closer. I didn't want it. Her weakness wasn't mine. But I'd taken it on unconsciously.

"My father fell in love with someone soft and innocent. He made her a part of this world, forced her. But mom couldn't handle it, the pressure, the danger. She took her gun, the one father bought her, and she put it to her temple. I was unconscious in the sand, she probably thought we were going to die together. Her first bullseye." My throat was raw as I scraped the long-held secrets up its tender opening. "I lied in the hospital. Said we were attacked, and someone had killed my mom. I told no one the truth, especially my father. What did it change? I wanted him to mourn without knowing what she'd done. My father always assumed I healed with no complications, and I never planned on having children. But I let it affect me. I always kept you away, as best I could. You know who I am, what I'm capable of, but I never wanted that for you."

A shadow passed over Jesse's face as he reached out and thumbed my lower lip.

“You don’t need to hide from us, Adelaide.”

I tossed my head, tendons tight in my neck. They didn’t understand.

“You say you want what we had back, to be mine again. That you love me. But I can’t go back to the way we were. I don’t want lies or barriers to keep us apart. If you want me, take the bad as well. Could you be happy being a target? Learning to defend yourself? I drove a wedge between us, wanting to keep you separate and safe. In case you couldn’t handle it. But I can’t do it anymore.”

Jesse jostled me, so I was straddling him. His light brown eyes were determined.

“I’m not your mom, none of us are.” He waved a hand to the others. “What she did to you is abhorrent, and I wish I could wipe away all the pain and betrayal it made you feel. But Adelaide, if you’re trying to scare us off, it won’t work. I already put my life on the line for you. Remember all the brownie points it got me?” His cheeky grin flared and faded as he continued. “All I want is to fix us. I want you in my arms again. It’s too late to want to keep us separate, we already decided to learn how to defend ourselves.”

His words wrapped around me, and Jesse tensed, like he expected me to fight. But I sagged with relief. I tossed a look over my shoulder, seeing Logan and Briar nod as well.

“What your mom did was horrible, but all I can think about is that you had to carry the burden of it alone. But we won’t repeat the past’s mistakes.” Briar shared a look with me, and I knew he meant what we had spoken about. We weren’t responsible for someone else’s actions. I had let my fear of my mom control me for too long. She had mutilated her own daughter out of terror. I couldn’t live my life the same way she did.

It was time to slough off the parts of me driven by fear. To embrace what was here and now.

“We won’t.” Logan’s jaw clenched. His head whipped to the side, where my phone had lit up. “It’s a message. Unknown

number.”

I slipped off Jesse’s lap and read what it said.

Meet at Dock Six, Wednesday 4pm. I’ll pledge.

Ray. He wanted to pledge allegiance to me. As my ally or another trick?

“Adelaide,” Briar hissed, peering over my shoulder. “What if it’s a trap?”

“It might be. But they want me alive, and I need to finish this. I have to take the chance.”

I accepted the silent support they offered. I knew whatever happened, the three of them would be at my back. That made the daunting prospect a little easier.

Adelaide



“T ook you long enough,” Ray’s voice echoed from the shadows as he stalked out with a scowl. Jesse, Logan and Briar fanned out in front of me like a living shield and Jonah’s lips twitched minutely, his gun trained on Ray. I hadn’t told him anything, but he hid his surprise well.

“Are you here alone?” I investigated the dark pocket he’d been lurking in. Dock six was neutral ground, a holding warehouse for transporting goods, legal, of course. Except for the drop floor, which Ray shouldn’t know about. That held goods that were in a gray area. Ray spread his arms out and looked at Jonah, lip curling up. His face was sallow, cheekbones sharper than they should be.

“Check me. I’ve got nothing and no one with me.” Jonah patted him down, rough. “How’s our girlfriend?” Ray joked, but there was no lightness.

“Be careful, Adelaide,” Logan muttered under his breath. Jonah nodded, giving the all clear before stepping back and raising the barrel of his gun again.

“Is Lara ok?” Ray’s voice was strained as he paced, his boots slapping on the floor like a heartbeat.

“She’s safe,” Jonah grunted, and they shared a look. A wary, silent overture. But Jonah’s gun didn’t drop, and Ray’s shoulders slumped.

“I’m not here to talk about Lara. She’s under my protection. I’m here to see if you’re ready to take a knee.” I bit out, my veins hot under my skin. Surging with energy that was difficult to control. I rode the wave, letting my hairs prickle on my skin and focus narrow. Ray eyed me with a barely contained frustration, running his hands through his hair.

“And will I be under your protection, too? I did some digging, you know, after you blindsided me the last time we met. What I found wasn’t pretty.”

Briar and Jesse fanned out to hem Ray in, but Logan stayed, shifting his enormous form behind me. The weight of his protection at my back was calming.

“Swear fealty, Ray,” I urged, jutting out my chin. I needed this failsafe to protect myself. A desperate noise tore from his throat.

“What is your preoccupation with this? We’re both in danger, Adelaide. I didn’t have anything to do with what happened. But this has been in motion for *years*. The second I blew up our proposed engagement, it’s been building.”

“I need you to swear fealty so that if you turn out to be a rat bastard like your papa, I can put a bullet between your eyes and there won’t be any consequences. I don’t need The Unseen breathing down my neck about offing the Donato heir. Surely you can understand that.”

I shrugged, my face a mask. I might have been a tangled mess on the inside, but he would never see me crack. I didn’t need The Unseen having a fit because proper protocol wasn’t observed. Even I wasn’t foolish enough to provoke the mysterious organization that fought to keep our criminal worlds in the shadows. Ray let out a shout of laughter, tugging his hair with clenched fingers. The dark locks stood at all ends, and, for a moment, I almost pitied him.

“You haven’t heard the wonderful news?” He rolled his eyes. “I’m no longer the Donato heir. Dear papa was furious about your elopement because it meant I’d obviously failed to seduce you, like he kept pushing me to do. He ordered me

to..." Ray bit off with a curse, looking at me with haunted eyes.

"He'll put my cousin in my place now. Let me tell you, he'll have no qualms about doing what I refused." His eyes flashed.

"Which is?" I waved my hand, feeling exasperated. Our amplified voices sparred in the warehouse, and I moved closer to him.

"He wanted me to get you pregnant, any way I could." He took a step forward and lowered his voice, "Even if you weren't willing."

I locked my knees to fight the wobble in them. He wanted Ray to rape me? All to conceive a baby? I still couldn't understand why he would care so much. What would he do when he realized there wouldn't be any child?

"I'll kill him," Logan growled, wrapping an arm around me and hauling me against his back. As if Harold Donato were about to burst in. My heart flared with fire, throat closing with the indignation of what he'd just insinuated. Logan's banded arm tightened around my stomach and the scars throbbed with blistering sensitivity.

"Why Ray? Why is he so obsessed with a child between our families?"

"Don't come any closer," Jesse barked as Ray shuffled forward. The scent of sweat drifted off him and I noticed the rumpled, stained condition of his clothes for the first time. It was a sickly-sweet desperation, unwashed and thick. Logan's heart thumped against my back, but I wasn't panicked. The conversation with my father had me mulling over Harold's motivation already. What I couldn't work out is what they had to gain. Especially if they attempted to impregnate me by force. He had to know I wouldn't stand for it without exacting my revenge. A realization crashed over me, and my jaw dropped open. Ray clapped, a cynical smile stretching his lips. The sound was a slap on my face. I had spent so long thinking I was untouchable. I had forgotten that people would do anything for power.

Anything.

“She gets it. Now you know what we’re dealing with. I’ve been in hiding for weeks. I didn’t dare reach out to you. After we spoke, I went to papa and tried to work out what he’d done that had got you so riled up. He ordered me to get you pregnant, whatever it took. Said if I didn’t go along with it, they would shoot me on sight. I refused. He lost his mind when I tried to reason with him. He tossed me out without a second thought, like he didn’t even care about his only son.”

I covered my mouth with my hand, muffling the gasp I made. My eyes bugged as Logan leaned over, questioning me with a slight squeeze on my shoulder.

“What is it? What have you realized, siren?” They all watched me, lungs hitched on my next words.

I had been right to trust my gut when it had screamed there was a predator chasing me through the shadows. It had been so loud that I couldn’t ignore it. I had thought Harold Donato was devious, but I had no notion he was so cold. He wanted the Orazio bloodline mingled with his own, and it didn’t matter what I thought of it.

As soon as the baby was born, I’d be dead. He could claim our territory and burn down the remaining pillars of it. Scorch Greenwich Bay until the only thing that remained was him. And a malleable child. The Unseen would accept the claim of a mixed bloodline, even if it was an infant. I never thought I would be happy about my mom hurting me. There would be no child, no matter what happened.

“Has this been his plan all along? How does he think he’s going to get away with it? No one will follow him,” I asked, shoving down the trembling cords of emotion that threatened to break free and overwhelm me. I couldn’t stop imagining a child, my child, in the arms of that evil man.

The key to two kingdoms.

Ray pressed his lips together, bloodless with barely contained fear. He was doing the same as me, pushing it down and getting a handle on it. How must it feel? To know he’d

been a pawn all along. Never with any agency of his own. What would have happened if I'd married him at eighteen?

"It's exactly what you think, from that very first engagement attempt. I unwittingly ruined it with my rude comment to you. But it didn't stop his maneuvering. Those scandals your father was nearly embroiled in? He orchestrated all of that with his contact in the authorities. But your whip smart ability to rescue a reputation foiled him again. Then Chief Goldman moved in and fired anyone who even smelled of corruption."

"He didn't give up though, did he?" I pressed, and he nodded.

"He went back to his original plan, getting us married. This child is the only thing he wants, a mad obsession. But he amped up his efforts this time. He made a deal with your three doofuses, got them out of the way nice and tidily. He used the sighting of Crimson Claw to force an alliance. Us against a common enemy. He upped the urgency by having us attacked, hoping it would push us together."

"Nicole, he hired her? The severed hand?" my voice sounded disembodied. She had been right about one thing. This was a game, and I was a pawn, being used for stakes that made my stomach tremble.

"I don't know about those, but he will stop at nothing. I wouldn't put it past him." Ray laughed and shrugged like I'd told a joke, strolling toward me. Jesse launched himself in front of Ray and shoved him away.

"Back. Up," Jesse growled.

"You're a hard girl to manipulate Adelaide, although we must have been convincing enough as lovers as he thought he was about to get what he wanted. He thought he had you all worked out, all of this to have you running further into my arms."

"One step closer to a child," I stated, and he indicated his agreement with a small nod.

I heard the boys' shocked inhales.

"Adelaide..." Briar started, but I waved a hand at him.

“A child that gives him the Donato and Orazio kingdoms,” I clarified. My limbs prickled, but the rest of my body was surprisingly numb. Harold had been biding his time, but his plans had failed. His son was here, in front of me. A grim smile stretched my lips. He had done all of this for a child, but it was the one thing he couldn’t get from me.

“I didn’t know anything about this, Adelaide.” Ray clenched his jaw. When he saw his words had no effect, he lowered himself to his knees. Pride kept his shoulders pulled back. A lion born in a den of snakes. His eyes blazed with fury as he spat out his next words. “I swear fealty to you, Adelaide Orazio. Can we stop this now? We’re on the same fucking side.”

Ignoring the protests of everyone else in the warehouse, I closed the distance between us. I held out my hand to Jonah, and he relinquished his gun to me. My thumb dragged the safety off. It sounded like a bullet, the only sound in the deathly quiet space. Ray flinched, his dark hair covering his forehead. I leaned down and tapped the muzzle under his chin, forcing his head up.

He didn’t look angry, only resigned as he swallowed hard.

“This is why I had to put distance between myself and Lara, so can you at least tell her the truth? Papa thought we were real because I’ve been acting like a man in love, but he just got the woman wrong. When he threatened her, I panicked. He would have killed her. Seeing how far he will go for this; I know for certain.”

He tossed the plea to Jonah, eyes sliding to the stoic guard beside me. I cut him a look, wordlessly telling him not to reply. He pursed his lips, like he was insulted at the insinuation.

“I accept your fealty Raimondo but know this.” I leaned down so our eyes were level, wanting him to see how deeply serious I was. “If you are working with Harold, I will make your death painful and I will make it slow.”

His eyes flashed, but he bit his tongue while taking a deep breath. His lungs emptied with a shudder before speaking.

“Adelaide, I will stand beside you when we end him together. He’s a dead man walking.”

“Here, here,” Logan grunted, having sidled up behind me again.

“This is what you’ve been afraid of?” Jonah said, and I slid the gun from under Ray’s chin and pointed it at him. I didn’t miss the flicker of hurt. Its twin twisted in my gut. His eyes narrowed, and his hands stretched out in a placating manner. Adrenaline surged inside me, and I breathed through the rush. I’d planned for him to hear all of this, to see if he reacted in some way. But Jonah was too good at guarding his expressions and I hadn’t spotted any signs of deceit.

“Are you working for Harold too, Jonah?” I accused, expecting him to do anything except laugh. It was shockingly bright, his chest heaving at the force of it. He wobbled out another weapon from his inside jacket pocket and slid it over to Jesse, who picked it up with fumbling confidence. I might be a sharp shot, but my guys? I’d kept them apart, untrained and innocent. I was confused by Jonah’s next move. He pursed his lips, shaking his head with disgust.

“No. How many times have I shown you? Hold it firm and get your grip right.” Jesse’s hands slid quickly, and Jonah nodded, like a proud father. “That’s better.”

“Jesus, this is painful,” Ray snapped, getting to his feet and snatching the weapon out of Jesse’s hands. He rolled his eyes in my direction. “You’ve gone full paranoia, haven’t you, Addy? Jonah is probably the only man not on Harold’s payroll.”

My nostrils flared as I looked at Jonah. He was still tense, but in that way that he always was. In fact, it wasn’t me he was looking at, his gaze coasting over my shoulder. Still looking for threats to me. He let me process silently.

“You can trust me,” he assured, gruffly. I pierced him with my gaze, traveling over every inch of him. He didn’t plead, didn’t beg or offer reasoning. Something deep inside me recognized his truth. He wasn’t working against me. I jerked my head, and he sagged, the movement minute.

“Let’s get out of here. I’ve got some snakes to slaughter.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out. Father. My throat burned with acid and in a spontaneous decision, I answered the phone. We hadn’t spoken since our last conversation, and I wasn’t ready to hear his voice. Familiar, beloved and revered. But my respect for him was tarnished silver. Precious but dulled. Marked but not unsalvageable.

“My girl,” he sighed, sounding relieved. “I’m glad you answered.”

“I hope there is an apology incoming. This call will end without it,” I growled.

“Please, let’s not fight. I want to explain myself. There are some guests here, so perhaps afterwards?”

I had always been a daddy’s girl. It was the obvious choice, when you have a brutal side and there was only one parent who encouraged it. As soon as I could walk, I trotted after his tall form, begging him to teach me. There was a gleam in his eyes, one I had only ever seen repeated in my grandparents’.

The mark of a predator. Innate strength, cunning and knowledge of someone who could kill at will.

Never had I ever heard his voice tremble like it did now. I marked it immediately, the wrongness of it jarring through me.

“I see, friends of ours?” I hedged, not encouraged by the heavy swallow.

“Old friends.” Again, the warble. Almost invisible to anyone else. But this was my father, and I knew him. Even if I didn’t like him very much right now, he was my blood. He was in danger. There was only one person the visitor could be.

Wait, I mouthed, holding up one finger to halt the movement of the surrounding men. They paused, like magnets as they drew in, tense.

“Harold is there? At your house?” I clarified and sliced my hand at the quiet panic everyone made. I pointed to the car, relieved when they started moving without asking any more questions.

“What is it bamb—”

I cut him off with a sob, thinking quickly. There was no telling what kind of devious plan the older Donato was up to. I needed something that would send him off kilter. I glared at the guys as they looked on in alarm.

“I’m glad you called. I’ve got some news and I need your help.”

“What is it?” His voice sharpened.

“I’m pregnant, and I think it’s Ray’s,” I whispered. “Can I come over?”

The only way to fool a predator was to tease it with what it wanted. Everything else would pale, including doubts and logic. I waited on his terse assent before I hung up the call. The command nestled on my tongue choked when Jesse stalked toward Ray. He paused with inches to spare, chest heaving as his arm swung and fist slammed into Ray’s face. The surprised man crumpled to the ground with a hoarse cry.

“You slept with *my wife*?” Jesse roared.

Adelaide



Ray scowled at Jesse from across the seat.

“You going to let him get away with that?” he growled at me, nursing the purple blooming bruise on his chin. Jesse just shrugged, plucking at his seatbelt with a smug grin.

“I had you going for a second, didn’t I?” Jesse taunted, and I smothered a smile at how Ray bristled. I didn’t know what kind of situation we were walking into, but I needed some levity right now. The mark would only sell the story I was about to spin.

“Quit it, Adelaide doesn’t need the animosity,” Briar interjected, and they both settled in their seats. Ray crossed his arms over his chest with a huff.

“What’s the plan, siren?” Logan asked, dropping the window. A sliver of fresh air rushed in, it brushed my cheeks like a kiss, and I sighed into it. When I’d dropped the lie about my being pregnant, Jesse had launched himself on Ray. Landing several punches until he rolled off, laughing at Ray’s protestations. He hadn’t believed it was true, only using it as an excuse to lay Ray out.

Payback for pretending to date his wife, he’d explained to the shellshocked Ray.

“Harold wants a baby, and he’s proven he’ll do anything to get it. Whatever it takes to get his hands on what’s mine. I’m

going to play the Mafia princess. He obviously thinks I am dense. You can play the man whore easy enough Ray, it's your nature, isn't it? As far as anyone knew, we were dating, so it was a night of passion that turned into a miracle."

"Didn't believe you were dating for a second," Jesse blustered but then frowned, looking between Ray and I like he needed to reassure himself of the fact.

"I can show you just how charming I am. Come sit on my lap, Adelaide. Let's practice," Ray bit out and I cut off the expletive that exploded out of my guys.

"Enough," I warned, staring at them with laser focus. "We're not measuring dicks. Nobody is interested, and Briar probably has you all beat." With that comment, a strangled laugh escaped Briar, and everyone quietened. I used the opportunity to fill Jonah in on all the secrets I had been keeping. His eyes widened and two spots of color sprang to his cheeks as I tapered off.

"He offered me money once, but I told him there wasn't a number he could give to sway me from working with you. I guess he realized there was no point in spending time with me, not when I was so obviously loyal to you."

I couldn't help myself, sliding a disappointed look at Logan, who was next to me. He cringed in readiness for my next words.

"If only you guys could boast the same," I tsked. Strangely, the words didn't sting as hard as they used to. We had been through so much since then and they were beside me. I couldn't do this without them next to me.

"Savage." Ray choked on a laugh and shook his head.

"It's true, and it's our biggest regret. We'll never stop making it right," Logan whispered.

Jonah's eyes bounced between us, settling on the tattoo on Logan's hand. I stared at it too, the permanent promise of his words.

"So, are you really married or?" His eyebrow raised.

“No.”

“Yes.”

I rolled my eyes as the boy’s affirmation drowned me out. Briar’s hand fell on mine, the tattoo stark. He leaned over, his breath tickling my ear.

“No matter what happens, I will always love you and only you. I’ve already written my vows and I hope one day we can elope for real. Picture us drinking champagne and watching the sunset in Italy, just us together. I hope to earn the right to speak what I’ve written to you one day.” He lifted my hand and pressed it against his chest. His heart was beating rapidly underneath. “I dream about our hearts skin to skin again, and once we destroy Harold Donato, I’m going to show you the depth of my dedication.”

My breath hitched, trapped by the lump in my throat.

I let myself fall into the warm fix of his eyes. There was a low-level simmer in my stomach. It kept me focused on what we could walk into. But it seemed to fall away in this moment, bolstered by the raw honesty and vulnerability Briar had shared.

“I look forward to that,” I replied.

“What are you two whispering about?” Jesse butted in, but I ignored him, staring out the window instead. We were pulling into the Orazio estate. The guards at the gate moved aside with swiftness when they peered in the front window. Jonah steered the van slowly over the elongated driveway. One of the white shutters flapped against the house, an imperfect mark on the opulent exterior.

“Follow my lead. No outbursts, no posturing. We’re a united front who are going to raise this fictional child,” I reiterated. I’d already drummed this into them on the drive over, but I needed to say it again. They agreed but Ray rubbed the mark on his face with another disgruntled look at Jesse.

A lean faced staff member opened the door, hurriedly straightening their askew tie. I didn’t recognize his face. The back of my neck prickled as he led us through the house.

“Where is Lisa?” I asked, naming my father’s current housekeeper.

“She’s on holiday Miss.” His eyes darted quickly to the side. I heard the echo of footsteps further down the hall, too heavy to be my fathers. A shiny boot kicked a door shut as we passed, with all the subtleness of a bull.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” I nudged Jonah, but he already had his phone pulled to his ear and was muttering sharp orders. The staff member’s eyes bugged, but he wisely held his tongue. I paused outside the dining room and rubbed my eyes until I felt them water slightly. I practiced a few panicked breaths. Only then did I enter the room.

It was like interrupting an intimate soiree. Father seated closely to Harold with his wine lifted to his lips. Two red ticks at the side of his mouth told me he’d been drinking for a while. Harold picked up the half empty decanter and filled his glass. I didn’t recognize the thin man pacing behind them, but Ray did. He moved with a jittery energy, too sharp and jerky to be called elegant. There was a hunger that hid in the hanging folds of his jacket. Like he could eat and never be satisfied.

“Peter.” His shoes squealed on the marble floor as he halted sharply. This must be the new Donato heir. The one who insisted he could bring Harold’s devious dream of a child to life. Peter offered a grim smile before looking me over, much like one would weigh meat at a market. Calculating. Father jostled around Peter as he walked toward me with arms outstretched.

“You came.” His hands grappled around mine, squeezing my fingers together until they flared with pain.

The men, the lunch, the pacing heir.

None of the many red flags confirmed the level of danger as much as his iron grip.

I’d hope we’d have the upper hand, but that was dashed now. He knew we’d walked right into a trap, unable to stop it. I wondered how long before father caved and called me.

Knowing he was luring me into certain danger. I leaned down to kiss his weathered cheeks.

“My girl, always so clever.” He squeezed my hands again, and I heard the unnecessary warning. This was my playground and normally I had to work hard to get these dense men to see my worth. But today I was doing something different. I wasn’t going to be clever at all.

“I’m in such a mess. But I think we’ve found a perfect solution.” I let my breath warble, dashing invisible tears. Harold Donato approached and tried to kiss my cheeks, but I tucked myself into my father.

“The lines of fate have twisted around you both. They know that the joining of our two families is the most important legacy we can leave. Greenwich Bay will know a golden age,” Harold crowed, his hand clapping down on Ray’s shoulder in a congratulatory manner. I suppressed the urge to shudder. His version of that legacy had me six feet under the ground and his greedy hands snatching up everything that remained. His gaze flickered to my guys behind me, a furrow deepening between his brows.

“Well, I am looking forward to raising this child.” I let my hand skate over my stomach. “I’m so glad Ray is going to sign his parental rights over to me.”

Harold stiffened, lowering back into his chair. Peter guffawed behind him, not as practiced in keeping a poker face.

“Why would you throw away such a blessing?” Harold managed through gritted teeth. Ray pushed the scattered plates to the side, helping himself to a lone bunch of grapes.

“What use do I have for a kid?” Ray popped one in his mouth with another lackadaisical shrug. “Plus, she’s already married. It was just bad luck that she’s pregnant. It’s probably not even mine.” My father slumped into his chair with a thud, and I perched on the arm next to him. My guys had spread out behind me. Jonah was nowhere to be seen. Harold’s cheeks flushed red, almost purple, his hand shaking as he reached for his glass and took a drink.

“What use indeed? You bring dishonor to the Donato name. I knew you weren’t responsible enough to be called heir. That’s why Peter is here.” Harold waved an impatient hand at Peter. He stalked over, lifting my hand and planting a kiss on it. His lips were unwelcome, cold, and I snatched my hand back, wiping it on my clothes.

“He will protect you. Provide you with exactly what you and this baby need.” Harold added. I struggled to contain the fury that burned through me. The high-handed arrogance of this man.

A voice cleared.

“She doesn’t need a puffed-up idiot to protect her. She’s already got three,” Jesse drawled from where he leaned against the wall. I raised an eyebrow at his facetiousness, and his lip quirked.

“We can make this marriage disappear, sweet girl. This child needs more than these men can offer.” Harold leaned over and caressed my knee. My skin crawled. I shrugged off his invasive touch. I had chastised the boys about losing it but had to wrench myself back from crushing his nose into his face.

The false comfort he offered was insulting. The guileless watery eyes housed a monster who would destroy me given the chance.

“Well, now that we sorted pawning my leaving off on Peter, I’ll see myself out,” Ray announced airily, leaning down to brush a kiss on my cheek. He squeezed my arm twice and sauntered out of the room. I relaxed slightly when Peter hurried after him. He was an unknown, and I’d rather Ray dealt with him before I moved to the next part.

“Adelaide,” Father cleared his throat, but I waved him off. He was trying desperately to warn me of something that was obvious. Harold Donato had strolled in here, assured of his imminent success. He squatted like a toad in my father’s house. He didn’t know that his son had pledged on his knees to me, that he’d lost an important chink to his armor. His neck was exposed. I wanted him to admit it before I destroyed him.

“I don’t need my marriages dissolved, I’m quite content with them.” I smiled. “So kind of you to offer, though. Now that Ray is certain he wants nothing to do with the baby, I think we can all agree this is Orazio business.”

“You don’t know what you’re throwing away,” Harold spluttered, looking at father like he would agree with him. A tickle coasted over my neck as my hair moved and lips fused to my skin. Harold’s teeth cracked as he looked over my shoulder. I ignored him, reaching to cup Briar’s cheek. He turned his lips to my fingers and kissed them softly. Logan and Jesse crowded me as well, like moths to a flame. How I burned.

“How can you allow this?” Harold implored my father, recognizing I was a lost cause for his pleas. “Your only daughter, consorting with these men like a whore. You should have done your job. Run them off years ago. At least I can say I tried. So many beatings that I organized in your name, and did you appreciate it? No. These cockroaches aren’t fit to squash under my boot. You let them in your house, you let them steal your daughter and take what should’ve belonged to the Donato family.”

Harold rose from his seat, leaning over my father and shouting until spittle flew from his lips. My ears roared at his words, his confession. I exchanged a look with my guys, knowing they heard the same thing as I did. Their faces collapsed when it sunk in, they had given me up thinking it was threats from my father. But it had been Harold all along.

“You organized what?” I dropped the breathy, distraught tone. This had gone too far now. Harold rolled his eyes at me, turning back to my father with a growl.

“I did you a favor,” he hissed, leaning in close. “I thought they’d see sense the first time I had my men beat them into the ground. But apparently, they’re only motivated by money. Still, it was me who tried to save your legacy. While you just stood by and let her get used up.”

My father turned away, eyelashes wincing against his cheeks. When he opened them, it was toward me, not the rabid

man baring his teeth in his face. There were waves of regret in the dim ocean blue.

“I’m sorry, my darling. I’m sorry I didn’t accept your choice, that I pushed you away from them.”

Someone’s fingers tightened on my shoulder, and I shook my head. Harold looked at us in disbelief.

“You had your men beat the shit out of me, threaten my family and then turned around and offered me an out. You are a psychopath,” Jesse’s voice shook, and I reached out to comfort him. The man in front of us had been manipulating us for years. His obsession made my stomach quiver.

“Cut the shit,” I snapped, patience frayed. “The legacy of our family has nothing to do with you. I won’t have it hijacked by a megalomaniac. Which is exactly what you are.”

“You will learn to hold your tongue when our families join.” Harold straightened, shaking his head.

“Over my dead body.” My lip curled. I was out of my chair in moments, but Briar grabbed my arm.

“That can be arranged,” uttered a voice, velvet laced iron. I whipped my head to see a monster of a man walk into the room. Silver flashed at his wrists; cufflinks shaped in a silver rose. His nose carved a severe line down his face, the end hooked. The stranger’s lips quirked under my suspicious perusal, and I didn’t miss the dismissive sniff he gave as he judged me.

“No,” Briar whimpered, his body stumbling into my back.

The stranger’s teeth poked through a wide smile. I realized I was wrong. Harold wasn’t the shark.

Whoever this man was, he brought an energy that sent a shiver down my spine. His strides were languid power, unfazed and confident. My father swallowed audibly.

“Ah, Alessandro, good of you to join us. It’s about time you met my true heir.” Harold settled into his chair and linked his hands over his stomach, eyes bright.

Alessandro dipped his head, dark hair shifting like ink. He reached for one of the wine glasses and drained it with a sigh.

“We met a long time ago,” he answered me. “In this very house. What was it Raimondo called you?” He tapped his chin, musing. “Ahh, butterball. You’ve grown into your curves.”

His leer was performative, but it set Briar into panicked wheezes. Hands fumbled against mine, clammy with sweat. His pupils were pinpricks when I looked at him, color drained from his face. Alessandro leered at Briar, too. This time it blistered with heat.

“Hello, my sweet Briar Rose. My, haven’t you grown?” He tilted his head with a smirk. “It’s been a long time since you left without saying goodbye. How fortuitous that we found our way back together.”

Briar sagged backwards in Jesse’s shocked hold. The whites of his eyes rolled backwards as he was sucked into unconsciousness. I swallowed my cry of alarm, shoving down the panic that strung at my insides.

“I know who you are.” My gut churned. This was the man who abused Briar. He flicked another hungry look at Briar, lying senseless on the floor.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you alive until the baby is born. I’ll even share my sweet rose with you, but first we need to deal with the other two.”

I didn’t have time to react before he ripped a gun out that had been concealed under his jacket. The barrel pointed right at Logan. I couldn’t contain the gasp I made this time.

Adelaide



It hurt to breathe. My lungs protested each tiny inhale. I couldn't look away. Vision shattered like glittering glass. My senses narrowed to the sight of the steady black barrel pointed right at the heart of one of my soulmates. Logan's life in the hands of a killer, the very killer who had hurt Briar.

"You are a greedy girl, aren't you, Miss Orazio? Or should I say Mrs?" Alessandro hummed. "I guess it won't matter soon because you'll be a widow."

"Stop," I cried, watching his finger tighten around the trigger. Fire blazed in my lungs, refusing to expel air until I knew he spared Logan. Alessandro's eyes were cold, and he tilted his head like a snake. I knew if I provoked this man, he would strike and fill me with venom.

"Thank you." He lowered the pistol and tucked it into the waistband of his pants. "You owe me a new car." The last comment he directed to Harold Donato, who had dropped the caring façade and was lolling in his chair. I clutched Logan's arm, gripping him hard enough to hurt, but I needed to feel his warmth, his solidity.

It had almost been taken from me.

I let Logan go, mouth open to speak, when my vision rocked. Alessandro's meaty hand slammed into the side of my

face. I swallowed a cry, hand cupping my nose, where a drop of blood trickled.

Everything had changed now. I swallowed the lump in my throat. The Donatos better be prepared because I was going to raze them to the ground.

“I bet him that these three guys would make excellent leverage against the Orazio darling. Harold didn’t believe me.” Alessandro stepped over to Briar’s unconscious form and peered down at him with an impatient purse of his lips. “We disagree from time to time.”

“Were you on the same page about hurting innocent boys?”

Alessandro hissed and tapped his finger on his lips. Harold’s eyebrows drew together, and he shrugged. My head whipped back to Alessandro.

“We all have our desires, don’t we?” he whispered conspiratorially with a maniacal twinkle in his eye. I reared back, disturbed by how completely unbothered he seemed.

“Ray is the Donato heir.” I frowned, wanting to know how we could have missed something like this. My stomach ached with phantom pains, and I resisted the urge to rub my hand against it. Harold winked, bloated with conceit.

“I’m quite proud of my forethought. Alessandro is my eldest son, illegitimate, but that’s no matter. I kept his mother housed and quiet until he was old enough to join the family. You can understand the reasoning. How many attempts on your life has there been? I didn’t want my true replacement to end up dead. So, I raised Ray like he was always the one, kept him hoping and wishing for me to announce he was inheriting. I honestly never expected him to last long, not after he opened his idiot mouth and blew up our deal.”

He goaded me about the attacks I’d endured. So many of them orchestrated by him.

“You won’t get away with this,” father warned, indignation filtering through. I shot him a look. This was a setback. I just had to focus on steadying my rapid heartbeat to get back on

track. The plan would still work because Alessandro had done what men in our world always did.

Discounted me.

He considered me cowed and able to be controlled. As long as he believed I was incubating a child who was half Donato and half Orazio, we would be safe. I only had to wait for Jonah and Ray to give me the sign.

“It’s already done. You know how it is, Antoni. The strongest among us will always prevail,” Harold taunted. “You ought to pat her down, she’s a firecracker this one.” He added for Alessandro.

He flicked his eyes over me dismissively.

“I’ll take my chances.” His lip curled.

Your arrogance will be the end of you. My thoughts boiled, murderous. But I remained stiff as I catalogued his threat level. I didn’t like how his gaze kept straying to Briar’s unconscious form, excitement glinting. Briar shifted, his eyelids fluttering open.

“Are you alright Briar?” I whispered, not looking at him but watching the beast in the room with us.

“Yes,” Briar replied, but it was wobbly. His inhale rattled, and Alessandro’s pupils dilated.

“You’ll have time to play when we get this secured,” Harold barked as Alessandro reached down, grazing Briar’s cheek. He glared at the older man, who blustered. “You aren’t head of this family yet, boy.”

Anger, thick and dark stiffened Alessandro’s back, and he pulled himself up to full height.

“I’m not a boy any longer. You’ll do well to show me the respect I deserve,” he hissed.

Harold raised a lazy eyebrow, entirely too relaxed as he provoked the weapon he’d honed.

“Respect is earned, not inherited. Now deal with these four and get Miss Orazio somewhere she can gestate comfortably

for nine months.” He waved a hand. Alessandro sniffed, his finger itching on the trigger of the gun.

“You’re right, it is earned. I spent my whole life doing grunt work, rising from the ranks of this family with my own skills. Your men already take orders from me and if you had an ounce of intelligence, rather than blind rage, we might have been running this city years ago. But no, you wanted it done right, done clean because you’re scared of The Unseen. A baby. Well, guess what, there is no fucking baby.”

Alessandro’s shoulder bunched around his ears as he snarled at his father. Harold’s eyes widened, and he shook his head jerkily, like he couldn’t believe it.

“What are you talking about?” he whispered. Alessandro growled, wrapping his fingers around the thin material of my shirt. The button’s strained in his hold.

“Let go of her,” Jesse cried, his movements halted when Alessandro turned the gun toward him. His nostrils flared as he nodded.

“That’s right. Take a seat, little boy. It’s about time we got some things straight. Starting with this baby.” He wrenched my shirt open from the bottom up, the buttons scattering on the ground. My scars were visible. Like a violent map across the landscape of my skin. I lifted my chin, a move that made Alessandro chuckle softly. “A little birdie told me about these.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I told him. Ice replaced the blood in my veins. I could feel the vibrating fury erupting from everyone around me. But not me. I wouldn’t let him take anything else from me. Not one speck of my self-worth.

“Keep telling yourself that, darling.” Alessandro ran his fingers over the raised scars on my soft stomach. “Someone made such an awful mess of you, didn’t they?”

Harold brought his fist down on the table, a wine glass teetering over, breaking with a sharp shatter.

“You knew about this? How could you keep it from me? My plans for this family are ruined because of your duplicity.” His

chest heaved and for a moment, I thought he might have a heart attack. His narrowed eyes glared daggers at Alessandro. I shuddered as Alessandro's fingertips danced over my skin a second time. He hummed thoughtfully in my ear, seeming not to hear his father's tirade.

"Did you like the hand I sent? I thought that was a lovely warning to stay away from Bry. Perhaps I should have gutted you instead."

"Don't worry, I won't make the same mistake as you," I snarled. He huffed and stepped away from me. I yanked the hanging sides of my top together until Logan pressed his jacket into my hand.

"Siren." I could hear a million questions in his voice, but all I could give him was a tremulous smile. Now was not the time.

"I never liked your plans," Alessandro mused, stopping to pluck a grape from the table. "Scheming in the shadows. I want people to know our name. Not just because we merged with the Orazio family. But because we obliterated it."

Harold seemed to realize he didn't have as much control over his son as he thought, quickly backtracking.

"Now isn't the time. She could still be pregnant. Let's rule that out before we burn everything to the ground." He glared at me like it was my fault I couldn't have children.

Alessandro seemed to consider this before he lifted his gun. Harold flinched, but he wasn't the target. My father was. The sound tore through my eardrums before I even processed what had happened.

"No!" I cried, falling to my knees in front of my father. His head hung limply, grayed hair askew. I pressed my hand to his chest, sickened by the warmth that spread over my skin. My ears were still ringing, ringing, ringing. Logan babbled in my ear, pushing me aside to place his hands on my father. His face twisted at the contact, his hands staining red but he didn't relent. He pushed through his aversion to try and save my

father, whose skin had turned ashen. I turned to Harold and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket.

“You’re a dead man,” I snapped, throat raw. Pain wrenched through me as fingers wrapped around my hair and yanked me backwards. Alessandro clicked his tongue in my ear.

“Now, now. Let’s not make promises you can’t keep.”

A sharp reply hit my teeth as he shook me like a doll.

“I think it’s time we had a little chat.” He fisted his hand in my hair and jerked his gun at Briar. “Let’s go Bry.” Jesse and Logan tried to follow, but he waved them back with an excited pant.

“Now isn’t the time,” Harold complained, but Alessandro rolled his shoulders, the words coasting over them. His unrelenting grip dragged me to the door, and I was too shell-shocked to fight. My father, bleeding steadily, seemed unreal.

“Look after him,” I begged Logan and Jesse as Alessandro hauled me out of the room.

“I love you, my girl.” My father’s voice followed us, and I stumbled.

The world bubbled, blistered and tore as Alessandro prodded us up the stairs. My father. The blood on his jacket. I had to believe it wasn’t fatal. I stumbled over my feet twice, the second time punctuated by a hard slap of his hand. My body sought Briar’s warmth, but Alessandro kept his thick body between us, as if knowing the comfort it would give me. My mind buckled under the pressure.

Walls dripping red. My father’s echo of pain.

His nails scratched half off as he clawed them on the ground.

The vision was so thick I didn’t recognize where Alessandro had taken us until he spun in a circle, the whites of his teeth glistening. The pastel pink walls were deceiving, as was the faux white fur throw on the bed. Alessandro fingered it with a barely restrained glee. My childhood bedroom looked

innocent, but I was far from it. He pointed at my study chair, white with gold accents.

“Sit,” he ordered, wagging the zip tie he pulled from his pocket. I grunted as he yanked my arms behind me, the plastic cutting into the tender skin of my wrist. He stroked my cheek, giving Briar a sidelong look.

“I bet you lost your virginity here, didn’t you?” He pursed his lips, like we were sharing a secret. My vision blackened on the edges as Briar’s knees wobbled, his hand shooting out to grasp the soft duvet.

“Don’t tell him anything,” Briar’s voice was sharp, even as he folded onto the bed like jelly. Alessandro’s smile didn’t budge as he turned to Briar. The soft click of his tongue filled the room, chased by the hard slap he doled out to Briar’s colorless cheek. Briar rocked to the side with a soft cry, restrained, like he hoarded the sound to deny Alessandro. The brute’s jaw ticked, but he managed a soft smile. A congenial monster, he tilted his head toward me in silent apology. Briar whimpered when Alessandro’s hand shot out, circling his throat. His thick fingers squeezed, red flaring in Briar’s cheeks immediately.

“God, I missed this,” Alessandro muttered, fixated on the flush on Briar’s tanned skin. My pulse hammered as I twisted my wrists. I wanted his head on a plate, a macabre trophy. My blood sung to spill his. Retribution earned a thousand times over. But I needed out of these binds first. So, I gave him what he wanted, spilled words he would gorge himself on.

He didn’t need to know they were lies.

“Yes. It was here.” I dropped my gaze down, feigning shame at having shared such a tender truth. Alessandro straightened in the edges of my gaze, sucking in a wet, excited breath.

“Was he sweet? I’m sure he would have been sweet, kissing every inch of your body.”

How little he knew of Briar, to believe him sweet in the bedroom. I couldn’t help the defiance. My eyes seared like a brand as I shook my head, curling my lip.

“He wasn’t.” My tone was brutal, but my gaze was only for Briar. A droplet of blood sank from his down turned lip. *Don’t give up, my love.* What I gave this monster was nothing. Our first time together was untouchable, pristine in a preserved glass box. Nobody could taint the memory of his finger’s first path over my skin. In Calder Place, under a slivered crescent moon. His lips tattooed endearments into my skin, coaxing my pleasure into a wildfire. His touch had made me complete. There was nothing this man could say to take that away from us. Briar’s tongue flickered out, collecting the blood. I hope he tasted vengeance in it. We’d both taste Alessandro’s blood before the night was finished. All these promises he stole, tucked away in the secret parts of him. Alessandro observed our unspoken communication jealously, grinding his teeth.

“Perhaps we need a demonstration?” Too bright a voice. I’d cut his vocal cords out. I’d bleed him like a stuck pig. His back looked ripe for a thousand silver blades. Alessandro twisted the knob to my bedroom door and opened it.

“Come, come.” He ushered in the last person I expected to see. Briar cried out loud, unable to contain his despair.

Nicole. Her dark hair was in loose ringlets around her shoulders. Her smooth, bare legs poked out of a sea blue silk robe embroidered with orchids. *My robe.* Horror etched itself through my features, digging into my tender skin as I struggled to free myself. My lungs seized as she floated toward Briar. Her soft doe eyes drifted between Alessandro and Briar, awed into silence. She nibbled at her thumbnail, glistening with jittery excitement. Alessandro swept his hands out wide. Magnanimous as Briar and I shattered into pieces.

“Touch her like you touched Adelaide,” Alessandro prodded. Briar met his gaze for the first time, stark horror unhinging his jaw. It hung slack with disbelief. Nicole let out a soft laugh, a whisper of amusement, eyes still bright. Her fingers stroked down the edge of my silk robe, waiting for someone’s command. She was a vessel. There was no agency in her gaze. She waited with mounting anticipation.

“H-how long?” Briar asked, wincing like the words were bitter. His shoulders rolled over, like he already knew the

answer. Alessandro took great pleasure in answering, rubbing a thumb over Nicole's shoulder. Her cheeks like ripe strawberries.

"You didn't think I'd leave you untended, did you?" Conciliatory, his teeth looked like fangs. Nicole folded her body close to Briar, unseeing of the way he cringed away. Her eyes were full of him, but not the real Briar. The one that lived in her mind, the one she believed loved her back.

"I told you no one else could love you like I do. Alessandro always trusted me to look after you. This is the way it always should have been. Us, together. Before *she* stole you from us." Nicole shot me a glare laced with poison.

I felt it in my heart, the pinch, the numb that spread. Stealing all my emotions. Because Briar folded at her admission, crumpling in on himself. Marked and torn like paper, irrevocably changed by marks he didn't ask for. Alessandro watched on, gluttonous with victory. I shattered in silence, letting each part of my fall slice deep. I would avenge every scar. My feverish promise to myself. Briar's hand lifted slowly, his fingers toying with the button of his shirt before unhooking it. Our eyes met, a tidal wave of pain that clashed in between soft pink furnishings. Alessandro's sick breath caught in his thick throat, a hiss of pleasure at the sliver of skin Briar parceled out. I shook my head, the base of my neck prickling, sharp nausea rising. I wanted to look away. But he needed me. Like magnets, our gaze melded together. My sight wavered, wobbly with unshed tears. His throat bobbed. Another button released. Sharp collar bones, so beautiful. Coveted by everyone in this room. But Briar's gaze begged me. Every patch of skin he unveiled with shaking fingers was mine. Only mine. Always mine. Nicole made a soft noise, looking at Alessandro again. His hand strayed to the straining lump in his pants, palming it with unrestrained heat. My stomach cramped so hard a gasp escaped me.

"I've waited a long time for this." His lips barely moved, trembling with excitement. Briar refused to look away from me. A tear glistened as it tumbled from the corner of his hazel eyes. I drowned in the silver of his agony, frozen by the misery

in that one escaped tear. My own cheeks were wet, and I swallowed the sobs in my throat. *I am with you.* I could feel his soul inside of me, safe in my hold. Always. His lashes fluttered closed, as if he felt it too.

“Look at me,” I whispered, feeble and weak. But enough. My wrists burned with the bite of the zip ties. Another button. Bare skin, a flash of a nipple in the gaping material. Nicole panted.

“You’re insane,” I couldn’t hold back.

“That’s relative.” Alessandro waved me off, his hand still working himself over the material. A succession of popping noises shuddered through the walls. I froze, hope a tender bloom. Alessandro cocked his head, his eyebrows meeting in a slight frown.

“Ah, sweet Briar Rose, wait for me. To be continued.” His secret smile was thick with confidence as he waved an impatient hand. “Don’t leave this room. Unless you want me to put a bullet through her skull.”

Alessandro took his dark, oppressive energy with him and my lungs flooded with sweet oxygen. I choked on it, wishing for freedom instead. Nicole’s gaze raked over Briar’s exposed skin until he shifted uncomfortably. I bit my tongue when he shot me a warning look.

“Let’s not wait.” I stiffened at the cloying warmth in his tone that had Nicole swaying toward him. But the grimace he stifled loosened the tightness in my chest.

“So, Alessandro asked you to watch me at the foster home?” Briar pressed his leg against hers and Nicole flushed, close to combusting. As if this was a first date rather than a twisted situation.

“Yes, but he did it for us,” she justified, leaning in. “He had such a lovely home planned for us, but you left.” Her softly parted lips stretched tight, but she refused to acknowledge me. I clamped my tongue between my teeth. The blunt edges trapping the insults I wanted to fling at her. Briar needed his answers, and I wouldn’t ruin his probing. My limbs had lost

feeling, wrenched back like a contortionist. Briar's face flittered with shadows as he tried to give her the reaction she wanted. His eyes defrosted into a tepid warmth. Nicole wouldn't know what true heat looked like from Briar, how it scalded with delicious power. Her breath hitched, mesmerized by his closeness.

"You told him everything I confessed to you?" He squeezed the answers out of her, balancing the push of her desire for his body. Nicole's head bobbed like a doll.

"Did he tell you what he did to me?" Danger flashed in his hazel eyes, shadowed in the low light of the room. Nicole blithely brushed past the warning.

"Since the first time. I told you I knew everything about you." Her admission was a tender scold, as if sharing a memory with a lover. My stomach revolted, twisting violently. "Alex sought me out, asked me to help him monitor you. He thinks it's sweet, how many admirers you have, even though he was the first to love you. He's so proud of the man you've become."

Briar gulped loudly, choking on the insinuation she made. There had been no love in what Alessandro had done. I stared unseeing through the red that smeared my vision. She'd worked with Alessandro. Kept his abuse quiet. Her wide eyes were wide and guileless as she stared at Briar. Still, with that hungry possessiveness.

"What is wrong with you?" I breathed, seeing the madness glinting in her eyes. She scowled, still intent on ignoring my presence. But my gaze rankled her enough that she snapped.

"Don't look at me like that. As if you're better than me."

"I don't help monsters abuse children. He thought of you as his shield from Alessandro, but you've always been a trap, haven't you? A sweet, innocent little monster yourself."

My breath echoed ragged in the room. I was beyond thinking clearly now. I wanted revenge, craved it like the blood through my veins. Briar was blank, but I knew he was

sinking into years of memories, seeing them through a new lens.

“Where is your golden crown you boasted to me about?” Nicole’s face twisted. “Bloody and broken, just like I warned you.”

Her words stole the oxygen from my lungs. Her hands tightened into fists at her side.

“So, what will you do with me now?” Briar twined a finger through Nicole’s dark hair and revulsion skittered through me.

“Now that she’s been dealt with, he can take you home. Like he always intended to. Just do as he asks, and everything will be perfect. But I’ll be there, and what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” Her fingers snuck beneath the gaping material of his shirt. Coasting over his rippling skin. Briar’s congenial expression fell like a stack of cards. Revealing someone I had never seen before. Forged in agony, shaped in pain, a broken, dark, twisted shadow. Briar’s hand snapped out and collared Nicole’s bobbing neck. Her squeak of surprise smothered by his clawed grip. Briar wrenched her to the bed, looming over her with a silent snarl. Nicole’s nails left unwanted streaks on his skin. She bucked her narrow hips, unable to displace him. Rage consumed Briar, a storming, slapping ocean, biting at a crumbling cliff. Nicole’s eyes bulged, garish popping like a skinned grape. Trembling, watery and losing focus. Briar’s chest heaved as he poured his rage into her body.

“Don’t do it. It’s not worth it,” I croaked, the ties strangled my wrists, making them swell with sharp impotence. Briar didn’t seem to hear my words, face twisted in a terrible mask. What he’d endured leached to the surface, grotesque after years of being hidden. Even in his madness he was beautiful, curls like a woodland sprite. But no fairytale creature gnashed their teeth like he did now, thirsting for vengeance. Nicole had stilled, eyelids fluttering as though still fighting.

“You would do it,” he gritted out, tossing me a tormented look. His shoulders trembled under the terrible weight of his choice. One I had never wanted him to have to make.

“Let me be the dark one.”

“I want to. I want to so much it hurts.”

“That’s because you’re good, you feel the desire, but you can’t.” Briar made a low noise, and it bounced off the pastel pink of my walls. His whitened fingers softened, but I didn’t relax. Not until they peeled away an unhinged gleam shimmering in the dark pools of his gaze. He brushed away the mussed strands of Nicole’s hair. Not with regret. There was still too much anger for that. He trudged to me, shaking, a mottled tear balanced on his jaw. Reflecting the shadows in the room with us. We weren’t the only dark things here.

“Check in my desk, for scissors, something to—” I shifted my ineffectual body with a frustrated noise. Briar rifled through the forgotten mess, pulling out a silver pair. He flashed me a smile, one that looked so like Briar, before it melted away. Marred by the reaching grasp of Alessandro and his eager assistant. The scissors kissed cold against my skin, like ice. I hissed as feeling flooded into my contorted limbs, whimpering under the pressure of it. Briar took my hands in his, feeling running into the numbed skin. It reminded me of the day we met. For a moment our breaths mingled, soft, ragged things. We hoarded our words, needing the silence. Craving touch which we used to build, rather than destroy.

“We should go before he returns.”

My body groaned as I stood. But even I couldn’t continue, not before pulling Briar into my arms. He shuddered in my fierce hold.

“What should we do with her?” He gulped, flicking a remorseful look at Nicole. This was why I was the killer. I yanked off a silk pillowcase and tore the ivory material into strips. In moments, Nicole was a macabre present, trussed tightly into an immovable lump. I stuffed the remaining silk in her mouth and wedged her between the floor and the bed. She didn’t argue, her slack body unable to.

“Don’t worry.” I brushed my hand down Briar’s damp back. He’d sweat through his shirt. “I’m not finished with her.”

Jesse



I didn't pay attention to Harold, too focused on trying to help Adelaide's father. The press of my hands against his chest was ineffectual, especially as it rose less and less.

"Oh fuck," I muttered over him, the graying of his skin set fire to any hope I had. Antoni sucked in a wet breath, his fingers twitching. Then his eyes fluttered open momentarily, filled with pain and anguish.

"I-I'm sorry," his voice stuttered out, stealing the last of his energy. Wetness coated my cheeks, my throat thick with emotion. For the stark horror of this moment, and the devastation I knew would tear Adelaide apart.

"Don't speak," Logan whispered. "Everything will be alright."

Lies. All lies, but we couldn't help ourselves. Alessandro had hit Antoni in his chest and there would be no recovering. Still, we tried, grunting as we pressed on his wound. My hands and sleeves were soaked red. Logan's face twisted as he pressed against Antoni's chest. The touch disturbing him, even in the face of death. He pushed through the agony of it, knowing as I did, it would be fleeting.

There was no saving him.

"I should have—" He gurgled, searching over our faces. "Given my blessing. Take care of her. She nee—" His mouth

went slack around the plea, but I knew what he was going to say.

She needs you.

Logan's low curse echoed in the room as his chin drifted down to press against his chest. A roar filled my ears, blocking out the words spoken next. The husk of his body was disturbing in a way I had never experienced before.

"Now that's a real shame." Harold lifted a wine glass in a mocking salute. "A true adversary, although he got soft in his old age. That's what happens when you let a woman run things. But don't you look good with some blood on you?" His eyes twinkled with the twisted compliment.

"Fuck you," I snarled.

"That's more my heirs' style." He shrugged, chuckling low at a joke I didn't quite grasp. If my hands hadn't still been hot with my father-in-law's blood, it might have given me pause. "Now let's get out of here. You can be leverage until I find out if there is a pregnancy to celebrate."

Harold held a gun with practiced ease at our backs. The stare of the barrel on the pistol was heavy, now that I knew firsthand what damage it could do. Every time I'd shot at a target before, it had been like a video game, detached from reality. But the tang of blood thickened the air in the room, leaving no escape for the truth. I wiped the sticky blood on my pants, needing it off.

"I could have turned you both into something brutal," Harold continued as he urged us down the hallway. One artwork was askew on the wall, a black mark down the white paint. The Donatos had left their mark on this house in more ways than one. Briar's reaction to Alessandro unsettled me. They knew each other from somewhere and his face was vaguely familiar. The shape of it niggled in the back of my mind.

"Adelaide is going to slaughter you," Logan said. His lack of inflection made Harold spin around with a curl to his upper

lip. There was desperation to his flaring nostrils, the slight shake of his arm as he lifted it.

“Why couldn’t you have done what I wanted? This could have been so easy.” I contemplated the older man, but we were no match for a bullet.

“Sorry, we didn’t make it easier to kill our girl.” I couldn’t help but snap. We spilled out into the lounge room. Their gas fireplace flickered with contented flames, inviting relaxation. Except for the slumped body that was pressed too close to the heat. Singed cotton smell invaded the room, noxious enough to tickle my nose. Harold toed the body with a grumble, uncaring that one of his men had been killed.

“She’ll be dead any way once I get a baby out of her.”

The knowledge that there wouldn’t be a baby was like thorns digging into my skin. I winced at the harsh pull, the sting. My stomach cramped at the thought of what Alessandro was doing to Adelaide right now.

“All this stress won’t be good for the baby.” Logan tried a different tactic. But there was no reasoning with a maniac. His wrinkled face creased with mirth. The false flames in the heater flickered, unperturbed by the monster in their midst.

“You’d be surprised by what a pregnant woman can endure. Besides, you’ll play along, or she’ll get hurt. And she’ll behave or you’ll both get hurt. See how that works?” He drawled, slow and bitter as caramelized molasses. Ray’s cousin, Peter, skidded into the room, the lines on his face deeper without the smug expression he wore earlier. His hair flopped to the side, revealing a thinned spot.

“Well?” Harold barked, waving his hand impatiently. Peter flicked us a suspicious look.

“Ray—uh—slipped out before we could apprehend him. We’ve suffered losses, but I haven’t seen any of their men yet.” He cleared his throat, wincing as Harold growled.

“My son is useless. Why is it so hard to find him? And she wouldn’t have bought more than the one guard. It can’t be hard to find the big bastard.”

The fabric of air in the room shuddered before I heard the slight pop. Peter's mouth dropped open as he fell, slack jawed, onto the ground. A shiver electrocuted my spine as the light drained from his eyes. Surprise, pain and... nothing. Bile bubbled at the base of my throat.

"Looking for me?" Jonah swiped his arm over his jaw, smearing the darkened blood that coated the left side of his face. One side of his head had a clotted wound. But it didn't hinder him. Jonah's teeth flashed like a wolf. He was normally stoic, but there was blood lust painted on him now, hungry.

"What is it with you and not staying dead?" Harold moved behind Logan and me, and my skull prickled. A quick look confirmed the gun he had pointed at us. He didn't even seem shaken by the loss of Peter. Logan choked softly. Harold lifted his shoulder, smirking. "You're going to throw your gun toward me and move out of the way."

Jonah pinned me with a murky look, molten with intent. He held the gun up, nestled in his hand as he surrendered. He flicked the safety on and tossed it so close to me it almost grazed my feet. For a moment, my heart stopped. My existence narrowed to the roar of my pulse, a hurricane in my ears. My knees buckled and fingers scrambled around the gun until I had it pointed at Harold. Just as Logan slammed into the side of Harold, gagging at the sensation of his touch. Harold's smug grip on his weapon loosened, and Logan kicked the gun away. Death was hard, hot metal. It thrummed up the veins in my arms, baying for release.

"Let's not be hasty." Harold lifted his hands in surrender. "I can give you whatever you want."

All I wanted was Adelaide, safe and in my arms again. Harold would stop at nothing to destroy what I craved. But the barrel still shook. Sweat made the trigger slippery, and I clenched my jaw, trying to steady my hold.

"Do it," Jonah goaded.

Still, I hesitated. I ground my teeth, excavating past the reticence, hoping to be flooded with the desire to kill. Harold's lip ticked up, the tiny movement mocking. Sweat beaded down

my back, making my shirt meld to me. My arms cramped, locked in readiness, but I faltered.

“What the fuck are you doing with that?” Adelaide’s outrage knocked me out of my haze. She and Briar rushed into the room, and I noticed the red marks on her wrists immediately. I tasted fear at the sight of her marred skin. “You don’t know the first thing about weapons.” Logan’s gaze softened at her heated reaction, and we shrugged.

“Jonah taught us. We want to be the ones backing you up.”

She stifled a gasp, whipping her head around to glare at her guard. I knew she would react like this, six years making sure we never had to worry about her world touching us. Six years of protection and we obliterated it. She turned her blistering glare on me, and I knew she was thinking of her mom, searching for an unnatural sheen in my eyes.

“We are not done talking about this.” Her finger prodded Briar, who was the closest.

“I’m a crime lord’s soulmate. It was time to learn what that actually means. I don’t want anything to come between us again,” I justified the madness so easily.

“It’s not a toy,” she hissed.

“Jonah is an excellent teacher.” Adelaide pursed her lips at Jonah. She needed a distraction so, I slammed the safety off and pointed it at the wall, steady now. Plaster exploded as I let off a warning shot.

“Very impressive,” Harold taunted. “Now try aiming for a person.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Adelaide whispered. “Shooting a target is not the same as shooting a person.”

“If this is ever going to work, we need to hold our own. You kept us apart for good reasons, but we are not your mom and we’ll never be able to truly be together if we keep these walls up. Don’t worry about us, siren, we made our decision a long time ago. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep you,” Logan added, ignoring Harold’s teasing.

She nodded, blowing out an exhale that was half relief and half shaky terror. This was our world now.

No secrets, no sacrifice.

“You don’t have to do this to keep me. And I’m not done talking about it. Of course, Jonah would meddle. He’s the only one with the stones enough to defy me.” She rolled her eyes, wagging a finger at Jonah, who only shrugged. But his eyes were warm.

“Don’t be too hard on him. He put up a good fight initially,” Briar joked as he laid his hand on her arm. “We wouldn’t do this if it wasn’t our choice.”

Harold crossed his arms, pursing his lips.

“So touching. But you can’t make a lamb a monster. Now that your father is dead, these three will be your downfall. Mark my words.”

Color drained from Adelaide’s face, and she leaned heavily on Briar. I pressed the gun into Logan’s hold and launched my fist into Harold’s face instead. The noise was wet violence, the crunch muffled against my hard knuckles. I barely registered the pain, slamming my fist into his collapsed form, over and over. His weathered skin bloomed under my fury, fissures of blood making my punches jerky. I growled, inhumane. I didn’t need to pull the trigger. I would beat this man to death. I could feel it in my marrow.

Adelaide



My mind was too fractured to stop the barrage of intrusive visions. They flashed in my mind, and I jerked, as if physically hit. Briar clutched me in his hold.

“Breathe. Please love, breathe,” his voice cracked in my ear. Jesse was a flurry of movement as he beat Harold further into the floor. The older man’s groans were pitiful. My knuckles whitened as I tightened my grip on Briar’s shirt. His arms wrapped around my waist, and I sunk into the soft shelter he provided. My father was dead. I had known it was coming, even as Alessandro dragged me from the room, but the small piece of hope I had fizzled. Grief was a gaping maw, and I teetered on the edge. Logan and Jonah pulled Jesse off Harold, hauling him away as Donato slumped to the ground. I found myself in the cocoon of their embrace. I yanked them into me, breathing their warmth deeply.

“We are going to get out of this,” I whispered, my lips tasting sun on their skin. Salvation. It halted the dark spiral wrapping around my ankle, threatening to drag me under. “And you’re going to take me on every damn date you promised me, got it?” I pressed a hard kiss to each of their lips, the taste of them motivating me.

“We love you,” Jesse murmured against my skin. My fingers tightened before I released them. The lump in my throat forced me to choke out my next words.

“I love you too.”

It was the truth. The admission rolled off my tongue easily, and I breathed out for what felt like the first time in months. I’d never stopped loving them, and I never would. It wasn’t forgiveness, but I needed them too much right now. My father was gone, and I needed them. Jonah touched my shoulder, a soft acknowledgment. We both shared pain in this. He had worked for my father for a long time.

“I’m going to sweep the grounds again. I’ve flushed nearly everyone out.”

“We need to find Alessandro,” I cleared my tight throat. The tension flooded between us, and the others didn’t miss Briar’s quiet gasping. Jonah held out his hand for the gun Logan was clutching.

“Who is Alessandro to you, Briar?” Jesse coaxed quietly as we broke apart. I was grateful Jonah jogged out of the room so he could have privacy. Briar stared at him with blanched cheeks and haunted eyes. I felt the pull, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“He’s a monster,” he whispered fiercely. “Adelaide, what he did to you...” He clenched his jaw under my unrelenting stare. My wrists burned as I tightened my grip around his waist, ignoring the others.

“It’s nothing and he’ll pay for what he’s done,” I promised him vengeance. Logan tilted his head, desperate for answers that weren’t mine to give.

“What happened when he took you away? You need to tell us what the fuck is going on. He called you—”

Briar swore, a surge of disgust etched in his features.

“*Don’t*,” he begged. “Don’t call me that nickname.” There was a glazed lag in his expression. As if he were half trapped in memories.

“He looks familiar, but I don’t remember him. We can’t help if we don’t know what’s going on,” Jesse pressed. Briar laughed hollowly, his hand sliding down his face.

“I met him when we were still in the foster home. You wouldn’t remember him because he has a knack for targeting the weakest person in the room. That’s always been me.” His shoulders slumped. “I never wanted you to know.”

“Know what?” Logan’s voice had a thread of frustration. There was pressure forcing the air out of my lungs. Thoughts clamored in my mind, brash horror. I flexed my hands around Briar’s back, trying to gain control. Now was not the time to fall apart. We needed to be strong, me most of all. He flicked me a look, drenched with shame. I nodded encouragingly.

“There is a reason I can’t stand nicknames. Remember the extra tutoring I was given? He was my tutor but no tutoring ever occurred. He... did things to me, said if I told anyone, he’d use you too.”

Color faded from Jesse and Logan’s skin. The former stumbled back into the table. They crumpled in front of me, the shock making them shrivel.

“I remember now.” Logan rubbed his jaw. “We were so annoyed that you got to go out for food while we were stuck in that shithole.”

“I tried to come with you one time, and you fought me,” Jesse breathed, his eyes widening.

“I didn’t want you to go through it too,” Briar admitted, his voice cracking. Jesse groaned, his head dropping into the cradle of his hands. “It doesn’t matter.”

I reared back, eyebrows smashing together. Alessandro had hurt Briar. He’d taken from him something that wasn’t his. Just like he had me. They were ghosts of themselves, the admission making them thin, breakable. Briar was ashen, and a slight tremble wracked through his body.

It did matter.

“Don’t.” The word was a hammer, and he flinched. It wasn’t what I intended, and I made a noise of derision. “Don’t call yourself weak or downplay what he did to you. I’m sorry if I ever did make you feel like I believed you were anything but

strong. It matters, and he'll pay for it. But right now, I need to get us out of here. Are you with me?"

Briar met my fervent gaze, matched it.

"I'm always with you Adelaide."

I dropped my arms, giving Logan and Jesse a moment to digest. They were shell shocked, but there would be time to address emotions later. I pressed a kiss to Briar's forehead, a promise of vengeance in it. I closed my eyes and focused on tucking away my raw, jangled emotions, until only the rage remained. I let it spread. Burn and scorch me full of motivation. But Jesse and Logan weren't done. They smothered Briar and I between them, squeezing until we both gasped.

"I wish you would have told us," his voice was layered agony, vibrating with swallowed sobs. Briar took in a shuddering breath, his chest hitching against mine.

"We would have done something, anything," Jesse added, muffled. We clung to each other, the messy parts of us becoming glue, holding us together, stronger than before. My chest throbbed, their closeness the only balm. "You're our family. We would have fought for you."

"The only thing that matters to me is us," Briar admitted, and I pressed a hard kiss to his down-turned mouth. Slick wetness coated my cheeks, mine or his. It didn't matter. The burden was a shared well between the four of us. I shifted from our huddle, unwilling but necessary. Briar and I shared a look, and I saw the golden glints in his eyes like treasures again. Brighter than they had been a moment ago. Free of long hidden secrets.

"What are you thinking?" Logan was at my back.

"We can't wait for Jonah to return." I wandered over and prodded at Harold with my foot. "I'm going to be the one to kill your heir."

He glared with a baleful eye, swelling from Jesse's fists.

"You scare me in the best way, siren."

I managed a sharp smile. “Ray has hopefully secured the outside. Let’s make our way there.”

“Jonah and Ray as a dream team. Who would have thought?” Briar squeezed my shoulder lightly.

“Lara thought they were, I suppose.” My guys’ faces smoothed over as they tucked the emotions away. I did the same, nodding at my guys.

“Last chance?” I let the offer stand, but they all surged toward me. My chest was hollow, aching from a loss I hadn’t processed yet. I couldn’t let myself process. But their reaction gave me a muted glow.

“We’re not staying behind Adelaide. From now on, it’s no secrets and no sacrifices.”

I sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly as my hand circled the knob.

Then I opened it.

The hallway was dim, and the lights had blown down into the airy space. Shadows crept up the walls like creatures, but I welcomed them. I was one with the darkness in me, and there wasn’t anything that could scare me. It was now or never. I ushered them outside, noting the marks. They would fade, but the memory of them wouldn’t. Insisting they stay separate from the dangerous parts of my life hadn’t worked. We had all been trying so hard to keep things separate. Believing it would be cleaner to leave our dark, jagged pieces at the door. But where had that landed us? Hurting and broken. When we survived this, I was going to tear it down to the foundation, rip out the crumbling, weak parts. I was going to build something untouchable.

We were going to build it together. Jesse had picked up Harold’s discarded gun, and it looked good in his grip, natural.

I have a warped idea of what was attractive.

“Don’t hold back out there. Try not to shoot yourself in the foot.” I joked, trying to loosen the tight hold on my lungs. This could end terribly. We crept along the pathway, sticking to the shadows. The only sound was my soft, shallow breathing and

the manic thump of my heart in my ears. For all the men that had swarmed the house when we walked in, they didn't seem to be here now. Voices echoed and we detoured through the back garden. Logan surprised a guard who almost tripped over his feet at the sight of us. He grunted as the barrel of his gun slammed under the man's chin. The guard crumpled into a pile at our feet.

"Good. But he still caught you unaware," Jonah scolded quietly, melting out from behind the hedge. Logan gave him a smile. His eyebrow was a bloody ribbon, red trickling down his face. He searched over my shoulder before catching himself. My father wouldn't be coming. I clutched at my chest, wishing I could claw my heart out to stem the sharp pain. Grief was a distraction. There would be time to fall apart later. That's what I told the quivering hurt that ate my insides.

"I can't find him, boss." Jonah led us into a darkened corner where we rested for a moment. "Ray took care of the stragglers outside. But it's nothing. Majority of them ran as soon as the first one went down, like rats from a sinking ship. I've taken out pretty much all the rest."

He pointed to a hole he'd made in the hedge, and I peeked through. There were several cars idling on the drive, but no one was making a move to use them. I noticed a guard hovering in the shade of a hedge. I extricated the gun from Jonah and poked the muzzle through the hole. The guard had his thumb jammed in his mouth as he chewed, white teeth flashing.

My body jolted, and the guard's head whipped back. He fell to the ground. Dead. I looked back at my guys, expecting to see horror. This was who I was, the woman they loved. But there was no hesitation, only devotion. It calmed something in me.

"I'll get his weapon," Jonah muttered, and I let him slink away. I watched the crumpled body of the guard for the telltale sign of Jonah looting his weapon. But I heard a voice I wanted to destroy.

“Come out, come out, darling.” Alessandro strode out into the driveway, Jonah’s sagging body held up like a shield. “Don’t make me put a bullet in your loyal guard.”

My chest seized. Feet moving before I could even process it. Jonah’s immense chest looked wrong, bent and deflated as he was.

“Boss, don’t,” his protest was sharp as Alessandro whipped him with the gun. My guys fanned out behind my back. Alessandro’s greedy eyes latched onto Briar, and he drank him in.

I’m going to rip your eyeballs out. I promised myself silently.

“Deliver my father to me. You’re going to let us both get in this car, and I’ll let the big guy go. Deal?” His lip curled like he couldn’t stomach the thought of having me win, but he had no choice. I didn’t move, looking past his shoulder. An answering grin, muted by a car windscreen, made me smile maniacally.

No deal.

But externally I nodded, jerking my head to Jesse and Briar, who loped up the steps to retrieve the bloodied mess of his father. It wasn’t long before they hauled him out, a shriveled, bloody bruise.

“Let my guard go,” I ordered, as Jesse shoved him into the drive. Harold swallowed a curse, gnarled hands pressing into his thighs.

“Fucking bitch,” Alessandro tossed at me before Jonah surprised him by tossing his head back. The hard skull ricocheting off Alessandro’s tender nose. He roared as blood spurted and they rolled to the side, a flurry of arms and legs.

“Wait, I can give you the Donato territory.” Harold wrenched himself to his feet, leaning against the car. I didn’t move, looking past his shoulder. My guys moved back as I flicked my hand, hiding my satisfaction.

“It’s already mine. You killed my father. The Unseen won’t dispute my right to swallow up your pitiful holdings.”

I gave a stiff nod, my spine fizzling with energy. Headlights flooded the area, illuminating Harold in an eerie light. Harold turned with his arm up in surprise as the engine revved. Ray smirked at his father from inside the car, giving him a little wave.

It was quick, but at my nod, Ray slammed his foot on the pedal and floored the car into his father. The crunch that filled the air was horrific but satisfying. I forced myself to commit it to memory. I would never allow myself to be maneuvered like this again. Ray got out of the car, the engine still purring, and looked at his work with a discerning eye. Harold lay on the ground, bent at a strange angle and silent.

“Good riddance,” Ray spat. “Everything clear inside?”

“Hope you’re not having second thoughts, Ray. It appears you have a half-brother. Don’t get too attached, though. I plan on killing him in a moment. It’s a bit late to be loyal to the Donato name now.”

He scoffed, looking pointedly at the gory aftermath of his time behind the wheel. One eyebrow inched up. He raked a cursory look at Alessandro, hiding whatever reaction behind levity.

“God, it feels good to live up to my nickname. I gotta tell you.” He grinned.

Alessandro lifted his head, scratched and bruised with an animalistic growl. Jonah was panting on his back while Jesse and Logan surrounded him. There was a slight wail of a siren, soft but urgent. The attack had not escaped notice from the authorities.

“You’re a traitor to your name,” Alessandro growled. “How could you—” Logan slammed his boot into the back of his skull. When he peeled his head off the ground Jesse spat in his furious face.

“That’s for my brother.” The glob of liquid seeped into his glare.

“Get him up,” I ordered coldly and waited until Jonah wrenched Alessandro, his face still mocking in defeat. “Fast or

slow Briar?" I asked, soft and sweet like spun sugar, motioning to Alessandro.

I didn't look away from Briar, letting him see ravenous thirst and rage that peeked from behind a stoic mask. I wanted it slow. I wanted to peel the fingernails off this monster one by one. Not for me, but for what he did to Briar. As long as he was dead, I was happy. Briar's eyes widened, haunted by the choice, or his history, I couldn't tell.

"Sweet Briar Rose, he isn't bloodthirsty like you and I," Alessandro laughed and something in Briar snapped.

"Blow his fucking brains out," he choked, a steel undercurrent threading through his gaze.

I pressed the barrel to the man's head. Wanting it to bruise before I stole his life.

"Are you sure?" I pushed down the simmering need to mark this man in every way he had marked us both. To make him scream for mercy. But looking at Briar's pallor, I knew the only thing that would help him heal was to have this man dead. He nodded, and I could only acquiesce.

"Don't look boys," I ordered and waited until they averted their eyes.

"Enjoy hell." I smiled, my measured threat carrying a bleakness. My finger squeezed the trigger and Alessandro slumped on the ground, his mouth still pulled in an expression of shock. My ears rung from the shot, and I staggered over to the waiting embrace of Jesse, Logan, and Briar.

"All bow to the queen," Ray joked, not realizing how true his words were. He frowned at Jonah, streaked with blood and dirt. "Are you okay, brother boyfriend?"

"What the fuck, don't call me that," Jonah spat to the side with a grimace.

"Well, you're my girlfriend's boyfriend, right? We need a name. What about Brother Beaus?" Jonah's expression darkened and Ray held out his hands placatingly. "We'll workshop it."

“What about Lover Lads?” My head whipped up to see Lara strolling down the drive, her eyes anxiously cataloging the marks and bruises on her men. But my shocked exhale was in reaction to whose arm she had threaded through hers. Chief Goldman.

“What do you think?” she added.

“No comment,” Beck Goldman grunted, gaze narrowed at the pooling blood beneath Alessandro’s head. He drew his phone to his ear with a sigh. “It’s me. Call off the patrol to the Orazios. Nothing to see here.”

Lara patted his chest and leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek.

“Excuse me?” I stuttered, unable to process what I was seeing.

Lara gave me a sheepish look, hurrying to throw her arms around Jonah and Ray.

Jesse put his fingers under my chin, distracting me with a kiss. I sank into their hold, for now. This wasn’t the end, but at least we could breathe for the moment. We had time to unravel and heal the broken parts of us.

Adelaide



One Month Later

I wiped the crumbs of the apple muffin I'd been eating and crossed out Threads in my notebook. The scent of flowers filled the office and I sucked in the fragrance of them. The list was half done now. All the dates Jesse had promised to take me on, and I'd held him too when I thought we might end up dead.

I still couldn't believe it was over. My skin crawled as if someone was watching me, the sensation difficult to shake off.

"If in doubt, just shoot." I grinned at Kinsley's exasperated sigh. She was far too tenderhearted to run a biker club. "Don't knock it until you try it. A good flesh wound is always an excellent deterrent."

"This pack of wolves are already violent enough," she complained. "But I'll try it."

"You wanted boss bitch advice, you got it. Having a group of violent men at your back isn't a bad thing."

Having a pile of them on top of you wasn't something to sneeze at, either. I grinned to myself.

"To be honest, I figured you'd tell me more about how to feign confidence."

Kinsley had peppered me with text messages since we met, determined to pick my brains about how to run her club. She was still shifty about how it all worked and how she got the role. But it was talking an adorable bunny into being a lion. Amusing.

“I don’t pretend. I am confident. How did you go with my little friend?” I drawled. Nicole hadn’t been forgiven or forgotten in the chaos of everything. There were too many eyes on me, so I rang Kinsley and asked if she could do me a favor.

“Don’t worry, you won’t ever be seeing her face again. Poor girl pissed herself.” Kinsley gave a decidedly evil laugh. Perhaps there was hope for her yet.

“What did you do?” I waved Lara in as she paused in my doorway.

“We showed her our teeth,” Kinsley hummed, coy. I said my goodbyes to the Crimson Claw president with my thanks. Lara settled into the seat opposite me, crossing her legs.

“That’s a heavy look,” Lara pointed out. I smirked at the tennis bracelet glinting on her wrist.

“Perhaps I’m just jealous that when my men pissed me off, I didn’t get diamonds,” I joked.

“I will not say no to sparkly rocks.” She shrugged sheepishly at my arched eyebrow.

I held up my hands. Things between us had been tense for a moment before she explained to me what had happened with Chief Goldman. The man might have spoken about morals, but for love – they could always be bent. It also meant I had the authorities back on side, which was another boon after news leaked about the death of my father.

“No judgement here honey, take him for all he’s worth. Have you decided what you’re going to do about your group of guys? I still cannot believe you corrupted Chief Goldman? Don’t let him get too close to your heart unless you’re completely sure.”

“Like you?” Lara quipped as she crossed her legs. A faint flush at my insinuation. She was still navigating her unconventional relationship. Three men were vying for her attention, and they could not be from more different worlds. I paused for a second, chewing my lip. I’d crashed with Lara again after everything that had happened. Said I needed space, but I was a coward.

Cut them loose or take them back. Those were my choices. And I had made it the second I’d seen the barrel pointed at Logan. I had cemented it over this past month as they continued their relentless pursuit. Like the rings on their fingers, they were tattooed on my heart.

They hurt me, and I hated them for that. But underneath the toxic black tendrils was a deep history, one that I missed. Desperately. The taste I’d had while living with them again had left me ravenous for more. After all we’d been through, I at least understood their motives.

“I imagine them with other people, and it fills me with the worst pain. I imagine myself with someone else and I can’t stomach it.” A grimace tightened my lips.

“It will take time to heal, to move on from them.” Lara hummed, misunderstanding me. A shock rush of tears stung the back of my eyes.

“I don’t want to,” I admitted. The dates we’d been on had proved it to me. When I could put my hurt and bitterness in a box, it was so right between us. They were all trying so hard to prove their love. But I didn’t know how to move past what had happened.

“What do you want?” Lara cocked her head, eyes shrewd. The little witch. She’d goaded me into admitting it aloud. Now that the words were out, my chest felt lighter.

“I want to go back to the way it was before. Before a greedy man played us all like fools and tore us apart.”

“No, you don’t,” Lara scoffed. My forehead scrunched at her disbelieving tone. “The love you had was drowning under secrets. You were trying so hard to keep your life from

touching them. They were trying so hard to become worthy of what they thought you needed. All the darkness, all the insecurities have been dragged out in the light now. You can finally process them, instead of pretending everything was perfect.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that love isn’t enough sometimes.” A haunted look passed over her face, like she spoke from experience. “You could have all the love in the world, but if you carry self-destructive tendencies? It will never work. All of you were chipping away at your relationship, slowly but surely. They blew it up, but honestly, I don’t think it would have lasted.”

A soft gasp fell from my lips, and I rubbed my aching chest. The room tilted, like the axis it sat on shifted.

“You honestly think that?” I breathed.

“On your anniversary dinner, you sat there for hours, waiting for them to show up. But afterwards, you didn’t even confront them. The Adelaide Orazio I know would have cut their balls off and made them like it. What you have in your heart is the foundation, but it doesn’t stop there,” Lara spoke with a seriousness I didn’t expect from her. She fidgeted with her bracelet, as if worried she’d overstepped.

“I don’t know what to do,” I cried, throwing my hands up. Lara met my wide eyes with a shake of her head.

“You do, but you’re scared.” She stood up from her seat. “Now, let’s get going because we have a meeting at Calder Place, and I need you to review the artwork that’s installed. It’s not the original one you signed off on, but I think you’ll like it.”

I sighed and grabbed my bag, my phone buzzing in my palm.

*Hope you like the flowers. We love and miss you so much.
Have the best day <3.*

It was from Jesse but meant from all of them. I tossed my phone into my bag with a scowl, frustrated at the wave of butterflies that swept through me. I followed Lara downstairs and into the waiting car. Jonah nodded at us from the front seat, his eyes dulling as Lara avoided his gaze. It would take time for her to work out her relationship dramas as well. The smile I gave him was tight, lost in my thoughts. I didn't like to think of myself as scared, but it was true. I was terrified of being hurt. Now I flirted with the edge of a decision, letting my stomach swoop before I skittered away.

Loving is risking. So, was I ready to take a risk?

We pulled up at Calder Place Community Center, and I felt a strange mix of pride and sadness. It was coming together amazingly. The community center's roof swooped in an elegant line and the windows showed a basketball court that I knew would be an instant favorite. This space was a boon for the community. But I felt conflicted. A heavy lump floated in my stomach. It used to look like an overgrown dump. But I'd met my three soul mates in that mess. The only people who had been able to touch me so deeply. Loss whipped through me, a hollow wind tunnel. I'd destroyed this special place.

"It should be ready within a few weeks. Come around and look at the sculpture," Lara explained.

I shook off my regrets and followed her around the side, my mouth dropping open at what I saw. In the place where our tree used to stand, there was a huge metal structure. In the shape of a tree. The branches twined upwards. They were bare, like it was winter. Around the base was greenery and the beginnings of vines creeping up the trunk.

"Oh, it's lovely," I choked out, hurrying toward it.

"The plants will grow all the way up, so it'll hopefully be entirely green. Do you like it?"

I palmed the trunk, admiring the way it emulated the texture of bark. Then I froze. Inside the tree was a cutout, covered by glass. There was a metal plaque on the inside, lit by a tasteful light.

In memory of Antoni

Always loved, never forgotten.

“This is beautiful.” I reached out and hovered my fingers near the glass. I had buried my father at the greenhouse, beside my mom. But this was special. A reminder that out of loss, something beautiful can grow. I wasn’t there yet. I still missed my phone ringing for his checkup, his barely concealed frustration as he muttered under his breath. His embrace. The sharp edge of grief sliced through me deeply. But the generous love of my guys blunted it. They insisted on keeping me busy, knowing instinctively that I shouldn’t be left alone with the weight of my despair for too long.

“That’s not all.” Lara smiled softly, tugging at my elbow to show me the other side. There was a similar glass cutout, only this one housed the wooden slab with our initials that Briar had kept in his room. Mounted like it was part of the tree. I couldn’t stop myself from plastering my hands on the glass this time.

“H-how?” I looked at Lara through watery eyes. She wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Your guys came to me with an idea and I’m sorry. I couldn’t say no. If you want it gone, I will organize to have it torn down. Just say the word,” Lara explained. I pulled her into a quick side hug.

“No, I love it.” I stared at it, biting my lip so the pain would distract me from the rush of emotions coursing through me. There were three matching inhales, and I turned to see Briar, Logan, and Jesse standing behind us. My heart ached at the sight of them, as if I hadn’t been in their presence just hours before. Emotion rushed through my veins, heady and dizzying.

“You love it?” Briar asked, his eyes glowing. Lara leaned into me and whispered.

“This is your chance to grow something new, better than before. Be brave.”

As she twisted away, I pinched her hip. Wise and knowing Lara was a pain in my ass. She told too many truths I didn’t

want to hear. But I was grateful to have a friend to call me out on my shit. She was right. I had to decide now. This constant state of limbo wasn't fair on any of us. And to be honest, it was fear holding me back. It clung to my insides, weighing me down.

Adelaide Orazio wasn't going to be conquered by fear. My shoulders slid back as I looked at my guys.

"I love it, just like I love you." I rested my hand on the trunk, looking at the engraving with a rueful smile. "This sculpture is just like we are. It's different, past, and present, wrapped in one. It's the future, with room for growth and life." I fingered the plants that were twining around the base.

"What are you saying, siren?" Logan breathed, hope flickering like candlelight in his eyes.

"I want a future with you. A new start. And I want a big, sparkly rock." I couldn't help the stupid grin that exploded over my face. An enormous weight melted off my shoulders. I didn't wait for them to say they wanted this. They had always been waiting for me. I folded myself into Logan's arms and pulled his shell-shocked face down to me, kissing him deeply. His arms convulsed around my waist, and he made a keening sound, burying his head in my neck.

"Am I dreaming right now?" he whispered fiercely. I pulled back, fighting against his tightening arms.

"I can't give you up. Seeing the gun pointed at you destroyed me. I can't fight it anymore. But things must change. We weren't honest with each other. We were holding on to insecurities and it tore us apart."

Logan framed my face with his giant hands and looked at me with adoration. Warmth trickled through me at the press of his body against mine.

"I will continue doing the work, siren. I'm never losing you again."

"Not even to see the world?" Just once more, I asked.

"There is no place in the world that can rival the universe I see in your eyes," he whispered, and I melted. Jesse snaked his

arm around me and pulled me away from Logan. He didn't give me a chance to speak before his lips descended on mine. Flames followed the path of his tongue, scorching heat raced through me. Burning away all the remnants of pain I felt. Tears hovered on my lash line, but I blinked them away. I could feel the force of emotion, the strength of his love as he poured it into me.

"Thank you for giving us this chance, princess." He leaned his forehead against mine.

"I still can't give you a family," I whispered. His lashes fluttered, tickling my skin.

"I love you just as you are, Adelaide, I always have. Not for what you can give me. We are family enough."

My heart squeezed at his words, the honesty shining in his eyes. He let me go, pushing me toward Briar, who looked at me with such longing that I couldn't breathe. His arms encircled me tentatively, and he made no move to kiss me.

"I'm not letting you go," I whispered, stubbornly. "You know that, right?"

"I fell in love with you right here when I cleaned your hands. There was nothing I wouldn't do for you. Atoning for my mistakes hasn't finished. I'm ashamed by how much pain I caused you. I understand if those are too much to forgive." Briar ducked his head. I leaned against him, taking a moment to lull in his arms. My lungs were tight, but only because I needed him closer. All of them. I wanted to tuck them into my body. Share one heart.

"I understand better now what drove you all to the decisions you made. All I want is a promise that we are going to work on our foundations, make it strong enough that no-one can shake us again," I replied. At my guy's urging, I had booked an appointment with a therapist soon after the confrontation with Harold. It had been uncomfortable at first. Peeling back inner layers always were. But underneath, there was a certainty, one that needed nurturing and care. But what never dimmed was my love for them.

“I’ll never stop earning your forgiveness, Adelaide,” Briar promised. His breath was a hot puff on my cheek.

“Kiss me,” I urged him, and his lips met mine tenderly. My chest was bursting with an overwhelming sense of hope and relief. Briar’s kiss was a seal to his promise. I could taste the sincerity and the desperate need with each press of his tongue against mine. I pulled away, turning to look at our tree. My hands snaked out, seeking Logan and Jesse. They latched on immediately, their bulk pressing into my side. Everything else faded away as I followed the line of the tree, spinning into the sky.

This love had been hard fought.

It had transformed, forced to change through unimaginable pain. We were different people now. Like this tree sculpture. Made anew. Now we had to focus on growing the roots deep, of committing and flourishing.

We had flushed the poison out before it had destroyed us all. But I knew what was in my heart and theirs. Love without secrets, without sacrifices.

Love was risking.

Hurting. Healing. Hoping.

Here.

Six Months Later

Calder Gym was a sleek, silver beast. It was hard to note the scent of fresh equipment with all the people pressed in. I cast a look up at Logan, who was on the upper level, his camera plastered to his face. Up high, it separated him from the crush of people, plus it gave him the best view for photos. Behind him Jesse's office and Briar's were pressed together, walls of glass looking out over the dream they had built together.

"I couldn't be more excited about opening Calder Gym, and I can't wait to get some training sessions in." Augie Black flashed a wide smile, posing with Jesse and Briar in the middle of the boxing ring. The rising boxing star had been more than interested in investing in an elite gym. He had been intrigued when Harold talked about it initially. But after he read the boys' proposed plan, he was impressed and keen to support Greenwich Bay locals.

They'd accepted investment from me and Ray to help get it set up. Because there was nothing emasculating about accepting an investment, it didn't make them look weak in my eyes, and that was all that mattered. We'd lost too much time because of false beliefs attached to self-worth. We wouldn't waste anymore.

"Thank you so much to everyone for coming and supporting the opening of Calder Gym. Five percent of all profits will go

toward Fostering Futures, a program that supports foster children and helps to set them up for success.” Jesse signed off.

Augie Black leaned into the microphone.

“I’m also going to donate ten thousand dollars to Fostering Futures.” I let out an excited cheer, looking at the wide-eyed teens next to me.

“Ten thousand dollars.” Their twin wide eyes gleamed, and I smiled indulgently. “Aunty Addy, that’s so much.”

Jesse’s sisters, Tara and Kelly covered their mouths and giggled. Their mother, Samantha, squeezed their shoulders in light admonishment.

“I’m so sorry.” She shook her head, an apology ready always when it came to Jesse’s exuberant sisters. I led them out of the crowd and up the stairs where Logan was leaning on the barrier.

“The view is better up here,” I explained. Samantha and her girls gave Logan a wave but made no move to touch him. His eyes crinkled with soft warmth as he looked the family over.

“Danny is parking the car,” Samantha mused, staring down at her son with unveiled pride. I had helped Jesse draft a letter back to his mother and had been with him every step of the way as they built their relationship. It wasn’t easy, she and his stepdad had been openly confused when Jesse blithely explained his fiancé was engaged to his best friends as well. He looked up from the stage, searching the crowd before finding us. Relief softened his features, chased by a blinding smile. I blew a kiss, sharing his joy.

His family were here, supporting him. Jesse had found everything that he longed for and we had all gained a family. I tickled my fingers over the back of Tara’s neck, and she let out a screech of laughter.

“I love the photos you took for the gym, Logan,” Samantha praised, staring at the space appreciatively. Seeing his work blown up and hung around the space had made Logan flush with pleasure. His lips ticked up at the compliment, but he bit

his tongue on the denial I knew was there. I pinched his waist with a knowing look.

“Thank you, I love how they’ve turned out.” He pressed a kiss on the top of my head. I melted into his side, and he tucked the camera away in favor of wrapping me in his arms.

“You’re heading interstate next week, for another marketing shoot Jesse was telling me? Does traveling ever get tiring?” Samantha asked. Logan looked down at me, a smile cutting through his thick beard. My stomach swooped and swirled at the depth of emotion in his eyes. Crystal blue sapphires, precious gems carved just for me.

“There is nothing better than coming home to my family.”

I luxuriated in the feel of his solid chest against my back. The opening of the gym flew by, until there was only us left. Jonah paused by the door, and I waved him off.

“Don’t worry,” Jesse quipped, cracking his knuckles. “We can protect her now.”

I slapped my palm on his chest, soft and playful with a light scowl.

“I don’t need someone to look after me.” Jesse pulled me into his lap and pressed an ardent kiss to my throat. Jonah wisely fled as Logan locked the door after him. Briar leaned against the ropes of the boxing ring; arms banded over his lean chest.

“You need looking after, in fact, you’re quite filthy. We ought to clean you up.” His eyebrow inched up, arresting my lungs with the insinuation. “Don’t you think so?” He looked at Jesse and Logan, smirking at their fervent nods.

“Such a dirty girl,” Jesse breathed, licking down the column of my neck. “You taste like sin.”

In one swift movement Jesse was on his feet, with me cradled in his arms. His fingers kneaded into my skin, as he moaned into the nook of my neck. Briar strode ahead, clearly having thought this out. I was panting already, more than eager to be looked after. Logan pressed a kiss to the side of my head

as he walked beside me, excitement glinting in his eyes. Jesse took me deep into the change rooms and into the shower area.

“We haven’t christened the showers.” Briar waved at the white, tiled area. He unraveled the shower nozzle, bouncing on his toes. “Why do you think I insisted we put these in?” He jiggled the showerhead. Jesse groaned, putting me down and pushing me toward Briar, but not before a generous grope of my ass.

“You want me to take this off?” I fingered the buttons of my dress. They hissed as I flicked open two, pausing for more instructions. Briar bit his bottom lip, pleased with my submission. He flicked the water on, testing it, with a smile I didn’t trust.

“Take off your bra but keep the dress on.” He nudged me against the cool tiles and turned the spray on. But it wasn’t warm like I expected. Frigid cold water turned blood to ice in my veins and I squealed, turning my face to the wall. The shock of it had me shaking.

“That’s fucking cold,” I complained, gasping as the dress clung to my shivering body. Goosebumps sprung over me as I wrapped my arms around myself. Jesse and Logan hooted, eager to see how this would go.

“Turn around. Let me see how hard your nipples are,” Briar coaxed, uncaring of the icy water spray still soaking me. I turned with narrowed eyes, dropping my arms reluctantly. He stepped closer, pupils dilating at the wet dress plastered to the round swell of my breasts. My nipples poked through the thin material, tingling and hard. Briar passed the freezing water over my soft flesh once more, groaning softly as I heaved a shocked exhale.

“You look so fucking beautiful.” His compliment warmed me under the steady stream of cold water. My teeth chattered, and he clicked his tongue, stepping forward to change the temperature. He hooked the shower head back up and asked me to clean myself. I stripped the dress off and lathered my body with the available body wash. Their gazes touched me with more heat than my own fingers did. The caress of their

eyes as they followed my trailing, teasing hands made my pussy pulse. Jesse folded first, shucking his pants down and fisting his curved cock. Logan asked me silently for permission, ever the good boy. When I gave him the nod, his pants fell to his ankles immediately. Briar palmed the sizeable bulge in his pants, content to watch.

“Get on your knees, let me fuck those pretty tits,” Briar breathed, changing his mind and shedding his clothes. Warm water sprayed down my back as he sat in front of me. I leaned over, letting my hard nipples graze his skin. Briar looked half feral with waiting, his incredible length straining toward his stomach. I pressed his heated flesh between the soft skin of my breasts and moved over him. We slid together like silk, sweet luxury. Every decadent slide sent a fizzle of pleasure down my spine. Watching Briar fall apart in front of me made me move faster, craving the way his face scrunched with waves of desire.

“God, me next,” Jesse pleaded, and I sent him a wink.

“Gonna paint you in my cum, f-fuck.” Briar’s fingers dug into my shoulder as a spurt of cum splattered over my chest. His eyes glowed with lust that darkened as I stepped back into the water, washing it off with a grin.

“Now I’m all clean again. Who’s going to mess me up next?”

Jesse leapt up, tripping on his pants in his haste. Logan tore his shirt off, naked in seconds. I shared a look with Briar.

“Both?” I offered and chuckled as their knees buckled.

“I want your ass.” Jesse plastered himself to my back, squeezing my large, dimpled cheeks. Logan pressed in front of me, his hands wrapping around my thighs.

“Are you ready, siren?” He brushed the question along my lips. He hoisted me up, clamping my slick, fevered body to his as he angled his cock at my entrance. His mushroom head pushed inside of me easily, welcomed by my eager heat. He pressed his head into my chest, cursing as I took him to the hilt. Logan hooked his arms around my thighs as he hinged his

hips upwards. Dizzying pleasure cascaded through me, the precarious angle adding to the sensation. Jesse provided support, his fingers working a cool liquid around my other hole.

“You bought lube?” I gasped as Logan hit the perfect spot inside of me. Jesse grinned against my shoulder, nipping me for my shocked tone. His fingers stretched inside my hole, readying me.

“Princess, I always come prepared. Besides, we are celebrating,” he grunted, swirling his cock against me. I wrapped my arms around Logan’s neck, moaning into his mouth as Jesse sought entry. The heat of his skin was blistering as his cock carved a molten path inside me. I gasped, wordless, all of us frozen except for Jesse’s slow inch forward.

“Our perfect little love,” Briar commented from the side.

Logan palmed my breasts, and Jesse kneaded my ass. I was limp between them, overwhelmed by the cascade of sensation. Jesse thrust softly, and I gasped at the drag of him and Logan in my thin inner walls.

“Drown me, siren,” Logan whispered, holding me so tight. I swam in the clear blue of his eyes, chasing the thrumming desire that coursed between us all. We were a live wire, every touch building toward an explosion. Logan and Jesse fucked me between their hard bodies, cradling my softness. I tossed my head back to rest on Jesse’s shoulder, nails digging into Logan. Black stars dotted my vision as I let them use me.

Jesse’s hand snuck in between my body and circled my clit. His hungry touch had me crying out. We shot off the cliff together, a chorus of groans. My walls clenched around Logan, claiming every drop. Jesse twitched as his load filled my ass. Somehow, they got me to the ground before sprawling down beside me with shaky legs. Briar looked on in amusement, his cock half hard between his legs.

“Want to break in my office chair?”

Six (More) Months Later

“Say hi to Mama,” Lara cooed, angling my little angel toward the screen.

“Hi baby, I hope you’re being the best boy for Aunty Lara.” I blew kisses.

Toby, our Irish Wolfhound puppy, was lolling in Lara’s arms. He was much too big already, but Lara couldn’t help but baby him. I couldn’t resist his adorable face. The added intimidation of having an enormous dog at my feet when he grew up wasn’t a bad deterrent, either. Jesse rested his chin on my shoulder and made kissy noises.

“We love you buddy, can’t wait to see you,” he added, saccharine. Lara grimaced.

“Ok, this is weird. I’m going before I gag. Enjoy your holiday.” She waggled Toby’s paw at us.

“Can you tell Raimondo to stop dodging my calls?” I adjusted my bikini, slapping Jesse’s hand when he tugged the string tied around my neck. Lara’s eyes widened and darted behind the screen and back.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Lara’s lips tilted in an approximation of a smile.

I narrowed my eyes at her, about to launch into all the ways I knew she was hiding something, but Logan ducked in behind me, waving his hand at the screen. She hadn’t made it official

with Ray, Jonah or Beck. Something seemed to be holding her back, but it didn't stop them from pining for her.

"Bye Toby. Bye Lara." He closed the laptop and pulled me out of Jesse's lap. Jesse just laughed, telling us he was going to shower before Briar got back.

"Why'd you do that?" I pouted, but I allowed his lower hand to drift down my back. He led us over to the balcony of our suite. Positano was perfection. I drank in the view of the pristine blue water and the pulse of the sun against my tanned skin.

"She'll tell you what she's doing with her love life when she's ready," Logan chastised me, a tender admonishment. "Whatever and whoever she is with is her private life."

I leaned against the rail, untying the sarong around my bottom half and letting it fall to the ground.

"I'll give her a few more months, but Ray and Jonah are both distracted messes at work. I caught the end of a phone call the other day and someone was praising her ability to suck him off." Logan pressed his tall body against mine as I huffed. Over the last year, Ray and I had worked together well, and I'd made him my right-hand man. Along with Jonah. I trusted him, and I hoped my best friends could work it out. She was skittish, and I understood. It was hard enough juggling one man, let alone three.

"Don't talk about blowing other guys siren, I might get excited." His breath tickled my ear as he nibbled the soft skin. I wrapped my arms around him, plastering my body against his. His cock pressed against me, half hard already. Now this was a distraction I would accept every time. He nudged my head and captured my lips, fingers traveling over my curves.

"Have you been a good boy for me?" I asked with a coy twist to my lips. His eyes flashed molten, and his head bobbed. I felt his fingers tremble on my hips.

"Do you want to come?" I didn't touch him, only myself. Running my hands down my body, goosebumps sprang in their wake.

“Yes, master,” he breathed.

I hadn't let Logan come for three days. I'd touched, kissed and even sucked him almost to completion. He'd been so good for me. I played with the tie of my bikini bottoms, teasing it.

“Sit on the chair and don't move. Don't touch me either,” I instructed, my pussy fluttering as he rushed to sit. “Pull your shorts down.”

He yanked them down to pool at his feet, locking his hands behind his back. Logan's cock strained upwards, and I was tempted to suck him again, but I didn't think he would last. He'd let his blonde beard grow out while we were away, and he looked like a man I'd dragged in off the mountains. I pulled my bottoms to the side and sunk down. My walls clenched around him. His head made a thunking sound as it hit the back of the chair. My thighs burned as I pulsed up and down on him. His tortured expression made me wetter. But I refused to give him what he wanted. How I loved to toy with him. He didn't move though, just jammed his eyes shut and moaned.

“You're doing so good. Do you like it when I use you?” I breathed a satisfied sigh as I ground my clit against his hips. He let out a string of expletives.

“Siren. Please,” Logan panted. I rolled my hips once, letting him feel me, hot and deep, before pulling off. I tossed my ass back as I bounced on his straining tip.

“I'm so wet and it's all your fault.” I smirked. He was so close to breaking. But then I saw Briar's dark mop ducking through the front door. I yanked up Logan's shorts and rearranged myself. Logan let out an agonizing groan, and I swallowed it with a hungry kiss.

“Don't worry, I'll let you come later,” I promised. Perspiration dotted his forehead as he gave me a glazed eyed look.

“Cool it, lovebirds. Come get this before it melts,” Briar called out, and we pulled apart reluctantly.

“Fuck, your body is going to kill me one day, siren.” Logan looked like he'd rather throw me over his shoulder. Eat me for

his dessert, rather than the gelato Briar was balancing. He kicked the door shut and wandered over. There was a gelato shop a five-minute walk away from our Airbnb and it had the best peach gelato I'd ever tasted. Briar insisted on getting me one every afternoon. He sent me a beaming smile. Therapy had helped him cut loose the shackles of his past. Now that the truth was out, and he admitted to himself what he'd endured, he could heal. There were still bad days. For all of us. But much fewer than before. My intrusive thoughts were rare, and when I had them, my guys were there to help me get through it. Logan snatched up his pistachio gelato and pressed a lingering kiss to my head.

"To be continued," he promised. I just stared as I took a long lick of the cone. My tongue traveled glacial up the waffle exterior. Logan cursed under his breath, wandering away and adjusting his package. I gave Briar a cheeky smile, and he just shook his head, used to my antics. Logan was so easy to tease, and he could never resist me, especially not when I was wrapped up in skimpy bikinis.

"So. Damn. Good." I moaned, pressing Briar into the chair and folding myself into his lap. "Thank you." I pressed a peach-flavored kiss to his lips.

"My pleasure. I made a mess, though." He held up his hand, sticky with gelato. He tossed his curls out of his face with twinkling eyes.

"Oh, no." I batted my lashes. "Whatever could we do about that?" I whispered, leaning forward and running my tongue down his skin, collecting the gelato there.

"God, no," Logan blurted out, pushing off the balcony. "You're a tease." He looked at my tongue with longing. Jesse padded out, barefoot and naked, except for a towel slung around his waist. I drank in the sight of his dark sculpted chest.

"What's got into him?" He hiked his thumb at Logan, and I just shrugged, continuing to lap at Briar's hand until it was clean. He'd grown steadily harder underneath me and I

wriggled, not content to tease just one of my husbands into madness.

“Oh, now I get it.” Jesse snatched up his cold smoothie and sank into the chair opposite us. I wouldn’t ever fall pregnant, but Jesse and I very much enjoyed trying. Greenwich Bay was my baby and when I needed snuggles, I had Toby. Jesse’s continual devotion soothed my fear about him wanting children. There was something about the thought of getting me pregnant that set him off in the bedroom.

“It’s melting quick today,” Briar laughed. His fingers dropped to the inside of my thighs and pried my legs open. He teased the seam of my bikini, smiling as my breath hitched. I continued to eat my gelato while he ran his fingers up and down, languid. Logan watched on with a feverous heat. Now I knew how he felt. Briar’s elegant fingers stroked at me, absentmindedly, while he enjoyed his gelato. Need coiled in me, a fire stoked and humming.

This trip had felt like one long orgy, but I always wanted more. It was hard to remember a time when we weren’t on each other constantly. Midday quickies had turned into afternoon sessions. Until Logan had booked this trip and insisted, we get away.

A belated honeymoon. The ring on my finger caught the bright light, luminescent under the blaring sun. We’d spoken soft vows in front of our tree. There was no ceremony, or piece of paper to record this marriage. I’d etched them on my soul the day we carved our initials into the tree. They were my husbands, in the only place that mattered.

My heart.

We traveled often now, and it was as wonderful as Logan had envisioned. He was working with his mentor, Chris, and often traveled with him on photography assignments. But it was the travel we did together that he truly loved. The four of us together, exploring unknown places and enjoying each other. My heart had never been so full.

“I love you, Adelaide.” Briar’s teeth scraped my neck. I shuddered on his lap, trying to move my hips so he would

brush his fingers where I craved them.

“I love you too.” As he pulled his fingers away, I moaned. He shrugged under my glare, eyes dancing.

“You can’t get upset. You tease us all the time, case in point.” He waved a hand at Logan’s straining shorts. I huffed in annoyance, but I couldn’t argue, which was why I stood and undid my bikini top, tossing it to the side. Their eyes heated, but I draped myself across the sun lounge instead. My fingers dipped underneath my bikini bottoms. Well, what did they expect? The sun on my bare breasts was decadent, but not as sizzling as commanding their attention.

“You’re asking for it,” Jesse warned, dropping his drink on the table. The ice jostled inside of it.

“For what?” I drawled as they all stalked over. Their shadows loomed over me. I palmed my breasts with one hand while my fingers worked under my bikini. My fingers slid easily around my wet clit, making my toes curl.

“You want to drive your men wild?” Jesse’s hands landed on his hips. I leapt up and raced toward the door with a giggle. But a muscular arm banded around me, and he lifted me up, carting me through the door.

“Of course, she does. Been teasing me all morning,” Logan complained, but I could hear the smile in his voice as he carried me to the bedroom. Jesse tossed me on the ruffled bed. They filtered into the room like wolves, and heat built between my legs with anticipation.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way.” Briar looked at me with adoration.

Neither would I.

And as my guys converged on me, ready to punish me for my teasing, I was consumed with thankfulness. Our love was worth every risk.

“Not you,” I told Logan as he put his knee on the bed. I waved him back into the armchair in the corner. “You’re going to sit right here and watch.” I pulled his shorts down and wrapped my hand around his stiff cock.

“As long as that’s ok?” I whispered.

“Yes, master.” He gulped. My finger swiped through the beading cum on the end of his cock, and I sucked on it with relish.

“I love the way you taste.” I leaned forward and fused my lips to his. “Now I want you to fuck your hand. Make a big mess for me. I want you to come so hard you hate yourself, understand?”

Logan fisted his cock, teeth clamping down on his bottom lip. Jesse pushed my top half on the bed and unraveled my bikini bottoms. He tossed the flimsy material to the side and spread me for Logan’s perusal.

“Look at our girl’s perfect pussy.” Briar joined him on the other side and they both widened me. Stretching me with a delicious sting. Jesse dipped one finger inside with a soft moan.

“Goddamn princess.” He added a finger and thrust it in languidly. “Someone is excited.”

I pushed my ass up in the air, wiggling it a little. I knew what would happen and Briar didn’t disappoint. His hand landed on my ass, a delicious warmth spreading out from the initial sting.

“Don’t be greedy. You’ll get what you want when we’re ready to give it to you.” The authority in his voice made me shiver. Logan muttered curses in the corner. We were getting Briar the boss today. The metallic slap of his belt being wrenched out made me suck in my breath. Beneath the quiet, sweet facade lurked a sharp tongued, demanding man. I might be Logan’s master, but he was mine. Jesse’s fingers reached places inside of me I needed. But it wasn’t enough. I chanced a slight rock, just a buck of my hips, to encourage him. But Briar didn’t miss it, letting out a sharp click of his tongue.

“What did I tell you? Jesse, stop what you’re doing. Adelaide needs a reminder.” Jesse pulled away, and I whimpered, turning around to glare at them both. Jesse sucked on his fingers with a smirk. He loved watching Briar work me

over, happy to play assistant. Logan had slowed his strokes, pole straining and leaking cum. The head of his cock was engorged and red as it peeked through the desperate clasp of his fist. Briar wrapped his fingers around my chin and wrenched my head toward him.

“Eyes on me,” he growled. “I’m disappointed. I told you to wait. Now you’ll have to be satisfied being my little fuck toy.”

His zipper was a roar in the room, and he crept it over his bulge. I bit my tongue, frustration channeling into the heat between my legs. I parted my thighs for him to press between them, his cock waving in my face. The length of it frightened me when I first saw it, and its thickness was still a challenge to take. Having more than one husband was a blessing, Jesse and Logan stretched me out and filled me with their cum. Enough that I could take Briar. But he wasn’t going to fuck me on his giant dick. He tapped it on my plump lower lip, raising his eyebrow. He was going to choke me on it.

“Swallow his cock, princess,” Jesse moaned, wrapping his hand around my hair and guiding my gaping mouth over the flushed head. The corners of my mouth stung as I tried to take as much as I could. I undulated my tongue. The most I could do with him filling every available space in my mouth. Briar didn’t stop until he hit the back of my throat, even then he held me as I spluttered. My vision blurred with sudden tears, and I sucked gallops of air through my nostrils. Jesse’s grip on my hair tightened, adding a sting to the overwhelming sensation of suffocation. Panic rose in my chest, chased by excitement. My nipples were already hard when Briar reached down to pinch them.

“My perfect, pretty love. I enjoy seeing you cry over my cock.” Briar jerked his hips forward, forcing more of his hard flesh into my mouth. His lips tilted with a cruel, dark promise. His thumb brushed against my cheek, catching the desperate tears that had broken free of my lash line.

“Jesus,” Jesse whistled, drawing out the word in ecstasy. I locked eyes with Logan, throat convulsing with the intrusion that wouldn’t relent. His fist flew over his cock, and he choked on gasping pants. I was under Briar’s control, but he was

under mine. It was a beautiful, twisted circle. Jesse just lapped up every angle with another moan. Briar caught my face in his hands and slammed until tears streamed down my face.

“Keep those eyes on me, I said. Show me how well you can take orders.”

I rolled my tongue around his head when he pulled back, hollowing my cheeks. Taking all of him was impossible, but I lifted my hands and twisted them around his thick base. The haughty dominance cracked for a moment, and he let out a satisfying groan before knocking my hands away. He pulled his cock from my mouth, and I whined, working my sore jaw.

“I see we are determined to be a bad girl today. I want your filthy mouth only. Jesse? Do you think you can help me teach our girl a lesson?” My heart fluttered in my chest as they urged me onto all fours, facing Logan in his chair. Jesse settled behind me, his hands devouring my ass cheeks.

“I’m going to eat the fuck out of your pussy, princess.” His eager breath panted against my tender, aroused skin. Jesse’s tongue was exuberant as it explored, drawing out noises of pleasure with each swipe of his tongue. It dipped into my hot channel, wet and probing but not the hardness like I was craving. Briar stood in front of me, his hand jerking himself with control. His expression was stern as he inched forward, angling his cock toward my mouth.

“Let’s try this again. Choke on my cock like a good girl and I’ll let you come.”

I opened my mouth, sticking out my tongue. It was bratty, but he let it slide. I trembled between two polarizing sensations. Hard, unrelenting thickness immobilized my mouth, while Jesse’s soft, wet tongue ran over every quivering inch of skin. This time I didn’t move. I let Briar control my body, nudging more tears from my eyes. My throat and jaw ached, but there was something freeing about it. Being in the hands of someone else. I kept my gaze locked on my owner. His quiet grunts my reward for being so malleable. Jesse kneaded my fat ass, rolling the plump flesh in his hands as he muttered incoherent praise against my pussy. Each lick of his

tongue added to the building tension in my body. My thighs quivered with unlocked energy, tingling right to my toes. I let my moans vibrate over Briar's monster cock, unable to stop myself. He was rocking steadily now, hands tangled in the light strands of my hair.

"So cock hungry, aren't you, Adelaide? Yeah-h-h just like that," Briar stuttered a little. My skull ached as he twisted my hair in his fist. Jesse groaned against me, fingers wrapping around my thighs so he could get closer. How he was even breathing I didn't know, but if he stopped right now, I would riot. His tongue flattened on my clit, and I gave a muffled cry. I slammed my eyes shut as they swept me over the cliff of a sharp orgasm. It exploded through my body, and I heard Logan cry out with me. Briar eased his hard cock from my mouth, grasping my chin as I sagged onto the bed. Jesse was grinding against me now.

"Fuck, you've got me all worked up." His voice was guttural. I tossed a coy look over my shoulder.

"Hold that thought." I needed to deal with Logan first. His legs were splayed wide, glistening with ropes of milky cum. I swayed my hips as I approached, gratified by the way his eyes dropped to my heavy tits. He was breathing hard, his hand frozen around his softening cock.

"I thought you wanted to come?" I sneered in his ear, wrapping my hand around his fist and forcing him to move it up and down his hard length.

"Yes, I did, master."

"Then you'll keep touching yourself while I fuck my other men. Don't stop, do you understand? I want you covered in cum."

He gulped. "Yes."

I collected some of his cum and smeared it over my tongue before leaning over him.

"Be a good boy for me and swallow." Logan's pupils dilated as I leaned in and kissed him. His taste between our tongues felt illicit. A secret that only he and I shared. For a moment, it

was only us, indulging in our bottomless hunger. He gave, and I took. Greedy and domineering. I nipped his lip, pulling back with a smile. “You are so fucking handsome right now.”

A light dusting of red filled his cheeks, and I swung my juicy ass as I crawled back on the bed. Jesse had stripped out of his clothes and was strangling his cock with a firm grip.

“God, you’re sexy, princess,” he whispered as I pressed my tits together and spread my knees wide. My body was still tingling from the orgasm he gave me. Briar slouched into the other armchair, waving a hand at me. He wanted a show. His hands traveled down his cock in direct opposite to Logan’s desperate jerks. It was sensual and controlled.

“Let’s give them something to get excited about,” Jesse whispered in my ear, launching up to scrape his teeth over my shoulder. I shuddered, leaning back as his hands captured my tits, massaging and tugging. He lay back down and quirked an eyebrow. I shared a wide smile with him. He was my sunshine, my joy. I backed myself between his legs, facing away from him, before notching his straining length at my hot opening. I hooked my legs under his, sinking down with a sigh. Jesse had the perfect view of my ass, and I propelled it back, making it jiggle. His cock arched inside of me, and my voracious pussy clutched onto him. I leaned forward, my breasts jostling with the movement. My body has curves, all over. There was nowhere that didn’t move when I was being fucked. It hypnotized my men, Logan scrunching his eyes closed as he came again, spurting a smaller amount of fresh cum for his collection.

“Keep going,” I urged him, and Logan obliged, wincing through the hypersensitivity. Jesse’s fingers clutched at my upper thighs, digging into the skin.

“You’re fucking me so good. Perfect ass, perfect – uh-hh.” Jesse’s stream of compliments cut off when I ground down on him. Briar was stroking himself faster now, cum beading at the tip of his head. He quirked an eyebrow.

“Do you want this cum inside you? Or should I paint myself into an artwork like Logan?”

My walls clenched around Jesse, and he let out a bellowing groan.

“Oh fuck, I felt that. She wants it bad.” He couldn’t take my teasing bounces anymore, leveraging his hips up to snap against me. Burying himself to the hilt inside of me over and over. Heat rolled over and through me as his cock grazed against the perfect spot inside of me.

“Keep going -uh- right there,” I cried out as his powerful thrusts made me melt. I grabbed my breasts to stop them from jostling.

“Don’t,” came Briar’s sharp hiss and I let them go, let him and Logan drink me in. I dropped my head down, each pound of Jesse’s hips pushing me closer to another release. My pussy was fluttering around him, encouraging his brutal movements.

“Give it to me,” I groaned. His fingers slipped on my thighs, sweat making us glisten. Pushed to the limit as we searched for ecstasy together. His body and mine entwined and gloried under the jealous eyes of Briar and Logan. Jesse’s hips stuttered on a roar and his cum spurted inside me, warm and welcome. He didn’t stop moving, though, faltering once before stroking fiercely again.

“Come for me, princess. I want to feel you,” he begged, and it was so beautiful. So honest. His raw tone took me there, my pussy clutching around him like he wanted. I rocked my hips through the tiny shudders that cascaded out, chest heaving. Jesse eased himself out from underneath me, arms pulling me onto his glistening chest. We burned together; our lips meeting was sumptuous. I panted into his mouth, giddy. Jesse brushed my damp hair away from my face.

“I love you,” he whispered, dropping a kiss on my nose. A tender footnote. My heart warmed in my chest.

“I love you so much,” I replied. Fingers wrapped around my ankle, and I felt myself slide backwards.

“Did you think we were done?” Briar curled his lip when I looked back in amusement. Jesse stifled a bark of laughter, throwing his shorts on. There was no sound from Logan

except the slow, rhythmic stroke of his hand. I tossed my head back with a cheeky grin.

“See something you want?”

His answer was a hard slap on my ass cheek. When I didn't give Briar what he wanted, the flat of his palm landed on the other side. My skin blossomed red, a tempting warning. One Briar didn't heed. He was too busy hitching me to my knees and pushing my upper half onto the bed. His hot flesh hard against me.

“Yes,” he groaned, angling the head of his cock through my dripping pussy. “I want this.”

I groaned as he inched forward, his thick cock stretching me. Even after Jesse had fucked me full of his cum, it was still uncomfortable. No pain, just an overwhelming fullness that choked the air from my lungs. I groaned.

“That's my eager girl,” Briar praised, pulling my cheeks wide to give himself more room. The slow slide of him inside of me was decadent. My need for him was sweet on the back of my tongue. Briar owned me, wholly and completely. He pinned me beneath an insistent weight.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered, and I snaked my hand underneath, rolling my fingers around my swollen clit. “That's it, so good for me.” His silky voice praised. The praise set off waves of warmth inside of me. His hand splayed on my lower back, pressing me down.

“I love how you fuck me,” I admitted, breathy. Briar replied with a surprised laugh and a growl. His hips snapped forward, stuffing more of his cock inside my pussy.

“I haven't even started yet. But I know you like it when I fill your hot, needy pussy. Say thank you, Briar, for giving it to you so well.”

He dragged his length back, scrambling my thoughts. He jerked his hips forward again, making me gasp. “Say it, Adelaide,” he ordered, but he leaned forward, his lips tender as they brushed against my back. My heart leapt in my throat.

There was so much to be thankful for, not just his enormous dick scrambling my insides.

“Thank you, Briar.” I hoped he heard it, the emotion I knew was threaded through the words. We had been through hellfire and back. Every part of us scorched and burnt. Until our love rose like a phoenix, unmarred by the past. I turned my head and gazed at Briar, letting our love shine like a mirror in my eyes. His lips softened and his hips rocked, making love. His fingers coasted over my ass, as if memorizing every inch. But he already knew it. I would know Briar anywhere. The feel of him, of each of my guys, was like my own shadow. *I love you*, I mouthed to him, and he winked.

“My heart is yours,” he replied.

Then he slammed me into the mattress, more like a man who hated me than loved me.

“I know you love my cum, my little love. Don’t worry. I’ve been saving this load for you.”

The sound of his hips slapping against mine filled the room, and I traded moans for his passionate grunts. My fingers circled my clit wildly now. I didn’t think I had another release in me, but it took me by surprise. Briar dragged his cock in and out and I gasped open mouthed on the bed. Trembling as pleasure swept through me.

“God, you’re everything,” Briar groaned, hips shattering against me until he came with a shout. His cum dripped from me as he pulled out, pressing another soft kiss on my ass. I slid off the bed and crawled toward Logan, my legs jelly. He was still jerking himself. Cum splattered up onto his lower stomach.

“You are such a good boy,” I praised him, prying his hand off his cock. He stared at me with adoration, waiting for my orders. I climbed onto his lap, hovering over him.

“I’m not done with you yet.” His answering groan was tortured. “Can you give me one more?”

His hands curled onto my hips, sharp with longing.

“Yes, please.” He cleared his throat with a frantic nod. “Watching you was...” I pressed my finger to his soft lips and sunk down on him. I ran my fingers through the spent cum on his thighs and painted it around my breasts.

“Now you own me,” I whispered, rolling my hips in a slow circle. His teeth flashed in a smile, and he searched for my mouth. I sank into him, boneless from Briar and Jesse’s rough handling. This was a slow, languid slide. A roll that didn’t stop. We rode the wave together, covering each other in our arousal. I drank from his mouth like it was a freshwater spring. Our lips velvet, silk and cream. He gifted me soft pants, and I took those as well. Logan’s fingers coasted over my body, touching every inch of me. Our release wasn’t an explosion, but a sigh. I arched into him, flattening my breasts against his chest. Our mouths melded as I felt him twitch inside of me. I twisted my fingers in the hair at the base of his neck, draping myself on his expanding chest. The rise and fall of it lulled me, my eyes drowsing closed.

Logan lifted me from the chair and bathed me with delicate touches until I was fresh and clean once more.

“Come to bed, siren.” He grabbed my hand and led me over to where Jesse and Briar were already waiting. I didn’t hesitate, enfolding myself in between them. My body buzzed with satisfaction, but it was my heart that was truly sated.

Pain and pleasure, love and hate. I had felt it all, but in between their arms? I was safe.



Still want more? Curious about Adelaide’s first time with her guys? Join my facebook group [here](#) or newsletter [here](#) for an extra special exclusive chapter.

Lara

I tossed my phone to the side, wishing I could shatter it instead. Adelaide had sounded so blissfully happy, and I wanted to keep that version of my friend. Not the murderous killer who would likely gut me when she found out the secrets I'd been keeping. Toby scampered across the floor as Beck emerged from the bedroom, a crease marring his perfect forehead. My mentor had only gotten more attractive with age.

“You’re going to have to tell her the truth soon. You’ll have to tell them all. Time is running out. I told you I’d give you until this assignment was up to present yourself, and I just gave my notice.”

I shook my head, teeth grinding at the sharp twist in my stomach. How would Jonah and Ray react when they found out I wasn’t who I said I was? Beck pursed his lips at my mute denial, tucking his Chief badge into his pocket. He held his arms out for my inspection.

“Time to play the good guy again. How do I look?” He sniffed at the ill-fitting disguise he wore. His jacket was faded on the elbows and the hems of his pants crushed under the heel of his scuffed boots. But even the wardrobe couldn’t hide the power he exuded, the intense slash of his nose and gleaming gaze like sea glass. Smooth after toiling in the wild ocean.

“Exactly how a Chief of Police should.” My stomach curdled at how easy he made it look, knowing we were two sides of the same coin.

Both pretending to be something we weren't.

“They're going to hate me.” I snagged his sleeve as he brushed past me. Letting his cedarwood scent flood my nostrils, bitter with gunpowder. He ran a finger down my cheek, and the callouses centered me. He knew who I meant. The people who had snuck into my heart, Adelaide and the two other men who I had somehow fallen in love with.

Ray and Jonah would never forgive me, which was why I had never grown what we had.

I had come to Greenwich Bay trying to flee my past but somehow, I'd become entangled again. Darkness clung to me like a curse.

“Better hated than dead. You're lucky it was me who discovered you, if anyone else had been given this assignment they would have handed you in already. I've put The Unseen off your trail for now, but you can't hide any longer. You have to rejoin the fold.”

Thank You

This story started out as a plot bunny that I worked on while I was finessing Triad's Curse. For someone who writes exclusively PNR/fantasy I could not shake this story from my mind. To my early readers, you might remember it from when I chucked up rough chapters, riddled with mistakes. I just wanted to share a story that hurt/healed and everything in between. And had an epic grovel, of course. But this story was begging for more and so I had to go back and do Adelaide and her guys justice. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please consider leaving a review or recommending on social media. Word of mouth is one of the most phenomenal ways you can support indie authors!

To my readers, thank you so much. I was talking about this story to my husband one day, about the betrayal specifically. He looked at me in horror and said, "who would want to read a story like that?" I laughed and pointed at myself. For an indie author I feel so blessed to have found so many readers who have snatched up my stories with so much enthusiasm and excitement.

For my eagle eyed readers you might have realized that Dilly's Cafe has made an appearance before, as well as a certain brooding character, with a scar on his lip. Loanna makes an appearance in my free novella, Wings of Desire, but she looked very different. All these characters are biding their

time for a big showdown, angels, demons and everything in between. But that is a story for the future!

I couldn't do this without my wonderful husband. You have always been my biggest fan and your love and support is beyond words. You unravel my mess and help me see the beauty in the chaos. Thank you for loving me and pushing me to fulfil my dreams!

To my beta and sensitivity readers, your feedback was invaluable! It helped me turn this story into what it is and your advice was everything! Thank you for being my early cheerleaders. Also I added more spice just for you ;)

To Chelsea, thank you for helping me give Jonah his name!

Also By

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The Power of Blood Novella

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